



GOING downhill FAST

Mountain-top barbecues, helicopter shopping trips, exotic goats flown in for dinner — the super-rich are turning the Alps into just another party playground. Whatever happened to skiing, asks **Kate Spicer**

Clearly, it's the Russians who are to blame for the unabashed ultra-luxurification of the Alps. It was they, after all, who demanded Ukrainian snake and rock lobster for dinner — never mind that there was 2ft of powder outside and the nearest rock lobster was three hours away, at the Lausanne Palace. Thanks to those bleedin' Russkies, a jaunt in the mountains can cost you £60,000 a week. And that's before you've even had a snifter of 1812 cognac or a whiff of a £300 cigar. The Russians must be stopped before the wholesome, rustic charms of the annual ski holiday vanish altogether.

Except that, much as the tales of vulgar wealth fit comfortably with the cultural stereotype, it is not entirely the Russians' fault. They may have crazy-paved the path to Alpine excess by creating opportunities previously unthinkable in a mountain environment, but where the oligarchs have gone, our own high-net-worth individuals are increasingly following. Ask anyone in the swankier valleys of the Alps, and they'll tell you the same thing: the 2006/07 ski season has been the scene of more ridiculous demands from spectacularly loaded holidaymakers than ever before.

The New Alpinists are an international bunch, but most are based in London. Many work in the financial markets. (One hedge-funder said, when asked if the Russian comparison stood up: "What we're up to is simply a more discreet version of the oligarchs' rape of Russia in the 1990s, so why not?") They scatter themselves across the Alps, wherever there are Michelin-starred restaurants and chalets equipped

with high-tech cinemas, more bathrooms than bedrooms, and hot tubs with epic views. Méribel, Val d'Isère, Les Gets, Verbier, Zermatt, Klosters, St Moritz, Chamonix — scratch the surface and you'll find a burgeoning hospitality elite ready and waiting to pander to rich men's demands.

A generation ago, an Alpine holiday meant hunkering down en masse in a big chalet with one bathroom, which you shared with the staff. Skiing was a sport, and even the rich were prepared to rough it for their high-altitude fix. Skiers were hardy sorts with simple needs. Most real skiers still are. As one operator puts it: "Generally, the more money you spend, the less good you are at skiing. The French, Swiss and Italians just get on with it."

The truth is that a third of the New Alpinists don't ski at all, nor do they want to. What they want instead is a chalet that's run like an exclusive boutique hotel and a herd of Argentine goats flown in for a mountain-top barbecue. They want tepees, huskies, foie gras sizzling on the burner and Belle Epoque champagne chilling in the snow round a roaring fire at the top of the bubble lift in Val d'Isère. They want a chopper transfer direct from the slopes to a first-class shuttle direct to the Super Bowl. They want — well, basically, they want it all.

Annabel Adams thinks wanting it all is just the beginning. She has just taken the Ibiza concierge business Deliciously Sorted to the Alps. "I'm excited by what is happening in parts of the Alps — it's like what happened in Ibiza a few years ago. I'm surprised people don't ask for more. It can be done." Deliciously Sorted delivers hedonism in ▶

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▶ whatever form imaginable to those who want to crash directly into a scene made popular by Jade Jagger and her posh raving elite. “Our Ibiza clients get in touch with me here in the Alps, wanting access and helicopters. What they can get in London or Ibiza, they expect to find here.”

Tales of the worst excesses of the Russians, fuelled by an unholy trinity of cocaine, hookers and guns, have yet to be matched by the Brits here. But that’s not to say they don’t prefer a proper party to the old moon-booted boogie in a dire resort disco. These days, the high-end ski companies have to double as event planners, sweet-talking the local *mairies* and lift operators so that the coveted high-altitude rave-up can happen.

George Burdon runs Dynamic Lives, a “concierged” holiday company that provides “tailored hand-holding”, as he likes to describe it, based in Chamonix in the winter and Ibiza in the summer. In the Alps, Burdon’s British clients are mostly hedge-funders and their ilk, out exploiting what, business-wise, is seen as “the new golf course”. They may spend a basic £2,500 in 48 hours. Burdon recently threw a party in a deserted hotel at the bottom of the Vallée Blanche. “We trained up in the funicular to the glacier – drinks were served on the way. We had an Haute Savoyarde dinner, then dancing to Euro-house and pop. Around midnight, we went down to go clubbing. It was good, honest fun.”

Others are less coy about their clients’ needs. Kit Harrison owns the deluxe-skiing market-leader Descent International. It was his flagship chalet Septième Ciel, in Verbier, that the Beckhams tried to buy for £10m in 2004. His chalets cost up to £50,000 a week, basic, and come with three wine lists: house, à la carte and the wish list, which is sourced by the sommelier in consultation with the client. “Your money buys you the experience you want, rather than the experience someone else thinks you want,” Harrison says. “In the Alps today, the client is the boss. Our staff are ready to receive 80 guests for an impromptu party if the client wants it. Whatever they want, they can have – even at short notice.”

He will not be drawn on illegal requests, but says that within the privacy of the chalet, it is up to individual managers what kind of arrangements are made. Needless to say, his ambitious staff come from five-star hotels and are not there to ski and shag. “They come to us with an understanding of what luxury is, an understanding that is turned on its head during a season with us.”

Again, for Descent, the ability to arrange a party at altitude is key to delivering client satisfaction. Harrison’s list of events this season is impressive. On St Valentine’s Day, he intercepted a couple on their way to lunch and showed them to a fur-covered love seat cut out of the snow, scattered with rose petals, chef and waiters at the ready. There have

been late-night husky safaris through woods to marquees ablaze with twinkling lights and exuberant musicians. Helicopters aren’t there to pick up gnarly off-pisters; they are glorified wheelbarrows dropping outsized party kit. And while parties are small, a handful of people can easily run up a £6,000 tab in one simple night of fun.

There are 1.3m regular snowsports enthusiasts in the UK, and currently very few of them fall into this market – Harrison has 2,000 guests a season, and 80 staff to look after them. But where the high rollers go, humble professionals with a bit of cash to burn will follow. Already, the upper end of the mid-market has companies such as Hip Chalets delivering Asian-styled chalets complete with Japanese chef, should you want him. Hip Chalets’ properties are considered “quite cheap”, says the owner, Jamie Strachan, a social player and former British free-skier. “We don’t cater to the super-rich and the Russians, but our people still want to feel individual and unique – people aspire to and worship celebrity. Everyone wants to feel like the person behind the sunglasses.”

Chamonix’s only boutique hotel, the Clubhouse, with its penthouse Myla suite offering views over Mont Blanc and the Aiguille du Midi, mops up couples prepared to spend up to £4,000 on weekends of Michelin meals, heli-skiing, top-flight mountain guidance and all the rich-bitch mollycoddling in between. The place – a favourite with media Londoners – is famous for regular excesses: lobster snow barbecues, gin martinis, sex toys in the minibars and guests who step out for dinner in high heels. So much so that bemused locals have branded it a bordello. The owner, Jonathan Downey, tries not to care (although regular nose-arounds by police concerned about “fire”

hazards clearly get on his nerves).

Downey doesn’t think the changes in the Alps are all about the high-end market. “I’ve got the Myla suite, yes. But I’ve also got bunkrooms downstairs that sleep six and cost £40 a night. Everyone has access to the same urban-Alpine experience here. All I want is to offer people the same thing that they’d get in London. Our guests – I don’t care how rich they are – are the kind of people who know what they want, and we give it to them. That’s the Alps of the 21st century.”

So, your car may not come ready-warmed, with the anthracite leather and blacked-out windows that you specified. Its driver may not be liveried, and – unlike the Russians spending six-figure sums on their holiday rental – you will not be able to specify that he have a bushy beard. But some of the superluxe service at the upper end of the market will inevitably trickle down. The helicopters will be there, ready – if you have the cash – to buzz you to Milan for a bit of shopping. Just make sure you go in January when the pistes are quiet – or, in true New Alpinist style, when the sales are on. □

