

# High on Piste

What's it like to live and work in the French mountains? **Catherine Cooper** talks to three expats about their lives at altitude



## HOW TO BECOME A SKI INSTRUCTOR

Every country has their own recognised ski instructor awards – the British have BASI and the French have ENSA. You'll need a good level of French to go through the ENSA exams but it's a great thing to do if you can. BASI is all in English so that makes it easier for English speakers. To get fully qualified in both systems is a challenging process but if/when you get through it, the doors open to the best job in the world.

**Derek Chandler, 41**, runs Marmalade ski school in Méribel (Savoie) in the French Alps. He is married to Holly, 36, who runs ski chalet company Fish and Pips and they have two children, Wilf aged 16 months and Martha, two months.



*“Our tag line is #aveccest and our aim is to share our love of the mountains with the people we are guiding”*

I set up Marmalade in 2010 but I'd been in the Alps for a long time before then – I'd worked as a ski instructor for 10 years.

The mountains have always had a strong pull for me. I grew up near the mountains in north-east Scotland and have always enjoyed spending time in them – hiking, camping, climbing, mountain biking and, of course, skiing.

At Marmalade we teach beginners in private lessons, but we mainly concentrate on taking intermediates out in small groups, not just to improve their technique but also to enjoy the mountains. Our tag line is #aveccest and our aim is to share our love of the mountains with the people we are guiding. We try to aim for a shared private lesson feel rather than a traditional group ski lesson atmosphere.

For example, our youth groups are popular – they're for kids who don't want to be in a traditional ski school anymore, but maybe don't want to ski with mum and dad either. According to their level,

we'll take them on bumps and off-piste – helping them develop their technique while having fun too. We run various how-to sessions ranging from skiing a blue slope to an introduction to off-piste, as well as telemark and snowboarding.

When I set up it was just me, but now we've grown to nine full-time winter instructors with a few more on stand by for busy periods. We are mainly British with a couple of Italians – Méribel is very popular with British people and 99% of our clients are British.

I'd already worked in the resort for several years so had clients who would come back and ask for me – I'm also a trainer for the British Association of Ski Instructors so that would always keep me busy in any quieter times too.

As setting up businesses in France go, establishing a ski school is comparatively simple. We are a syndicate and our instructors are self-employed and responsible for paying their own taxes and *cotisations*. That said, there are many ski schools which come and go quite quickly as it's a lot of work for not a huge amount of return – you really do have to love what you are doing.

We live half of the year in Méribel and then spend the rest of the year in Alderney in the Channel Islands where we manage a hotel. Going backwards and forwards works well for us at the moment, and I think it's likely that the local French school will be used to 'seasonal' children, so hopefully we can carry on for a while longer, as long as it suits the kids too. By the time they reach secondary education we'll have to settle in one place or another.

For the foreseeable future though, we will have two children who spend their winters in the French Alps, which is so exciting. They will grow up learning to speak French and embracing the French culture, plus we can carry on skiing and exploring the mountains as a family.”

skimarmalade.com

“We live in an amazing part of the world and I’m really excited that our daughter will grow up here”

In 2013 Zayne and I ran the Tour de Mont Blanc trail, covering 100 miles in five days. It was then that the seed of ‘wouldn’t it be amazing to live in the mountains?’ was first sewn. Over the next couple of years we started browsing property websites and quickly realised that the Alps were too expensive and we’d prefer to be in the Pyrénées. We also wanted to be within reasonable distance of an airport and needed a house which could be converted into at least three - one part for us, one for a B&B and one for my mother Anna. She’s very much a Francophile and had decided to move with us.

We found our house in Lasseube in January 2016. It’s a real *coup de coeur*, being in an 18th-century converted stone farmhouse with nine bedrooms and four hectares of land overlooking the Bearn Pyrénées. We moved over in March 2016.

The next year was spent renovating - not only did we have to divide the property into three so that it would work for us all, but there was a huge amount of decorating and landscaping to be done. We did the vast majority ourselves, mainly to save money but also because it was often difficult to find someone who would commit to doing the work.

We now have three B&B rooms and we are planning to add some safari tents next year. So far, most of our clients have been French or Spanish, mainly retirees and, surprisingly, very few Brits. This summer was our first and we weren’t sure how it would go, but we advertised on Airbnb and Booking.com and were pretty much fully booked for the summer months.

The Pyrénées have so much to offer - great ski resorts which are family-friendly but also with enough challenging terrain to keep almost anyone happy, and plenty of walking and cycling. I’m really keen to help promote the area as a destination and am working with La Confédération

Pyrénéenne du Tourisme, and I’m helping them to produce videos and online content to do so.

I did a degree in French at Poitiers University for three years, so I am lucky that my French is fluent. Zayne is South African and didn’t even learn French at school so it’s a little harder for her, but she’s making progress.

The biggest challenges include it being difficult to find out information about what kind of business structure to adopt - there’s lots of conflicting advice and you kind of have to piece it together. It seems to take ages to get anything done and I still get caught out by everything closing at lunchtime. However, we live in an amazing part of the world and I’m really excited that Ariella is going to be able to grow up here, with so much space and beautiful scenery. We have kept our house in London and you can never say never, but I see us being here for the next 20 years at least.”

[secretpyrenees.com](http://secretpyrenees.com)

Adventure athlete, author and journalist **Tobias Mews**, 40, runs his *chambres d’hôtes* Secret Pyrenees in Lasseube near Pau with his wife Zayne, 42. They have one daughter, Ariella, two.



**TOBIAS'S TOP TIP**  
Consider all the mountain ranges - whether you're just visiting or looking to move! The Pyrénées are much cheaper than the Alps and a brilliant destination in their own right.

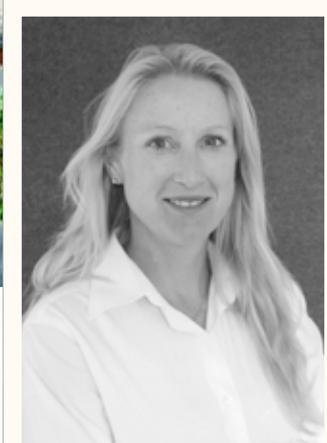


**Main image:** The Pyrénées provide the perfect playground for adventure athlete Tobias

**Below:** Following extensive renovation work, the property is now a family home and a B&B

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**Anna Barber**, 40, lives near Val-d'Isère in the Tarentaise Valley with her husband and two children, aged three and six, where she co-owns food delivery service Huski with two business partners based in the UK.

*“We deliver great food and drink to people on holiday in local resorts, but also to people who live here all year round”*

**M**y husband and I were both in the army and have lived in many places, but we owned a house in the French Alps. When the time came for our son to start school two years ago, we decided to move to France as we wanted the children to experience a different culture and to grow up bilingual.

I got chatting to one of my now business partners, Paddy Griffith, at a wedding, who was talking about a business he wanted to set up in the Alps delivering high-quality food to people in the area. He'd already teamed up with Cook Food, but he needed someone to manage things on the ground, so it was perfect for me.

I hadn't worked on anything like this before. I was previously a captain and flight commander on operations in Iraq in the Army Air Corps, so in many ways this seemed quite simple! However, what was more complicated was finding out how the system worked in France, how to set the company up and what the rules and regulations were. We set up as a SARL and employ our drivers seasonally.

The idea behind Huski is we deliver great food and drink which can be easily heated for people on holiday in local resorts, but also to people who live here all year round. Most (but not all) of our clients are British - many are in self-catering

accommodation and don't want the hassle of cooking after a day's skiing. We also cover chalet girls' nights off in catered chalets, and are working with some tour operators who are looking at offering packages including our services. We're aiming to offer a third way - between fully catered and self-catered. It's more flexible as people can choose what to eat, when they want. We deliver to local resorts including Val-d'Isère, Tignes and Les Trois Vallées, or meals can be collected from our HQ in Bourg-St-Maurice.

So far we've been running just one season and been very well received. We made ourselves known using a mix of social media, network building and free trials for commercial partners. Our six-day menu which costs €115 is particularly popular, but we offer over 70 different dishes and 30 choices of drinks.

We love the mountain lifestyle - being able to be outdoors a lot and the fact that the children get to stay children longer. They love skiing and at their local French school there is time to ski every week, and they take two weeks out each year just to ski with the school - that can't be bad!" **LF**

**hu.ski**

***Tempted by the high life?  
Turn to page 82 for our round-up of  
mountain homes for sale***



**Main image:** Huski dishes are real crowd-pleasers

**Above:** Paddy's children and friends enjoy the snow

**Below:** Meals are delivered or can be collected from Huski HQ

