

# Move for the ultimate Alpine adventure

Some lucky families are swapping suits for skis and the city hustle for a new life in the mountains. *Liz Rowlinson* meets the couples setting up on the slopes

**I**t's a feeling most of us recognise at the end of a great winter holiday: let's not go home. Let's move to the mountains and ski forever. It tends to be a fleeting feeling that dissipates as we throw ourselves back into our daily routine.

For some, however, the call of the mountains lingers, niggling away at the back of the mind, until, one day, they pack their bags for good.

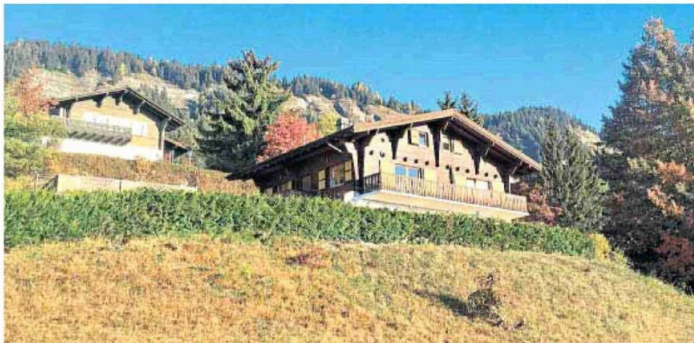
Andrew Yates did just that. He is a business consultant from south-west London who spent great chunks of his life troubleshooting failing companies, until he and his wife, Rebecca, gave up their jobs and moved to the French Alps.

They set up a business around their shared



*Continued on page 2*





## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

passion for skiing, cycling and hiking in the historic, French village of St-Gervais in Haute Savoie.

"It wasn't a whim, more a wake-up call," says Yates, 49. "I realised that it was more important to have healthy, happy children that I would get to see every day rather than a fat salary."

The Yateses are just two of an increasing population of expats in the Alps, and beyond, who have eschewed successful careers to set up businesses based around their love of the mountains.

There are plenty of opportunities for those with an entrepreneurial streak, says Tamsin Beaubé of Leggett Immobilier's Alpine team. "The most popular businesses are the catered ski chalets, but there are also those who run gîtes and small hotels. The more adventurous expats have completed years of training to become ski instructors and mountain guides.

"Or – less dependent on the tourist trade – there are people in the property sector, such as estate agents, architects, interior designers, builders and craftsmen, and English teachers."

The idea of upping sticks and moving to the mountains so that you get to ski every week might seem an idyllic existence, but how easy is it to earn a living?

Francesca Pangli, also from London, found setting up the catering company, Powder N Shine, in the Trois Vallées in the French Alps five years ago tough but incredibly rewarding (powdershine.com).

She and her husband, Steve, who are both 33, had been taking a sabbatical skiing during the recession when they spotted a gap in the market and decided to stay on.

"I saw that there weren't really any small companies offering high-quality catering, and after three years of learning the ropes running a chalet we set up our own team," says Pangli, who had been in marketing.

"We now have 12 people working for us and offer a variety of services, including two catered chalets. Eighty per cent of our clients are from the UK and we have to work hard to ensure a high number of returning

guests. Finding the right people to work for us has been the hardest part of building the business, because chefs move around a lot and if you have a bad year, guests won't come back."

She and Steve live in a five-bedroom chalet near the pretty, ski village of St-Martin-de-Belleville. They now have a 22-week-old daughter, Annabelle, who will soon attend the local crèche, and will be a "great skier and also bilingual", promises Pangli, who is a keen ski racer herself.

"We work very hard in the winter

but never forget that we are here for the lifestyle. I will get up at 5.30am to ski for a couple of hours before work on a day when there's beautiful powder. Or even ski all day if it's really good."

There's a charming five-bedroom, five-bathroom chalet currently for sale in St-Martin for €1.49million, ideal for

a small chalet business (08700 11 51 51; frenchestateagents.com).

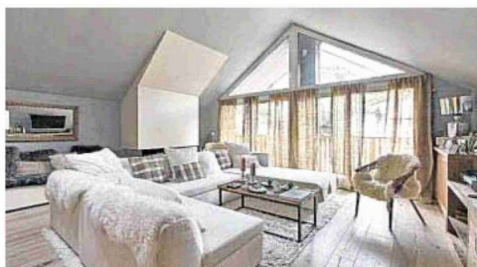
The seasonal nature of the ski business can be hard to adapt to, agrees Yates, whose company organises chalet holidays in the winter, and bed and breakfast and cycling/hiking trips in the summers (piste-pursuits.com). "After the security of a monthly salary, running a business where money is never guaranteed is tough. But once you accept its cyclical nature, however, the work-life balance is great."

A truly year-round destination like Chamonix can offer a steady income and an increasing number of people are moving there to combine work with enjoying the mountains, says Sophie Daubeney, who swapped Richmond in west London for Chamonix nearly 10 years ago.

Now 32, she runs a company that manages chalets (mountain-lifestyle.com). She employs 18 people and lives in an apartment in the heart of the town. "Like many others, I left to do a ski season with a backpack, ended up managing the chalet and stayed on when I fell in love with the summer side of life here," she says.

"Everyone has made a conscious decision to be here – to work and play hard – and that is almost the flipside of running your own business, too, the

On top of the world: Francesca Pangli with her husband, Steve, and Annabelle in St-Martin-de-Belleville, front; Chalets in La Tzoumaz-Verbier, above; Caroline Murray and her son Caspar in Verbier, below; a six-bedroom chalet for sale in Méribel which is on the market with Knight Frank for €5.85m, right; a chalet living room up for sale through Savills for €4.95m, far right



Chalet chic: a penthouse in Val di Luce, in Italy, with three bedrooms, for sale with Sothebys for €950,000

## FOR SALE IN THE MOUNTAINS

### Morzine Portes du Soleil

This seven-bedroom chalet in the popular French resort of Morzine, with a separate three-bedroom apartment, presents an exciting business opportunity to live on top of your catered chalet.

Guide Price: €1.49m  
Agent: French Estate Agents (08700 11 51 51; frenchestateagents.com)

### Choseaux Megève

Dare to dream with this high-end ski chalet which is situated in the French village of Choseaux. It has six bedrooms, five bathrooms, a bar and a wine cellar. You'll need a drink once you see the price.

Guide Price: €9.8m  
Agent: Knight Frank (020 7861 1727; knightfrank.co.uk)



### St Martin Trois Vallées

This five-bedroom, five-bathroom chalet is located in the charming Trois Vallées village of St Martin de Belleville in France.

The resort opens from December 12 until April 22, 2016.

Guide Price: €726,500  
Agent: French Estate Agents (08700 11 51 51; frenchestateagents.com)

### La Tzoumaz Verbier

This chalet, with multiple apartments, is part of a new four star scheme being developed by the Swiss real estate group called Residence sur la Piste in the Four Valleys ski region of Switzerland.

Guide Price: CHF417,000 (£273,331)  
Agent: Paul Sidebottom, Swiss Real Estate Company (+41 763744039)



lines blur and it's hard to ever let go. I take a step back from it by going for a two-hour run in my lunchbreak."

Toby Mallock is another who did a ski season in his gap year and ended up moving to the mountains to be a ski instructor. Now 39, he co-owns a ski school in the fashionable Swiss resort of Verbier (performanceverbier.com), and lives with his wife, Caroline, 33, and their 16-month-old son Caspar in the village of Le Chable.

He thinks Switzerland, although expensive, offers greater flexibility for a ski-school business than France, which is famously bureaucratic. "In France I would not be allowed to teach skiing – the rules are far more relaxed here, and there simply isn't the red tape for business-owners," he says.

So, with the Alpine ski market relatively buoyant due to high demand and limited supply, how much will it cost to buy a chalet from which to run a business?

You can forget Verbier, unless you have over CHF2 million (£1.35 million)

but look to France and you can find opportunities in smaller ski villages for less than €500,000 (£356,000) – and gain from the exchange rate, as French properties are still nine per cent cheaper than a year ago for UK buyers. You can also lease chalets, but beware that if you want to offer more than 15 beds (not bedrooms) in a catered chalet you are required to have staff resident on site.

Many traditional chalets include a self-contained apartment for staff. In St-Gervais, for example, which is only an hour from Geneva, there is an eight-bedroom chalet for sale for £1.26million comprised of five apartments with views of Mont Blanc (frenchestateagents.com).

The big-hitting resorts of the Trois Vallées – Courchevel 1850 and Méribel – command a premium, but look to the smaller villages nearby for better value: Les Menuires, La Tania and St-Martin-de-Belleville.

Leggett has an eight-bedroom, seven-bathroom farmhouse in Samoëns, in the Grand Massif, for €899,000 (08700 11 51 51, frenchestateagents.com). It has a sauna and a pool and is already run

as a successful chalet business.

Or there's a recently converted, furnished Savoyard farmhouse in the village of Montriond near Morzine in the Portes du Soleil with two apartments and a total of seven bedrooms for €2.25million (0044 (0) 20 8144 5501, home-hunts.com).

When choosing a ski property, the quality and size of the ski area and access to an airport will always be key drivers, according to Alpine agents. But there are other mountains, in Italy for instance.

Is it perhaps time to head for the hills?