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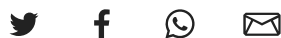


How 'contactless-catered chalets' are the ski world's answer to Brexit and Covid

Brexit and Covid-19 created the imperfect storm for British chalet operators in the Alps, as experts warn of dwindling availability

By Abigail Butcher, TRAVEL WRITER

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As tour operators report strong demand for ski holidays next season, the options for staying

in a catered ski chalet looks set to be limited, as companies grapple with restrictions imposed on them by Brexit and Covid-19.

Catered chalets have long been [hugely popular among British skiers](#), but with higher staffing costs and concern over how long the pandemic will last, the plethora on offer just a few years ago has dwindled.

While specialist chalet operators are working around the issues to continue to offer catered and shared catered properties, prices will be increased by at least five per cent — but more options are also appearing on the table.

Ski France, a leading French accommodation provider, has exploded onto the chalet market with a new 'contactless catered' programme across an estimated 60 or 70 chalets next season, a concept being mirrored elsewhere throughout the industry.

ADVERTISING

While a number of British catered chalet operators have been [lost to the pandemic](#), Ski France has hoovered up vacant chalets, increasing its portfolio from five last season to 50 at present, with hopes to secure more before next winter. It says the contactless programme offers an affordable and Covid-safe option for fans of the chalet model.

Guests will arrive to a fully stocked larder for breakfast, tea and snacks, while meals will be delivered freshly during the day while skiers are out, over six days of the week. There will be a mid-week linen change and hosts at the end of a phone to organise ski hire and restaurant bookings. It's also offering an à la carte version, where self-catering guests can have 'contactless catered' on the days of their choice.

Richard Green, founder of Ski France, said: "Contactless-catered chalets are the logical answer to clients' anxiety about close contact with others — how long social distancing will be de rigueur is anyone's guess, but it's likely to be at least a season or two. It keeps post-Brexit prices reasonable, as operators will no longer be able to rely on gap-year students keeping wages low. Local people will now fill the jobs."

Ski chalet holidays have always been a social affair, with a British host cooking and serving meals | CREDIT: Ski France

British [seasonal workers](#) have previously staffed Alpine ski chalets, classed as "business visitors" to the EU but since January 1, all that has changed. Visitors are now restricted to spending no more than 90 days in the EU during any 180-day period so staff must now be "seconded," which requires work permits that are lengthy and tricky to obtain. In addition, staff must be employed on local payrolls adhering to local employment law.

Working a season has been a [rite of passage for many Britons](#) since the boom in skiing and the advent of chalet holidays, particularly among younger, gap-year students happy to work for minimum pay in return for the perks of being able to ski for six months.

While a UK trade group SBIT (Seasonal Businesses in Travel) is lobbying the government to make it as easy as possible for British citizens to work abroad seasonally, ski companies cannot yet bank on results. At present, Crystal Ski Holidays, which last September [cancelled its entire catered chalet operation](#), says it plans to “focus on hotels and self-catering” next season and is still working out how to operate chalets for 2021/22.

Hotelplan, owner of Inghams, Esprit Ski and Ski Total, also [cut its programme](#) in half in anticipation of Brexit and Covid difficulties. It is an active member of SBIT but will go into next season with the same reduced operation and says it’s “actively recruiting” EU passport holders both in the UK and local to their destinations.

Hotelplan CEO Joe Ponte told us “our chalet programme is already [50 per cent sold](#),” but a spokesman declined to comment on how exactly chalets would operate.

Skiworld is similarly busy with bookings and while not yet detailed on its website, it will run chalets with self-catered, catered, “contactless” and “flexible catering” options. Marketing manager Robert Dixon said: “Since we are one of the few operators offering catered chalets for 21/22, we are seeing [much higher than normal demand](#) for next season — in Paradiski we have no availability for a catered chalet over Christmas 2021, for example. Plus we have clients who weren't able to ski this season so it’s almost like two seasons will be combined into one.”

Timeline: The history of ski chalets

1932 Erna Low, a young Austrian woman studying in London advertised for other young people to join her on a Christmas skiing holiday, to help her get back to her family for Christmas. Five enthusiastic clients spent a fortnight in Sölden for £15, including full board, rail travel and ski hire. It went so well she started it as a business.

1940s After an interruption by the war, keen skiers started to venture to the mountains again in the late 40s, locations including Megève, St Moritz and Klosters were popular.

1970s-80s Boom time for skiing with new hotels opening in resorts across the Alps and the emergence of specialist ski operators including Bladon Lines, which was the first chalet operator from this new age of ski holidays. Offerings were cheap, cheerful and hugely popular.

1997 The luxury ski chalets took off with the launch of Descent, priced at £40,000 a week which grew to operate in Courchevel, Val d'Isère, Meribel, Les Gets, Verbier, Zermatt, Klosters and St. Moritz.

2003 The restoration of Ferme de Moudon in Les Gets by Nicky Dobree was highlighted in an episode of Grand Designs Abroad, a project that changed the face of ski chalets forever.

He said catered chalet prices would be increased by “more than five per cent” to reflect the uncertain market and extra cost of employing local staff.

Consensio, which operates luxury catered and self-catering ski chalets in the French Alps, also reports pent-up demand and many roll-over bookings from this season. Ceri Tinley, Consensio co-founder and managing director said many guests have booked an extra week to get away twice after missing out this season. Consensio, too, is offering flexible catering options.

“We are planning on running our current portfolio in the same way we traditionally have (pre-Covid), we are still waiting for confirmation on who and how we can employ staff,” she said. “We are launching a ‘relaxed catered chalet’ as we feel there is a current gap in the market and to keep costs down — they only need half the staff.”

Specialists like Le Ski are convinced the chalet business has returned to the hands of expert operators | CREDIT: Le Ski

The most encouraging news is from Le Ski, which reports [sales are 500 per cent](#) higher than usual for this time of year. The company runs a range of chalet sizes in Courchevel, La Tania and Val d'Isere, some of which will next winter be operating as shared occupancy and are already 50 per cent of capacity full.

Le Ski owner Nick Morgan said: "There have been so many changes and challenges in the ski industry over the past few years it is difficult to keep up but fundamentally we are doing the same as we have been doing for 39 years. Quality chalets with flights, transfers, five nights' catering, unlimited wine with dinner, champagne and canapés every catered night."

While he said prices "have had to rise" to work around staffing costs, no guests had raised any objections. "People understand the issues we've had to deal with and that prices have to become more realistic for good quality, legally-run chalets. We are convinced the chalet business has returned to the hands of the specialists who started it as a model."

Top chalet holiday deals to book now

Ski France: contactless catering

A week's stay, from December 13 2021, at Chalet Rose Blanc, in [La Plagne](#), costs from £399.90pp for 10 people sharing on a contactless catered basis with [Skifrance-classic.co.uk](#).

Inghams: chalet catering

Chalet Hotel Rosset, [Tignes](#), France costs from £1,159pp, including seven-nights chalet catering, flying on March 19, 2022 from London Gatwick with [Inghams.co.uk](#).

Le Ski: shared chalet

Chalet Rikiki is ski-in/ski-out in [Courchevel Moriond](#) and sleeps 22. A week's stay from 22, January 9, 2022 costs from £1,395pp for seven nights includes en-suite room, flights, transfers, six-day Trois Vallées lift pass, breakfast and chalet catering on five nights with [Leski.com](#).

Skiworld: self-catering

Self-drive to Val Claret Apartments, [Tignes](#), for February Half Term on February 12, 2022 for £400pp, including Eurotunnel Flexiplus upgrade worth £255 per car (based on four sharing) with [Skiworld.co.uk](#).

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