

# LIVING THE DREAM:

## Mountain life

**Snow Woman meets three women who run successful businesses in the Alps and asks what it's really like to live and work surrounded by the white stuff...**

**L**et's face it, doing a ski or snowboarding season is a great way to hone your on-piste skills but it doesn't always do great deal for your career CV. But if you return from every snow holiday declaring that you're going to pack up and move to the mountains, rest assured that there are ways to make the move without resorting to cleaning chalet loos.

Many inspiring women all over the Alps have fulfilled their dreams and turned their ideas of living in a ski resort into a reality, without sacrificing their long-term prospects. So if the Alpine lifestyle appeals but you want to continue to live your life the grown-up way read on. Here are three ladies who have done just that and are doing very nicely. Start hatching your masterplan now...

## MELODY SKY

MELODY, 39, IS A PHOTOGRAPHER AND FILMMAKER IN VERBIER, SWITZERLAND

**WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO THE ALPS?** I did a summer season working in a dive school in Greece as their underwater photographer. I wasn't interested in working in a cold environment, but some of the other divers persuaded me to come to Tignes for the winter. I took a job as an Ice Dive guide and quickly got a taste for snowsports. The rest is history.

**WHAT ARE YOUR FIRST MEMORIES OF THE MOUNTAINS?** The amount of snow! I couldn't believe how deep and white it was. I was working in a bar in the evenings and taking people ice diving during the day. I had to dig my way into my house every night and dig out of the house. At night I would dig a path to the entrance of the bar!

**SKI OR BOARD, WHY?** Ski. I did ski, board and telemark for my first three or four seasons, but I have to constantly get my camera bag on and off and change position on a 10p piece, so skis are much more practical. It's easier and safer to have two feet to balance on when you're hiking, or traversing, off piste to get the shot.

**WHAT'S A TYPICAL DAY FOR YOU DURING WINTER?** On a typical shooting day I get the camera kit ready, jump in the car to the lift station, meet up with whomever I'm shooting with and go and find the best snow and light. I don't generally get much good skiing in because I'm zig zagging around and looking for positions. I always finish the day with a cold beer or a hot chocolate in the Farinet Lounge Bar in Verbier before heading back to my computer to edit the shots.

**DESCRIBE YOUR PATH TO BECOMING A PHOTOGRAPHER?** My mum and dad bought me a Kodak

instamatic when I was really young. I used to spend all my pocket money on developing my films into 'Triple Print' (remember them). I did a year-long art foundation course and did night classes in photography but it wasn't until I was 26 that I finally decided to go to university. Even then I studied film & sport science rather than photography. I worked filming in the Alps before I started working as a photographer and now I do both.

**DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE LIVING THE DREAM?** I really feel extremely privileged to be doing what I'm doing. I'm really passionate about the ocean and the mountains, travel and people. I can use my favourite hobby to make a living in places I want to be in and my office is wherever my laptop and camera bag land. The only drawback is missing my family. I wish I could pack them away with me.

**WHERE IS YOUR MOST TREASURED PLACE IN THE ALPS?** I have to say Verbier. I have been spending most of my time there for the past 10 years. It's a gorgeous resort with a lot of sunshine, good snow and a massive amount of accessible off-piste skiing. There are some extremely talented photographers and film-makers in Verbier but there's no competitive vibe. We all try and help each other when we can and we're all very excited when we see each other's successes. I think that's really special.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WANTING TO MOVE TO THE ALPS?** Stick to a career or study plan. It's great fun doing seasons but you see too many really talented people coming for one season, staying for the next ten years and then realising they have nothing behind them at the end of it.

Melody Sky Photography  
([www.melodysky.com](http://www.melodysky.com))

### FIVE TOP TIPS FOR SETTING UP A BUSINESS IN THE ALPS

**1** Go and live in the resort – it might mean putting off your dream for a season but you'll certainly get a feel for whether you really want to live surrounded by snow. It will also give you time to work out if your plan can become a reality.

**2** Ask someone who is already living and working in the country you intend to move to, to help write your business plan. And 'gen' up on the law and local politics, too – it pays to know the right questions to ask.

**3** Have a back-up plan in case it all goes wrong. Rather than sell up in the UK immediately, think about renting out your house or flat so that at least you have a safety net if it all goes wrong.

**4** The Alps are a very seasonal place and there are periods of significant downtime. Take account of this in your business plan, or plan to do something else during this time.

**5** Learn the language before you go. Whilst it's very easy to 'get by' in the Alps by speaking English, locals generally appreciate a little effort. What's more, you're bound to come across people who don't speak English at some point. A little hard work pre-season might mean that things don't get lost in translation later on.

*I can use my favourite hobby to make a living in places I want to be in, and my office is wherever my laptop and camera bag land*



# STEPH LIGHTFOOT

STEPH, 36, OWNS A GYM IN CHAMONIX, FRANCE, AND IS A PERSONAL TRAINER AND SPORTS THERAPIST

**WHAT FIRST BROUGHT YOU TO THE ALPS?** I originally came to the Alps after university to ski. I was 21 and looking back I'm not sure if it was the prospect of improving my snow-sports skills, or drinking shots and meeting sexy snowboarding boys that was more appealing. I gave the boys and drinking a go for a bit, before skiing won hands down!

**WHAT ARE YOUR FIRST MEMORIES OF THE MOUNTAINS?** Being seven and on a school ski trip. I was desperately homesick and I remember sitting next to a big Austrian bloke in a restaurant, and crying into my hot chocolate and plate of chips. He tried to cheer me up but he scared the life out of me. I was very young to go away without my family but I totally fell in love with skiing: I came second in the slalom, beating all the big girls in my group. I was so proud of myself! And hooked for life...

**SKI OR BOARD?** Ski. No question. I tried boarding for one day and quite enjoyed it, until I broke my thumb. It dumped a metre a few days later and I couldn't hold a ski pole with my hand in a cast. In the end I got the doctor to redo the cast around a pole so that I could ski – I was going mad not being able to get out in such great powder. I never boarded again!

**WHAT'S A TYPICAL DAY FOR YOU DURING WINTER?** My working day is very varied. In the winter I do a lot more massages and sports therapy sessions, while personal training and running coaching tend to die off. The morning usually starts with me leading a class like ski fit. Then I'll have a big breakfast while I tackle the day-to-day running of the business. I make sure I have some time for myself at some point in the day, too – mid afternoon I'll go for a run or cross country ski. I often end up working until quite late in the evening as most of my clients want to ski during the day and save their training until the late afternoons and evenings.

**DESCRIBE YOUR PATH TO BECOMING A SPORTS THERAPIST AND PERSONAL TRAINER?** My first business was a company providing accommodation for seasonaires in the French Alps. I've since worked in marketing but I've always been interested in the human body. As I got more involved in endurance sports (in the winter ski touring and cross country skiing, and in the summer trail running and road cycling), I became fascinated by sports performance, injury prevention, and recovery. I came back to the UK to study for a while but came back to the Alps with my qualifications. Chamonix is a super sporty place, so it's a perfect base for what I now do.

**WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT?** I'm very proud of my current venture, my gym, Be Pure Fit in Chamonix. It keeps me busy and although it has moments when it's stressful, it's a great project to have created and I love the fact that we make a real difference to people.

**DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE LIVING THE DREAM?** Yes and no. I live in an amazing place and have a fantastic lifestyle and I will never take the mountain views, or all the sports and healthy lifestyle for granted. But I also work very hard and things are not always straightforward as an expat in the Alps (even if you're fluent in French). You still deal with the day-to-day 'life stuff' that everyone does, and living here is expensive. But when I've had an amazing day out in the mountains I wouldn't be anywhere else!

**WHERE IS YOUR MOST TREASURED PLACE IN THE ALPS?** I have always loved La Grave – there's something so special about that little town. I love the Elisabetta hut in Italy. I always love going to see my friends in Vallandry (Les Arcs), where I spent seven years. I love the view of the Mont Blanc range from the top of Mont Buet. There is no place like the mountains for clearing your mind and calming your soul.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WANTING TO MOVE TO THE ALPS?** Don't get lulled into thinking that it will all be like it is when you're on holiday. Life out here is great, but think wisely. Unless you can afford not to work, make sure you have a good plan – either a job lined up, or work you can do remotely. Visit the place you may move to several times – at different times of year. And go with your gut instinct – life is for living, so be willing to take the risk. But make it a calculated one.

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# HOLLY FISHER

HOLLY, 31, IS PART-OWNER OF FISH&PIPS, WHICH OFFERS GASTRO CHALET HOLIDAYS IN MERIBEL AND VAL D'ISÈRE

**WHAT FIRST BROUGHT YOU TO THE ALPS?** A love of skiing, food and adventure! My dad is a keen skier, so I already had the ski bug in me and a season was always in the back of my mind as one of those things that had to be ticked off the list before getting a 'proper' job and settling down. My oldest pal had already done a season in Val d'Isere which she adored and said that we had to do one together once we finished university.

**WHAT ARE YOUR FIRST MEMORIES OF THE MOUNTAINS?** ESF ski lesson aged four. My dad was determined to turn his girls into extreme skiers, as he didn't have sons. I remember long, tortuous mornings at ski school being pushed to the back of the 18-child line. I remember the freezing cold and the inappropriate skiwear. But there were some amazing first memories of skiing down the mountain for the first time between Dad's legs, making new friends, going fast, eating big breakfasts and drinking hot chocolate.

**SKI OR BOARD?** Skiing, definitely! I would love to do both but whenever I have tried boarding I have been utterly abysmal.

**WHAT'S A TYPICAL DAY FOR YOU DURING WINTER?** My typical winter day is never typical! Things are always changing because there are so many variables that play a part in running a chalet company – the staff, guests, vehicles, maintenance, travel, injury, skiing, chalet owners and weather! I spend a great deal of time at my computer four days a week, at least one day a week travelling to and from Meribel. Skiing goes to the bottom of the

pile, but if I get two outings a week on the slopes I'm happy!

**DESCRIBE YOUR PATH TO BECOMING THE OWNER OF FISH&PIPS?** Towards the end of our first season working in Meribel, my friend and now business partner Philippa and I had long talks about what to do when we got home. We always came back to working together, cooking yet learning new skills in business; and if it could facilitate skiing and living in the mountains then that would be pretty good. Setting up a chalet company seemed the logical solution. We spent the summer and winter learning the skills we needed and started putting feelers out for chalets. We eventually had a call about three small chalets in Meribel Village and within a days we'd signed a three-year contract. The year that followed was the hardest yet most rewarding year of my life.

**WHAT DO YOU CONSIDER YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT?** Outsiders would probably say that my greatest achievement would be setting up a chalet company in France in my early 20s, or writing a cook book, or winning the *Times* Chalet Chef 2010, or opening and turning round a restaurant in the Channel Islands. But I would say my greatest achievements are taking the plunge, following a gut feeling and finding something that I love doing.

**DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE LIVING THE DREAM?** I ski in winter and I surround myself with food, which is my main passion in life. It is not as glamorous as everyone imagines, though, and I rarely switch off from work. But it's my dream and I enjoy it.

**WHERE IS YOUR MOST TREASURED PLACE IN THE ALPS?** It would have to be Meribel and Les Trois Vallées as this is my Alpine home and where it all began. One of my most treasured spots is watching the sun set from the top of Saulire, then skiing empty slopes with legs burning and a grin on my face.

**WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WANTING TO MOVE TO THE ALPS?** Try to learn the language, as it gets you a long way in France. Be prepared for lots of bureaucracy and paper-pushing! Think of something that will fill your summers, not just your winters.

**WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING IF YOU WEREN'T THE OWNER OF FISH&PIPS?** Absolutely no idea, I can't possibly imagine where or what I would be without it!

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