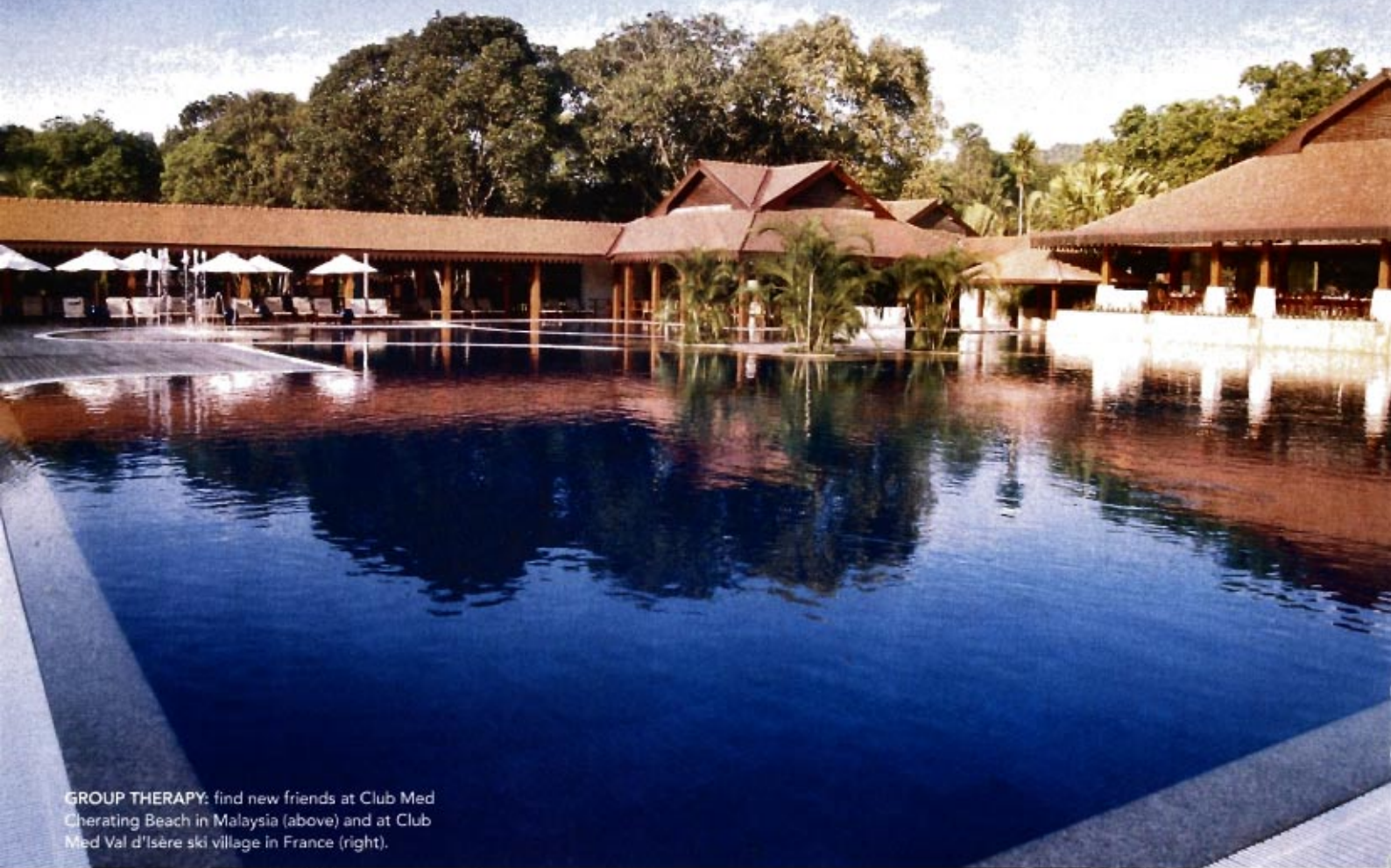


hot & cold THERAPY

With a little **gentile** persuasion, Club Med has a way of winning over even the most reluctant guest. On the beach or on the ski slopes, it's easy to get into the party spirit!





GROUP THERAPY: find new friends at Club Med Cherating Beach in Malaysia (above) and at Club Med Val d'Isère ski village in France (right).

I have a confession to make. I don't do "group", as in group activities. I also don't queue, nor pay to get in. Which is probably why I don't go out much.

Club Med resorts appeal to groups, so I am probably not the most promising guest they have ever met when I arrive at *Rendezvous II*, a seven-day singles fest for folk from around the globe at Club Med Cherating Beach on Malaysia's east coast.

And perhaps it wasn't the best time for my visit as other times are less focussed on group events. *Rendezvous* is an annual event, a fact that disturbs me somewhat when I meet return guests from the year before. If it worked, surely they'd be married to last year's conquest, with .6 children and a joint cheque account. I muse. Nonetheless, I keep schtum and head for the buffet. In fact, I spend most of the week heading for the buffet.

Club Med's buffets are legendary. It's a group thing, a communal eating experience: all those hands reaching out together for the fluffy breakfast pancakes, succulent luncheon shellfish and ginger-spiced stir-fry for dinner. And we won't mention the all-you-can-drink wine supply. That's best kept under the table (which is where I ended up on my first night).

Cherating resort is a four-trident (pronounced "tree-don") property in the Club Med portfolio. Translated, it's a plush, beachfront complex with an infinity pool straight out of *Belle* magazine.

Language lessons

Guests are referred to as GMs. That's not to be confused with general manager – he is known as the Chef de Village but he doesn't cook, he's the boss. GM stands for Gentil Membre, or kind guest. Staff members are GOs, not as in the Wham song but as in Gentil Organisateur. Translated, that means they are paid to make sure you're having a good time because they're having a good time. Still with me?

Crazy Signs are what the GOs do with the GMs each night. It's a coordinated dance ritual that ends the nightly show. The show includes the Chef de Village, who sings, dances or juggles. It also involves audience participation, preferably volunteers but sometimes conscripts. If you were the first on the dance floor for the Hustle, the Bus Stop or the Macarena, then you'll love Crazy Signs.

Back to *Rendezvous II*. Did I meet a man? Yes, many. Any I would see again? Yes, one crazy French mosquito man (he constantly needed swatting) whom I did see again. Did he do group? Yes, he did too much group and not enough solo time. In fact, he loved group so



Club for cubs

We all know Club Med's reputation as a playground for adults, but did you know it also offers the perfect family-friendly holiday program? Children of all ages are welcome at most Club Med villages. Selected resorts offer specialised babies' and kids' facilities, with qualified staff members who can look after and entertain little ones while their parents play. New mascots Clubber and Meddy are ready to delight junior clubbers with their fun-packed antics.

Where to get more info

Club Med: www.clubmed.com.au



much, he left me reclining in my room for over an hour while he ran off to do the haka with some New Zealand rugby boys at the bar.

Snow business

Three months later and I have a confession to make. I did group, not with the French mosquito man but with a swarm of French men. I couldn't help myself. It was Club Med Tignes Val Claret, the highest resort in the French Alps, and I was cold. There's a lot to be said for group to raise the temperature. Crazy Signs becomes a new art form when it's below freezing.

I had gone to the Alps to perfect my skiing; instead, I perfected my perving. My Club Med ski instructor is a cliché, though he prefers to be called Claude. It's obvious he was first in line when chiselled cheeks, blue eyes and long lashes were handed out, so I am first in line for my lesson each morning. "Follow me," he cries as he whisks me into a frenzy down the slopes. Not that he's looking at me – he's too busy checking out his perfect silhouette, shadow-lit by the sun on the snow. I don't learn much, but the view from behind him is always good and we stop regularly for *panache* (beer and lemonade) and Chartreuse liqueur (liquid fire). I think it makes my skiing better, but I don't quite remember.

Adult education

I am warming to this group thing and decide to take on my first adults-only Club Med in Chamonix. This town on the French-Italian border is home to Mont Blanc and the infamous Vallée Blanche ski run.

Chamonix is the *pièce de résistance* (that's French for "hot") of the Club Med ski resorts in France. With an interior revamped by renowned designer Jacques Garcia, it's also home to the Cinq Mondes spa. This, you must understand, is no ordinary spa. This is the Mark II, the Silver Shadow, the Jackie O of spas.

And this is where I spend my time, soaking in wooden tubs filled with rose petals under softly coloured lights that change hue with every heartbeat. I take breaks for foie gras and wine at lunchtime and melted camembert and wine at dinner, where I sit next to a delightful French artist. I am beginning to like this break-bread-with-a-stranger dining philosophy.

The French love food. And wine. And sex. Okay, let's not get carried away here. Their love of sex is prevalent at Val d'Isère, my third Club Med stop on my skiing sojourn. It is here that I meet one 26-year-old man who reminds me every time I see him – at the bar, in the restaurant, in the gym, in the ski room – that

he is the "king of sex". It must be a small kingdom, I tell him, as I always see him alone.

I meet French bankers, Dutch media men, German IT experts and American lawyers. Val d'Isère is the party Club Med and I lock my door at night, though this doesn't stop a few knocks post midnight. That's what I love about French men – they make you feel so wanted.

By the time I make it back to Oz and to Club Med Lindeman Island, I know all the moves to Crazy Signs and think nothing of throwing myself on the stage with the Chef de Village. I join in water polo, happily invite potential new friends to dine at my table and am first up at trivia and karaoke events. This embarrasses my niece, whom I have brought to Kids' Club. You see, she doesn't do group.

Twenty-four hours later and she's fighting me for the microphone. Club Med does that to you. It's part of the magic.

RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

Acor is now a significant shareholder in Club Med and the two organisations will increasingly work closer together to provide even more holiday options for travellers. Rachael Oakes-Ash flew Virgin Atlantic Upper Class from Europe to Sydney. Malaysian Airlines and Virgin Atlantic codeshare from Sydney to Kuala Lumpur with connecting flights to Cherating.