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## The traditional British ski chalet holiday is under threat

After 100 years of success, rising costs and pressures from Brexit and the pandemic could kill the much-loved chalet break

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”.



Chalet Harmony offers a luxurious experience in a British ski favourite

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 they had left open 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, somewhat hit-and-miss, tradition of British chalet-style ski holidays. Very long, in fact. The concept of the catered ski chalet is nigh on 100 years old. It evolved in the early 1930s with the parties first 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. Rather than investing in large hotels, 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 will mean it will always be able to fill its accommodation, are we seeing the last hurrah of the catered chalet? While a handful of companies, most of them – like Purple Ski, which runs Chalet Harmony – operating at the very top end of the market, continue to thrive, the most traditional of ski holidays is in steep decline.



Chalet Harmony sits at the very top end of the chalet market Credit: Richard\_Roberts

Purple prospers because its particular 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 up to 14 people, and the cost is divided accordingly. There certainly seem to be plenty of clients willing to fork out such sums for their ski holidays – by early November, Chalet Harmony was already booked for all but four weeks this season.



Chalet Harmony is available from £44,990 a week Credit: Richard\_Roberts

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 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, the neighbouring resorts to Méribel. He is one of the few specialists to have weathered the storm and believes that his determination to continue to use British staff has been key to this. 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. Now 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.



Chalet Harmony features both a pool and a hot tub

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

In the end, and despite my uneven experience of chalet catering over the years, 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 I have always enjoyed the house party atmosphere which 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.

## **Essentials**

Nick was a guest of Purple Ski (01885 488799; [purpleski.com](http://purpleski.com)), which offers Chalet Harmony from £44,990 a week, including meals and drinks for 14 people. Flights and transfers are extra.

*Read more in the Telegraph Travel's [guide to ski holidays in Méribel](#).*