




Contactless skiing in France – a solution to Covid and Brexit

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Chalet Etienne in Méribel - Credit: Keith Perry

I am staying in a catered ski chalet – but not as we know it. The traditional set-up with live-in staff to cook, clean and serve you your meals is changing after the double whammy of Brexit and the Covid pandemic.

With tour operators finding it difficult to recruit British staff because of European work permit changes, coupled with coronavirus making the idea of sharing a chalet on the slopes with strangers less appealing, British firm [Ski France](#) had to find a solution to keep their chalets full for the 2021-22 season.

Their answer? Contactless ski chalets.

The company has introduced the concept across its 50 ski chalets this season in Val d'Isère, Tignes, Meribel, Courchevel, La Tania, La Plagne and Alpe d'Huez. The idea is that you still have all the benefits of a catered ski chalet – but you don't see the staff.



Chalets are cleaned by the backstage crew halfway through the week while guests are out skiing
- Credit: Ski France

Guests arrive at their Ski France chalet and find food in the fridge, cool beer and chilled wine ready to drink, firewood neatly stacked, and beds made. There is a selection of fresh ingredients to cook with, easy recipes to follow and delicious dishes prepared by a local delicatessen. The only tasks for guests are deciding who should put the food in the oven, who serves dinner and who stacks the dishwasher (visiting chalet staff don't wash up).

In addition to food, staff are on hand to book your skis or snowboards at the local hire shop as well as lift passes. Halfway through the week, when the family is out enjoying the slopes, the backstage chalet crew cleans the accommodation from top to bottom, replacing towels and re-stocking the fridge and cupboards with goodies. They are at the end of the phone whenever needed, but out of sight unless necessary or wished for.

We visited Chalet Etienne in Méribel to sample what Joanna Laforge, the company's co-owner and marketing director, calls 'chalet holidays 2.0'. Arriving in the late evening, we are not met by chalet staff but instead a fully stocked fridge, chilled wine, beers, stylish bedrooms and an eight-person hot tub bubbling in the garden. There's even a sauna shaped like a traditional wooden wine barrel, and the ingredients for dinner are already laid out in the kitchen.



Cosy up in the snug after a day on the slopes - Credit: Ski France

While other operators are also cottoning onto the appeal of contactless chalets, Ski France was already working on the concept before lockdown and bookings for the coming ski season are looking healthy (Méribel officially opens on 4 December). "In the current climate, contactless catered chalets seemed a good way of allaying people's concerns about being in close contact with others while still enjoying the fun of a traditional ski chalet," says Joanna Laforge. "It also allows people to keep their social bubble with friends and family, which is still an important factor for many." Contactless chalets have enabled Ski France to keep post-Brexit prices reasonable, as operators can no longer rely on gap-year students to keep wages low. Local people will now fill the jobs. A week's stay at a contactless chalet can cost less than £420 pp excluding flights and transfers, says Laforge.

While some chalet operators are working to continue to offer catered and shared catered properties, prices have increased by at least five per cent. The Ski France contactless chalets have been divided into two groups, Classic and Premium. Although the price points are different, both will provide local produce and various ingredients for breakfast, afternoon tea, a three-course dinner and drinks each day.

For guests who prefer a more bespoke food offering, Ski France also offers an 'à-la-carte' option. Here, guests can choose from a much longer provisions list and pay for what they want. For families and friends wanting to take charge of their own shopping while in resort, or to try out local restaurants, they can simply take the chalet 'as is' and order little or no food from the 'à-la carte' provision.

Guests can fly to Geneva, Lyon, Grenoble or Chambéry ([Jet2](#) has just announced new winter flights from December 2021 to April 2022 from five UK airports) and then jump on a bus, hire a car or organise a private transfer with Ski France's own transfer company, MV Transport (limousines, mini-buses and coaches). Alternatively, families and friends wanting to maintain their protective bubble can make the whole journey in their car by booking with [Eurotunnel Le Shuttle](#) (Folkestone to Calais) or one of the ferry companies (Dover to Calais).



Keith tries electric skateboarding - Credit: Keith Perry

We chose to visit Chalet Etienne at the tail end of the summer season in September and although the resort is quieter than in peak ski season, there were still plenty of mountain activities to keep us occupied.

We met Alexandre from MCF mountain bike school to try e-biking through Méribel's pine forests on e fatbikes. Riders can choose different power settings to help them negotiate steeper terrain and thanks to the turbo boost I find I am able to power up the toughest climbs with ease and then reduce the power mode when I fancy more of a workout on the easier trails.

On another day, we headed for Lac de Tueda for a spot of electric skateboarding. Although I am a terrible skateboarder, I find the e-skateboard with its hand-held speed controller surprisingly easy to master and soon I am whizzing around the

stunning circular trout lake surrounded by pine forests.

Another must is Aquamation at Courchevel 1650, the largest mountain water park in Europe.

A final stop on the journey back to Lyon is Ski France's very own 14th-century Château de Candie hotel at the medieval city of Chambéry. Set in 15-acre grounds, it offers 25 individually decorated rooms as well as an outdoor pool and two restaurants. The château also has its own vineyard and grows its own grapes to make delicious viognier white wine.



The vineyard at Château de Candie in Chambéry - Credit: Keith Perry

A week's stay at Chalet Etienne, with Ski France, costs from £638 per person (£8,929 total) for 14 people sharing the Premium chalet on a Contactless Catered basis.

Visit skifrance-premium.co.uk or call 0203 475 4756.