

# FOOD & TRAVEL

EAT · DRINK · ESCAPE

SKIING

## MINDFULNESS IN THE MOUNTAINS

The wellbeing ski holiday is a no brainer, says **Abigail Butcher**

Emma Cairns freeriding



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Emma Cairns on the slopes; Spa at Cordée des Alpes; Abi swaps après at Le Rouge for laps of the pool; Cordée des Alpes

I'm swimming slow, purposeful strokes while watching the snow fall outside, thinking about my day, and how I have tried – but failed – to combat my competitive streak. Length after length of the pristine pool melt away behind me along with the fatigue in my legs after a long day in the mountains, and so does my anxiety.

I'm in the Swiss ski resort of Verbier, lapping the pool at the gorgeously rustic Cordeé des Alpes hotel, my home for the week while I attend a women's ski camp with Element Concept. The camp is one of many in a new wave of mindful ski holidays that are less about fondue and vin chaud, and more about self-improvement and self-awareness.

Our appetite for exquisite spa hotels in the mountains appears unabated – no sooner is the paint dry on Andermatt's enormous Chedi than Four Seasons will open a new ski-in, ski-out property with 2,000sq/m spa in the French resort of Megève this winter. Six Senses has also announced two new spa hotels in Austria's Kitzbühel and Switzerland's Crans-Montana that will open in 2020.

I live and breathe the mountains, so this surge in wellbeing retreats is no surprise – with clear air, spectacular scenery and an unrivalled proximity to nature, the mountains are perhaps one of the most obvious places to rejuvenate mind and body.

Among the leading offerings are those from Chalet Rosière ([chaletrosiere.fr](http://chaletrosiere.fr)), 'the world's first wellbeing chalet', which opened last December in the small French resort of La Rosière, offering healthy ski

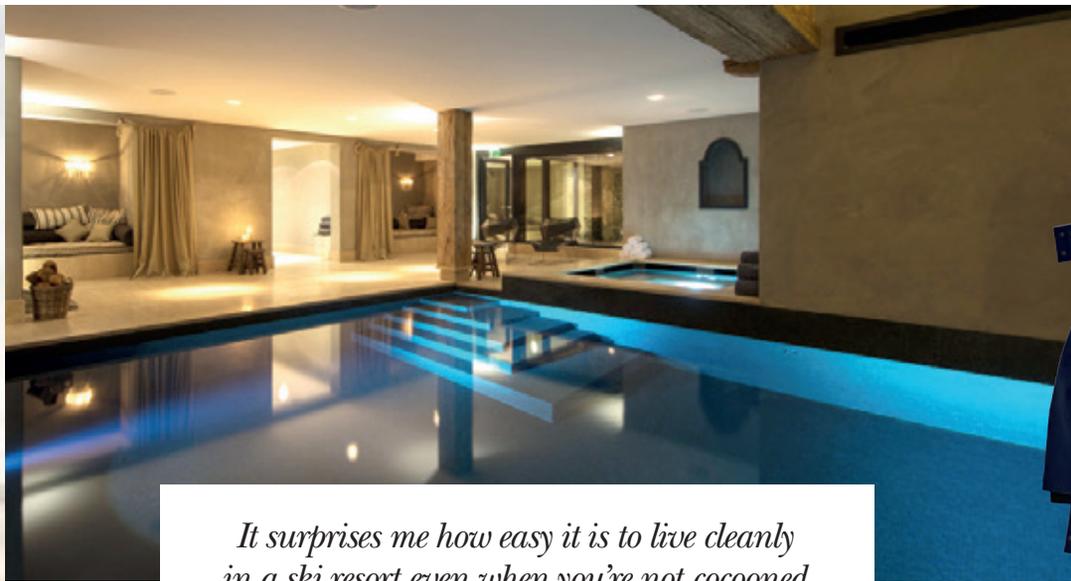
holidays and yoga retreats in the Tarentaise valley.

Even former British freeride skier Jamie Strachan is getting in on the act with his mindful skiing breaks at HiP Chalets in Chamonix. Combining Qigong, yoga, massages and craniosacral therapy, buddhist Jamie is helping guests connect mind to movement and fully experience the privilege of being in the mountains. 'Bringing mindfulness in to your skiing will not only improve your techniques and mental strength on the slopes – it will also ground you and lift up your spirits,' he says. And it's this mindfulness that I'm chasing with Element Concept in Verbier. The women's camps were borne out of ski school co-founder Emma Cairns's observation that men and women ski, and learn, differently.

'Women and men have three major physical differences when it comes to skiing,' says ski instructor and former ski racer Emma Cairns, as we head up the La Pasay chairlift in Bruson – a wooded section of Verbier that's perfect for the heavy snow we're experiencing. 'Men are stronger in the core and torso, they have 20 per cent more muscle than women and their pelvis is a different shape – women hold their spines in a more concave position, and this all affects how we ski.'

It makes utter sense – I'm a ski instructor myself and without making excuses or sounding like a raging feminist, I've been aware for many years how differently women and men ski.

The camps – run over a weekend or week – integrate life coaching



*It surprises me how easy it is to live cleanly in a ski resort even when you're not cocooned in a wellness retreat. Every restaurant and café we visit has über-healthy options*



## THE KIT

**BORN NOULI**  
Leggings, £65 a pair.  
[bornnoui.com](http://bornnoui.com)



**CANADA GOOSE**  
Perley 3-in-1 parka,  
£1,300. [canadagoose.com](http://canadagoose.com)

**PATAGONIA**  
Women's all-  
weather zip-neck  
with Polygiene, £54.  
[patagonia.com](http://patagonia.com)

**Sport Active Cream**  
**QMS MEDICOSMETICS**  
Sport active cream SPF15, £66  
for 30ml. [qmsmedicosmetics.com](http://qmsmedicosmetics.com)

**DRAGON ALLIANCE**  
NFX transition goggles, £185.  
[dragonalliance.com](http://dragonalliance.com)

with skiing, yoga and nutritional talks, and focus specifically on the physical and psychological ways in which women ski differently to men.

Verbier-based life coach Elaine France ([womenwhomovemountains.com](http://womenwhomovemountains.com)) not only gives two group sessions but also skis with the camp when she can, so is on hand for one-to-one chairlift chats or over a coffee.

The other women on the course – who range in age from 20s to 40s – are all high-achievers: successful, entrepreneurial self-starters who don't want to go to an anonymous ski school to learn like penguins one after the other but improve their skiing in an adult, mindful way. They're an inspiring group to be around.

'All of us are trying to build a solid foundation that will allow us to adapt to a constantly changing environment,' explains Elaine. 'When we change and start to learn something – a new technique while skiing – it puts us into a vulnerable place and ideas start to ping around us like popcorn as we have multiple focus points. It's hard going.'

The most typical reaction, says Elaine, is that we get frustrated with our progress and that we can't pick it up instantly, and that frustration will be replicated by our bodies. 'You need to recognise that and remind yourself that you're in the early stages of skill acquisition – and not be too hard on yourself,' says Elaine.

And because of this recognition, I'm processing my learning over the day while doing laps of the pool while waiting for a massage, rather than drinking rosé in Le Rouge, Verbier's popular après-ski haunt.

In fact, it surprises me how easy it is to live cleanly in a ski resort even when you're not cocooned in a wellness retreat. La Cordée has its own juicer that I use each breakfast time rather than hit the croissant buffet, and every restaurant and café we visit has über-healthy options – from Le Rouge to Le Bec, the brasserie near the main Medran lift in which we meet daily. I chose fish, veg and salad rather than spag bol – choices made easier by the inspiring nutrition talk we have one evening from Verbier-based functional medicine doctor Mirthe Elk.

At the start of the week, Elaine had asked us to set an intention. Mine was to not be competitive – with myself as much as others. Emma had worked on getting me to ski more smoothly and less aggressively – my default – and six months later I'm still working on that, but I think I'm getting there. Thanks to their recipe for mindful learning, I was able to recognise that I was getting to grips with new skills and that it is ok to not be perfect each and every time.

But most of all, I succeeded in arriving fresh and energetic for each day on the slopes — and that, in Verbier, is quite an achievement. ■

**BOOK IT:** *Element Concepts runs weekend (350CHF) and week-long (750CHF) camps* ([elementconcept.com](http://elementconcept.com)). *Return flights with SWISS start from £65* ([swiss.com](http://swiss.com)); *return train transfers cost 141CHF* ([myswitzerland.com](http://myswitzerland.com)). *Rooms at La Cordée des Alpes, from 200CHF pp* ([hotelcordee.com](http://hotelcordee.com)). *For more information on Verbier, visit [verbier.ch](http://verbier.ch)*