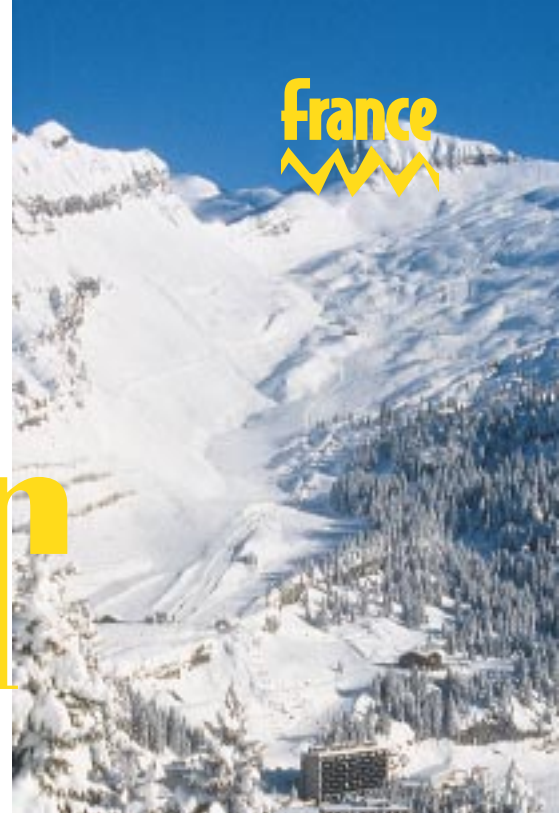




# A run to remember



**E**very one remembers at least one downhill run of their trip. That particular moment on the snow when it all comes together. The first run on a new pair of skis, the last run down to the bar, skiing fast through untracked powder, your first couloir.

Flaine is one of those love/hate resorts. You can tumble headlong in amour with the spacious cruising avenues that, thanks to the north-facing aspect, are usually smothered in quality snow, but cringe in abomination at the 1960's concrete apartment blocks, the grey monoliths a travesty to the spectacular scenery. The Tourist Office's brochure suggests that the dreary buildings create a harmonious symphony of shadow and light against the snow and ice – looked like a car park to me. Strange but true is the fact that the only ski resort listed as an art monument in the 1960's – maybe so but it still looks like a car park.

The Met Office had forecast up to a foot of fresh snow, and the pines, heavily weighed down already, confirmed this. It was one of those serene mornings of bright sunshine and the Flaine bowl was wearing a white fluffed duvet. Moguls had been temporarily vanquished and the pistes looked freshly artexed.

Without a doubt, legs and lungs would be screaming in protest at the end of the day, groaning limbs were inevitable

**Ski tips dangling in mid-air, I wondered "Why is no-one else skiing this chute?"**

but no pain would eclipse the pleasure of a full-on powder day.

At the top of the gondola it was a scene from the January sales with people popping from the cabins like champagne corks. From the top of the Grands Platières, Mont Blanc was clearly silhouetted with its rock face cloaking Chamonix in shadow and hurling spears of translucent light outwards, mesmerising always.

The entire contents of the gondola skied off in the direction of the marked runs. I poled in the direction of the Diamant Noir, a black run that falls from the summit to the base covering nearly a kilometre in altitude. At the entrance with ski tips dangling in mid-air a thought occurred to me. Why was no one else skiing this tantalising chute? Was this gun barrel I was about to drop into a renowned avalanche-gully full of hidden malice?

Peering down only the tracks of the piste patrol could be spied. It was a classic chute: manageable pitch, no moguls



and smothered in fresh fluff. The local experts were obviously having a late breakfast. Across the valley the ski bums of Chamonix would by now have turned the Grands Montets into one huge mogul field. Caution was thrown to the wind and along with it common-sense. After dropping in, two turns were all it took to shake off any form of hesitation. Once through the throat of the chute the run fans out, with the wall of the Grand Platières as your backdrop.

The lower mountain is a genial arena of jumps, convex rolls and gun barrels where lack of imagination the only restriction. Half-way down and already a hundred turns. Officially I hadn't even gone off-piste yet and I let go a smirk as I smugly thought of skiers paying £200 to heli-ski in snow like this.

The landscape tilted and abruptly became choked with trees. After several near misses and concluding that playing 'chicken' with the pines is non-compatible with reaching middle age I decided it was time to go on one of those crazy traverses where you frantically turn the skis across the fall-line and hang on for grim death. My situation didn't get any better as I ended up on a rock-shelf some eight to ten feet above the main chute with small trees lining the lip of the ridge. When a gap appeared I darted through it and floated off that fuelled by bravado, stupidity or simply the fact that the whole gondola was watching me. Miraculously landing with my head above my feet I carried on making turns, achieving total coolness – well that's what I thought. Nonchalantly looking up the hill I wondered if anyone had seen this none-too-mean feat with gravity.

A TOTAL

# eclipse...

THE

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