

Your hot tub or mine?



Kathryn Wharton and husband Barney

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Guest romances, Jacuzzi parties and two hours' sleep a night. It's all in a day's work for a chalet girl

As social stereotypes go, they don't come much juicier than the buxom chalet girls. Watch a new film about their escapades and you start to believe that cooking, cleaning and hanging out rich people's dirty socks to dry each day really is a glamorous role for the privileged. *Chalet Girl*, released here next month, is set in the glitzy resort of St Anton in the Austrian Alps and portrays the chalet culture as a decadent world in which the staff need to be as Sloaneys as the guests and where Gucci ski glasses are a must if you want a frappuccino at a chic alfresco mid-station.

The young and destitute heroine, Kim (Felicity Jones) lifts herself out of poverty when she lands a well-paid chalet-host post looking after an über-rich family. Thrown into

unfamiliar waters, she finds herself swimming furiously to keep afloat in a new world of beautiful girls, rich guests and high expectations.

While the chic backdrop of St Anton, like many upmarket European ski resorts, may be no myth, what of the culture of the chalet girls? Does the job really require the culinary skills of a cordon bleu chef or the social etiquette of high society? “Lucy” admits that she embarked on a season as a chalet girl in Val d’Isère, France, because she wasn’t ready for the real world after gaining a degree in sports science three and a half years ago. She has been working in France ever since and is now a host in a luxury seven-bedroom chalet in Chamonix. She shares her duties (and a bedroom) with another girl, a live-in chef, who is also part of the team. They are all British, under 30 and, says 27-year-old Lucy, they love to party.

“It’s a crazy lifestyle of drinking every night. But you’re working physically hard as well, cleaning, cooking and shopping for food. The chalet staff live a much crazier life than the guests. We usually go out about 11pm once we’ve got the dinner dishes cleared up. Clubs stay open until 5am but we have to be up at 7am to collect fresh bread and lay out breakfast, so we regularly get only two hours sleep. It’s like first year at university all over again.”

In *Chalet Girl* Kim has a romance with her rich-kid guest Jonny, played by the *Gossip Girl* actor Ed Westwick. Cue playful Jacuzzi scenes and plenty of clandestine midnight bed-hopping. Lucy says this is much closer to the reality of life as a seasonaire [staff who work ski seasons].

“Clients do flirt with chalet girls, especially in all-male parties where there is a real alpha-male mentality,” she says. “They eye us up over the dinner table. It’s good, harmless fun and most of the time they invite us out and happily buy our drinks all night. We think they’re a bit stupid really, but we’re on the minimum wage so of course we flirt with them and try and get as many tips and drinks out of them as we can.”

Not that the men’s motives are innocent, though. “The chalet girl is one of those cliché fantasies,” Lucy says. “Everyone thinks they are an easy pull. The guys probably have competitions between themselves over who can pull us first.”

That said, Lucy has never been tempted into a relationship with a guest. “Ugh — you should see some of them! In my first year we had a Jacuzzi in our chalet and often the guys would say ‘Come on girls, hop in, have a drink’. We never did because our chef was our boss! But it did happen elsewhere. I know one girl who said that she wanted ‘to collect her flags’. She meant she would try to sleep with as many different nationalities of men as she could. She is attractive so I think she did pretty well.”

As well as tales of sex and alcohol-fuelled debauchery, there are stories of real romance. Kathryn Wharton, 37, went to work as a chalet girl at the age of 29 and fell in love with her boss, whom she married two years ago. Wharton took a break from her £75,000 a year job as an IT consultant in Bristol to go to work for Freshtraxxx luxury chalets in Chamonix. She expected to stay for only a year but she’s still there and now runs a tour-operating firm and recruits for seasonal posts, including chalet girls. “The idea that

chalet girls are privately educated, full of finesse and skilled cooks is a bit of a myth,” she says. “The ones who come to us for jobs are predominantly 18-year-old gap-year students. Yes, there are a lot of wealthy ones — you can tell the ones whose families have said ‘Here’s £600 to do a chalet academy course’. But the general run-of-the mill are those who, like me, got fed up in the UK and wanted a break.”

Of course, it isn’t just daddy’s girls looking for a holiday. As Wharton points out, there are plenty of older women whose children have left home and want to try something different. There are fewer chalet boys — they tend to prefer jobs as drivers and snow shovellers. “If you say chalet girl, most people think of her amazing cooking, but actually in the high-end accommodation, such as the one I worked at, there would be professional chefs. The chalet hosts make breakfast, bake cakes and serve drinks.”

While the society chalet-girl image may not be as typical, no one denies the reality of the partying. “It’s not just Europe,” Wharton says. “In my early twenties I did a season in Canada too. I probably drank every day. And the hot-tub culture goes on. I remember going out with other seasonaires and on our way home we’d jump in anyone’s hot tub. All the log cabins would have one outside. We’d jump over a fence, or sneak round the back and have a party in a stranger’s hot tub. My experience in France was calmer as I was older, but I imagine it can be wilder because the guests are younger. In Canada many of my guests were wealthy, middle-aged and boring, but in the French Alps the guests are of a similar age and outlook to the girls.”

Lucy recalls one notable love affair. “This girl had been in the resort only two weeks and had a group of Russian guests. One of them, the son of a Russian billionaire apparently, swept her off her feet. He took her to New York and Moscow and within weeks she was living with him. The management didn’t care about guest romances, either, it was almost encouraged. In my first year I heard our boss say that chalet-girl liaisons were great because he always wanted the client to have a good time. He was the owner of a small chalet chain, though, so he got away with a comment like that. I think he only recruited girls he fancied.”

But the relentless partying can take its toll. “It is hard,” Lucy says. “You are hung over but always on your feet — cleaning, serving food, being perky in front of the guests. Then you want to ski for several hours a day. On such little sleep it gets ridiculous. Each week we would do a changeover of guests and we’d usually go on a bender. One week our guests left at 6pm so we went out early. We got in at 5am — our new group were arriving at 8am so we had to get it ready while we were wrecked. A colleague said, ‘Let’s just spray Febreze on the duvets and pick off the individual hairs’. That’s what we did. It was a total party atmosphere and there was very little management control.”

Not all are as diehard as Lucy, though, and, as she notes, the lifestyle can be a danger to health. “I know seasonaires who have suffered burnout. It’s usually the ones in their first year because they overdo it. A lot of people go home mid-season because they’re exhausted; some get homesick. You sleep in shared accommodation: in my first year there were four girls in one room. We had one bunk bed and two pull-out beds and it was open-plan. Emotions can get heated at times. I can definitely see how it can just be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

Five top snow helmets

“**Ink in Water**” helmet, £69.99, by HardnutZ (hardnutz.com)

“**Riot**” helmet, £85, by Pro-Tec (00800 82677625)

“**Muse EPS**”, £75, by Bern at Ellis Brigham (0844 3721010)

“**HiFi II**” helmet, £85, by R.E.D. (redprotection.com)

“**Ranger Custom Air EP**”, £265, by Salomon (01276 404860)

Selected by Hannah Rochell

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