

The chalet holiday that went on forever

<http://www.homesandproperty.co.uk/es/hautesavoiechaletoliday.html>

Caroline and Robert Thompson discovered skiing in the Haute Savoie and never wanted to leave. So they stayed. By Alison Gunn



[Chalet Brio, built in traditional Savoyard style, sleeps 16 guests and includes a self-contained owners' flat with room for six people](#)

Many winter sports fans dream of owning a ski chalet — and with the euro at 80p and some French banks offering three per cent mortgages, now could be the time to buy in the French Alps. However, with prices in the ritzy resorts, such as Courchevel or Chamonix, still as high as their altitude, investors are increasingly looking "further down the mountain" at smaller resorts with good links to the main ski areas.

English couple Caroline and Robert Thompson discovered Samoëns, a pretty town in Haute Savoie, when they were skiing in nearby Flaine. "We were struck by its authentic, historic character," says Caroline, a social work consultant. "It's in a beautiful valley, so not only is it great for skiing, it's a wonderful year-round destination. And it's only an hour from Geneva." Returning to Samoëns in 2005 on impulse, the Thompsons not only bought a plot of land, they hatched a plan to build and run their own ski chalet. In their early fifties, with two children away at university and travelling, the time was right for a full-blown career change.



[Caroline and Robert Thompson successfully hatched a plan to build and run their own ski chalet](#)

Robert, who worked for an insulation company, gave in his notice and they put their house in Northamptonshire on the market. Nine months later they had sold up and in 2007 moved to France, where they appointed a local architect, Olivier Morin, to oversee the building work. "He was brilliant and well worth the fee," says Caroline. "We had a lot of input, but he sorted out the planning application and booked contractors." Having designed their previous home, the Thompsons had some building experience but, inevitably, there were hiccups.

The first carpenter went to ground, then the plumber went bankrupt and during construction the pound slid to be one-for-one with the euro. But eventually it all came together and Chalet Brio, which sleeps 16, plus six in a self-contained flat, opened in winter 2008. Living and working together in the chalet has been a challenge but the couple have capitalised on their strengths. Caroline, always a talented cook, took courses to learn how to cater for up to 22 guests, and grows vegetables and fruit in Chalet Brio's garden. Robert, meanwhile, has used his practical skills in numerous ways — carpentry, electrics, decorating and creating the chalet website.

"It's a good partnership," says Caroline. "We had to learn to work as a couple — to support each other when you are tired and guests are demanding. During peak season the hours are very long." Highlights include meeting so many different and interesting visitors from all over the world. Now in their fifth year as chalet hosts, the Thompsons have settled into life in France and business is good. Key to its success is the easy access to Geneva.

"Guests often look at the snow reports and decide to pop over for a long weekend," says Caroline. Summer has proved an unexpected bonus, booking out far in advance. "There is so much to do here — walking, cycling, mountaineering, extreme sports — or just relaxing around the swimming pool." The Thompsons plan to work another two or three seasons but eventually they will return to England — possibly handing the chalet over to their son, Joss, an engineer, and daughter Polly, a marketing executive. Both are qualified snowboard teachers.

* **Chalet Brio:** chaletsinsamoens.com; 0033 0450933975



£1.78 million: [Ferme Creuzé, Morillon](#) is a farm with lovely views and 24,000sq m of land

Where to buy in Samoëns

Chalets on the sunny, south-facing side of the valley go for higher prices, as does property in the town with access to restaurants and bars, the sports centre and cable car. Also worth looking at are the satellite villages Morillon and Les Carroz, which have their own ski lifts, and Etelley and Verchaix, served by the ski bus.



£726,000: five-bedroom Chalet Genepi, Samoëns, comes with a one-bedroom flat

What there is to buy

"It's better to buy a new or recently built chalet than attempt a costly renovation," advises Caroline. "Newer chalets are better laid out with more bathrooms and good finishing." On the south side of the valley, Chalet Falcon, with seven en suite bedrooms, costs £1.45 million. In Morillon, close to the ski lift, the new three-bedroom Chalet Drosere is £385,000, while five minutes' drive away in Verchaix, a new 79sq metre apartment in Hotel Fleuri is just £108,000 (all through alpineproperty.com). A 608sq m plot of land in Etelley costs £89,000 through Les Chenets Immobiliers (les-chenets.immobiliers.com).

In the town, MGM Properties (mgm.frenchproperties.com) is selling well-designed, fully furnished apartments from £210,000 at Les Chardons Argentés, which have access to a private swimming pool. More affordable is buying under a leaseback scheme, avoiding the 19.6 per cent VAT. Owners are guaranteed a rental income and can stay in their apartment for eight or 10 weeks a year. In Les Carroz, MGM has six ski-in, ski-out units in Chalet des Belles Pistes, from £180,000. Call 020 7494 0706.

Rental income

Rents vary depending on chalet location and quality, but a guide for a two-bedroom apartment would be €800-€1,500 a week (£650-£1,217) in season, with peak prices at Christmas, new year, Easter and school holidays. Net rental income is taxable (currently 20 per cent), and don't forget to factor in management and maintenance costs, which can be hefty because of the weather.