

# Village people

*Bespoke chalets around Sainte Foy cost far less than those in the main Alpine ski centres. By Richard Edgar*

**L**ean back against the solid walls of the chalet and drink in the early morning view: snow-capped mountains across the valley glow orange as the sun catches the peaks. Birdsong fills the air and mists curl up from below. Then a circular saw screams into life. For this chalet is still a building site.

It's the latest creation by Chris Harrop, a British builder who first came to ski in the Tarentaise valley in the French Alps three decades ago and has stayed here pretty much ever since. His company, French Mountain Property (FMP), specialises in renovating derelict buildings and creating bespoke, luxury chalets around the small French ski resort of Sainte Foy. Being outside the main nearby centres of Val d'Isère, Tignes and Les Arcs might be less convenient than a piste-side pad but offers owners a unique experience at far lower cost.

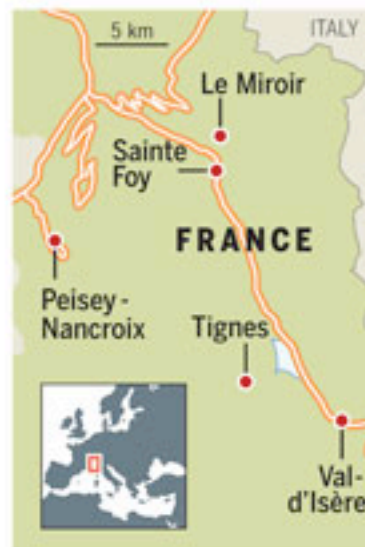
Builders are at work on Chalet Pèlerin, a five-bedroom property in the village of Le Miroir, about 2km from Sainte Foy. The plot, the design and the finishes are all to the specification of the American client. "They can get as involved in the design as they like," says Harrop. A lap pool, sauna and steam room are installed but there is a hole outside where the whirlpool will go, and inside the building a forest of fibre optic cables sprouts from various corners. Eventually they will be hidden behind the rough-hewn wood panelling. "It's going to be ultra-modern in terms of infrastructure, but we try to stay true to the Savoyard style," says Harrop.

Since founding FMP over a decade ago, Harrop has built or renovated about 20 properties around the region. Taking inspiration from established farmhouses in Tarentaise villages such as Le Miroir, his designs have a remarkable solidity and patina. This is in part because he uses reclaimed materials whenever he can.

His workshop, in the nearby village of Landry, is in an old timber yard. Blackened planks and beams are stacked in rows wait-



**Savoyard** FMP have built Chalet Merlo, above, and Chalet Chardonneret, left, on sale for €1.2m, reduced from €1.5m Mark Junak



ing to be used. "It's becoming harder to find [this] locally," he says. "Some I get from Poland or Austria but when we use new woods we have developed treatments to age them where even an experienced joiner couldn't tell the difference."

It takes about 18 months to build a chalet from start to finish and local contacts help in negotiating the planning process. Word often reaches Harrop that a suitable plot is coming to market and FMP swoops in.

One plot for sale in the village of Peisey-Nancroix has plans for a seven-bedroom chalet below the church, spread over 350 sq m and priced at €3.4m (\$4.6m). It is only 200m from a ski lift with access to Les Arcs and La Plagne. But most FMP properties are more isolated, either in farming villages or on their own, a short drive from the slopes. Not being ski-in/ski-out limits the appeal of the properties. However, Simon Clemmow, a founding partner of the advertising agency CHI & Partners, who with his wife Liz bought a derelict farmhouse in Le Miroir in 1998, sees this as a benefit: "If you were just here for a week you would probably want to be in the heart of [a resort], but we like the choice of areas."

After a major renovation by FMP, which has left them with a seven-bedroom property, they are spending a third winter season in the chalet, keeping in touch with the office by phone and e-mail. Being in a

real village instead of a resort is an advantage in that it doesn't become a sterile ghost town once the snow melts.

Another FMP client, American Marshall Findlay, bought Chalet Merlo for his family six years ago. He is attracted by Sainte Foy's fabled off-piste descents. "When we ski in Colorado it's all on-piste and very controlled. Here it's a much better experience." He and his wife and teenage sons visit around three times a year and rent the chalet out for the rest of the time; it also serves as an unofficial show home for FMP. The formal letting of a new-build has significant tax advantages in France, allowing owners to claim back sales tax on their outlay (including furnishings) which is a 19.6 per cent benefit, albeit with strict conditions, according to Alan Bondaz, director of local accountants Sareg. Findlay says he has seen a substantial rise in the value of Chalet Merlo, although growth has slowed in recent years.

"The Lehman Bros collapse changed things immediately," says Chris Harrop. "We lost two or three important clients who would have secured our future." Several FMP properties for sale have been reduced by 15-20 per cent. That discount is mirrored in Val d'Isère, where Paul Niwano, a British businessman who runs the 4Property estate agency, says top-end chalets have dropped around 15 per cent from their peak. But the most dramatic dif-

ference between the chalets in the main resort and those further away is the relative value. A 350 sq m new-build in Val d'Isère will cost upwards of €10m by the time it is finished, compared with the chalet FMP is proposing of a similar size in Peisey-Nancroix at €3.4m. "Our clients pay a premium for location," says Niwano, "and the specifications here are a bit better." But he says the market at the top is relatively stagnant in Val d'Isère. "There's no question it slowed down but as there's limited stock it hasn't seized up completely."

Sandrine Charrière from Sainte Foy Agence describes a new confidence among buyers. She and her partner Marie-Agnès Gaden opened their business three years ago, at possibly the worst time, but "this year has been great," she says. Charrière's agency tends to serve a different segment, with demand highest between the €500,000-€1m mark. FMP, too, is experiencing resurging interest. As I departed Sainte Foy, staff were preparing for second viewings by two potential buyers from abroad. After a much-needed snowfall, at least one was planning to ski before deciding.

*Richard Edgar is global editor of FT video. He stayed in Sainte Foy courtesy of Chalet Merlo*

## Buying guide

### Pros

- Owning a one-off property
- Avoiding the main resorts cuts the price of property dramatically
- Being in a traditional village allows you to experience French life and culture

### Cons

- No ski-in/ski-out convenience
- Almost no nightlife
- A car is a necessity

### What you can buy for

**\$100,000:** 4Property has a very modest Val d'Isère studio for €84,120  
**\$1m:** A two- to three-bedroom new-build FMP chalet in Sainte Foy

### Developers and agencies

**French Mountain Property.**  
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**Sainte Foy Agence.** tel: +33 (0)4 79 220 220, [www.saintefoy-agence.com](http://www.saintefoy-agence.com)  
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