

Sloping off: welcome to the British Alps

Wealthy high-flyers are deserting London to colonise the ski resort of Chamonix, where the British community now numbers more than 1,000. **Damian Whitworth reports**

SIMON WARREN was 35 and being paid "stupidly well" by an American merchant bank when he had an icy epiphany in the French Alps.

"I had spent 12 years in London. It was an unsustainable lifestyle. I worked for a bank with an aggressive reputation. The hours were ridiculous. It was a miserable environment. Some people thrive on that but I didn't seem to have the balance in my life that I was looking for.

"I went on a ski touring holiday and I was climbing a glacier at 4am. I realised that I hadn't felt this much alive or happy for a very long time."

When he returned to Britain he resigned from his job and retired from the City. He spent a year diving and skiing all over the world and eventually found himself in Chamonix. A year on, he has decided to settle. What does he do with himself? He laughs. "That's a very good question."

The deep, narrow Chamonix valley was discovered by the outside world in the mid-18th century when a group of English travellers adventured up from Geneva. But while it has long been popular with the French, Italians and Scandinavians, the British started arriving in large numbers only when easyJet began flying to Geneva within the past few years. Now an extraordinary British colonisation is under way. Doves of City high-flyers are quitting their jobs and fleeing to the Alps, where a community of permanent residents has sprung up in the shadow of Mont Blanc, Europe's highest peak.

Disenchanted by London and the intense pressures of Europe's financial hub, they are drawn to the Continent's mountaineering and extreme winter sports capital. They come to Chamonix to turn on, tune in, ski. They have the cash to do so in style, a fact that is both a boon and a burden for this corner of the Alps.

The attractions are easy to see. The mountain scenery is spectacular and the skiing some of the best — and most demanding — in the world. But for this new influx, the appeal of Chamonix is that it is more than just a ski town. "It is different from 90 per cent of resorts, where come April the last person leaving has to turn out the lights," says Warren. "This has a resident population all year round." Chamonix is the world's leading destination for climbers and hikers, as busy — if not more so — in summer as in winter. "It's an hour from Geneva and has a lot of dynamic international people. The fact that there is a core of people in Chamonix who are not just ski bumming makes it interesting."

If they are not ski bummers in the classic twentysomething, bar-crawling, bunkbed-hopping sense, some of the permanent new Brit population

are high-end piste artists. One former executive at Citibank, in his early forties, has retired here with his wife. "I had been coming here to ski for 20 years. Then, when I was made redundant, I realised that we had enough to live on for the rest of our lives." Does he worry that he might get bored? "You start off on the pistes. Then go off-piste. Then ski touring. There's always a new challenge."

Other residents insist that they will do more with their lives than just ski and spend. For all his joking about not knowing what he does all day, Simon Warren says he could not live a life of pure leisure. Although "financially I have no immediate pressures, irrespective of our financial circumstances we all have to work. I would find it very difficult to just ski every day. If people stop completely they just stop growing." He is now looking for investment projects.

Peter Vohmann, 29, a former investment banker at Merrill Lynch and his girlfriend, Angela Bidwell, 27, who also worked for the bank, quit their jobs in 2001 and went travelling. They came to Chamonix because they loved skiing although "neither of us are real mountain people", says Bidwell. "We loved Chamonix because it's a town. It doesn't close down. It has a lot of charm and character." She admits to missing family and friends but enjoys "the pace of the life. In London you see friends once a week. Here people pop in for a

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coffee and you see them all the time." They bought a large Art Deco building and decided to invest their money in turning it into a private members' club. Their partner in the Clubhouse is Jonathan Downey, owner of the Milk & Honey clubs in London and New York and a string of bars. Vohmann and Bidwell are here full-time for the long haul. They will oversee the club but will have a manager to run it day to day.

The club, with its reproduction 1970s leather furniture, plasma screens and sex toys in the bedrooms, already has 1,000 members. One recent afternoon several members were to be found in the bar, checking e-mails and doing a little business after a morning on the slopes.

One regular is George Burdon, a former broker on the London life futures exchange. He now has a company, Dynamic Lives, which rents out lavish chalets and apartments and creates bespoke holidays for people from his former life. He spends half the year in Chamonix and half in Ibiza. "My ambition was to prove that you can live and have a business in the locations where you spend time on holiday," he says over a very leisurely lunch. "I want to be able to draw energy from the mountains and the locality." If he has had a hard morning in the office he just tells his staff: "OK guys, I'm off" and repairs to the slopes, or his hot tub.

Indeed, for this breed of ex-City hotshot, who made their money from being chained to their desks for at least 50 per cent of each day, spontaneity is central to their existence. As I slump quite happily in a leather chair in front of a roaring fire in the Clubhouse bar, listening to Vohmann and Downey praising the wide variety of international cuisines on offer in Chamonix, they suddenly announce that we are "going to do something mad". Within half an hour we are across the border, hurtling up an icy, forested Italian mountainside on snowmobiles. In the dark. This is, frankly, terrifying. We emerge at a rustic restaurant where they order delicious pasta and sausages and €200 (£138) bottles of wine. We are well-oiled by the end of the evening, which is just as well as the descent is even more hairy. Fortunately, the Italian drivers are sober.



Chamonix residents, clockwise from left: businessman George Burdon in the hot tub; accountant Kate Scott; British products on the supermarket shelves; a view of the town; former banker Simon Warren

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have this amazing playground to train in. I can't imagine going back to London and a restrictive job. The thought of putting smart clothes on and going to work fills me with horror."

Jon Dobson, 32, worked in marketing for Kellogg's and McDonald's and "found London utterly soul-destroying and incredibly expensive. I was paid well but it doesn't matter how much money you have, it's not enough." Hooked on snowboarding, he decided to move to Chamonix and run a snowboard store to fund his addiction. "It's a gamble, but the lifestyle was crucially important. I missed the outdoors. I love the whole ethos."

Following in the slipstream of the



wealthy new arrivals are those intent on making a living off them. These include John Reid, 35, an artist who has opened a gallery on the premise that "if they can afford a chalet they can afford one of my paintings". Britons are his best customers and the gallery is flourishing. Of a population of 10,000-12,000 in Chamonix, more than 1,000 are Britons who live in the town all year round. The Super U supermarket has a substantial "British foods" section where the new locals can pick up Heinz baked beans at £1.14 (78p) a tin and 40 PG Tips tea bags at €3.24 (£2.23).

This British invasion is not without cost. The Chamonix Valley is extremely narrow, some would say oppressive, meaning that there is very little land left on the valley floor available for new building. The cost of property has exploded, driven by the British invasion.

Philippe Chevallier, of the Cham-

nix estate agent Century 21, says that 50 per cent of his buyers are British and they account for considerably more than 50 per cent of the value of the property sold because they buy the more expensive homes. Last year more than 25 homes went for over €1 million. A four-bedroom chalet costs a minimum of €800,000 (£551,000). One agent in the town centre has a palatial seven-bedroom spread on the market at €3.6 million (£2.5 million).

"We have a social problem in Chamonix. Now it's not possible for people in Chamonix to buy or invest," says Chevallier. "In the past five years the people of Chamonix have been interested in selling property to make money. Now we have the damage that the children have no property to live in. There is a little tension."

But while some may complain, those French with property to sell are hardly holding back. When I ask if some French locals won't sell to the

'The French are fed up as we are prepared to work more than 35 hours a week'



British on ideological grounds, Chevallier laughs. "We have people who say the opposite. They want to sell to the English because they think the English will pay more." Loic Giordani, 20, who works in the Invasion snowboard store, wants to buy somewhere with his girlfriend, but instead rents a tiny apartment. "It's good for business but hard to live here. A lot of friends have moved away. It's just too expensive. A few months ago there was graffiti saying 'English go home' and things like that." He has a plan that will enable him to buy. "I'm going to do like the English and have a good business. But I'll work with English people, not French people. It's an English mentality. The French from here are..." he puts his hands in his pockets and shrugs extravagantly. "I would need a very successful business to stay here permanently."

I hear this brutal analysis of French entrepreneurship from several Frenchmen. Chevallier says the British are "more dynamic. It's in your mind." Over at the Tourism Office, Bernard Prud'homme says that "my model of commercialisation is you, the British". I think this may be a subtle "nation of shopkeepers" barb because he goes on to say that the French interests are "culture, history, politics and science".

Prud'homme says that the tension is overplayed. While for some French people in Chamonix "the reaction is 'British go home', generally relations are good," he says.

However, the fact that many Britons exploit loopholes in the tax law to base their companies in Britain and thus avoid heavier French taxes has not endeared them to the natives. Jon Dobson is half-Canadian and says he plays that up when asked where he is from. "There is huge animosity," he says, recalling an encounter with a customer recently. "She said: 'Are you English?' I said: 'No, I'm Canadian.' And she said: 'Good, because we don't like the English'."

Some Britons don't even seem to notice the French. "There must be a lot of French people here," one British woman says. "But I don't know where they are." Others are disparaging of Gallic complaints. "The French have got this attitude embedded: they are going to be fed up because we are prepared to work more than 35 hours a week," says one.

Simon Norris, who owns the Hotel Eden and regards himself as "totally integrated", says that when he first arrived in the town more than 20 years ago, "if I heard an English voice in the street I would go up and say hello." Now "I feel a bit uncomfortable seeing signs outside the bars in English. Locals are mystified that people have lived here for five or six years and don't speak French."

Perhaps the surest sign that the complexion of the town is changing is in the classrooms of the Jeanne d'Arc school. The five-year-old son of the British hotelier Nick Gulliford is one of six British children in his class of 30. "Initially the school was concerned that the British kids would stick together and so they were split up," says Gulliford. "Now they are fully integrated and bilingual." Prud'homme believes this could be the way forward for the town. "The next generation, educated together, will be a very good melange."

Chamonix is more than just the latest fashionable pit-stop for the moneyed set. The Britons who live here insist that they are here to stay, using the town as a base for a European existence. "I love the region and am committed to it," says Simon Warren. "I get a kick from the fact that you are in the middle of Europe."

When he wants culture he heads into Geneva, or through the Mont Blanc tunnel to Milan; to Montreux or Basle for the summer festivals. "Oh my God! We are Eurotrash now. It's really frightening."