

Alpine M



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www.themountainlodgecompany.com



'Is this hat really working, or do I look like a nummy?' (the latter - Ed)

When a golfing soiree to the French Alps results in a near-death experience, an invitation to a stranger's wedding and a suspected murder, you know you've been on a *GOLFPUNK* caper...

Words: Richard Lenton Photography: Luke Tchalenko

It'd been 20 years since my one and only jaunt to the French Alps. Dressed to the nines in Cabrera ski gear, and with Brother Beyond battering my eardrums via an archaic Alba walkman, I zigzagged my way down the slopes like a young Franz Klammer. Alas, after being caught red-handed with beer in one hand and fag in the other, I was subsequently banned from school jollies. I couldn't wait to return to the scene of the crime, only this time it was to swing clubs rather than swig ale (I'm a vino man these days)...

MONDAY 10pm

"Richard, it's Joe. I can't believe it, I've ruptured my knee out running, I'm on my way to the hospital. I'm off the France caper, so you'll have to take charge. There's a *GOLFPUNK* reader called Rob going on the trip, and a new photographer, Luke. You're meeting them at Gatwick Airport at 6am tomorrow. A fella called 'Skinny' Lees - his real name's Richard as well, but I know you're easily confused - from The Mountain Lodge Company will meet you at Geneva Airport. You'll like him, he's from oop north as well, West Yorkshire somewhere. I know it all sounds a bit M16, but it's kosher, I promise."

Our Travel Editor never did possess great timing, but, I'm not complaining. Another voyage of discovery begins...

TUESDAY 10am

"Aye up," says our friendly, follically challenged host in the foyer of Geneva Airport. "I'm Skinny. You must be t' lads from t' GolfPunk." "Aye, happen that'll be us," I reply. I moved away from Yorkshire a decade ago, but whenever I'm in the company of a fellow Tyke, I find myself talking like an extra from *Brassed Off* within a nanosecond.

We dump our stuff in Skinny's van, and head over the Swiss border into France en route to Chamonix Golf Club. The banter's flowing, and, as the Alps come into view, the scene is stunning. Skinny's been here for 14 years; I bet he really misses Halifax...

He moved to the Portes Du Soleil region - which comprises the resorts of Les Gets, Morzine and Avoriaz - in the mid 90s after completing a degree in Minerals Estate management, and has been enjoying the life of Riley ever since.

"I've skied since I was 12, so living out here is like living the dream. I ski all winter, but I needed something to do in the summer, so I've got into golf in a big way," he says, as we reach Chamonix.

The views from the course - which lies in a valley surrounded by snow-covered mountains - are staggering, and the weather would prompt 'Phew What A Scorcher' headlines from those wags at *The Sun* if we were back in Blighty.

"AS THE ALPS COME INTO VIEW, THE SCENE IS STUNNING. I BET HE MISSES HALIFAX..."



“YOU EITHER SEEK SHELTER FROM THE STORM OR LEARN TO DANCE IN THE RAIN”

An initial nine-hole course was opened here back in July 1935 to give British tourists another reason to visit the region during the summer months, and the track was subsequently extended to 18 holes in 1982. However, it's difficult to reconcile the fact that people were skiing down the fairways just six weeks ago; how the staff have transformed a popular ski resort into a lush, green golf course in such a short period of time beggars belief.

We're met at the pro-shop by Christophe, the manager. Alas, his Anglais is little better than my pigeon Francais, but thankfully Luke speaks perfect French. I met our cosmopolitan snapper for the first time at the crack of sparrows yesterday at the check-in desk at Gatwick Airport, but we're already getting on like long-lost friends. His grandparents hail from Russia, his dad's half French/half German, he spent much of his early life in the Lebanon and the Ukraine, but now he's settled with his Russian wife in Del Boy country - Peckham. A slightly weird combination one thought, but not as strange as the revelation that his mother hails from the rather less cosmopolitan Mablethorpe. I used to go there on my holidays every summer. If you're going there next year, remember to pack a bag of 2p coins for the slots, half a dozen windbreaks and some thermals; Mablethorpe has been known to make Iceland seem positively equatorial.

The opening hole at Chamonix is a gentle 310-yard left to right dogleg. Luke's bravely positioned himself 10 yards in front of the tee to the left, despite never having seen the three of us play. Thankfully I clip a five iron down the sunbaked fairway; I love playing to the cameras.

Unfortunately Rob and Skinny have never been under the *GOLFPUNK* spotlight; GP reader Rob's drive is similar to Ian Baker-Finch's at the 1995 Open - it's headed west, by several fairways, while Skinny manages to drive his ball straight at the scorer's hut. While the boys are hacking away in the undergrowth, I'm hitting a cheeky sand wedge to 10 feet for birdie. However, that's easily as good as it got. Once the nerves settle, Rob kicks my arse, while Skinny, a relative novice, gives me more than a run for my money.

At the par three fifth, we're perched high above the hole, staring at a pin 120 yards away. I have no idea what club to use; I can't play half shots, so I reach for a wedge. It's bang on line...bugger me, this could be my first hole-in-one... "Where did it go lads, I lost that," I ask, desperately hoping that the reply will be 'it hit the flagstick and went in, kid.' "Er, you went

over the green, over the bunkers at the back, over the river and landed on the 10th tee..." Five minutes later, Christophe's buggy screeches to a halt next to me. "I believe this ball's yours," he says. "What did you hit? Driver?" "Er, no mate, I've been working out..."

As we stride down the 18th fairway, the storm clouds that have been threatening to engulf us finally flaunt their wares. It's hammering down, and flashes of lightning add another dimension to the drama. But, on days like this, you either seek shelter from the storm or learn to dance in the rain. Rob lashes a nine-iron to the back of the green to set up a glorious birdie. It's a great way to end.

We hastily finish the hole and scarp for the sanctuary of the clubhouse. After losing a nearest the pin competition earlier, it's my shout at the bar.

"Pints all round lads?" I ask, hoping that my companions aren't thirsty.

"Aye," reply the three smirking amigos. "That'll be 28 euros," says the barman. "Twenty eight? You've got to be having me on, fella. For quatre beers?"

"Oui monsieur," he says, with an evil smile. At the current exchange rate that's six quid a pint. I've paid a hefty price for being crap at golf.

We jump into the van and head off into the eye of the storm on the trip back to the Alpine village of Morzine. Skinny gives us a potted history of the area. "This is Taninges. In World War II, Taninges wasn't occupied as the townfolk collaborated with the Nazis and the Vichy and were left alone," he says. Unfortunately, all I can think of is *Allo Allo*, and Rene's quest to conceal the Fallen Madonna With The Big Boobies, and his affairs with a brace of nubile young waitresses from his downtrodden wife, Edith.

We arrive at the chalet and meet Skinny's missus, Karen, who, unbelievably, used to rent an art studio round the corner from my flat in Hove. Small world. "Drop your things off lads, help yourself to beers in the bar, and we'll have some food on in half an hour," she says. Now this is service.

We're joined by a handful of Skinny and Karen's friends - ex pats who've found life in Morzine much more to their liking than the hurly burly of London, and an American guy called Craig who works as a piste controller.

"Basically I bomb avalanches to make sure certain areas of the slopes are safe, and I also get injured people off the mountain," he says, over yet another home-made burger that Karen's rustled up thanks to one of a plethora of Jamie Oliver





cook-books in her sizeable, Mediterranean kitchen. I can't stand the geezer, but you can't knock his grub.

The locally produced vino is fabulous, dry as a bone with a subtle hint of fruit (you're not Oz Clarke, nobhead - Ed). Skinny sets fire to the BBQ but it matters not. I can't remember the last time I felt this relaxed; I could happily live here. Karen's asked me to join her for a run in the morning. I'm well up for it - I find it's a great way to see and discover a new place.

WEDNESDAY 8am

The chances of me going for a run are slim to none - and slim just left town. That vino was potent. And I really don't need a hangover when we're going paraponting...

Despite being scared witless of heights, I'm set to launch myself off the top of a mountain with a chute and a French geezer called Paschal on my back.

As our van climbs higher and higher up into the atmosphere, Rob and I are exchanging nervous glances, while an excited Luke chats in fluent French to the adrenaline-junkie guides. We're trying to feign indifference to the whole experience, but the slightly green hue on Rob's face is giving the game away.

I'm first to launch myself into the unknown. "Okay, we both just run down this hill, then jump in the air when I say the word," says Paschal. Here we go... It's difficult to run with what feels like a lead-weight on my back, and heavy strapping between my legs, but I go for it. "Now, jump!" shouts Paschal. "Shhhiiiiitttttt," I yell, as we soar up into the sky.

We're floating, about 50 yards above a forest of lush pines, which is perfectly fine as John Rambo has aptly demonstrated that it's possible to survive falling into trees from such a height. However, once we're over the edge of the precipice and staring down into the valley below, it's a pretty hairy experience.

Pascal tells me to hold my GP mag in the air as he reaches round my tense,

What to do...



LUGE:
Tremendous fun. Richard from the Mountain Lodge Company is sure to direct you towards the Luge - he's a dab hand at it. Visit youtube and check out the clips.

PARAPONTING:
Adrenaline junkies will love it, but the more reserved among you may give it a swerve. If you're interested, then email ailelibre@wanadoo.fr or ring 00 33 663 236142

“I’VE NEVER LANDED ONE OF THESE WITHOUT BRAKES BEFORE”



Where to stay...



MOUNTAIN LODGE COMPANY www.themountainlodgecompany.com

Mobile: 07903 387703; **France:** 00 33 450 75 02 07

The company run by ex-pats Karen and Richard operates from the alpine village of Morzine in France through two fully catered chalets. Enjoy a warm welcome - Richard is a fine raconteur with an even finer selection of local wines and vintage malts, and marvel at the fantastic views from the balcony. Highly recommended.





spasmed frame to take a photo. "No thank you pal, I'll hold on for grim life thank you very much," is my rather blunt response to what he no doubt sees as a perfectly polite offer.

After half an hour, I'm back on Terra Ferma - it's a big relief. Above me I can hear the whooping and laughing of Luke - he's having the time of his life. "This is amazing!" he yells. "I love GOLF PUNK!"

However, there's another noise emanating from the skies; it's like the wailing of a young child who's been made to go to bed early. Only it's not a child, it's Rob, whose crying is due to the fact that the brakes have broken on his parachute. "I've never landed one of these without brakes," says his right-hand woman, Marie, with more than a hint of concern. Rob's beside himself as he careens towards the ground a wee bit quicker than Luke and I. He lands in a heap, but thankfully in one piece. However, for the next hour, the subtle green hue on his features metamorphose into something more akin to an angry David Banner. "All I could see was a load of wires and the brake handle in her hand," he sob.

We decide on a relaxed stroll around the local market in an effort to bring Rob round. Almost immediately I'm accosted by a middle-aged wide boy called Jean-Pierre, who's selling cheese, meat and home-made pickles. I have no idea what he's on about, but I'm intrigued by his jar of red onion relish.

"Argh, this eez wonderful," he says with boyish enthusiasm. "But don't eat too much...how you say, it makes you..." He then sees fit to demonstrate, audibly, that his red onion relish can, how you say... make you fart prodigiously. I still buy it mind, although everyone refuses to sit next to me in the van as we set off for more

white-knuckle action at The Luge; a snake-like ride which you navigate at break-neck speed in a plastic cart.

Rob heads off first, while Skinny and I have a race to find out who's the pride of the White Rose county. However, having seen the plethora of luge and mountain bike victims in the town sporting grizzly scars across their arms and legs, I take it conservatively and I'm beaten by a tattie field. Skinny did have the advantage of local knowledge though; and local knowledge is what you need when you take on the golfing war of attrition known as Les Gets Golf Club. To say it's a little bit tough, is a bit like saying that the cloning of human embryos is a touch controversial.

The course is perched on the ridge of the Chavannes, and is characterised by its Alpine slopes, wicked natural contours and rough terrain. The views across the surrounding valleys and mountains are stunning, but the golf is punishing; providing a variety of challenges along its immaculately kept greens and fairways.

The sheer right to left drop on the opening hole means that pinpoint accuracy is required from the tee. Daunting is not the word. All you can do is take in a lung-full of fresh mountain air, grab a long iron and pray. Oh, and remember to hire a buggy. Walking around this course could be an Olympic discipline it's that tough; on a previous sojourn to Les Gets, Skinny's uncle managed to walk only a single hole before slumping to his knees. "I thought he'd had a heart attack," says Fred.

Immense concentration is needed to navigate your way around this hugely technical track. For seven or eight holes I score pretty well, but it's so mentally demanding that it's hard to put a consistent score together.

Continually searching for balls is not good for your state of mind; the final straw is at the 13th where a pummelled drive over water is lost in an abyss of long grass just inches from the sanctuary of the fairway. My head drops, and I struggle to pull myself together. After reaching the turn in 42, I sign for a round of 106...

Thankfully, a few beers and a no-expense-spared BBQ at Louis's Bar in Morzine quickly lifts my spirits. The place is packed, mainly with mountain bikers



Where to eat...

L'ETALE, MORZINE
Everything that's good about French restaurants. Atmospheric and cosy, with fantastic service, magnificent food and healthy portions. My starter of mussels was a main course in all but name. Some of the best food I've ever tasted, and the wine is exceptional.



Where to play...

CHAMONIX GOLF CLUB

35, Route Golf, 74400 Chamonix, Mont Blanc, France

Tel: 33(0)4 50 53 06 28

Web: www.golfdechamonix.com

Details: 18 holes

Green fees: 45 to 75 Euros

A fun and challenging test of golf in the most beautiful of surroundings. It's hard not to be inspired by the views of the snow-covered mountains, but you need to keep your eyes on the prize around this cheeky little number. Originally a nine-hole course, it was extended to 18 in 1982 after tireless work by designer, Trent Jones Snr.

Golf Porn Factor: █████

Golf Punk Factor: █████

LES GETS

Les Gets, 74260 Les Gets, Haute Savoie, France

Tel/Fax: 33 (0)4 50 75 87 63

Email: info@golflesgets.com

Web: www.golflesgets.com

Details: 18 holes

Green fees: 25 to 45 Euros, plus a little extra for the buggy...

If you think Pinehurst No 2 is the toughest course in the world, then think again. This is extreme golf. Situated on the Chavannes ridge, it offers a mentally challenging round of golf with exceptional panoramic views. In the heart of the Portes du Soleil, in wooded surroundings, the course has a hole named after the nearby peaks; the 14th, Mont Blanc, being the most impressive. Its variety along with the superb way in which it is looked after can't fail to seduce you.

Golf Porn Factor: █████

Golf Punk Factor: █████

EVIAN MASTERS COURSE

Evian Masters Golf Club, Rive Sud du Lac de Genève BP

n 8, 74502 Evian-les-Bains Cédex

Tel: 33 (0)4 50 75 46 66

Email: contact@evianmasters.com

Web: www.evian.fr/golf/edition/parcours.html

Details: 18 holes, 6,620 yards, par 72

Situated on the south side of Lake Geneva (Lac Lemman), the Evian Masters course is blessed with beautiful views, and plays host to the Evian Golf Cup and the world's largest women's open competition. The course mixes easy-looking holes with some very tough and clever ones. Manicured to perfection, with generous fairways and large subtle greens. The Evian Masters Training Centre - a state-of-the-art facility that makes you want to practise all day - opened in 2006, catering for every part of your game.

Golf Porn Factor: █████

Golf Punk Factor: █████



How to get there...



Easy Jet flights run frequently to Geneva, where Richard from the Mountain Lodge Company will pick you up and take you to his chalet overlooking the Alps. You can't miss him - a bald, bearded fella who sounds like Seth Armstrong.



**“SOD THE RAIN,
WE HAVE TO
FINISH. I MIGHT
NEVER PLAY A
COURSE LIKE
THIS AGAIN”**



who risk life and limb on a daily basis to negotiate the mountainous terrain on bikes that, in some cases, cost three times as much as my car.

“The problem with the bikers is that they splash out thousands on their kit, but they don’t fork out much for their apres-bike entertainment,” says Skinny. “Everyone’s supposed to bring their own meat here, but half of them are just eating the free salad. That’s why I want the golfers to come to my place. They enjoy the social side of things much more, and they don’t mind splashing out on a decent meal and a few bottles of wine.”

I meet Craig and Sharon from Skipton (it seems there are more Yorkshire folk here than in an episode of Emmerdale) who run top end chalets with Michelin star chefs on hand to cater for the more well-to-do clientele. “How much do you charge then?” I ask. “It’s between 16 and 26,000 euros a week,” replies Sharon.

“I suppose a grand a week ain’t bad if there’s 20 of you,” I say.

“Er, no, it’s 16 to 26,000 Euros each...” is the staggering reply. I’m obviously in the wrong game.

We head to the Buddha Bar, where Karen’s pals, the rock band *Five Inch Snails*, are covering some old classics with aplomb. The shots are flying down quicker than a brake-less Parapont, and after yet another round of Sambucas bite the dust, a tired and emotional Skinny invites the three of us onto his stag do in Hamburg. To say we’ve all bonded is a huge understatement; at this rate we’ll be ushers. At the end of a fabulous night, we take a long, occasionally sideways stroll back up the hill to the chalet.

“Nightcap lads,” says Skinny. We’ve plainly had enough, but... Karen does the sensible thing and retires to bed as the vintage malt makes an appearance. Luke’s got his shirt off now, for reasons unbeknown to any of us. I feel the need to do the same. Is it mere male bonding or a step too far into the world of homoerotic...?

THURSDAY 8am

“Shall I try to push our tee time back this morning then?” says Skinny, stumbling into my room wearing the same clobber he had on last night. “That would be glorious,” I mumble, as I turn over and rest my trash-compacted head on the pillow. Thankfully, there’s a slot this afternoon.

Three hours later we’re up, but not really at ‘em. With our tee-time at the home of golf in the South of France - the venue for the LET’s Evain Masters - just hours away, we head into the centre-ville for a full English (very, erm.. cultured - Ed), but on the way Luke can’t help himself snapping away at a posse of police gathering evidence following the death of a young mountain biker in the early hours of the morning. “Chuffin’ ambulance chaser,” cry the Yorkshire mafia, to Luke’s obvious chagrin.

We order our scran at a delightful little French cafe; lovely jubbly, here we go.

The croissants arrive, along with some bread. “We must get these before the big fry up then,” says Rob, as we hungrily tuck in. Twenty minutes later, still no bacon, bangers and beans. Luke, in his fluent French, has a word. Bad news... “Apparently, we all just said ‘breakfast’ rather than ‘English breakfast’...”

Then the penny drops. Bugger, we’re in France aren’t we, not Sid’s caff in Peckham. “Oh, and the kitchen’s now closed so we’re out of luck...” adds Luke.

After pigging out on croissants, we set off for the imaginatively-named Evian Masters Golf Club. This is sure to be the highlight of the holiday (sorry, work...) from a golfing standpoint. The weather’s murky, but it can’t detract from the majesty of the course. The views overlooking Lake Geneva, which provides a staggering backdrop to many of the holes, are on the picturesque side of majestic.

Half way around this green and pleasant land, the rain kicks in. It’s coming down in stair-rods, prompting everyone on the course to scarp for the bar - except us. “We’ve got to finish,” says Rob. “I might never play on a course like this again.”

By the 15th I can barely grip my club, I’m soaked through from tip to toe.

I line up a four-iron approach, melt it perfectly, but the club follows the ball 50 yards down the fairway. It’s ridiculous, but the last few holes are awesome, so I vow to carry on regardless.

The 17th, at a tickle over 100 yards, looks a doddle. But it isn’t. We’re so annoyed at failing to trouble the flagstick that we have three goes each, but none of us can land the ball within 10 feet.

At the 483-yard, par four 18th, I opt to use the first fairway for a better line into the green. Translated, that means a wild slice sees me stomping the wrong way up the opening hole to retrieve my ball. I hit my approach shot flush, but it crashes against the scorer’s hut and bounces into a pond. It’s a sad way to end a memorable round.

That evening we head into Morzine, where Skinny and Karen have booked a table at L’Etoile, which is owned by the flamboyant Vincent. His quaint, beautifully lit restaurant is alive with atmosphere. Every table is full of smiles from the happy patrons, who are wolfing down colourful plates of first-class fare.

As we peruse the menu, Rob’s looking perplexed. “I’ve only ever ordered prawn cocktail and mixed grill when I’ve been out for dinner,” he says. “My Dad always used to order for us.”

I encourage him to try something different to test his bored palette, and he pulls out all the stops.

“I’ll have the bruschetta and...er...a mixed grill, sil-vous plait.” You can take the lad out of Leicester, but...

We head back to the chalet, where Skinny, Rob and Luke hit the bar to polish off the whisky they’d attempted to drain last night. I opt for bed, hoping against hope that I’ve not been banned from any future GOLF PUNK capers...



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