



French Alps & the Jura

HIGHLIGHTS

- Conquering the **Alpe d'Huez** (p261)
- Teetering on the edge of the **Gorges du la Bourne** (p242)
- Slowly approaching the hilltop, medieval-fortified village of **Nozeroy** (p255)
- Conquering the highest pedalled pass – **Col du Galibier** 2645m (p241)

TERRAIN

Extremely mountainous in the Alps, and mainly rolling hills in the Jura with some real lung-crushers from time to time.

Telephone Code – 03

www.franche-comte.org

www.rhonealpestourisme.com

Awesome, inspiring, tranquil, serene – superlatives rarely do justice to the spectacular landscapes of the French Alps and the Jura. Soaring peaks tower above verdant, forested valleys, alive with wild flowers. Mountain streams rush down from dour massifs, carving out deep gorges on their way.

Mont Blanc, Grandes Jorasses and Barre des Écrins for mountaineers. Val d'Isère, Chamonix and Les Trois Vallées for adrenaline junkies. Vanoise, Vercors and Jura for great outdoors fans. So many mythical names, so many expectations, and not a hint of flagging: the Alps' pulling power has never been so strong.

What is so enticing about the Alps and the Jura is their almost beguiling range of qualities: under Mont Blanc's 4810m of raw wilderness lies the most spectacular outdoor playground for activities ranging from skiing to canyoning, but also a vast historical and architectural heritage, a unique place in French cuisine (cheese, more cheese!), and some very happening cities boasting world-class art. So much for the old cliché that you can't have it all.

Known as the *cols du courage*, the mountains present a unique set of cycling challenges. The seemingly endless climbs and dizzying descents demand a reasonably high level of fitness and some solid bike-handling skills. A readiness to let out a holler at well-earned mountaintops is also not out of place. Spending hours climbing a *col* (a ridge pass) knowing it will take a matter of minutes to descend is a thrill only cyclists can appreciate.



FRENCH ALPS

HISTORY

The French Alps encompass two historical provinces: Savoie to the north, capped by Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc (4807m); and Dauphiné in the south, topping out in the Hautes-Alpes (High Alps) that stretch to the Italian border. The high cols of the Alps mark transport routes that for centuries have brought people together. Col du Lautaret served as an important trade route between France and Italy before the Tunnel du Fréjus was built, while Col du Galibier marks the former frontier between what was once Savoie and France.

Tourism in the Alps has largely been built around skiing, and it came as no surprise when the International Olympic Committee chose for the Winter Games Grenoble in 1968 and Albertville in 1992.

The history of cycling in the Alps is intimately linked to the Tour de France, and the battles of the high cols have added to the stature of the race (see boxed text p241).

ENVIRONMENT

The Alps are some of the most recently formed mountains in France and are still subject to change and vivid differences. For example, the patterned woodlands and pasture of the Vercors mountains, which span part of the western ramparts of the Alps, are nothing like the rugged austerity of the Hautes-Alpes (High Alps). Whereas the limestone Vercors is prone to frost shattering and erosion, the High Alps lie in a sedimentary zone of durable peaks and pinnacles.

The Alps have an abundance of plants and animals, much of it carefully protected in two national parks (Vanoise and Écrins), although even in these there are large zones in which industry and human habitation are allowed. That said, together with four regional parks – Queyras, on the Italian border south of Briançon; the Vercors, southwest of Grenoble; Chartreuse, north of the Vercors; and Massif des Bauges, north of the Chartreuse – the Alps enjoy the greatest concentration of parks in France.

CLIMATE

Temperatures in the Alps are more extreme than elsewhere in France, with a maximum average of 27°C in July and 3°C in January. The Alps, particularly the Vercors massif, also tend to attract heavy rain from September to November. Changing weather conditions are another hallmark. Even in summer it can be very cold on summits, and the descents, with wind chill, can be treacherous if you're not properly clothed.

Snow covers even lower-altitude stations most years from December to April. Many of the high cols can be closed (look for *col fermé* signs) as late as May or even June, especially those above 2500m.

PLANNING

Maps

Michelin 1:150,000 local map No 333 *Isère, Savoie* covers both the Vercors Contrasts and the High Cols of the Tour de France rides. Mountain goats will want volume 3 of the six-volume *Atlas des Cols des Alpes*, published (in French) by Altigraph. It includes all but parts of Day 2 of the Vercors Contrasts ride and provides comprehensive maps, elevation profiles and even ride descriptions for both road and mountain-bike rides.

Books

In Grenoble, ask for (or download) a copy of *L'Isère à Vélo*, a booklet (in French) of 36 road-bike circuits in the area. The three VTOPO *Alpes Grenoble* guides provide incredible insight into more than 164 mountain-bike circuits.

Cycling Events

La Marmotte, Le Bourg d'Oisans to Alpe d'Huez (www.bike-oisans.com; departs from Le Bourg d'Oisans; July) This world-famous cyclosportive pits pedallers against mountain passes - 174km with 5000m of climbing.

Brevet de Randonneur des Alpes (BRA; www.cyclotourisme-grenoble-ctg.fr; departs from Vizille; July) covers ground almost exactly like the High Cols of the Tour de France.

Marco Pantani Memorial Cyclosportive (www.lapantani-les2alpes.com; Les 2 Alpes; August)