

Ski holidays

Is Britain's classic ski chalet escape in danger?

Rising costs, Brexit and effects of the pandemic threaten to kill the much-loved chalet holiday. Nick Trend explains how to still make it happen

Croquettes stuffed with foie gras, cèpe mushroom and truffle, oysters served with a passion-fruit mignonette. And this wasn't even the main menu, just the canapés to accompany the Veuve Clicquot. The rest of the fine-dining avalanche was to come once we had sat down at the long table with its picture windows looking out over the moonlit Méribel valley.

The first flurry was a celery-root vichyssoise with pistachio, followed by scallops with butter and artichokes. Then came the main culinary rush of beef tenderloin, with (yet more) foie gras and a red wine jus, served with a potato parmentier. Finally we subsided into orange crème brûlée followed by a last sprinkling of white chocolate rocks with vanilla meringues.

As I slumped back in my chair after that, the first evening meal in Chalet Harmony, I thought back to previous culinary experiences on ski chalet holidays long gone. There was the young host who, when it was suggested that the cake he served was a little on the solid side, replied: "Well it is the first one I have ever made." Then there were the young women who, a few years later, left their cookery book open on the kitchen table on their night off. The page was headed: "Emergency Puddings – try these quick fixes if you have a disaster with your first attempt."

That sort of lottery has all been part of a long, hit-and-miss tradition of British chalet-style ski holidays. The concept of the catered chalet is high on 100 years old. It evolved in the early 1930s with the parties pioneered by Austrian skier Erna Low in 1932, soon after she had moved to England. The 23-year-old hosted a fully catered two-week house party for "young people" over Christmas and New Year. It cost £15 all-in, including rail travel to Austria.

By the 1960s and 1970s, it was Méribel, where I was now, which had become the destination most closely associated with chalet parties. Hugely popular with British skiers, the resort was developed by an enterprising Scot, Colonel Peter Lindsay, before and after the Second World War. He ensured that the buildings reflected the traditional style of stone and timber Savoyard chalets, which were, of course, perfectly suited to the growing British preference for hosted accommodation.

But, while Méribel's enviable position at the heart of the 3 Vallées means it will always be able to fill its rooms, are we seeing the last hurrah of the catered chalet? While a handful of companies – including Purple Ski, which runs Chalet Harmony – at the top end of the market continue to thrive, the most traditional of ski holidays is in steep decline.



Essentials

Nick Trend was a guest of Purple Ski (01885 488798; purpleski.com), which offers Chalet Harmony, pictured, from £44,990 a week, including meals and drinks for 14 people. Flights and transfers extra.

Purple prospers because its market is expanding. It specialises in sumptuous, well-staffed chalets with established chefs putting together spectacular menus, ski equipment fitting and in-resort drivers. "Increasingly," says Joanna LaForge, Purple's commercial director, her clients "include a mix of skiers and

non-skiers, often with some staying in the chalet during the day. As a result, the space, level of comfort and chalet facilities are more important than ever. Excellent spa facilities are a must."

All this comes at a cost, of course. Purple's prices range from about £20,000 to £50,000 per property for a week's stay. If that sounds horrendous, remember that is for the whole chalet, which might sleep 14 people, and the cost is divided accordingly. Plenty of clients seem willing to fork out such sums for their holidays – by early November, Chalet Harmony was already booked for all but four weeks this season.

But those companies operating at the more traditional end of the chalet market have struggled. Nick Morgan, owner of Le Ski, one of the few surviving fully bonded tour operators to offer traditional chalet holidays in France, estimates that the British market has shrunk

by 70 per cent over the past four or five years. In other words, he underlines, if there were once 1,000 such chalets there are now only 300. Crystal, the UK's biggest ski operator, withdrew from the chalet market altogether in 2020 and many smaller companies have stopped trading since – or during – the pandemic.

Morgan has 33 properties offering traditional mixed chalet parties, mostly in Courchevel and La Tania. He is one of the few specialists to have weathered the storm and believes his determination to keep using British staff has been key. They are "more suited to bonding with our British guests and it is what they expect" and, despite huge difficulties caused by Brexit, he has managed to continue to employ them legally. It is getting a little easier to get visas, but only, he says, because they have become used to the process, which remains complicated, time-consuming and expensive.

This expense gets passed on to customers. Since the 2019/20 ski season, he says, costs and prices have risen by 40 per cent. But you can still find holiday offers for under £1,000 per person, including flights, transfers and chalet board. To me, that is pretty good value for a ski holiday.

In the end, and despite my uneven experience of chalet catering, I'm still a fan. I have never knowingly refused a delicious meal in a sumptuous French chalet like Harmony, but I'm equally happy with something more modest and have always enjoyed the house party atmosphere that Erna Low and Peter Lindsay had such foresight to enable.

Whether you want to enjoy the pampered privacy of the top end of the market or are happy to muck in at the more affordable end, let's hope we are seeing not the demise, but the dawn of a second century of chalet conviviality.

The best chalet holidays this winter, still with availability

Le Ski (leski.com) offers rooms in Chalet Riliki (sleeps 22) in Courchevel, France, from £2,576, departing Dec 29



Skiworld (skiworld.co.uk) has availability in Chalet Les Rousies in Les Deux Alps, France, from £849, departing Jan 4

Ski Solutions (skisolutions.com) offers Treize Etoiles, a five-star chalet in Verbier, Switzerland, which sleeps 12, from £2,895, excluding travel, arriving Jan 12



Inghams (ingham.co.uk) offers rooms in the Chalet Fauner A (sleeps 16) in St Anton, Austria, from £899, departing Dec 21

Family Ski (familyski.co.uk) offers Chalet Imogen in Reberty, Les Menuires, France, accommodating up to three families, from £5,092 total for a family of four, excluding flights but including transfers from Geneva, arriving Dec 22

All prices are per person based on two sharing a room including chalet board for a week, flights and transfers unless stated otherwise