

SCOTLAND ON SUNDAY

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Weekend pass

SALLY RAIKES

Première Neige ski chalets

Sainte-Foy, France (0870 383 1000, www.premiere-neige.com)

THE Alps only recently had its first decent snowfall of the season, but while most resorts were wringing their hands in despair at the lack of white stuff, the tiny village of Sainte-Foy, in the Tarentaise valley, fared better than most. It may be small (there are just four lifts), but it's high (1,550m), and the off-piste skiing is unrivalled - just ask the instructors and guides from neighbouring Tignes and Val d'Isère, who head here on their days off.

Even better still, the slopes at Sainte-Foy are near-empty, and there is attractive chalet accommodation available in the village. Most of this is run by the Edinburgh-based ski tour company Première Neige, which has a portfolio of more than 30 properties.

Getting there Easyjet (0905 821 0905, www.easyjet.com) flies direct to Geneva from Edinburgh and Glasgow from £36 return, including tax. Grenoble and Chambéry airports are also nearby. From Geneva airport, it takes about three hours by car to Sainte-Foy. Private transfers can be arranged.

Why go there? To escape the thousands of British skiers who descend on better-known Alpine destinations. Sainte-Foy is close enough to Tignes and Val d'Isère (20 minutes by car) or Les Arcs (a ten-minute drive) to be able to spend the day there, but is a welcome and peaceful retreat come 5pm. It's worth skiing a couple of days in Sainte-Foy itself to appreciate its uncrowded slopes. There's an excellent ski school for beginners, and a day's lift pass here is relatively cheap at €22.

Room service All Première Neige's chalets have been built with wood and stone to blend in with the original village of Sainte-Foy, which is further down the hill. The company's most recent acquisition - and by far its most luxurious - is Yellowstone, an immaculately converted chalet that sleeps between 12 and 15 people (although it can hold 24). It has cliff-top views, an outdoor jacuzzi, a sauna and iPod docking stations in every bedroom. It would be an ideal place to spend a family celebration or - since it has a dedicated business room - a corporate weekend.

What's the food like? Superb. Expect a cooked breakfast, tea on your return from the slopes and a four-course evening meal that doesn't scrimp on portions. Our chalet host, Jimmy, was formerly a chef at the Seafood Restaurant in St Andrews - which hints at his expertise. From perfectly executed steaks to delicately flavoured smoked haddock and the homemade petit-fours that arrived with coffee, we felt utterly spoilt. If you're a serious foodie, Craig Millar, head chef of the Seafood Restaurants in St Andrews and St Monans, can be summoned from Scotland.

Out and about Les Brevettes, a rustic restaurant perched at the top of Sainte-Foy's first lift, is a great place for lunch - when we were there, the homemade ravioli and pitcher of red wine more than made up for the lack of visibility outside. If the weather is good, sign up for an off-piste ski adventure with Henry Schniewind (020 8334 7202, www.skioppiste.co.uk), an experienced guide whose avalanche talks are legendary in the valley. Première Neige can also arrange helicopter flights, massages, reflexology and pilates.

Little extras The fluffy towels and Elemis products in the bathrooms are a nice touch, not to mention a selection of DVDs and board games, ample lighting and comfortable sofas.

Après-ski Sainte-Foy is not the place to come to party the night away - that's part of its appeal - but has a modest selection of bars includes L'Iceberg and La Patchouli. Ski-biking, dog-sledding and heli-skiing in Tignes are also available.

The bottom line Prices start at £450 per adult per week for a catered chalet. Exclusive occupancy of the Yellowstone chalet starts at £6,469 for a week.

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