



French Alps & the Jura Mountains

POP 4.8 MILLION

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Best Places to Eat

- La Nouvelle Maison de Marc Veyrat (p502)
- Les Louvières (p536)
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Best Places to Stay

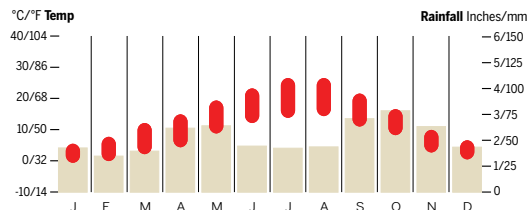
- Petit Hôtel Confidentiel (p504)
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Why Go?

The French Alps are as grand as the towering, icy flanks of Mont Blanc and as tiny as a delicate spring wildflower, as awe-inspiring as the crag of the Aiguille du Midi and as sublime as a single snowflake. Colossal peaks thrusting upward into cobalt-blue skies, crevasse-fissured glaciers, tumbling crystal-clear rivers, sapphire lakes, mountain passes blocked by snow for nine months a year – in summer, all can be explored on foot and by bicycle, kayak and car. In winter, the Alps turn into a snowy wonderland, with world-renowned ski stations offering some of Europe's finest skiing: impossibly fast black runs and world-class off-piste routes, of course, but also plenty of slopes for beginners and intermediates and lots of snowy activities for children. Year-round, the French Alps will make your heart pound and leave you uplifted.

When to Go

Grenoble



Feb–Apr Venetian Carnival in Anancy, world music in Grenoble and *vin jaune* feasts in Jura.

Jul–Aug The Tour de France whizzes by, and fireworks illuminate Anancy at the Fête du Lac.

Dec Christmas markets, freestyle events and fun on the pistes as the first big snows fall.

History

The French Alps have been inhabited since prehistoric times. Later on, migrant tribes of Celtic, Gaulish and Teutonic origin arrived, and by the first century BC communities were well established, especially around the lakes of Geneva and Annecy. Soon, though, the Romans took control of the Alps, building roads through valleys and over mountain passes. The Frankish kings of the Merovingian and Carolingian empires laid the foundations for the area's distinctive dialects, traditions and cultures. By the 13th and 14th centuries, the feudal houses of Savoy, the Dauphiné and Provence were fiercely contesting the Alps. The ensuing centuries were marked by successive wars and occupations, a cycle that ended with the union of Savoy with France in 1860.

Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat made the first successful ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786, and holidaymakers began to flock to the area in the late 19th century. During WWII, when German and Italian forces occupied the French Alps, the area became one of the main strongholds of the French Resistance. High-tech industry, hydro-electric energy and large-scale tourism have all contributed to the region's economic growth since the war.

Skiing & Snowboarding

The 200-plus resorts in the French Alps have earned a reputation for offering some of the best – perhaps *the* best – downhill skiing and snowboarding in Europe. In larger resorts, snowboarders are brilliantly catered for in snowparks kitted out with half-pipes, kickers and ramps.

At most stations, the ski season begins in early or mid-December and ends in mid- or late April, though the highest-altitude stations, such as Val Thorens (in Les Trois Vallées) and Val d'Isère (Espace Killy), open in mid- or late November and don't close until early or mid-May. Lots of people go skiing for a week, staying from Saturday to Saturday.

MIND YOUR X'S & Z'S

Ever wonder about the right way to pronounce the x's and z's at the end of so many Alpine names? It's easy: just pretend they're not there (they're silent).

FAST FACTS

- ➔ **Area** 51,890 sq km
- ➔ **Local industry** sheep, cattle, cheese production, viticulture, high-tech industry
- ➔ **Signature drink** Chartreuse

Summer skiing on glaciers is possible from about 21 June to the end of August, and again for a week around 1 November, at two French ski stations, Les Deux Alpes and Val d'Isère/Tignes (Espace Killy).

The Jura is renowned for its selection of *ski de fond* (cross-country) trails.

European downhill runs are colour-coded to indicate how kid-easy or killer-hard they are:

- ➔ **Green** Beginner
- ➔ **Blue** Intermediate
- ➔ **Red** Advanced
- ➔ **Black** Expert

Ski Rental & Lessons

Skis (alpine, cross-country, telemark), snowboards, snowshoes, boots, poles and helmets can be hired at sports shops in every resort. All-inclusive rental costs around €32 per day for good-quality alpine equipment or snowboarding gear (about two-thirds of that for kids) and €15 for cross-country. Reserving ahead online will typically get you a 15% discount.

Every resort has a variety of ski schools with certified instructors – tourist offices have details. France's leading ski school, the **École du Ski Français** (ESF; www.esf.net) – its instructors wear red – has a branch in every resort; group lessons typically cost €40/160 for one/six half-days. Private instruction is also available (€45 per hour). Kids can start learning from the age of four; from three years old they can play in the *jardin de neige* (snow garden).

Lift Passes

You will need a *forfait* (lift pass) to ride the various *remontées mécaniques* (lifts): *téléskis* (tow lines), *télésièges* (chairlifts), *télécabines* (gondolas), *téléphériques* (cable cars) and *funiculaires* (funicular railways). At the big resorts, passes cost €45 to €55 a day or €200 to €260 a week (ie six days), about 40% less than at major US resorts. Everywhere in the