

A fireman surveys the damage to the roof at Chalet Iona

Phoenix heights

At the end of last ski season, Chalet Iona, a luxury chalet near Méribel in France, went up in flames. The six-bedroom property has been painstakingly rebuilt and reopens this winter – like a fabulous phoenix rising from the ashes. **RUPERT MELLOR** visited the chalet and talked to its entrepreneurial owner and former punk musician, Richard Green

In the early hours of 27 May, 2016, the sky glowed red over Le Villard, a tiny Savoyard hamlet 6km below Méribel. Chalet Iona, a luxury six-bedroom residence on the village's edge, was in flames.



From punk to entrepreneur - Richard Green

"My oldest daughter was there, revising for her A levels," said Richard Green, British founder of the France-based holiday company Madame Vacances and Chalet Iona's owner.

"The fire alarm woke her up and she ran outside in her nightie, seconds before all the windows blew out." The chalet was so badly damaged that the cause of the fire has never been determined.

Some 18 months on, the chalet and its adjoining guest cottage have been rebuilt with great love and care and are ready to welcome new guests this winter.

To recap, upscale holiday home for hire Chalet Iona was something of a new departure for Richard who, since 1989, has built a large tourism empire since his first, small-scale hospitality ventures in the nearby ski resort Val Thorens. With no formal business training, Richard's rise has been remarkable, but with hindsight, he says, the signs of his future path were always there:

"I always wanted to work and was a born organiser," he explains. "When I was about 15, I was in a punk band called the Blood Donors – top track 'I Feel Like Pissing on my English Essay' – and what I lacked in

drumming talent I made up for in drive, booking venues, hiring PAs and recruiting friends to help set up.

"When school ended, I was the only one out of 250 sixth formers who didn't go to university. I headed for the mountains!"

Richard had picked up a taste for skiing on childhood winter holidays with his family. "We never skied the big resorts because we weren't that posh," he smiles. "My father was in the military, and was a brilliant, highly eccentric man. Instead of buying ski gear, I remember him getting a huge sheet of tarpaulin and cutting out trouser shapes and making our clothes. By the time I was 18, we'd done everything rich people had, just on the most ridiculous shoestring."

Financing his first full season as a barman in Crans-Montana, Richard spent the next four years fuelling his burgeoning downhill addiction with seasonal work for tour operators in Val Thorens and Les Arcs, and during the European summertime in New Zealand and Argentina.

As his peers left university and embarked on promising careers, he realised he wanted to find a way to 'graduate' from ski bummers and make the Alps his long-term base.

Returning from a five-month South American trip with thousands of flap-eared Peruvian hats, he set up an import-export business and a recruitment company finding seasonaire work for young Brits in the mountains.

Next, he took over a bar, The Lincoln in Val Thorens, which he packed out from day one with a simple, effective formula – cheap beer and good music.

Richard's business career then jumped a gear when he persuaded long-time customer Roger Borne, who was running Crystal Holidays' French

operations, to partner up, and the pair landed their first property deals.

Within months, they secured a contract with American broadcaster CBS to home its broadcast crew for two months over the 1992 Albertville Winter Olympics, and the company that would become Madame Vacances was off and running.

A quarter of a century later, it now offers 22,000 beds in 72 hotels, holiday apartment developments and chalets in 48 resorts all over France, from the ski resorts where it started, to the south-western surf town of Moliets.

So, when Richard decided to buy a permanent holiday home for his family, the Savoie mountains where he launched his career were the obvious choice. He looked in unspoilt villages that would give both access to the slopes and year-round, authentically French tranquillity. His search ended when he discovered the last chalet in Le Villard, just outside Les Allues, linked to Méribel and the Three Valleys ski area's fabled 650km of pistes by a 15-minute ride on the Olympe gondola.

With a small, year-round British ex-pat population, Les Allues is a charming traditional mountain village with a quaint 1645 chapel, quiet streets and five restaurants – all with bars. But Gallic authenticity shoots up the scale in Le Villard itself, population circa 70 lifelong locals, where quaint reminders of the area's smallholder farming history, such as the ancient outdoor communal bread oven, can still be seen.

"There's an old bassin – a stone water trough fed by a mountain spring – on my chalet's drive," says Richard. "And sometimes I'll come out and find a local washing his leeks there. Locals nick apples from the garden, too, and I've found strange devices that collect sap attached to our trees.

"But I don't mind at all, I get it. This is their land, always has been, and I'm a ship in the night.

"They're also extremely good. When my daughter was yelling for help outside the blazing chalet, a bunch of them turned up, and even ran into the burning building to see if anyone was trapped inside."

The chalet, set in its own orchard on the edge of a national forest, has vast panoramic windows in both of the main living spaces, with wraparound views of the imposing Bozel valley, right up to the 3,400m Grand Bec peak.



PHOTO: Sylvain Aymoz/Méribel Tourisme

Les Allues is linked to Méribel and the Three Valleys ski area

The décor is a subtly diverse, a high-end but homely blend of art deco and contemporary, with traditional stone open fireplaces and a magnificent 5.75m walnut dining table that can seat the full 20-guest complement of both the main chalet and the adjoining Little Chalet India, a natively converted open-plan guest cottage for up to six.

Chalet managers prepare lavish breakfasts, drive guests to the gondola in the chalet's on-demand Escalade, stock the kitchen with local groceries, and advise on wine choices from the private cellar, while additional on-request services include dinners by one of Madame Vacances' many pro chefs, plus massages, personal training and helicopter transfers.

The wild deer which sometimes wander into the garden are included, and this year's guests will also find a new 12-person Jacuzzi sunken into a 70 sq m wooden deck.

Even better news is that with weekly rates for the main chalet ranging from £8,759 to £16,549, it's significantly cheaper than comparable in-resort properties.

Bought initially as a private pied-à-terre, Chalet Iona is now available for year-round hire – "I couldn't resist doing business," Richard shrugs.

It joins his impressive, ever-evolving portfolio. The stunning Chateau de Candie, a historic luxury hotel in Chambéry that Madame Vacances bought in 2016, signals a new direction for his company,

which is now working towards running a collection of signature hotels in key French resorts.

Meanwhile, its successful 25-year track record is increasingly attracting the attention of French local authorities, who have begun asking Richard to manage large-scale leisure complexes in their communities.

But the project that currently takes up most of Richard's working hours is the west London rugby club Wasps FC, whose unpaid Chairman he became after enrolling his six-year-old son into the club 11 years ago, enabling him to reconnect with his own lifelong passion for the sport.

"It's actually been brilliant for my own personal development," says Richard. "I've been the boss of my own thing for so long, but at the end of the day, I give everyone who works for me a cheque. Here, I have no power, and I have to get the same results out of a mainly volunteer staff who owe me nothing. It's been an education!"

And should he tire of all of that, he has still more options.

"Once every few years I'll bump into the guitarist of the Blood Donors. He always says 'When are we getting the band back together?'"

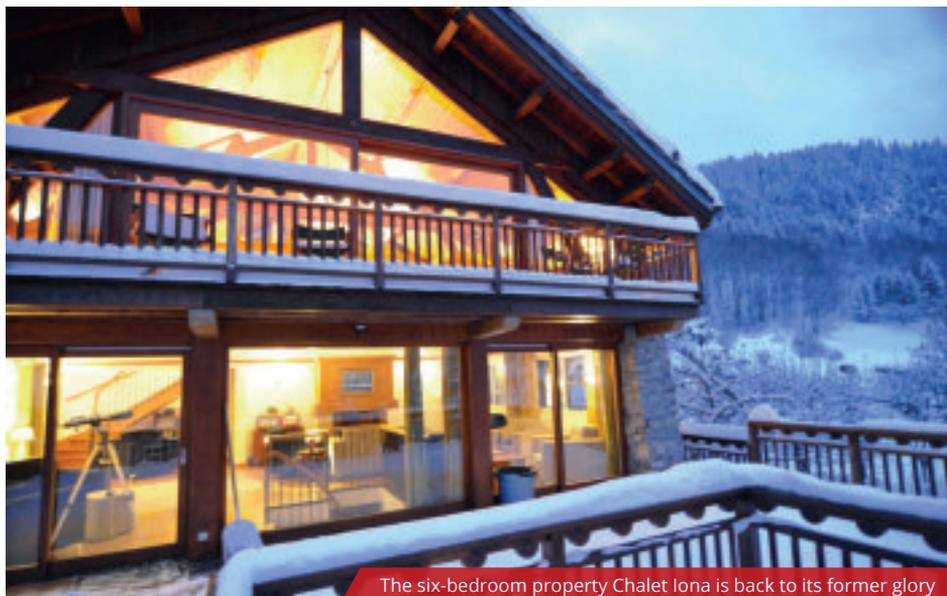
TRAVEL FACTS

Chalet Iona is available to hire from 9 December this season. Weekly winter prices for the whole main chalet, which sleeps 12 in six bedrooms and has room for two more on roll-out beds, start at £8,759, and the Little Chalet India, which sleeps four to six people, can be added for a further fee, starting at £1,943. The main chalet can also be booked by the night from £1,262 for a minimum three-night stay.

Find out more at:
www.meribelmountainretreat.com

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For more information about Madame Vacances hotels and accommodation go to:
www.madamevacances.com



The six-bedroom property Chalet Iona is back to its former glory