

SPOTLIGHT ON: French Alps

Above and beyond th

Jon Murray is flying high on a visit to the dazzling French Alps

Boarding the little red plane for a spectacular short flight over the mountains on one of those dazzlingly sunny days it seems only the Alps can produce, it was probably a good thing that no one had told us it didn't have any brakes.

How the single-propeller aircraft stopped was not something I had thought about, to be honest, as I climbed in next to the pilot, one of only three seats in this Mousquetaire D940. Had I thought about it, I'm sure I would have been nervous instead of, as in this case, excited.

The pilot went through the routine control checks, and then we eased forward, and trundled off down the 400m, 11 per cent gradient, slope. The plane, you see, like most things on the snow, was on skis.

And up we went. The villages of Les Trois Vallées, which look pretty enough at ground level, took on a majestic beauty when viewed from above. And the imposing mountains, many of which we had skied down the previous day, assumed even greater authority, the snow on them glistening in the sunlight as we passed barely a hundred feet or so above.

I felt very privileged to be taken on this flight, yet the company involved, Mountain Air Tours, want it to be known that such magical experiences are not beyond reach. A 20-minute flight over The Three Vallées, gliding over Meribel and Courcheval, and viewing on one side Val Thorens and the Parc National de la Vanoise, and out on the other side Mont Blanc, costs just 90 euros per person.

I use the term gliding because this is how it seemed. It was serene, and the landing one of the smoothest I have encountered.

And how did the plane with no brakes stop? By gravity . . . using the same landing strip, the icy slope simply slowing it down as it returned uphill.

What the flight emphasised was how, although the mountains here are a great place to ski, they offer so much more.

We had stayed in two locations, first in pretty St Martin de Belleville, then in the resort of Meribel, a long-time favourite of the English.

It was on the journey back from Meribel's airfield that our guide pointed out where Michael Schumacher has his chalet, not to



Jon in the Mousquetaire D940 skiplane

know, of course, that two weeks later, the former world motor racing champion would be critically injured in an off-piste skiing accident.

Skiing on-piste in The Three Vallées is safe, though, and difficult to beat. It's the largest skiing area in the world with a huge diversity of runs for all abilities.

Many skiers here enjoy the benefit of being able to choose whether to ski on one side of the valley in the sun, but where it is more crowded, or on the other side in the shadow of the mountains, where the slopes can be deserted.

In St Martin, we stayed at a two-Michelin starred restaurant, La Bouitte, where the chefs — father and son René and Maxime Meilleur — deliver such excellence in their cuisine that they are regularly on TV or on the front covers of gastronomy magazines. In 2012 they, and La Bouitte, gained entry into the select circle of the "Grandes Tables du Monde".

Whether you are in the restaurant, by the fire in the reception lounge, or in one of the cosy bedrooms, the use of sculpted wood catches the eye and radiates warmth.

The food was sensational. Each dish is prepared with unbelievable care and love. And precision. Take one of our starter courses — oëuf de plein air. This was cooked, our waiter informed us, for exactly 68 minutes at 62.5°C. It came with artichauts confits, pousses de coriandre and consommé d'alpages. And the taste was sublime.

On another, somewhat less cultured



evening, in neighbouring Les Menuires, we tried out snow scooters. Once the pistes are closed, the ski area becomes a real playground for these speed machines, and for those with energy to burn, or as a change from skiing, they are great fun, if somewhat expensive, at 100 euros an hour.

A more tranquil experience, and just as memorable, is to hire snow shoes. These enable you to go up or down steep slopes, even where the snow is deep. If you go at night, as we did through the forest above Meribel, they will supply you with a head torch, so you look like a miner. But the equipment allows you to go off the beaten track, and be part of nature again.

