



# ALPINE *inspiration*

Swapping the corporate world of Manchester for their own luxury chalet business in Morzine, Sam Thomas and her husband Jon Dredge are flying high in a very different way, as *Paola Westbeek* finds out

**N**estled in the heart of Portes du Soleil, one of the most important ski destinations in the world, is Morzine, an authentically preserved resort town which is just as attractive in summer as it is in winter. Morzine's charm and friendly, laid-back atmosphere did not go unnoticed by Sam Thomas and Jon Dredge when they first visited in 2006. After a snowboarding sabbatical, the young couple decided to wave their hectic corporate careers goodbye in pursuit of a new business

venture: starting a ski and snowboard chalet company in their newly discovered Alpine paradise.

"Jon and I left Manchester in 2004 in search of new adventures and ended up doing back-to-back winter seasons around the world for 18 months," Sam explains. "We started off in Whistler, Canada followed by Queenstown, New Zealand where we stayed for nearly six months. Finally, we went back to Europe and did a season in Les Trois Vallées, and that's where everything started."

At that point, Sam and Jon both knew there would be no turning back. "Originally, we were planning on going back to the UK, but I guess fate took its path and here we are, 12 years later and still in France," Sam laughs.

## THE ULTIMATE HOLIDAY

Not only had the couple stayed in many different types of accommodation during their career break, but they had also amassed a considerable amount of experience in property development alongside their jobs in recruitment. This, together with a genuine love for the slopes and a keen eye for interior design, is what led them to create More Mountain, a company that would see their vision of the ultimate ski and snowboard holiday brought to fruition. The goal was ▶



Sam and Jon at home in Morzine



to offer luxury and style, without the pretentiousness and at an affordable price.

Getting their business up and running wasn't easy, however. In fact, before finding their first chalet, two properties had fallen through on the same day. Discouraged, Sam and Jon were on the verge of booking a flight back to the UK, but within two days they found someone who was willing to take a leap of faith and entrust them with his property. Chalet Robin (named after its owner) was More Mountain's first accommodation. Today, thanks to local word of mouth and a long list of satisfied customers (many property owners were previous clients), the company has grown organically into a thriving business that counts six catered chalets and 27 self-catered apartments in its portfolio.

More Mountain prides itself on adhering to exceptional standards and making sure guests have a memorable holiday. Those who book a stay at a catered chalet are pampered and taken care of from the moment they are picked up at Geneva airport, which is just a little over an hour from Morzine, making the town one of the easiest French winter sport destinations to get to. "At the chalet, guests are greeted by a lovely host couple and treated to champagne and canapés. Everything, including lift passes, is sorted before they have even had a chance to sit down to a four-course, beautifully presented dinner," explains Sam. "The next day, after a good night's sleep and a full cooked breakfast, the hosts take guests up to the mountain in one of our minibuses or Land Rovers.

When they come back, they have freshly baked cakes with coffee or tea or a glass of wine by the fire. It's all very effortless. People do forget their brains at the airport when they arrive," she laughs.

That same level of personal attention is also given to guests staying at the stylish and modern self-catered apartments. "We have a meet-and-greet service and take the time to welcome the clients on arrival, make them a cup of tea and show them around. We don't just leave the key under the doormat and say 'help yourself'. We're actually there in person."

Inspired by the family dog Figsy, the couple have recently launched the Alpine Pups package for four-legged guests who accompany their owners on holiday.

### WORK AND PLAY

Sam and Jon's own chalet, which they designed and built themselves, is located in the centre of Morzine, just down the road from their office. After dropping their five-year-old son Ted at school, the couple have their first business meeting of the day while enjoying some fresh mountain air and walking Figsy, the fox terrier.

"We're certainly not stuck behind a desk like we were when we were back in the UK. We walk and talk and discuss what we're going to do that day. Generally, we're in the office between 9.30 and 10am, meet with our staff and find out what's been going on in terms of sales coming in to the business or what's happening with the apartments," says Sam.

While Jon is responsible for the financial side of the business, deals with

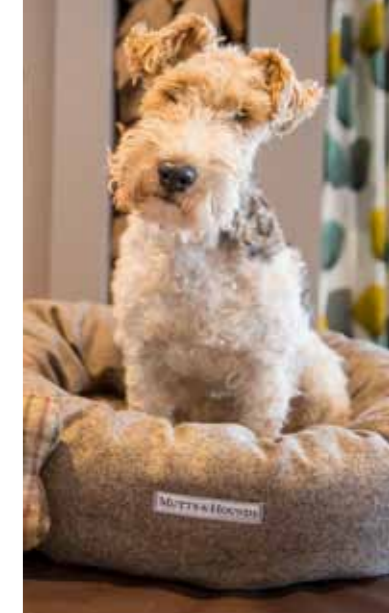


**Above and right:** Accommodation includes stylish apartments, cosy chalets and spacious farmhouses

**Below left:** Morzine has just as much to offer during the summer months as it does during the winter



**Right:** Family dog Figsy has inspired More Mountain's new Alpine Pups package



**Bottom:** Sam, Jon and son Ted make the most of life in the mountains



property owners and makes sure that things are running in the right direction, Sam is more involved in sales, marketing and staff recruitment.

"It's all very reactionary in the actual season itself," says Sam. "One moment we're having a conversation in our office about how we need to sort something out in an apartment or who's going to pick up the rubbish and the next we're discussing marketing and social media. No two days are the same. What does stay the same is that we're in the mountains. The view from the window is always fantastic. It's a great place to work and a wonderful town to live in."

At the weekends, the family always prioritise quality time out on the slopes. "Our son goes to ski school on Saturday mornings giving Jon and I a two-hour slot to go snowboarding," says Sam. They hit the slopes again after lunch, this time *en famille*. "Ted can ski like an absolute ninja!" she adds.

### SMALL TOWN, BIG HISTORY

What attracted Sam and Jon to Morzine in the first place is that it is so much more than the average ski resort destination which typically turns into a ghost town once the season is over. Even in summer, there's plenty to do and experience, from sitting by the lake and sunbathing to hiking or mountain biking.

"Morzine doesn't just rely on snow. It's very much a small town that has history to it," Sam explains. "It's interesting to understand how it grew and got its first ski resort in the 1930s. There are a lot of old families that still live here, so it still has a very traditional feel, but it's very welcoming and embraces the English. It has all the things that people need such as schools and libraries. Morzine has a life, it has a heart and it keeps going. I think that's what makes it so unique."

Getting married in Morzine in 2009 was quite an amazing experience for Sam and Jon. After a short ceremony at the



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5

Sam and Jon's favourite things about living in Morzine

Leading an outdoor life in the mountains and the clean, fresh air.

Being part of an entrepreneurial community where everyone is here for the same reasons.

You're always at one with nature and surrounded by beauty. The seasons are very obvious here in the mountains.

Meeting different people every day and the fact that no two days are exactly the same.

The view from our window every morning. It's inspiring.

*mairie*, a procession of 30 beeping cars full of friends and family who had flown in from the UK, led the newlyweds up to the mountain restaurant where they had their reception.

"We had a huge spread and a Savoyard wedding in the sense that we served *raclette* (a regional speciality consisting of melted cheese scraped onto potatoes, cold meats and pickles) and traditional mountain fare. It was very relaxing and easy-going."

**DON'T GIVE UP**

Though Morzine's large expat community means that English is quite common, Sam and Jon always make an effort to speak French. "We really pushed ourselves into social situations in which we had to speak the language and also took French lessons. Especially since having a child, our level of communication has increased massively," Sam explains.

Though at first it was difficult to raise a child with two

languages, their son is now completely fluent in French.

Besides the language barrier, other challenges the couple faced along the way ranged from simple things such as getting used to the shops closing for two hours in the afternoon to buying their house.

"The whole process of buying and renovating property was very expensive, time-consuming and definitely not for the fainthearted," Sam admits. "At the end of November, all the builders and local artisans become ski instructors for the winter period, so you basically have a six-month window to get everything done."

Though settling into a new life in France and starting More Mountain wasn't easy, Sam believes it was definitely worth the effort. "Don't give up," she advises. "There are a lot of hurdles to overcome, there is a lot of paperwork and it's all very time-consuming if you don't speak the language. But you have to put in the time and effort in order to be able to live in a beautiful

place like this. Eventually, you will reap the rewards." **LF**

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**This page from top:** Morzine in the winter; tree-top courses are popular with all the family; Jon Dredge, with son Ted and dog Figsy

