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Five-star Courchevel: L'Apogée

By Tom Robbins



Interiors of L'Apogée, designed by India Mahdavi and Joseph Dirand

In 1891 in the small north-western German town of Bielefeld, Dr August Oetker made a discovery that would bring unimaginable riches and provide the foundation for an empire that stretches around the globe. Not a buried seam of gold, nor a philosopher's stone, but something almost as valuable: a recipe for baking powder.

A pharmacist by trade, Oetker marketed his formula to housewives, offering them perfect results every time. It was a success and the family firm grew, spreading out across Europe, adding a range of pre-prepared baking mixes and toppings. In 1970, it launched the frozen pizzas that can now be found in corner shops from Norway to Namibia. Meanwhile, the group diversified into shipping, banking, insurance and publishing; today it has 26,000 employees, some 400 companies and annual sales of €11bn. There are hotels, too: the six-strong Oetker Collection is arguably the world's most prestigious hotel group, including celebrated *grandes dames* such as the Hôtel du Cap-Eden-Roc in Antibes and the Bristol in Paris. Now, they are being joined by the group's first mountain hotel, L'Apogée, which sits on a hill above the French resort of Courchevel and opened 10 days ago, the cherry on top of the whole ready-mixed Dr Oetker cake.

Even by the group's standards, L'Apogée is unusual. Built at a cost of €100m, it has 170 staff but just 53 rooms, and will operate only for the ski season – about 110 days a year. The interiors include more than 100 tonnes of marble. There's a private conveyor belt to deliver guests back from the ski slopes. The in-house ski room offers the hotel's own custom-made skis, while the boutique beside it sells boys' toys, such as a watch with a €525,000 price tag.

Officially, rates start at €900 per night, but only five rooms sell at that price and only in the quietest weeks of the winter. The 33 suites cost at least €1,800 and up to €6,200 per night. On average, the hotel hopes to achieve about €2,500 per room per night, not including breakfast.



Such rates would make L'Apogée the most expensive hotel in London, and are much higher than at the Hôtel du Cap, the most prestigious

address in the south of France. But they barely raise a shrug from my enquiring ski instructor, so much has Courchevel become the ski world's undisputed capital of conspicuous consumption.



In a village of 2,000 residents, there are now no fewer than 18 five-star hotels, more than anywhere in the country outside Paris. Of 13 French hotels with “palace” status, two are here. Five restaurants have two Michelin stars (the same number as New York), and two have one star. Private chalets, such as La Bergerie, cost up to €300,000 per week and each season try to out-trump each other with new outlandish facilities. “When we started in 1998 it was seen as pretty exciting if a chalet had an outdoor hot tub,” says Rupert Longsdon, founder of luxury ski specialist Oxford Ski. “Now they have to have an indoor pool and full spa facilities; some have cinemas or private night clubs. What was the weekly rental price is now being asked nightly.”

It has been a remarkable transformation. At the end of the second world war, the site of all this opulence was barren land – spurned even by the farmers because the rough grass scratched their calves’ tongues (leaving them, in the local patois, *écortzeuvé*, a word that evolved into Courchevel). But the state, and subsequently the *department*, had big plans: to develop the country’s first purpose-built ski resort here and create a chain of lifts running across the mountain tops all the way to Valloire, 33km away. In 1946, the first lifts arrived on the Tovets plateau – now branded Courchevel 1850 despite only being at 1,750m above sea level (apparently a marketing bid to outgun rival Val d’Isère) – and the first hotels opened the following year.

In the end, the grand plans were scaled back, the lifts never reached Valloire. Even so, the ski area covers 1,785 hectares, equivalent to the five largest North American ski areas combined. Moreover, over the past 20 years, nowhere else has courted the wealth of emerging markets in the same way. Last weekend, for example, some 250 leading tour operators and travel agents from around the world were entertained by the tourist office in the top hotels and restaurants. The previous year a jet was chartered to bring delegates from the International Luxury Travel Market conference in Cannes. Its entire website is available in Russian and “Brazilian”. And while building a new hotel in a Swiss or Austrian resort might involve years of local politics and planning debates, in Courchevel things happen fast: L’Apogée project was only begun in January 2012. It opened a year ahead of schedule, something unheard of for a luxury hotel.

And so the ski bums began to be edged out, the billionaires and celebrities started to move in. “If four or five top oligarchs ski in Courchevel and enjoy it, they spread the word – that’s how it works,” says Philippe Perd, senior vice-president of the Oetker Collection, who expects Russians and Ukrainians to be L’Apogée’s best clients, making up 25 per cent of guests. Such clientele have helped the resort reinvest huge sums to make the slopes the most manicured in the world. This season one of the lifts has been given a makeover by Karl Lagerfeld.

So what can Oetker bring to this festival of excess – roast swans, diamond-studded Moon Boots and Jacuzzis pumped with asses’ milk? In fact, the answer is rather the opposite. What really strikes is the total absence of ostentation, the restraint. Walk into the Cheval Blanc, the nearby hotel run by the LVMH group, and you are greeted in the lobby by a doorman in Tyrolean garb, and a 6ft-high reindeer fashioned from Louis Vuitton handbags. At L’Apogée the staff wear sober black suits, the walls are dark wood and the flowers are uniformly white.

The bedrooms are utterly devoid of high-tech toys or “wow-factor” gizmos: there is no television in the bathroom, no iPad, no electric curtains nor climate control system (if you want to change the temperature, you need to call reception, or open a window). My room sells for between €2,300 and €3,700 per night, but when I open the minibar expecting Krug miniatures and the finest petits fours, I find only two bottles of Kronenbourg, Coca-Cola, some nuts and a pot of Maltesers. In the bathroom there is Bamford organic shower gel, shampoo and conditioner, but €3,700 doesn’t buy bubble bath.

Instead the money has gone on creating a discreet, grown-up look, the work of Parisian designers India Mahdavi and Joseph Dirand. “In the mountains, people spend all day out in the blinding light, so we wanted them to come in and feel cocooned,” Mahdavi told me. “It’s not a statement of fun, or ultra-modern design – we wanted to create something that felt more like a home, a manor house.”

So the rooms feel simple, warm and comfortable, using a palette of burgundy, dark green and



The resort's Saulire cable car



ingham. It takes me a while to notice that the snowflake motif in the green leather headboard is replicated in the shape of the brass light fittings, the legs of the bedside table, the pony skin stools and the contoured surface of the walnut cabinets. Later I spot it in the parquet floor of the bar.

The bathrooms are more art deco, reminiscent of Mahdavi's rooms at Claridges in London, with swaths of Fior di Bosco marble and contrasting black stone. The glass of the mirror has tiny marks, betraying it as antique. "New mirrors are so cold – you look awful," Mahdavi tells me.

In fact, apart from the chairs, every item of furniture is bespoke. Even the black and white checked carpets, which are nice but unremarkable, have been specially woven. Such a blank-cheque-book approach is possible because the hotel is managed by the Oetker Collection, but separately owned and financed by Xavier Niel, the French telecoms billionaire. Oetker now plans to replicate the model, partnering with other owners to expand the collection to 15 hotels by 2020.

Throughout L'Apogée, the walls display brooding photographs by Adrien Dirand, the designer's brother. They show forests, glaciers and the pylons of cable cars, often swathed in cloud. I love them but can't help wondering if some visitors – many of whom, after all, come to Courchevel to sabre champagne bottles – might find it all a bit too austere and pared-back.

The hotel's position, on the site of a former ski jump above the resort, gives it unrivalled views, but the swimming pool is windowless and the restaurant focuses on the sweep of a grand staircase rather than of the surrounding mountains. The menu runs from lobster (€115) down to burgers and pasta: the hotel decided Courchevel had enough Michelin-starred restaurants, so chose something simpler and more family friendly. Opting out of Courchevel's gastronomic melee is another bold move – the Cheval Blanc offers a two-starred restaurant with just five tables and jaw-dropping architecture.

Maybe L'Apogée is a sign that Courchevel is finally growing up, or a vision of what high luxury looks like post-*la crise*. Possibly it's just that the real elite have always preferred simplicity – as one former general manager of the Hôtel du Cap put it: "When on vacation, the rich like to pay maharaja prices to live like boy scouts."

Early signs suggest there is a market for L'Apogée's discreet version of extravagance. My tour of the penthouse, on the hotel's first full day of opening, is cancelled because someone has just rung up to book it, for a week. The cost? €12,600 per night.



Tom Robbins was a guest of L'Apogée (lapogeecourchevel.com); doubles cost from €900 half-board. Packages can be arranged by Scott Dunn (scottdunn.com), Oxford Ski (oxfordski.com) and Kaluma (kalumatravel.co.uk)

Five-star skiing: more new mountain hotels

W Verbier The first ski hotel in the W chain opened on December 1, and is part of a big redesign for the Swiss resort. Instead of ending at a scruffy car park, the piste into town now arrives at a smart plaza in front of the W. Doubles from SFr500 (£346); wverbier.com

Le Grand Bellevue, Gstaad Built in 1912, this Gstaad landmark reopened last weekend under new ownership. A year-long refurbishment has seen the traditional interiors and 57 rooms reimaged in a far more contemporary style. Doubles from SFr620; bellevue-gstaad.ch

Koh-I Nor, Val Thorens Claiming the title of highest five-star hotel in Europe, the Koh-I Nor opened last month in Val Thorens. It has 63 rooms and food from chef Yoann Conte, who has two Michelin stars at his restaurant near Annecy. Doubles from €340 per night; hotel-kohinor.com

The Chedi, Andermatt A former barracks at the edge of the sleepy Swiss town of Andermatt is being transformed into a luxury resort by Egyptian billionaire property developer Samih Sawiris. The first step is the five-star Chedi hotel, due to open this weekend.

Doubles from SFr650; thechedi-anderlatt.com

InterContinental, Davos With a futuristic exterior and chalet-style interior, the InterContinental (right) is due to open by the end of this month. Doubles from SFr344; ihg.com



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