



Penny Kendall

And now... the real thing!

Well, up to a point. In this witty account, **Leslie Woit** reports on her attempts to be a real-life chalet girl.

What, watch the film? Why, when I can head straight for the audition. Casting for the role of chalet girl in Switzerland sounds like a lark. Two weeks at the business end of the ski world – serving yummy meals, folding napkins into bird heads, a bit of waving the feather duster through the air and... Bob's your uncle. It's out onto the slopes for a full day of skiing. For free!

But less about deranged, ill-informed old me. First, let me introduce our hosts. After years as peripatetic ski journalists roaming the Alps in perpetually dirty clothes, Penny and Eric Kendall had a similar epiphany. Yet in contrast to mine, theirs was married to adult levels of commitment and a liquid bank account: they decided to build and run a chalet of their own.

"We had enough of hearing 'You should have been here last week.' We realised we needed a place in the Alps," explains Eric. "You could smell we needed it." Gamely, they agreed to let me join the team. And even to have access to the washing machine, too.

So up I rock in sunny Zinal, a long-lost valley that rises up from Sierre and nestles beneath an Imperial Crown of glittering 4000-metre peaks. It's little known, but anyone who does, knows it's full of powder and empty of people

– great for off-piste adventures. The efficient yellow post-bus lets out smack in front of the Chalet Edelweiss. Behold, a cosy, designer-kissed chalet heaped with feather duvets, warmed by a huge double-sided fireplace, plugged into wifi, a 46-inch satellite TV and extensive library. Fab.

With eight guests due to arrive soon, I am given a brief tour. Eric is particularly proud of the heated bathroom mirrors. Penny loves her dedicated beer fridge. And here, my dears, they reveal with the pride of new parents, is the industrial sized hoard of every solvent, implement, and blower and sucker attachment known to the cleaning world. Marigolds burst like a rainbow from a secret drawer. The rag supply would make a tinker weep. I even glimpsed a face mask. What kind of establishment needs such a good clean? Who would make such a mess?

Ding dong.

They arrive in time for a late supper, which is to say they *miss it* – but this week's eight new guests are fed it cheerfully nonetheless. Being a relative chalet virgin, I am fascinated by the social ice-breaking of a mixed group's first night. Some quickly reveal what interesting occupations they have, others modestly keep the particulars of their (*more*) interesting lives

to themselves. Details of school fees/housing prices/commuting times are laid bare so lavishly, I wonder what they will possibly have left to say by the end of a week. But that's me being naughty in my new role of silent plate sweeper and glass topper-upper. They are having fun and that's what a chalet is all about.

An acting chalet girl's brand of morning comes sooner than a normal person's. Up, smiling and ready for her close-up by 7am, a healthy profusion of jams, breads and cooked goodies are laid out, preferences in the tea and coffee department are duly noted. The better part of a further hour is devoted to making sure gloves and sunglasses leave for the slopes with their rightful owners. It's like being Maria in *The Sound of Music* with an added whiff of Frau Schmidt the housekeeper and Herr Zeller, the Nazi... Do come along now. *Zee bus is leevink!*

A smile, a wave and a bracing waft of diesel later, the skiers are off for the day. They call this a vacation? Time for a bit of Zen: I practise Buddhist nonattachment while cleaning loos and get in touch with my inner Nigella as I whip up a mess of chocolate brownies for afternoon tea. The kitchen is Penny's domain and she runs a masterful ship (she has actually received applause at the end of her dinners!).

Our very own chalet girl

I learn a lot from watching her because you can't act your way through *beouf en croute* for 10.

Lesson number 18 (I can't possibly include everything, I started from ground zero): resist the impulse to drop dead with fatigue each time you're left alone for an hour. Go skiing! One day I even get to ski with a lovely guest who arrived before the others, which really does remind one what a ski holiday is like. Sunny, cold, spiky Swiss peaks as far as the eye can see. We break for late lunch and a tasty homemade pizzetta and local wine. Over the hill to the left is Grimentz and across the wide valley lies St Luc-Chandolin. Just hidden from our view, the Matterhorn lurks to the southwest. It's mellow and wild at the same time.

What the area lacks in pistes (there are just over 200kms worth, connected by bus and lift pass) it makes up for in seriously untrammelled off piste. And while the chalet isn't ski out – it is ski-in, plonked right at the foot of a lovely off-piste route called Piste du Chamois, which runs from the top of the domain of Zinal at 2900m right to the hamlet of Mottec - and our door. I make that a commute back to work for the evening's events of roughly 1400m of deserted off-piste powder. Some roles just have me written all over them.

In Character: An Actress's Cue Sheet

Engage in conspicuous and frequent hand washing. Like a perfect blow dry, it's not good enough to do it when there's no one to watch.

Get used to feet that hurt from standing (boo) and legs that hurt from skiing (hurrah).

Try not to guffaw at comments overheard, including such gems as "My guide last year was really impressed by me. He kept encouraging me to go ahead of him."

Discourage guests from 'helping' by stacking or passing plates at table (unless you want dinner on the floor and a very non-U atmosphere).

Be friendly but keep an eye on the silver/books/honour bar/hair dryers.

What happens in the chalet, stays in the chalet. (Yes, I realise you're reading this but I haven't exactly revealed any state secrets, have I. Unfortunately there just isn't space for the story about the guy with the...)

Changing rooms – and lives

Hammering, chiselling, cracking... and a whole lot of swearing (I imagine). After all this, they



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Honey I'm home!
What's for tea?

still speak to each other.

Eric and Penny Kendall's dream was hands-on - a gruelling 18 months of renovation to an old restaurant, featuring three weeks without water in summer, three months without heat in winter. Nine skips of hand-excavated masonry and 1000 bars of chocolate later, they'd lost nearly two stone between them, had acute back-ache, and narrowly escaped serious cranial damage from a spring-loaded awning attack.

But it wasn't all torture. The build lasted longer than it needed because of an agreement known as the Powder Clause. "Every time we woke up to more than a hand span of powder on the balcony railing, we downed tools and went skiing," explains Eric. "Now we ski three to four days a week – and we're always in the right place at the right time." 🇨🇭



Chalet Edelweiss,
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