

THE PEAK OF ALPINE CHIC

L'Apogée, the newest resort in glamorous Courchevel, has mountains of style. And skiing, too.

By Everett Potter

L'APOGEE

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L'Apogée is the latest rarefied resort to open in Courchevel, that lair of ski-happy oligarchs in the French Alps that's often dubbed Moscow-on-Snow. It's situated in Courchevel 1850, the glamour-puss of the resort's four villages (the number references the altitude in meters), an otherworldly locale where the sidewalks seem to sprout Parisian fashion designers and English celebrities, all jostling with those Russian magnates. This is the place, after all, that hired Karl Lagerfeld last year to give one of its cable cars a "makeover."

As befits Courchevel, L'Apogée arrives with a pedigree, another thoroughbred to emerge from the luxury hotel management stable of Germany's dynastic Oetker family. (The Oetker name also adorns Le Bristol in Paris and the Hôtel du Cap-Eden-Roc in the south of France.)

L'Apogée's owner, bad-boy French telecom billionaire Xavier Niel, enlisted Oetker to put the ski-in/ski-out resort over the top, as it were. A self-made man and savvy computer programmer who thumbed his



Gallic nose at establishment techies, Niel founded WorldNet, France's first Internet provider, and Free, France's fourth-biggest mobile network. Along the way he has famously owned or co-owned everything from sex shops to the song "My Way" to the newspaper *Le Monde*.

L'Apogée demanded Niel's kind of deep-pocketed backing. The resort cost a reported \$135 million and has only 55 rooms, a staff-to-guest ratio close to 1-to-1



and is open only during the 100 or so days of a French Alpine winter. Even with suites going for up to \$8,400 per enchanted evening (they do throw in breakfast and either lunch or dinner) and the penthouse pegged at \$12,700, Niel is clearly taking the long view on his investment.

Courchevel already has 18 five-star hotels to serve the Chanel-clad set, but even in that tony company L'Apogée stands out. From the outside, with its stonework and

wooden balconies, it's a classic and handsome take on contemporary Alpine architecture that would not be out of place at Beaver Creek or Deer Valley. The interiors are a different story entirely, however, featuring cool, understated public spaces that seem to radiate a self-consciously chic Parisian tone. Many walls are paneled in warm woods, and there's enough marble to empty, it would seem, an Italian quarry or two.

Nothing shouts "ski resort."

Parisian designers India Mahdavi and Joseph Dirand walk an aesthetic tightrope where old money feels comfortable, but new money is not ignored. So the dotting, black-suited staff have a Prada-ish look, even as they bring you a hot dog made with a Perigord truffle in the Champagne Lounge. In the rooms, the color scheme of burgundy, dark green and gingham is more cozy than cutting-edge. Every piece of furniture is custom-made or sourced from high-level scouting expeditions.

And, oh yes, there's also skiing. Head to the empty lifts in the morning with the

knowledge that many of your fellow habitués will have been twisting the night away and will not arrive at the slopes until 11-ish. They will make a few hero turns on the wide boulevards of snow, followed by a long lunch that ensures afternoon somnolence or shenanigans.

But for skiers who value every minute on the slopes, ski days in Trois Vallées, which includes Courchevel, Meribel and Val Thorens, are exhilarating, not to say daunting. The area is five times the size of Vail, and you'd be advised to hire a guide for a day or two to help you navigate the terrain—an explorer's delight and an agoraphobic's nightmare of above-tree-line skiing that offers uncrowded pistes and panoramic views of the Alps, all the way into neighboring Switzerland and Italy.

Will L'Apogée, a hotel built on the site of a former Olympic ski jump, truly prove to be the high point of Courchevel? Let's just say that in this place, where the higher you stay, the wealthier you are, L'Apogée provides a peak experience. **FL**

A RENAISSANCE IN SAINT-BARTH

LVMH's Cheval Blanc reimagines one of the island's most iconic hotels.

The new, high-profile proprietor wasted little time in putting his mark on the Hotel Saint-Barth Isle de France, one of the island's most *soigné* properties. The resort—formerly owned by the island's Anglican minister—was sold to Bernard Arnaud's LVMH last year. It will reopen this October as the third ultraluxury property under LVMH's Cheval Blanc hotel collection (the name derives from Arnaud's famed Bordeaux château). The first wave of changes for the 40-room hotel are experience-oriented. Like the Cheval Blanc hotels in Courchevel and the Maldives, there will be spa and beauty treatments provided by sister brand Guerlain—the resort even has its own dedicated Guerlain fragrance, Tropical Chic—and a new fitness center stocked with Technogym equipment. Guests can ply the waters in the resort's 69-foot yacht, accompanied, *bien sûr*, by their personal butler. What won't change is the hotel's plum location, fronting the stunning beach at Baie des Flamands.

