

A drop of ski heaven

If there's an occasion for justified indulgence it's after a hard day on the slopes. **Abigail Jackson** discovers ski holidays aren't just about fondue, as she embarks on a gourmet trip to Zermatt.

What is your idea of heaven? I can think of a few things – starting with fine wine, perhaps, enjoyed in the company of even finer friends. Great food, of course. How about a spot of luxurious indulgence: sipping Champagne in a hot tub under the stars sounds rather good.

Mix all that with a pair of skis, add fresh, perfect snow and some of the best mountains in the world – and you have something pretty close to what's on offer from a little-known ski operator called Mountain Exposure.

It operates only in Zermatt, Switzerland, regarded by many as one of Europe's, or even the world's, leading ski resorts, providing high-end accommodation specially-crafted mountain holiday packages to suit individual taste.

That can mean action-packed heli-skiing, 'at-your-own-risk' off-pisting for adrenalin junkies, or leisurely mornings on the slopes followed by an afternoon massage (while the tots are in childcare).

As well as great skiing, Zermatt is renowned for great food. Home to some of the highest-rated restaurants in the Alps, many of which are Michelin-starred, Zermatt is a gourmet paradise.

Mountain Exposure found many guests were as keen on Zermatt's dining credentials as the skiing. But knowing the best restaurants, finding them and booking them is tricky for many visitors.

Spotting a gap in the market, they introduced the new gourmet ski guides earlier this year.

When Mountain Exposure invited me to stay in their

chalet Gemini to sample gourmet skiing for myself, I set off in great excitement.

Boarding the mountain train from Visp, I know I am onto good things, as we wind through narrow mountain paths and valleys, by far the most breathtakingly scenic train journey I have ever encountered.

Mountain Exposure's Donald, our gourmet guide for the trip, and Belinda meet me and fellow guests at the station, and we make our way by electric taxi (Zermatt is a green town – only the doctor owns a car) to chalet Gemini.

Sleeping 10, it is everything a five-star alpine chalet should be: stylish, yet comfortable and authentic, complete with flat-screen TVs, geothermal heating, sauna, outdoor hot tub and, tucked against a hillside overlooking the town, sensational views.

Our chalet girl Bex greets us with Champagne (which barely stops flowing for four days) while gourmet chef Johnny is hard at work in the kitchen on our first meal.

After hitting the ski shop – conveniently located just a five-minute walk from the chalet – to get kitted out with boots and skis, we pay a visit to The Papperla pub, where many of Zermatt's greatest fans gather for après ski and live music.

Tonight, with resident band Satisfied pleasing the crowd with popular covers, the atmosphere is buzzing and everyone wears that merry post-piste glow.

I cannot wait to get up on the mountain myself, after

a fresh dump of snow, the conditions are excellent. But first comes a tour of the town.

Zermatt is immensely picturesque. The mountains are stunning and I'm already wondering how I will ever possibly be able to leave. We enjoy a relaxing evening in Gemini, chatting in front of the log fire, while Bex serves canapes and Johnny, busy in the kitchen, adds the finishing touches to dinner. Donald has carefully selected his favourite local wines to accompany all the meals served in the chalet, and our first gourmet experience of the trip is a great start.

The next morning, bright and early, Donald and Bex take us right to the top of the mountain. The Matterhorn Express lift is easy walking distance from the chalet. We are so close to the Matterhorn, it seems like touching distance. It's a gorgeous day. Perfect blue sky stands stark against a humungous expanse of brilliant white mountain. At almost 4,000 feet above sea level, the air is extremely thin.

But there's no time to hang about. We ski a red run down and across the border into Cervinia, Italy, where Donald has reserved us a table at L'Etoile. We have all earned our lunch, and I tuck happily into my delicious seafood soup, rehydrating with beer in the sunshine. Can it get any better?

Next day, the weather's turned and it's blowing a blizzard. Visibility is practically non-existent on the higher slopes. My first apres-ski-induced hangover doesn't help either, so I take it easy skiing to our lunch venue – this time a cute, popular place called Zum See. Fellow guests rave about the lamb dishes, but I opt for a carb-boost with a seafood pasta dish. It's excellent, and the wine cures my hangover a treat.

We move on to a little place called Blatten for a Gili-gili (a gorgeous cream-topped drink that tastes like warm trifle in a glass), then we ski down to Hennustal, a lively hut where the party is just getting started. The music is so loud I momentarily wonder about the avalanche risk. After a couple of beers we ski back down into town and get ready for dinner.

For day three, the sun's out again, so it's another morning of delightful skiing. We split into two groups. I enjoy a leisurely morning with Mountain Exposure's instructor, Charlie, while more experienced members of the group tackle some more challenging terrain. It must be said, Zermatt is fantastic for the more hard-core skier. We meet for lunch at Chez Vryony, where we huddle on sheepskin-covered benches and tuck into a feast of local meat platters, fondue and truffle risotto. What a treat!

After dark, Zermatt has something for every taste and mood. I found fun and sweaty dance floors, as well as more civilised and sophisticated bars, such as the Vernissage, a bar with a cinema screen.

On our last night, Mountain Exposure partner Hugh takes us on a 7km toboggan run. We stop for refreshment at The Champagne Bar, then get back on our sledges and weave through the mountain paths down into the town in the dusk. Johnny ensures our gourmet holiday ends on a high. We drain our wine bottles and laugh heartily.

The Mountain Exposure team formed three years ago, armed with a shared love of skiing, Zermatt and the finer things in life. They've put their hearts into their business and their passion is infectious. Mountain Exposure holidays don't come cheap, but they're worth every penny.

At the end of the trip my belly is bloated and my soul is nourished. And it feels brilliant. There is only one thing for it. I clamber into the hot tub. I sip my Champagne and watch the steam rise towards the inky, star-dotted sky. It certainly sounds like heaven, but it can't be – I feel too alive!



Chalet Gemini