



## EUROPEANS ATTACK CHERISHED BRITISH INSTITUTION

*Roger Bray*

The ski chalet holiday is a curiously British institution. It varies enormously, from the budget package where you pad down the corridor on bare feet to find the lavatory already occupied, to the luxurious, with champagne when you get back from the slopes and hot tubs to soothe overworked muscles.

I've never been much tempted by them. Their original appeal, it seems to me, carried a whiff of xenophobia. What's the point of travelling to the French Alps, for example, to be cooked for by a British member of chalet staff who's like as not spending a gap year on the snow? Besides, I don't have enough like minded skiing friends to justify renting an entire chalet and I'm sufficiently anti social to shudder at the thought of having to dine with strangers.

That said it's easy to understand why tour operators continue to offer them, extending the original concept by introducing the chalet hotel, which, as the name indicates, is a hotel with chalet style board. This kind of holiday comes at an up front, inclusive price, with no nasty surprises – a particularly powerful selling point during the recent downturn, when at least one leading operator increased its chalet inventory significantly. You get an English breakfast and afternoon tea and cake – and fellow Brits with whom to share tales of the day's derring do. So economics apart, there are those who don't want to spend their ski holidays any other way.

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It's all the more odd, then, that the Swiss authorities should have apparently bowed to pressure from a group of hoteliers to render the chalet business model – at least at the lower end of the price spectrum – impossible to sustain.

In June 2013 the Swiss federal government decided to enforce the country's employment laws in the hospitality industry. As a result UK chalet operators were obliged to apply working conditions such as minimum rest periods and – crucially – the Swiss minimum wage.

According to Andy Perrin, chief executive of tour firm Inghams, the minimum pay rate worked out at the equivalent of just under £34,000 a year. This

would have meant adding an average £350 to the price of a holiday. For operators offering the most expensive chalets this might not have been such a major consideration but for those offering more modestly priced properties it was a huge blow. Perrin claims the decision was "railroaded through" without consultation, so those whose interests would be damaged, such as suppliers and local bar owners, were unable to object.

While the move has undoubtedly caused individual harm the overall impact on Switzerland's tourism earnings will not be massive. The number of Britons denied their chalet holidays there this winter is probably not more than around 2000. But that, in a way, makes the decision all the more strange.

Previously it was generally acknowledged that different parameters applied to chalet staff parachuted in for the season. They were there for the skiing and snowboarding rather than to earn money. Putting them on the same footing as Swiss workers ignored the fact that they were fed, accommodated and in many cases provided with lift passes and equipment. And as to any suggestion that this amounted to slave labour well, they must have been willing slaves, as there are invariably many more applicants for chalet jobs than there are vacancies.

The Swiss decision is not the only current headache for those in the ski holiday business.

The French national ski school (ESF) brought a case against chalet operator Le Ski alleging its provision of ski guides for clients was in breach of the law requiring leaders of organised groups to be qualified ski instructors. This affected not

only chalet operators but also those selling hotel and self catering packages, forcing them all to stop offering such services until the outcome of the case was decided. Operators call it "social skiing". An Albertville court ruled against Le Ski, which appealed, arguing that the decision was contrary to EU law. It claimed regulations banning ski hosting were discriminatory as French civil servants and teachers established in the country were exempt from the need for qualifications.

As with the Swiss move, it comes down to entrenched interests – and it's equally misguided. It is more likely that Britons accustomed to Swiss chalet holidays will switch to similar breaks in other countries than switch to hotels. Holidaymakers join groups led by unofficial tour operator guides because it's sociable and because the hosts will show them where to find the best

snow and the best places to eat on the mountain. There is no safety issue. Hosts won't take groups off piste or anywhere clients are likely to get into trouble. If the service takes any bread from the mouths of officially qualified instructors, which I doubt, it could only be the tiniest of crumbs. As Le Ski managing director Nick Morgan notes, the ban does not mean its customers will join a ski school. They would not ask ESF ski instructors to show them round resorts and find the best routes. "They will simply have to spend more time looking at their piste maps".

With the support of ten other tour operators, Le Ski took its case to the appeals court in

Chambery. On September 4 the company's central argument was rejected. At the time of writing it was awaiting the result of a subsequent hearing at the Court of Cassation, or supreme court, in Paris, to determine whether any failure

in the legal process might justify reconsidering the case.

Meanwhile guides have also been threatened with prosecution and fines in the Italian Piemonte region. This has prompted at least three tour operators to stop offering the service in all or some of their Italian resorts. However, some of their irritation may be softened by the thought that the further the onslaught on social skiing spreads, the more likely it is to wind up in the European Court.

It strikes me as ludicrous that such a relatively minor issue should have absorbed so much time and money. And if it deters visitors, particularly those whose children may otherwise have entered ski school, there is surely a risk it may prove counter productive.

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*Roger Bray is a freelance journalist.*

*He can be contacted at [rogerbray@gmail.com](mailto:rogerbray@gmail.com)*