

# Sharing a chalet with strangers seems weird but it's big business, says Neil English

**O**PTING to share a house with complete strangers during a skiing holiday is still largely a British phenomenon. In fact most Europeans, especially those from Alpine nations, think we are barmy. I prefer to think it's just a little eccentricity, or simply that we are open to embracing the spirit of camaraderie.

Whatever the reason, the ski chalet concept is thriving. And it has certainly improved from the days when 'rustic' chalets were renowned for their wafer-thin walls and creaking beds, rarely supplied enough hot water for all guests to enjoy a shower in the only bathroom, and where the smell of sweaty ski clothes drying was only mildly disguised by the aroma of stew bubbling in the communal kitchen.

Many chalets now have good-quality chefs preparing your meals and feature a much better ratio of bathrooms to bedrooms. For high-end properties, you can expect Michelin-trained chefs, en suite rooms, fluffy robes, hot tubs, swimming pools and massage rooms.

For home-from-home comfort we have the late Erna Low to thank. In 1932, Erna was a student in London, unable to afford to travel back to Austria to visit her family. So she advertised for people interested in joining her on a skiing trip near her family home. Five people responded – enough to pay for her ticket.

The trip was such a success that Erna decided to repeat the exercise the following winter, and soon established a travel company that still bears her name today.

The chalet idea was introduced in the Fifties, when the firm's slogan was Sun And Snow With Erna Low.

Below I have hand-picked a variety of accommodation offered by long-established firms and new operators, at prices to suit all pockets.

## GREAT VALUE ON A BUDGET

**ERNA LOW** (0845 863 0525, [www.ernalow.co.uk](http://www.ernalow.co.uk)) offers a seven-night self-drive holiday, departing on January 29 and based on eight people sharing a three-double-bedroom apartment with mezzanine in the Prince des Cimes development at the



**ICING ON THE BREAK:** Chalet Andre in Val d'Isere. Below: Erna Low, who set up the ski firm that still bears her name



French resort of Arc. The price of £437.75 per person includes return Eurotunnel crossings for two cars, breakfast, tea and dinner with wine provided on six days by catering firm [www.projectski.co.uk](http://www.projectski.co.uk), and free use of the pool, hot tub and sauna.

Family specialist Esprit Ski (01252 618300, [www.espritski.com](http://www.espritski.com)) offers the intimate Chalet Andre or recently expanded Chalet Hotel Duucs de Savoie in Val d'Isere, France, departing on December 12.

The total cost for seven nights at either property for two adults and two children aged between two and ten is £1,281. This includes return flights from Stansted to Geneva, transfers, breakfast, adult and children's high tea and a four-course evening meal with wine for six days.