



**Right**  
The master suite  
at Etoile du Nord,  
Val d'Isère,  
designed by Nicky  
Dobree in with  
AND Architects. It  
won the World's  
Best New Ski  
Chalet 2023



# *ELEVATED* *design*

BREAKING THE MOULD OF THE COOKIE-CUTTER  
CHALET: IN CONVERSATION WITH **NICKY DOBREE**

ISABELLE CLARK 



IMAGE: PHILIP VILE





“

Who doesn't want to dream? Life is all about dreaming and there I was creating one for people to follow,” says interior designer Nicky Dobree. In 2003, Dobree was propelled into the spotlight after she converted her 300-year-old Alpine farmhouse and it made an appearance on television show Grand Designs. “What we did at Ferme de Moudon was quite ground-breaking,” she says. “It broke the mould of the cookie-cutter chalet and opened the eyes of the world to a new form of design.” As Dobree celebrates her 25th year in the profession,

she reflects on her design journey and the motivations that have fuelled her creative vision, and draws parallels between her upbringing and her career.

“My father travelled extensively. Every house we lived in was of a different style, a different genre – it was colonial in Saigon, and it was Haussmannian in Paris,” she explains. This exposure to rich architectural landscapes from a young age was the catalyst for her lifelong pursuit of creating homes that blend beauty, functionality and a sense of place. Her deep curiosity, which she describes as a constant thread throughout her career, also plays a key role in her work. “I love learning, and every project is a learning one. Each one speaks a different architectural language.”

After starting her career working on Georgian and Victorian properties in London, it was an innate appreciation of the outdoors that led her to chalet design in particular. Ferme de Moudon, like many of her subsequent chalet projects, is located in the snow-dusted forests of the Alps where thrilling descents beckon skiers like a siren's call. The impressive location and opulent appeal of Dobree's first Alpine project helped to spark a trend of chalet acquisitions. “It made people dream of an ultimate lifestyle, and it fuelled their imagination.”

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Ferme de Moudon has the striking sophistication and timeless allure of a luxury film set. The historic farmhouse is more than just a residence – Dobree and her family usually spend three to four months a year there – it's a paean to elevated Alpine living. An enchanting chocolate-box exterior gives way to a home characterised by crackling fireplaces, polished wooden floors softened by woven rugs, and oversized windows that frame majestic mountain views. The weathered wooden beams that tell the story of the retreat's agricultural past are juxtaposed with contemporary materials such as glass. Sumptuous armchairs draped with cashmere throws invite hours of relaxation.

The colour palette is warm and earthy, with shades of amber, chestnut and honey: “There's a lightness to my interiors,” she says. Heavier, richer hues and textures are reserved for small accents around the space, but larger pieces of furniture anchor the design in Dobree's signature soft-toned interiors. “The mix of materials is so important. I don't exclusively use wools and shaggy sheepskins – I mix them with linens. The fabrics aren't necessarily what you would expect. [Heavier fabrics are] lovely in a hotel that you're just visiting for the week, but if you've got to live in that all year round, it can be quite oppressive.” Layering is helpful in creating transitional spaces that can welcome guests throughout the year. Dobree and her family also make use of Ferme de Moudon in the summer months as a base for hiking trips.

Location is just as crucial as design: “The most important thing about a chalet – as with any property – is that it's connected to its environment,” says

**Clockwise from top left** Ski-in, ski-out chalet in the Haute Savoie, designed by Dobree; the sitting room of the Haute Savoie chalet; seating area in Val d'Isère; the Haute Savoie chalet's timber-clad formal dining room; Etoile du Nord's indoor-outdoor pool

IMAGES: PHILIP VILE





Dobree. “What’s the point of being in the mountains if you can’t see them? So, let’s make those windows as big as we possibly can.” Much of the allure of chalet living is the outdoor-oriented lifestyle that it affords, with mornings spent carving through fresh powder on nearby slopes and afternoons hiking through sun-dappled woodlands. Evenings bring a different kind of charm as weary adventurers retreat to their chalets where roaring fires, hearty food and a good rest await. As for Dobree’s usual après-ski routine? “It depends slightly on the time of day. It can go from tea and cake by the fire to an ice bar and drinks by the hot tub, or maybe champagne and canapés before dinner.” Ferme de Moudon is also home to spa facilities (including a sauna and massage rooms), an outdoor pool and a state-of-the-art entertainment system, which make for a seriously restful hideaway.

Dobree’s designs are made to last. Very little has changed since the property was finished in 2004, and the same goes for her home in England, where the library – with floor-to-ceiling shelves brimming with books interspersed with magazines and family photographs – “was inspired by the Hotel Montalembert in Paris. It was hand-painted by the most exquisite artist”. What appears to be timber is, in fact, the in-built shelving, meticulously painted to resemble wood. The illusion has remained flawless for more than 25 years, capturing the charm and sophistication of a classic European library. “I feel that whatever I do, I do to last. That’s why I always aim for my interiors to be timeless and elegant,” she says.

However, it’s not only her own spaces that receive the makeover treatment. Dobree helps clients to purchase, build and design properties all over the world. Over the course of more than 50 chalet projects, her work has taken her to all of the leading ski resorts in Europe, including Verbier, St Moritz, Val d’Isère and Megève. She explains that it’s a very collaborative process: “I always like to meet the client face-to-face in their home environment so that I can understand how they live and the things that they like – the more input from the client, the better.” The effectiveness of presenting fabrics and discussing drawings over video call is as limited as it

## IT’S IMPORTANT THAT A CHALET IS CONNECTED TO ITS ENVIRONMENT

sounds and doesn’t allow for the translation of the design’s minutiae. Even though many of her clients travel often, in-person meetings are crucial, but “my clients trust me, because I’ve often done several projects with them already and I’ve got to know them quite well over the years”.

Those not yet well versed in Dobree’s process can expect her to get to the crux of their design preferences and project aspirations in order to inform the action plan that she presents to the team. “I have a wonderful team who have been with me for nearly 20 years now. There’s a mix – we have architectural draughtsmen as well as designers – and we operate out of a studio in Pimlico. I couldn’t do what I do without them.” As with any project, it’s first important to confirm the details; from bathroom tiles to kitchen furnishings, all must be sorted before boots hit the ground. Once a full set of drawings has been arranged, Dobree enlists architects and tradespeople “to see the project all the way through to the last teaspoon in the drawer – literally,” she laughs. With chalets, it’s usually an 18-month build: “You’ll start in May, get the roof on in December, and then complete the following December.” Projects that she led in the past include cinema rooms, wine cellars, spa complexes, commercial kitchens, outdoor pools, fitness studios and private libraries, to name a few.





**Above** Etoile du Nord's sitting area with double-height ceilings **Below** Nicky Dobree  
**Right from top** Haute Savoie cinema room; Etoile du Nord seating

When it comes to choosing a location for a chalet acquisition, Dobree explains that this often depends on lifestyle. “Every resort offers different things. For example, Val d’Isère will always have snow and it’s got great skiing. Whereas somewhere lower like Megève is more for the intermediate skier.” The snow melts faster in the latter, but it doubles as a popular summer resort thanks to its verdant forest and a wealth of activities. An increasing number of clients are seeking out properties in year-round destinations, she says. “You don’t want to be living in a home that’s deserted for half the year. You want to live in a location that’s alive and vibrant with a community even out of season.”

Dobree is currently designing a property in the Mediterranean after previously completing a chalet in Saas-Fee for the same client. “I think people realise that it’s lovely to spend time with their family in the mountains”, and that a villa offers the “option of doing

something different”. This particular home, just north of Portofino in Santa Margherita, was formally a ruin, soon to be transformed into a small palazzo. The designer is also working her magic on a property near Saint-Tropez.

Ultimately, designing a chalet isn’t about a formula, it’s about understanding each client has a distinct set of needs and desires. For Dobree, a bespoke design ensures a property that works seamlessly for those who live in it, one that feels authentic, functional and truly unique. **B**



## HOW TO CREATE CHALET CHIC AT HOME



### COMFORT, COMFORT, COMFORT

“Comfort is everything in any home,” Dobree emphasises. Key pieces of furniture that offer style and relaxation are essential. She recommends the Groundpiece by Flexform, a sofa known for its casual yet elegant design, which is perfect for curling up after a long day. It has large, soft cushions, deep seats, and plush fabrics that invite you to sink in and unwind.

### LAYERING IS ESSENTIAL

Layering is a technique that Dobree comes back to time and again. “If you want the chalet look and feel, go for cashmere blankets and fur throws and snuggle down by the fire,” she advises, as “a lot of it is just about cosiness and feeling warm and cosseted”. Combine soft wool throws, tactile velvet cushions, and luxurious sheepskin rugs to create an inviting atmosphere that speaks to the warmth and comfort of an Alpine retreat.

### NATURAL MATERIALS

To capture the essence of a traditional mountain residence, turn to natural materials. Stone fireplaces and textured wool rugs evoke the rugged, natural beauty of the Alps. Take Ferme de Moudon, for example, where original wooden beams highlight the authenticity of the design and add character to the property – reclaimed wooden furniture or wooden panelling can help create a similar feel.

### AMBIENT LIGHTING

Soft, ambient lighting helps to create a relaxed and inviting atmosphere typical of a chalet. Low-hanging pendant lights, candlelit lanterns, and dimmed wall sconces will do the trick – these warm, golden tones mimic the glow of a fire and create pockets of light for a more intimate feel. Fairy lights strung around mantels or window sills can add a touch of nostalgia.

### RUSTIC ACCENTS

Incorporating vintage or antique furniture and other home wares goes a long way to achieving the chalet-chic look, giving your space a lived-in feel and add character. Look for unique items with a history or that tell a story, such as weathered wooden dressers, old leather armchairs, or get creative by mounting vintage ski equipment or other ephemera on the walls.

### APRÈS-SKI

Whether or not you have access to the slopes, the concept of après-ski should always be embraced. After a day in the outdoors, coming inside to relax with a warming drink is an unbeatable feeling. Dobree’s favourite post-slope tipples are *vin chaud* (hot mulled wine) and Aperol spritz, paired with good company and a roaring fire, making the perfect finishing touch to a chalet-inspired space.



