

Luxury travel



Auberge du Père Bise

Culinary thrills and divine hotels in the shadow of Mont Blanc

Sean Thomas visits three magnificent hotels and meets a Michelin-star chef in the French Alps

It's about the time that the chef Jean Sulpice veers off the sunlit, lakeside, narrow Alpine road in our 1970s open-top Renault dune buggy and starts hurtling across an open field with the clear intention of driving us all straight off the cliff and into the glittery waters of Lake Annecy that I remember a wise old insight: all chefs are just a tiny bit mad, and the best are often totally fruit-loop-en-croûte.

At the last moment, however, he veers the car from the wooded precipice, heading instead for a hedge of tall flowers. Then he leans from the rusty car, grabs a fistful of herbs and makes me inhale the nosegay: "I use this in one of my desserts. I put it all in my cooking. Everything! Tonight you will see!"

If Sulpice is a little loco, in the most charming way, there is no doubting his amazing talent. He comes from a dynasty of Savoyard hoteliers and worked across France from the age of 16, sharpening the Sabatiers of his craft. Then, in his twenties, he became the chef-owner of a restaurant at the top of a popular ski slope. Soon he was the

youngest chef in France with a Michelin star and, as he explains, it was also "the highest star in the world!" That is to say, his restaurant at Val Thorens at 2,300m, was so high that water boiled at 85C, not 100C, meaning that Sulpice had to painstakingly adjust all his recipes.

Now, after years of hard yakka in the peaks, the chef and his family have come down to lake level to reopen a revered old restaurant, Auberge du Père Bise, and turn it into a gastronomic hotel. The auberge is at the lakeshore end of the charming, Hansel-and-Gretel-village of Talloires. It's one of three recently rejuvenated hotels — none more than 90 minutes' drive from another — that I'm exploring, making a neat tour of the meadows-and-mountains of this eastern French region of Savoie.

"At first," Sulpice says, leaping from the car, and guiding me into the beamed, waterside hotel-restaurant, "I was uncertain whether to get involved. The auberge is so famous, it was once run by only the second woman in the world to get three stars. But then I looked at the location... and I could not resist."

A few minutes of investigation prove his point. The location is flawless. The sleek oakwood lobby of reception opens into an airy pavilion, the glass walls of which open, in turn, on to a terrace of decking suspended over the most blithely picturesque part of beautiful Lake Annecy. Today the lake is shimmering in the summer sun like a swathe of blue silk, occasionally zippered white by speedboats.

Behind us the mighty Dents de Lanfon soar rhapsodically above the tree line:



The Hôtel Royal in Évian



great for climbing, hiking, paragliding, or — if you are Sulpice — running, uphill, at 5am. There are round-the-lake footpaths and bike lanes. Otherwise you can sail, swim, yacht, pedalo, paddleboat, and fish for crayfish and perch, or you can forage, like Sulpice, for mushroom and herbs in the nearby forests. If you're feeling lazy, you can just sit on the decking of the terrace, sip chilled champagne and gaze across the water as the setting sun throws golden lances at ancient châteaux in medieval Duingt, some of them owned by the same families for 1,000 years. Yes, 1,000 years.

That may make the 100-year-old auberge look positively youthful, but it still has a historic reputation to uphold — a fact underlined by the 30, 40 and 60-year-old Michelin guides nailed to one new wall, praising it for its food. Yes, this place has a brilliant location (and 23 agreeable, mostly lakeview rooms), but in the end it is all about the tucker.

To be honest, I'm concerned for Sulpice. He already has two stars and he's the Gault & Millau guide's chef of the year. He could have sat on his culinary laurels, but he's boldly rebooting one of the most revered foodie temples in France, and charging hefty prices to recoup his investment. Has he blown it?

I needn't have worried. That night I sit down to dinner. The air is warm, the mosquitoes polite (one regal wave and they go), the lake is in a good mood (not always the case — the winds can be stormily capricious). Canapés arrive: a mini-macaron of apple and foie gras with a hint of Hobnob, a strawberry-infused micro-scroll of radish and

toffee (I think). My bouche is amused.

Then comes the tasting menu. It's a phrase I often dread, especially in France, where they take these things far too seriously, and where, all too often, it means 12 tiny courses of increasingly overambitious WTF, commonly hiding under foam, stretched out over four hours that feel like a pointlessly expensive term at a bad university.

This is not Sulpice's style. Service is brisk yet relaxed, the food comes with fine and deliciously obscure Savoyard whites and reds (ever heard of the local mondeuse grape? Me neither). Moreover, all the dishes are excellent, some are outstanding: pike quenelle in watercress juice with trout caviar, which looks like a pale yellow ice hockey puck made of softly condensed ether with amber pearls (and invented just today, the waitress tells me, with a hint of rolled eyes); Piedmontese ravioli stuffed with Annecy snails and a harmonious quintet of herbs; empty boiled eggshell refilled with saffron, crayfish and lovely globs of goo (I hope I'm not getting too technical).

After that I probably drink too much mondeuse red and I forget the last three courses. Or was it eight? I just remember going to bed feeling happy. And not too fat, which is always an achievement in Savoie. This is the land, after all, of creamy cheese and addictive charcuterie, of zillion-calorie raclette, tartiflette and fondue: grub for burly mountain men with rock-miner appetites.

Talking of mountains, the next day (7.30am, ouch) Sulpice takes me in his own water taxi across the lake to



Terminal Neige

ludicrously pretty old Annecy, the main town hereabouts. It's a delightful if well-touristed nook of antique France, with be-swanned canals, medieval townhouses and Italianate piazzas, and a street market boasting a brilliant cheesemaker (Jacques Dubouloz) and a cloister with a world-class bakery (Philippe Rigolot — try his famous "Mr Smith", an emerald confection of Granny Smith apple marmalade on delicate biscuit and cream). It's all so alluring I'm tempted to stay, but, as I say, the mountains beckon.

So I head for the hills to my second hotel, which is, like the Auberge du Père Bise, famously old and lately renewed. And that's where the comparisons end, because I am lodged in the un-boutique,

virtually imperial magnificence of the Hôtel Royal in Évian-les-Bains, on the mountainous southern shores of Lac Léman (Lake Geneva to you and me).

The French mega-corp Danone, which owns Evian water, also owns this venerable hotel, with its golf course, sybaritic spa, opulent rooms, duo of ace restaurants and summer training camp for top-notch soccer teams (the day I leave, Liverpool FC arrive). Danone recently invested squillions of euros to spruce up the old place.

Its money was well spent. The Royal has been on the tourist map since the first English tourists started taking Grand Tours. They would visit Lake Geneva en route to Italy and nearly always stopped in Évian, so the town

Need to know

Sean Thomas was a guest of Savoie Mont Blanc (savoie-mont-blanc.com)

Where to stay
Auberge du Père Bise (perebise.com) has doubles from €229 (£204) a night; the 11-course tasting menu costs €210pp. Hôtel Royal in Évian-les-Bains has B&B doubles from €382 a night (hotel-royal-evian.com). The boat from Évian to Yvoire is €450 for ten people. Terminal Neige near Chamonix has half-board doubles from €130 a night (montenvers.terminal-neige.com)



The Hôtel Royal

responded by building guesthouses, then pukka hotels. The architect responsible for the Royal's refurb has managed to keep the Victorian grandeur while adding neat touches of modernity. Put it this way, there's still lots of marble, mirrors and frescoes, but the steam rooms and hot tubs have wifi, and are now big enough for entire football squads (and their Wags). It isn't cheap; it is certainly lavish.

And then there's the Brand New Boat. As part of its attempt to attract the world's ultra-rich (a jolly successful effort, judging by the serenely unworried clientele sunning themselves around the pool) the hotel has commissioned its own intergalactic hydrofoil lake-rocket, to speed its guests from Geneva airport, and avoid all the snarly traffic.

You can also take this interstellar jetamaran off for a day trip. As I board I feel, pleasantly, like a cackling James Bond supervillain heading for his undersea lair. In fact I am zooming at 56mph (that's not a typo), on top of the water, to the cute but très touristy little town of Yvoire, with its cuckoo clock shops selling local crafts lovingly handmade by machines in China.

My advice? Spend no more than half an hour here in the lanes and gardens (it is rather comely), then walk or cycle to peaceful, nearly-as-pretty Nernier, a mile down the coast. Lord Byron and Shelley once stayed here. At the time they were living in the notorious Villa Diodati near Geneva, where, in one famously stormy summer, they took laudanum, got drunk, had threesomes, and 18-year-old Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*.

Byron and Shelley hated Nernier and said that it had some of the "worst beds" in Europe, although Shelley also noted that it had one of the prettiest boys. Today the town is quietly rich and discreetly hedonistic, with its golden lads and lasses jumping off the quay into the cooling waters, to escape the fierce summer heat. Shelley — and Byron, for that matter — would have found the new prospects most inviting.

All of which neatly segues into my final destination in Savoie: the refurbished, but resolutely historic Terminal Neige hotel, facing the Mer de Glace glacier, high above the affable, buzzy, youthful Alpine-Savoyard town of Chamonix. Mary Shelley visited the glacier in that same year of 1816. She described it as "the most desolate place on earth" and used it as a location in her famous novel.

To get to Chamonix I must drive south from Évian. At first, the journey

is unpromising. The traffic, as always, is heavy. Even when *la circulation* thins out the views are desultory, a kind of hilly suburbia interspersed with light industry. This is not the loveliest chunk of France. As I am about to abandon hope, the warehouses disappear, the autoroute veers drunkenly left and grows stilted as it speeds up a steep green valley. Ahead of me drifting clouds part to show shining white peaks, glittering like the sugared cakes in Monsieur Rigolot's marvelous pâtisserie in Annecy. And in the middle, the biggest of them all, one of the highest summits in Europe, Mont Blanc.

The revamped Terminal Neige, a near neighbour of Mont Blanc, dates from the 19th century, and is reached by a fire engine-red, rack-and-pinion railway (you cannot drive up, although you can feasibly hike). Inside, it is chic-yet-rustic, hipster-meets-hermit, cosy with a tinge of trendy. Outside it ain't the cutest. In fact, with its foursquare brooding granite, it could be taken for a prison. But then it's not meant to be looked at, you're meant to sit here, either in the glass-walled restaurant (try the scrummy sausages with polenta) or, weather permitting, out on the terrace, from where you just stare at everything else.

The views are bewilderingly majestic. Directly in front of the hotel is a vertiginously spired mountain, which resembles a mile-high gothic cathedral audaciously sliced in two by Damien Hirst on steroids. Way down below is the famous glacier, first "discovered" in 1741 by two Englishmen, dressed as maharajahs to "impress the natives". Behind it all looms Mont Blanc, a constant yet near-invisible presence: like a distant and generally benign autocrat who occasionally executes everyone with an avalanche. For walkers it is quite the destination. Through the afternoon I happily hike the scree beneath the peaks, my face burning in the sun, even as the rocks are sintered with scars of snow.

When I get back, I eat more Savoyard sausages, drink more mondeuse wine, sit on the terrace and watch the sun turn the rock-spines red. Tomorrow I might visit the famous ice caves, or take one of Europe's highest cable cars to the Aiguille du Midi. Tonight, as I rub my tired knees, I think of Jean Sulpice, wrestling with his high-altitude boiling points. In a way his mountaineering attitude captures the derring-do spirit of this entire region. Why climb Mont Blanc? Why make a quenelle of ether and amber? Why erect a hotel absurdly perched above a glacier? I don't know. But I am glad they did.