



Whims and Fancies

Luxury knows no bounds at Austria's Chalet N, one of the world's most luxurious ski chalets set in the heart of the Alps, making it an unforgettable stay for ELAINE KIM and her husband

RENÉ BENKO IS 37. MOST MEN his age would have done well to own their own home, but he has done quite a bit more than that. Emerging from obscurity through wit, diligence and sheer ambition, he founded the Signa Group at the age of 22, and has since built it into a property development conglomerate with a portfolio of hotels, offices and residential buildings and commercial properties, valued at over €4b.

When he built his holiday home in Lech, Austria's most prestigious ski resort, he spared no expense. Today, when Benko is not in residence, Chalet N in Oberlech is the world's most exclusive and luxurious (and incidentally one of the most expensive) ski chalet available for rental.

My husband John and I had the pleasure of being invited to stay at Chalet N. Upon arrival in Zurich, which Singapore Airlines' A380 flies to from Singapore daily, we were met by the chalet's chauffeur, smartly suited in a wool blazer emblazoned with Chalet N's insignia.



LUXE CHARM Set against breathtaking landscapes, Chalet N features a traditional wooden alpine architecture, but its interior is a picture of modern luxury

A two-hour drive took us past rolling pastures and breathtaking alpine landscapes to Lech. While Lech is Austria's most prestigious ski resort, Oberlech is its most upscale village with wealthy city-dwelling Europeans making their way in Porsche Cayennes and BMW SUVs to their luxurious second homes each ski season. Yet, Lech somehow manages to maintain its quaint atmosphere and village charm, and is delightfully unpretentious.

Chalet N shares the traditional wooden alpine architecture of its neighbours, but when you step through its glass doors, its interior is a picture of modern luxury. Munich-based firm Landau + Kindelbacher is behind the interior design of the chalet, and created a setting that is at once sleek and cosy, perfectly complementing traditional materials such as recycled pine, with modern glass and silver accents. The living room is warm and spacious. Sofas strewn with fur cushions and throws are arranged around a sleek glass-enclosed fireplace, and across the length of the room, wood-framed glass doors lead onto the terrace.

Stepping out onto the deck, we caught our first sight of the breathtaking view from the chalet—the valley falls away from the balcony to give rise to snow-covered mountain—a picture-perfect view of the Alps.

We were greeted by the affable Georg, who manages the chalet. Over glasses of Laurent-Perrier champagne, he explained how the 24 staff—including housekeepers, butler, chauffeurs, masseuse, personal trainer, hairstylist and Michelin-starred chefs—are available round the clock to meet guests' every request. "A guest could have a massage at 3am if so desired," we were informed as we took the elevator to our room on the second floor.

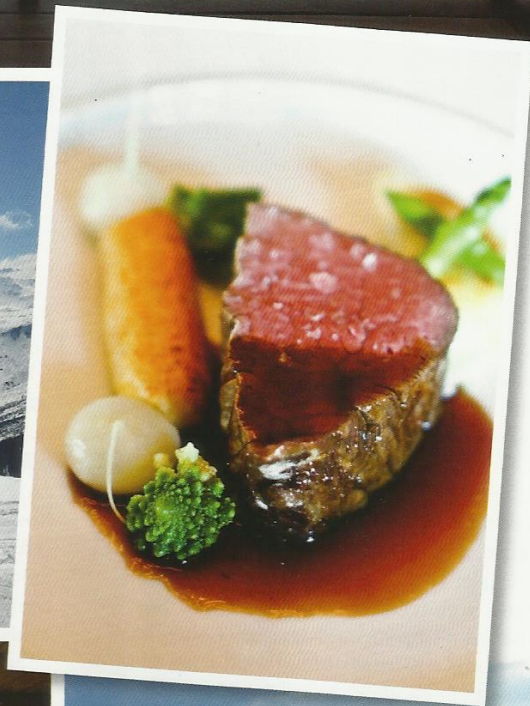
"And this is your room," Georg smiled as he pushed open a large door with a flourish. It wasn't a room. It was a luxury apartment with a spacious living and dining area, a bedroom with layers of soft duvet and pillows monogrammed with our initials, a large walk-in wardrobe and a luxurious bathroom stocked with his and hers Hermès amenities. It had every modern accoutrement—touch

CHECKING IN



COOL VIEW

The snow-covered peaks of the Alps as seen from Chalet N



PURE LUXURY

Clockwise from far left: The writer on the ski slopes of Oberlech; the main course of the degustation dinner; the hot tub set in the snow; the heated indoor swimming pool with a daybed over its edge



screen switches, electric blinds, even a Toto WC with a heated seat and massage jets.

This was one of the 10 suites in the property, and for all its luxury, paled in comparison to the master suite on the top floor, with its entrance hall covered with a Swarovski crystal-stippled silk carpet, leading to a huge living room with a sunken living area and fireplace, and a beautiful bedroom with a luxurious four-poster bed under Mooi chandeliers. A connecting door leads to the children's bedroom, with four cosy bunk beds each with its own built-in reading light, and an assortment of rocking horses, ride-on Lamborghinis and other toys laid out. The whole chalet sleeps up to 24 people.

Blown away by the luxury of the place, I was curious as to who the clientele are. "Mostly European families, some Russian, some from the Middle East," said Robert Leingruber, who works at the Signa Group and oversaw the project. And the price tag for a week at Chalet N? "€270,000."

Our hosts wanted us to simply enjoy the property, so our time there was completely unscheduled, and the staff ready to accommodate any request. We fell into an easy routine. We'd take breakfast at one of the two sun-dappled dining rooms, where a breakfast spread of pastries, cold cuts and yoghurts would be laid out, and the maitre d' stood ready to take orders from the menu, which included such indulgent dishes as poached eggs with truffle or a cup of egg soufflé with caviar. Every morning, I'd have flaky, buttery croissants with Gruyère and prosciutto, and order a lightly scrambled egg, which, flecked with chives, bacon and an assortment of other ingredients, was absolutely delicious.

Then, of course, there was the skiing. Chalet N is a ski-in, ski-out accommodation, equipped with a stylish boot room, and a ski lift at its doorstep. Gerhard is the in-house instructor and guide, and Marika Daxer comes in to provide guests with ski lessons. She took me out in the mornings and was lovely and down to earth, always insisting on helping me with my buckles and carrying my skis. It was only later that I learned that she was an Austrian national skier and world champion.

When we return from the slopes famished, a late afternoon lunch awaits. The Michelin-starred chefs are a pair of brothers and authors of a cookbook, so fine dining is a daily occurrence at the chalet. Their repertoire includes Austrian classics like schnitzel with mashed potato, Italian dishes such as lobster

capellini for lunch, and a five-course French degustation dinner. But they are not above preparing a nice toasted Nutella sandwich, which I asked for one afternoon. If you were an oenophile, a wander through the chalet's cellar would leave you in awe. On one side, shelves of French bordeaux—bottles of Château Lafite Rothschild and Château Haut-Brion—by the dozen sit on the glass displays, on another are burgundies from the top domaines (on one shelf, eight types of vintages of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti await) and on another side, Italian wines—rows upon rows of Sassicaia, Ornellaia and Gaja—line the wall. As I said, the owners spared no expense at Chalet N, and food and wine were no exception.

However, the highlight of Chalet N is the private spa, which rivals the most sybaritic ESPA I've been to, and implausibly, is all ours during our stay. The heated indoor swimming pool has a Ralph Lauren cushion-covered daybed cantilevered over its edge, and twinkling lights embedded in the ceiling.

Behind a glass door is a cavernous spa complex, warmed by flickering orange flames in glass fireplaces. There are two cold plunge pools, a steam bath, Finnish sauna, hay sauna, ice cave, and a tropical rainshower behind a curved curtain of Swarovski crystals.

There are two massage suites, each with a freestanding bathtub and

silver-leafed ceilings. Franko and Eva are ready to ease away any aches and tiredness, then deliver you, bleary-eyed, to the relaxation room with a cup of herbal tea, to lie on the beds that rock gently side to side.

But what we loved most was stepping outside to sink into the hot tub set in the snow, with the most spectacular view before us. Just us, alone among one of nature's most beautiful natural landscapes.

That is perhaps the greatest luxury that Chalet N offers—the sheer indulgence of having these luxuries on demand—any time you wanted and all to yourself. You can curl up under a cashmere blanket and watch a movie in the private theatre at any hour. You can stroll into the lounge and have the bartender create a concoction for you at the private bar. When the craving hits, you can ask the Michelin-starred chefs for a Nutella sandwich.

If I had all the money in the world, and could spend a week in any ski chalet in the world, would I choose to stay at Chalet N?

Without a doubt, yes. ⑩

The greatest luxury that Chalet N offers... is having these luxuries on demand