

# SNOW BUSINESS

The Alpine dream has turned into a profitable and rewarding reality for one hard-working British couple. **Caroline McGhie** meets the chalet owners living the high life in Morzine

**H**igh up in the French Alps the snow already lies deep on the ground. Paul and Francesca Eyre, with their three children Ben, aged 13, Eloise, eight, and Jamie, six, routinely pile on the layers each morning before venturing out into temperatures that can fall as low as -20C. They are 1,200ft above sea level and the cable car across the road takes them up to 1,800ft.

Paul and Francesca fell in love with Morzine when it was just a small Alpine village with a few family-run hotels, undiscovered by big ski operators. In their early twenties, they wanted to run a chalet, rent out the rooms and provide spectacular food to British holiday makers. Paul was a quantity surveyor taking time out to travel around the world. Francesca was a highly trained chef in search of a new life. Once Paul had met Francesca his journey around the world never got further than Morzine.

In the past decade and a half that they have been there, the village has become a hugely popular escape for those in search of snow and slopes. Skiers flock to buy weekend or holiday cottages, taking advantage of cheap easyJet flights to Geneva.

"When we arrived there were fewer than 100 British here. Now there are over 1,000, which is amazing," Francesca says. "We realised it had massive possibilities as it has all-year-round sport, with mountain biking, swimming

and golf in the summer."

So their adventure began. "We found a chalet to rent and bought the mailing list from the previous owners who had let it. There were 1,000 names on it. I had inherited £8,000 from my mother, which paid for the deposit on the rent, the list of names and getting our brochures published. Everyone advised us not to do it."

Chilly Powder ([www.chillypowder.com](http://www.chillypowder.com)) was launched. In the first season they had 60 guests and just covered their costs. By the third season they were doing well. The fact that the chalet was beside the cable car made it a winner.

"I did all the shopping, cooking, cleaning, and we did all the ski guiding. It was extraordinary," Francesca says. "We would fall into bed at midnight and start all over again in the morning. I always sit down and eat with guests, and now some of those first-year visitors are godparents to our children. They have come every year since."

Cooking is Francesca's great love. "I keep a diary of every menu that every

guest has had, so they don't have to repeat a meal. All the chocolates and breads are made by me, and the canapés and starters. It is haute cuisine – I don't go in for that ski and stews thing," she says.

Chilly Powder is just about to produce its first cookery book, so guests can crib specials like breaded poached eggs in hollandaise with asparagus, or the Surf 'n' Turf, which is built around beef



and prawns with colcannon potatoes.

The Eyres have become French residents (though they can't vote or have a French passport) and the children are completely bilingual. They went on to rent another old farmhouse and ran one each. Francesca cooked in one and the meals were driven to the other.

Then they took the big jump, found business partners to invest and built an entirely new chalet hotel, designed by Paul around the fireplace – which is why they called it Chalet Au Coin du Feu.

“We wanted to provide all the luxuries – massages, saunas, a zone for children, a zone for adults, a crèche, a bar, a library with a billiard table. I wanted people to be able to bring children but not have to worry about them from the minute they arrive. The children come and help in the veg patch, dig potatoes and collect eggs from our chickens which is stuff they can't do at home,” Francesca says.

They are exhausted but happy. “It was incredibly hard work but fantastic fun. The guests are wonderful and we have great house parties. We couldn't afford to go on holiday for years, but we have finally had one and went to India to do the Curzon Route, as my great uncle was Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India,” Francesca says.

“This is an ageless community so it doesn't matter where you come from. If you are interesting and fun, you are accepted. People have given up all kinds of careers to come here. We don't have our families around us, so we tend to be very close-knit. We don't have to commute into the big city and it doesn't matter what you wear. Jeans and jumpers will do. People take you for who you are rather than who you want to be.”

The children love it. “Choice is simple and free here. The children have Wednesdays off when the parents organise sport and music lessons.”

The Eyres are buried in snow from November until the middle of May and love the extremes of temperature. Snow isn't the bringer of chaos to them, but the harbinger of fun, new business and suppers to remember.

## CHALETs TO BUY

**1 GO FOR THE TOPS:** Chalet Grace, above, perches on a ledge at Zermatt, with the spectacular view of the Matterhorn looming through the windows. It has five hotel-style suites with a spa and a gym, games room, cinema, professional kitchen and lets at £42,000 per week. It is selling at CHF15 million (£9.5 million)

through Savills Alpine Homes (020 7016 3740).

**2 RUN A PARTY CHALET:** Chalet Vercland is in the little hamlet of Vercland, an hour's drive from Geneva and close to the town of Somoens. It is at the foot of the piste, just by the telecabin, and has five bedrooms, a bar-restaurant, outdoor terraces, office, ski-boot room and self-contained two-bedroom apartment. It is selling at €595,000 (£500,000) through [Winkworth](#) (020 8576 5582). Rooms let at €60 per night half-board at high season and €50 per night half-board at low season.

**3 JOIN THE HEIDI SET:** a four-bedroom chalet, below, set in a beautiful flower meadow skirted by a stream near les Houches in the Haut-Savoie. This was built two centuries ago in Grenoble, dismantled and rebuilt in Vaudagne, where it was lived in by the famous mountaineer Marc Batard who broke the speed record for the ascent of Everest without oxygen in 1988. There is also a traditional Mazot, or outhouse, with ladders up to a sleeping area for two. [Winkworth](#) (as above) is asking €600,000 (£508,000).

**4. PUT YOUR SNOWBOOTS ON:** a five-bedroom chalet at Somoens, bottom, in the Haute-Savoie, close to the buzz of town, with a cinema, jacuzzi and covered terrace at €890,000 (£753,600) through [Winkworth](#).



**Home from home: the Eyres' new chalet hotel has all the comforts guests need, from a cosy fireplace to home-cooked meals**





CHRY POWDER