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Are luxury American hotels spoiling the ambience of the French Alps?

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The new Four Seasons in Megève CREDIT: RICHARD WAITE PHOTOGRAPHY/RICHARD WAITE

If friends have bored you senseless with tales of transatlantic ski holidays, point them back to France, where two of the season's biggest hotel openings are imports from across the Pond.

Megève and La Rosière in the Savoie Mont Blanc region have both bucked the trend for new accommodation by local, independent operations - such as the new Fahrenheit 7 in Val Thorens, or the Rockypop in Chamonix - and plumped instead for two international brands: Four Seasons and Hyatt respectively.

It may be a canny move: for years I have extolled the virtues of North American skiing to anyone who will listen - the service and hospitality were leagues ahead of anything closer to home. For English-speaking instructors, cheery locals, affordable food and drink, Uncle Sam won, hands down. More recently, I'm not so sure.

I've stayed in one too many 'quality' American hotels where breakfast is an in-house Starbucks and the decor a bland, wall-to-wall greige. Moreover, prices have crept up, and not only because of the exchange rate. Combine this with a sea change of attitude in the Alps, where even the lifties now smile and wish you a bon journée...might Europe have the edge?

Megève, just over an hour's drive from Geneva, certainly has a venerable history. Founded by the Rothschilds, it has a patrician feel that regular visitors obviously enjoy. But the Four Seasons wants to appeal to a new market, and an international one at that: guests from Russia, China and the Middle East have made up a significant chunk of bookings since the five-star hotel opened last month.



America's latest export CREDIT: RICHARD WAITE PHOTOGRAPHY/RICHARD WAITE

But don't expect a gaudy oligarchs' paradise. The Rothschilds own the 55-room property, plus the 42-room Chalet du Mont d'Arbois next door, and have appointed Four Seasons to manage them. General manager Francois Arrighi champions what he calls 'le stealth wealth' as opposed to 'le bling bling'. He should know the difference: he was cherry picked from five-star hotel Les Airelles in Courchevel, and like several other staff here is an alumni of the George V in Paris; a blue blood connection if ever there was one.

What Megève's old money would make of the new hotel is a mystery: from the automated loo seats that would seem more at home in Tokyo to the ethno-fabulous modern art on the walls to the Bvlgari products in the bathroom... But like any grasping nouveau riche I swiped the lot (the toiletries, that is; not the loo seat).



No detail has been missed in the Four Season's rooms CREDIT: RICHARD WAITE PHOTOGRAPHY/RICHARD WAITE

The current Baroness Rothschild sourced much of the decor for Four Seasons Megève from her own collection, the rest she commissioned from artist Thierry Bruet; a full year's work at more than 120 paintings. The pan-Asian via Africa vibe could have jarred with the Alpine milieu but instead it succeeds at breaking up the tastefully neutral colour palette. That said, there are still swathes of marble, brass and dark wood; fabric wall coverings, fur and leather. The spa is a spectacular glass cocoon that practically glows with opulence.

And the food! Well; don't take my word for it: the restaurant critic of Le Figaro was visiting during my stay and was in raptures for Julien Gatillon, the two Michelin-starred chef manning the kitchens. The signature restaurant, 1920, is just what you might expect from its surroundings - sophisticated French - but more surprising was Kaito, a welcome experiment in Japanese fusion which brings something entirely new to Megève.

Four Seasons succeeds, simply because the whole operation is slicker than a barrel of eels. But from €800 (£710) a night - €15,000 (£13,333) for a suite - it simply cannot afford to fail.

The four-star Hyatt Centric, in La Rosière, is a more modest proposal but no less keenly anticipated. It, too, is privately owned, and hoping to attract an international crowd via a familiar name. 'Centric' is one of a dozen Hyatt brands and, happily, it feels quirky and independent and unlike a corporate chain.

The youthful staff help, smartly clad in bright blue plaid, as does the elephant motif in each of its 69 rooms. The pachyderm is the hotel's theme and mascot, thanks to the fanciful theory that Hannibal crossed the local Petit St Bernard pass on his way to fight the Romans. They're everywhere, from the life-size model outside the 8th floor restaurant, colourful canvases in the corridors to the charming cartoons on the wall of the kids' quarters in my family suite. The most pleasing is the large wooden carving in the bar, which you can contemplate while enjoying a pint of Carlsberg's strong Elephant beer - the perfect tonic after a day on the slopes.



The family-friendly Hyatt Centric pool

La Rosière has made a family-friendly name for itself and the Hyatt fits in very well: kids can use the indoor pool and (outdoor) hot tub, which is part of a well-equipped fitness set up. The pool is actually big enough to swim lengths in, which is more than can be said for the ones offered by some luxury outfits.

Access to the slopes is almost direct: just a few minutes' walk to the main Eucherts lift station. That's a contrast with the Four Seasons, where it's a 10-minute trot in a horse-drawn sleigh (yes, really).

As a fan of the small and old fashioned, I had not expected to enjoy either hotel as much as I did, but both succeed in what they set out to do. And most importantly, each feels as French as a local operation would, while making the most important concession to the international market: English is spoken just as well as it would be in America. In some cases, even better. Book now and you can be the one boasting to friends this season.

Need to know

Ski Solutions offers seven nights' room only at the five-star Four Seasons Megève from £2,750 per person this March; or from £1,830 half board at the four-star Hyatt Centric La Rosiere. Prices include flights and transfers. Find out more about the 111 resorts of the Savoie Mont Blanc region at savoie-mont-blanc.com.