

DIY on the slopes

Matthew Hampton

checks out what could be the future of ski accommodation: the contactless catered chalet stay

Of all the phrases guaranteed to grate – up there with “post-Brexit”, “Covid-compliant” and “the new normal” – sits that innocuous little homily, “a change is as good as a rest”. Because surely, if the past couple of years have taught us anything, it is that change is difficult, uncertain – and rarely ever restful.

You may already have travelled in this new normal and found the paperwork and tests manageable. But for those planning a winter ski or snowboarding holiday comes another unwelcome surprise: post-Brexit rules mean catered chalets with live-in staff are much more challenging to run without the army of young Brits willing to work for almost nothing in exchange for bed, board and lift pass.

French employment law states that seasonal workers must be paid a living wage, which means that many ski operators have wound down on traditional chalets or taken them out of their programme altogether.

Yet one company thinks it has the answer. **Ski France** – French-owned but partly British run – operates more than 50 chalets across the Alps.

This winter, it is trialling a new concept it calls Chalet 2.0, or Contactless Catered Chalets.

It gets around employment issues and Covid concerns by taking live-in staff out of the equation. A back-stage crew stocks the fridge and the cupboards and cleans the rooms halfway through the week, meaning guests enjoy the benefit of the chalet experience – homely accommodation, good food (and plenty of it) and fresh towels when they need them.

The only downside is that you have to cook the food and wash up for yourself.

Ski France is banking on its contactless model providing the Goldilocks effect. “We think this is the affordable way to enjoy a hassle-free chalet holiday,” says commercial director Joanna Laforge. “Guests get autonomy over their catering, allowing for an early meal before heading into the village for an evening activity, or a late dinner after some après-ski drinks. It also means they can keep to their social bubble.”

There are two price points: classic and premium, and on a pre-season recce to Chalet Etienne in Méribel, I would translate this as good and very good. In either scenario, the fridge and cupboards are fully stocked on arrival – including beer and wine – but forget about having to do mountains of prep to get a meal on the table: much ar-

rives ready to bung in the oven.

You can pay extra for à la carte; I would not bother. A sample menu featured a smoked salmon starter, a delicious pintade basquaise (game stew) with dauphinoise potatoes and roast carrots, followed by tarte aux pommes. “We were going to put a crème brûlée on the menu, but you need a blowtorch for that and we’d like the chalets to last another season,” says Larforge.

However you play it, this ski season will be different and probably harder than most, but having lifts open is exciting enough. For my money, the slightly cheaper classic option here would be plenty, putting in a few extra luxuries – fresh pastries in the morning, spirits in the evening – as desired.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus pointed out the only constant in life is change, so we may as well make peace with it. But not too much more, please; I’m only just getting used to the new normal.

One week’s premium contactless catered stay from £638pp, based on 14 sharing at Chalet Etienne in Méribel. skifrance-premium.co.uk



Chalet Etienne in Méribel does away with the need for live-in staff

