

Partnerships

Claire Freeland and Fraser Ewart-White

While running a chalet, these two friends saw a chance to overturn the traditional ski package holiday. A decade on, Powder White boasts 58 chalets and a £6m turnover

Words Behiye Hassan Portrait Joe Plimmer

Claire Freeland I've been in the skiing industry since I was 18. I started out as a chalet girl, worked my way up to managing a resort, and was working at Ski World, running overseas operations, when I met Fraser at a party through friends.

Fraser Ewart-White I was working at Blockbuster Entertainment negotiating with Hollywood studios for film rights. At the age of 30, I had an early midlife crisis; I wasn't going anywhere as I wasn't going to get a promotion unless my boss got promoted. Claire invited me to run Serre Chevalier in France with her for a season.

Claire Freeland We were working blindly. We'd never worked together before and we didn't know each other that well. But obviously that type of work is pretty intense and you learn about each other pretty quickly. You're living, working and skiing together 24 hours a day.

Fraser Ewart-White In the past, a skiing holiday used to be a pretty brutal experience. The only skiing holidays you could buy at the time were packaged: you'd have to be up at 3am for a 7am flight, then you'd be picked up by coach with other holidaymakers at the other end – only to spend the day going round all the resorts, dropping everybody off until you finally got to your own chalet at seven in the evening.

Claire Freeland People were turning up at our chalet looking broken from their experience. We thought, there must be a better way of doing this. We were determined to get away from what we felt was almost a boot camp experience. It was as if the holiday companies were telling the customer, 'right, this is the type of holiday we've got: take it or leave it'.

Fraser Ewart-White We saw a gap in the market, to offer skiing holidays on a non-package basis, allowing people to book their own [low-cost] flights. In 2003, Claire found the perfect chalet: a 10-bed in Verbier, Switzerland, for the perfect price. We initially funded it through a group of investors. We took the rental price of the chalet (which was around £55,000) and split it into 10 slices.

Claire Freeland We said to friends, 'If you invest in our company Powder White then not only will you get a free holiday but you

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will also get a return on the investment depending on the profitability at the end of the season.' The theory was that those 10 people would bring nine other people to the chalet and we would have sold 10 weeks out of an 18-week season – so we would have been over halfway. At first it worked, but as the business grew we changed things.

Fraser Ewart-White The way that we worked in Serre Chevalier is reflective of how we work together now. Although we have defined roles, there is a lot of communication going on between the two of us to make sure we know what the other one is doing.

Claire Freeland The operations, the front-line stuff, the customers and guests were going to suit my knowledge and experience. The

money, the sales, marketing, accounts and banking were going to suit Fraser's skillset. I'm the knowledge and experience and Fraser is the brain and the moneyman. As the company has grown we've had to change the way we work in order to be as efficient as possible.

Fraser Ewart-White Overall we want to grow the business by 25 to 30 per cent next year. We now have 58 chalets and act as agents on an apartment and hotel programme.

We don't feel as though we've hit our natural, optimum size yet. There's always a difficult decision to make as to how big to grow. If you suddenly become a massive operator and it's just all about guest numbers, then the quality goes out the window. We would end up doing the opposite of what we set out to do. There's definitely scope to expand considerably while maintaining the standards and type of holiday that we currently provide.

Claire Freeland We have exceptional knowledge about skiing, especially when coming up against the likes of the much larger operators and big online booking engines. It's not a case of booking a hotel and just making sure you've got a sunbed in the morning. It's ski passes, ski lessons and all those other things. It's a complex holiday and the big players cannot deal with that complexity – or those that are doing it aren't doing it very well.

Fraser Ewart-White I think there's real space for us to dominate a lot of these areas while maintaining the chalet product, the quality and the levels of staff and expertise we're lucky to have.

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On piste: Claire Freeland and Fraser Ewart-White spotted a gap in the ski holiday market