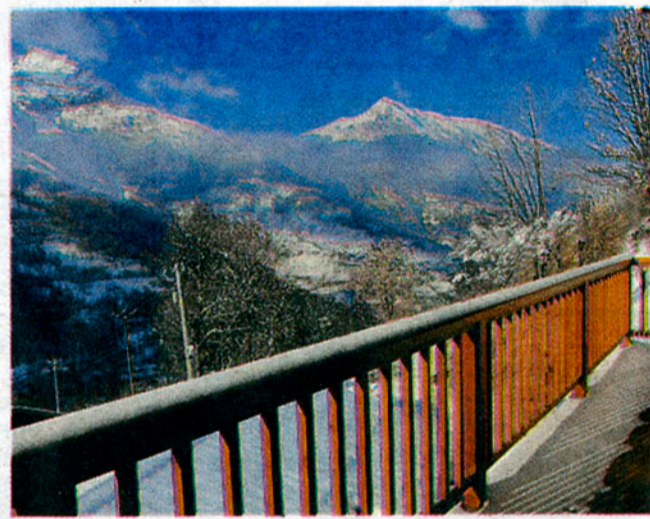


## ABROADOUTLOOK

ROBIN ALLISON SMITH



**Snow business:** Chalet Broski cost £400,000 to convert and now sleeps 14. Right: Colin Hutchins, the resident chef, and Caroline Tucker, the housekeeper



# FROM ALPINE RUIN TO SWISH CHALET

The skiing pals just wanted a place to stash their gear but six years later their £24,000 tip is worth a cool million, writes **Bel Mooney**

THEY had no intention of starting a business. All that the three winter sports enthusiasts wanted was to find a cheap place to use as a base for skiing and snowboarding. They were my partner, the photographer Robin Allison Smith, and brothers Lawrence and Rob White, photographer and businessman respectively. In 2001 they hopped on a cheap flight to Geneva, hired a car and drove to the Trois Vallées in the French Alps, just because they'd heard it was the biggest area for skiing in Europe.

They drove all over the place and consulted agents, but with little luck. Then one day, moseying down from the Savoy resort of St Martin de Belleville, they turned off the road into a hamlet called La Rochette. And there it was. A small, rundown house with a wrecked barn attached and a sign saying *A vendre*.

"We realised it had terrible access," says Robin, "but it had great views and it was just a mile and a quarter from the lift at St Martin. Best of all, though, was the price. The house hadn't been lived in for seven years and it was only £24,000." Split three ways on credit cards, it seemed a steal. But it had one tap, four sockets, one lightbulb, and nowhere to put a septic tank. They figured they could put one in the basement and turn the living quarters into a simple holiday flat. It didn't take long to sort out a makeshift kitchen and bathroom, and the following spring they hit the slopes.

Robin says: "Conditions were Nepalese. Unless you lit the wood stove you froze, and there was no entertainment except red wine and conversation." The plan was to improve the

accommodation a little and get planning permission to convert the whole thing, but they couldn't afford to do anything about that. It was enough to have a base for skiing — none of the three envisaged immediately spending much time and money on the place.

Three things changed all this. They were able to buy the next-door field for the septic tank, the planning permission had a shelf life, and they were able to dredge up some funds.

In a moment of fraternal harmony they

Split three ways on credit cards, the old house looked a steal

called their fledgling business "Broski". The building was a saga of smells and bells (the septic tank was a problem and the builders moaned because the church bells woke them up each morning). The initial plans were drawn up by a talented young French architect, Christelle Avenir. They had imagined getting all the work done by locals, but discovered that the building season is short; at first snowflake, every chippy and plumber downs tools to be a ski instructor.

Robin (an ex-builder) had the idea of bringing in labour from England. In spring 2005 the old barn was demolished by a building crew from the Forest of Dean, who stayed in a house rented for them in the village. Then came the Devon lads, drinking, quarrelling and eventual-

ly being banned from the local bar for brawling. But the chalet was rising from the wreckage. Robin is at pains to point out that they did find some excellent French artisans too, especially a brilliant roofer, an electrician who made the most of the meagre 17kW supply, and the plumber who coped with every bathroom change they made, giving a Gallic shrug and starting again.

Because the house was halfway up a mountain, they tried to use as much as possible of what was already there, but in the end most of the barn was rough old timber and had to go. Particular problems included insulation against temperatures that drop well below freezing. Robin says: "There were times when it seemed like we'd never get there. There was always something new to deal with — water, power, or the no-show from the guy laying the floor." But after 19 months of serious building they opened for business at the end of January.

As is often the case when three people go into business, they found that each had different ideas. Nobody wanted a chocolate-box Alpine chalet, but Rob White was drawn to minimalism, while Robin and Lawrence favoured the "shabby-chic" route. In the end the chalet was a mixture of both. They were united in the desire to create a place that was more than a crash pad after skiing. Robin says: "We wanted to create a house which a non-skier would love, with a welcoming, cool but homely boutique atmosphere."

And that's where I come in. The idea of skiing fills me with horror, but I have just had a week's holiday at the house. Looking at the photographs, it's hard to believe what they've



achieved. When the rest of our party left for the slopes I headed for the cosy library and read all day, looking at wondrous snowy views and checking my e-mails via broadband.

After a spa bath I lolled about in the sauna, finding it hard to believe this was once the chickens' corner of the barn. Each night they would all pile back for a gourmet meal prepared by Colin Hutchins, the resident chef (and former restaurateur), helped by his partner, Caroline Tucker, as housekeeper. The wine is included in the overall cost. It was a cracking holiday.

It has all come at a price. After that bargain purchase, the partners in Broski reckon to have spent about £400,000 transforming their wreck into a boutique chalet that sleeps 14 (with Xbox room and bar billiards for teenagers). This year, despite not finishing on time, the season has been very successful. Skiers are increasingly having their doubts about the Alps, but their high valley (the Val Thorens) has been given a snowy bill of health for at least 50 years. The property will also earn its keep in summer, when they will let it to walkers and mountain bikers; the chef will offer a cookery course too.

So with their property valued at more than £1 million, the chalet seems to have been a cast-iron investment. Would they do it again? Robin says: "Yes we would. It would be so much easier the next time around."

Chalet Broski: 07961 111777, [www.broski.co.uk](http://www.broski.co.uk)

## FORSALE

- If the price is no object, try these agents:
- Alpine Angels ([www.alpineangels.net](http://www.alpineangels.net)) has a seven-bed chalet in Chamonix for £4.53m.
  - Première Neige ([www.premiere neige.com](http://www.premiere neige.com)) is selling a chalet in Sainte Foy for £2m.
  - Pierre & Vacances ([www.pierre-vacances.co.uk](http://www.pierre-vacances.co.uk)) has a five-bed chalet in Courchevel for sale for £1.51m.
  - Chalets Direct ([www.chaletsdirect.com](http://www.chaletsdirect.com)) has an eight-bed chalet in Courchevel for £1,038,000 — right by the slopes.
  - Erna Low ([www.ernalow.co.uk](http://www.ernalow.co.uk)) has a £1m hotel for sale but not a £1m chalet.