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From charming to family-friendly, the 10 best French ski resorts



French ski areas like the Val d'Isère and Tignes offer huge amounts of terrain CREDIT: VENT DU SUD

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By [Peter Hardy](#) and [Felice Hardy](#)

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The French lay claim to the best cuisine, the best wines, and the best variety of ski resorts of any country in the world. While the first two are open to question these days, the third is undoubtedly true.

Destinations range from the high-altitude and purpose-built like [Val Thorens](#), with the seemingly endless terrain of the 600km [Trois Vallées](#) ski area on its doorstep, to lesser-known farming villages with traditional French ambience and tree-lined slopes like [Les Carroz](#).

Visitors may find that their expensively purchased euros go further in bars and restaurants in [Austria](#) and [Italy](#) in these financially-challenging times, especially in the big name resorts. But staying in lesser-known French destinations, or lower satellite villages that link to a big name area ([Les Carroz](#) links into the Grand Massif area it shares with better known [Flaine](#)), are attractive ways to reduce costs.

[Self-catering](#) has also become a more enticing proposition, staying in increasingly upmarket newly-built apartment residences with spa facilities. Chalet packages with UK tour operators continue to offer some of the best value, although tour operators have made [changes to the traditional model](#) in recent years in the face of increasing costs, and many companies have [reduced the number of chalets](#) they offer ahead of the 2019/20 season.

This means that booking well in advance has become more essential than ever, particularly if planning [Christmas](#) (December 25 is on a Wednesday), [half-term](#) or [Easter breaks](#) (Sunday, April 12 in 2020). However, there are often plenty of [bargains available](#) in the low-season dates in January and March. Here's our pick of where to go.

Unless stated otherwise, prices are per person, based on two sharing a double or twin room, half-board, for seven nights, including flights and transfers.

Best for beginners

Courchevel

Courchevel, famous for its glitz and multi-million-euro property prices, might at first glance seem an unusual choice for novices, but the resort has many facets. Situated at one end of the giant Trois Vallées ski area that includes Méribel and Val Thorens, 1850 is the smartest, most expensive and highest of the four Courchevel villages.

In less fashionable Moriond (also known as 1650), Village (1550), Le Praz (1300) and nearby La Tania there is much cheaper accommodation to be found. Moriond is ideal for beginners, with gentle nursery slopes well away from the inter-resort traffic of the rest of the Trois Vallées. But at the same time it's suitable for the more advanced, with easy access to a huge variety of terrain. The beginner slopes around the airport area of 1850 are also extremely good for beginners, with mild gradients and easy lifts.



Courchevel boasts plenty of gentle beginner slopes

There's a wide choice of ski and snowboard schools, but learning from a native English speaker is an advantage, and these schools are British-run: BASS Courchevel, Marmalade, Momentum, New Generation, Supreme Ski, Sweet Snowsports, The Snow School and The Development Centre.

Parents needn't worry about inexperienced small children on chairlifts during classes – children in ESF ski school groups wear waistcoats equipped with electro-magnets that lock on to the chair and release automatically at the top. After a day on the slopes, or on a day off, there's the Aquamotion complex, easily accessed from Moriond and Village. It has two swimming-pools, a spa, an indoor climbing wall and a surf wave.

Where to stay

Le Ski has 24 chalets in Moriond and neighbouring La Tania and over 30 years of experience in offering holidays here. Bellevue is a contemporary chalet apartment in the Aspen Lodge complex in Moriond with views across to 1850. It sleeps four in two bedrooms. From £995 with [Le Ski](#).

Alternatives

[Alpe d'Huez](#), [Morzine](#) or [Val Cenis](#) all have dedicated nursery slopes out of the way of ski traffic.

Best for intermediates

Serre Chevalier

This is the collective name for a dozen villages along the road from the ancient garrison town of Briançon in the southern Alps. They share a ski area with a respectable 250km of varied but mainly intermediate slopes, served by 61 lifts.



Serre Chevalier has 250km of intermediate-friendly slopes CREDIT: © LUKA LEROY/LUKA LEROY

Think of Serre Che as the laid-back, country cousin of A-list resorts further north, such as Val d'Isère or Courchevel – a bit smaller and a bit less hi-tech, but also friendlier, more relaxed and with bags more Gallic character.

For skiers stuck on the intermediate plateau, British ski school New Generation can help. It's run here by experienced instructor Gavin Crosby and his wife Mel, who offer group lessons on peak dates as well as private coaching all season. Book well in advance.

Where to stay

Ski Lodge La Vieille Ferme in Villeneuve is one of the most charming and rustic hotels in Serre Chevalier. Originally a farm, most of the building is still intact with some parts dating back to 1722. With its small staircases, odd rooms and quirky interiors the three-star Lodge really feels like a home rather than a rental property. From £655 with Sno.

Alternatives

Les Arcs, La Plagne, Flaine and Méribel all have extensive blue and red runs that give a feeling of having gone somewhere each day, rather than repeating the same slopes.

Best for experts

Val d'Isère

The resort is spread along a high, remote valley and shares the giant ski area formerly known as Espace Killy with neighbouring [Tignes](#). These days the ski area's name reflects precisely what's inside the tin: Val d'Isère-Tignes.

[Val d'Isère's](#) village divides into a number of sectors, from the central hub at the base of the main Solaise and Bellevarde lifts to the quieter outposts of La Daille, Le Laisinant and Le Fornet. As in any major holiday destination in the Alps, the vast majority of visitors are intermediates, so it's not essential to be an expert to enjoy good times here.

However, those who are will – particularly when investing in expert guidance to make the most of the challenging terrain, both on and off piste. Few world-class resorts have such variety. Progression Ski is a British-run school offering the full range of group and private ski and snowboard lessons. Instruction is expert and friendly.



Val d'Isère is renowned for its varied and challenging off piste CREDIT: ANDY PARANT/OFFICE DU TOURISME VAL D'ISÈRE

The slopes of Bellevarde, reached by the Olympique jumbo gondola or two chairlifts from the centre, or from La Daille, rise up to 2,827m. La Face, the steep and deeply challenging black run down to town, was the venue for the men's downhill at the 1992 Albertville Olympics and the 2009 World Championships. The backside of Bellevarde is the starting point for an enormous area of varied slopes that lead towards Tignes in one direction and back down to Val in the other.

The Solaise area at 2,560m, reached from the village by a 10-person gondola, has been completely remodelled in recent years as a high-altitude playground for beginners. But it is also the jumping off point for a whole range of much more demanding terrain.

Where to stay

Aspen House is a new building located in the old part of town between the church and the chapel, and 100 metres from the piste. Inside are eight smart apartments sleeping four to 10 people, a spa on the ground floor, and a concierge and reception area. From £929, staying in Loft 3, with VIP Ski.

Alternatives

Chamonix has some of the most demanding terrain in the Alps and Sainte Foy is a small resort with a giant off-piste area.

Best for reliable snow

Les Arcs

With slopes going up to nearly 3,250m Les Arcs' altitude means the ski area is open from mid-December until a week before the end of April. The highest of the four hamlets is Arc 2000, but equally snow-reliable Arc 1950 – just below 2000 at 1,950m – is the most attractive place to stay. The most recently built of Les Arcs' four villages, with construction starting in the early 2000s, it consists of modern Savoyard-style buildings.



The slopes in Les Arcs reach almost 3,250m CREDIT: ANDY PARANT

The Varet glacier above Arc 2000 is the highest point in the Paradiski ski area that Les Arcs shares with [La Plagne](#). Both resorts are made up of satellites set at varying heights and access 435km of piste in total. From the high point of Aiguille Rouge at 3,226m it's possible to drop all the way down to the village of Villaroger in the valley.

What most people don't know about is the growing number of excellent mountain eateries, in particular around Arc 1950 and 2000. On the pistes, these include the Bulle Café Les Arcs, which serves an exciting array of fresh seafood at non-exorbitant prices, and the sumptuous Chalets de l'Arc.

Where to stay

A one- bedroom self-catering apartment for up to four people in the ski-in/ski-out Sources de Marie residence in Arc 1950 costs from £1,008 with Erna Low (ernalow.co.uk), including Flexiplus Eurotunnel crossings.

Alternatives

[Val Thorens](#), [Alpe d'Huez](#) and [Tignes](#) are all high resorts that guarantee early and late season snow.

Best for charm and romance

Vaujany

French resorts are usually known for their convenience rather than their charm, so attractive villages with large ski areas are notable by their rarity. Vaujany is special, an unspoilt village sharing a large 248km ski area with Alpe d'Huez. It will bore the pants off party animals – but that's how its fans like it.

A giant cable-car accesses the heart of Alpe d'Huez terrain while a modern gondola ascends from the village to its local Montfrais area with great beginner facilities. There are also some more demanding blue and red runs here, well away from the main slopes above Alpe d'Huez, which tend to become overcrowded at peak times.

In the main area there's the famously long Sarenne black run and notoriously challenging Le Tunnel from the ski area high point of Pic Blanc, 3,330m. For experts, off-piste opportunities abound, but it's essential to explore with an experienced local mountain guide. Back in Vaujany's own domain at the end of the day, the long black run down to the lower hamlet of L'Enversin d'Oz turns the strongest legs to overcooked pasta. The alternative way home is to take the blue piste or gondola back from Montfrais.



The Sareene black run is famously long

In the village, modern apartments blend in with old farmhouses and a church that dates back to 1090, although the present façade is 19th century. Eating out in the village is limited, but there's a wide choice of restaurants on the mountain.

Where to stay

Chalet Saskia is a stand-alone chalet divided into two halves each sleeping 10 to 13 people, and superb cuisine is served in both. From €899 not including travel with Ski Peak (skipeak.net).

Alternatives

Megève has horse-drawn sleighs and an attractive resort centre, and little-known Aussois in the Maurienne Valley is rural France at its simplest and most delightful.

Best for partying

Méribel

There's no denying that the thousands of international visitors who make the journey each winter to this the geographical centre of the giant Trois Vallées ski area know how to party in style.

A branch of the French on-mountain après experience La Folie Douce, at the mid-station of the main Saulire gondola, gets loud at 3pm with a DJ and table-top dancing. The clientele tend to migrate after 5pm to the Rond Point, better known as The Ronny, just above the main village and the must-visit après venue. It has live bands and a fantastic up-for-it atmosphere. On a good night, dedicated party animals could be crowd surfing by 6pm.



Méribel is at the centre of the giant Trois Vallées

Alternatively, after a season off, Méribel institution Jack's Bar is back for 2019/20 in a new venue, still with comedy and live bands every evening, while Barometer has a pleasant English pub atmosphere. Later on, La Taverne and Le Pub are good warm-up spots for the main clubbing action even later at O'Sullivan's or Les Saint Pères.

Méribel's local slopes are extensive and mainly intermediate, and give easy access to the rest of the Trois Vallées ski area. The resort has an unrivalled selection of good-quality chalets, although wickedly high prices have led to a sharp fall in the overall visitor numbers in recent years.

Where to stay

Chalet Hotel Les Grangettes is situated just across the street from the main Chaudannes access lifts. Rooms are plain but clean, comfortable and comparatively good value. From £739 with Inghams.

Alternatives

In the country that gave après ski its name there is remarkably little of it. Les Deux Alpes and Chamonix are livelier than most resorts and do their best to address the lack of partying with a more extensive range of bars and late-night entertainment.

Best for families

Les Gets

With its village-based nursery slopes, pedestrian-friendly centre and road train shuttle between the main slopes and separate Mont Chéry ski area, this village in the giant Portes du Soleil ski area makes an ideal base for families. The region has oodles of groomed runs – 286 of them to be exact – linked by 196 lifts.

There's a huge choice of accommodation, including child-friendly chalets with nannies, and Les Gets itself is a pleasing mixture of old Savoyard chalets and more modern wood-and-stone buildings constructed in keeping with their Alpine surroundings. Child-friendly activities in the village include skating, farm tours and tenpin bowling. There's also a cinema and the Musique Mécanique Museum, with around 750 exhibits including music boxes, clocks and self-playing pianos.

Les Gets is set at a rather modest 1,172m altitude, which means snow cover is not necessarily reliable at village level throughout the season. However, there are more nursery slopes up the mountain at Chavannes, and the Native American Indian-themed Grand Cry fun park is also here.



Les Gets is popular with families CREDIT: ANTHONY BROWN/ANTHONY BROWN

Les Gets shares a 120km local ski area with [Morzine](#), and the British snow-sports schools BASS, Les Gets Snowsports and Mint Snowboarding operate here. Kindergartens include Les Fripouilles, which caters for children from six months to four years.

Where to stay

Chalet Cocon des Neiges is brand new for the 2019/20 ski season, overlooks the village and is two minutes' walk from the nearest lift. It sleeps 18 and has family suites with en-suite bathrooms. From [£579 with Ski Famille](#). Full child care is available.

Alternatives

[La Tania](#) in the Trois Vallées is car-free, although families with little ones need to be wary of people speeding down the main drag towards the gondola. Vaujany is an unspoilt village linking into the [Alpe d'Huez](#) ski area with no through traffic and a good crèche.

Best for terrain parks

Avoriaz

This purpose-built resort above Morzine in the massive French/Swiss Portes du Soleil area was largely the brainchild of French racer Jean Vuarnet, better known for his sunglasses than for his gold medal at the Squaw Valley Olympics in 1960. Accommodation is mainly ski-in/ski-out apartments, many of which have been renovated in recent years. Avoriaz has a quirky charm and a varied array of terrain parks – five plus a superpipe.

Snowboarding made its European debut in Avoriaz in the late 1980s and the resort built the first halfpipe in Europe in 1993. Facilities have come a long way since then. Park novices can learn first turns at the Chapelle park, which has kicker lines from green to red along with boxes and rails, before progressing to the pro lines and airbag in the Arare park.



Snowboarders will love purpose-built Avoriaz

In the Stash park all features are made from wood and there are three lines of varying difficulty snaking through the forest. The idea originated with Jake Burton, founder of Burton Snowboards. Avoriaz also has two parks especially for kids, Lil'Stash, and the Burton Kids Parkway.

The Portes du Soleil's variety of slopes suits everyone, from complete beginners to veteran powderhounds, and Avoriaz makes a good base for easy access to all of it. High and rocky, the resort is a great destination in a good snow year, much less so when the snow is thin on the lower slopes.

Where to stay

Ski-in/ski-out and essentially quirky, Hotel Des Dromonts is a funky throwback to the days of Deneuve and Vadim with plenty of retro chic and two good restaurants to choose from. The owner of the sports shop opposite once skied down the not-quite-vertical side of the hotel and lived to tell the tale. From £1,592 with [Ski Independence](#).

Alternatives

The Portes du Soleil has a total of 30 parks including boardercross and ski cross. [Tignes](#) and [La Plagne](#) also both have large parks with extensive features.

Best for value

Ax les Thermes

The attractive old town of Ax les Thermes, in the Ariège area of the Pyrenees, is a great choice for a value holiday since it's not a mainstream or fashionable ski resort of the Alps. It is only 90 minutes' drive from Toulouse airport too, so it's convenient for a long weekend or mid-week break.

The town lies at just 720m from where a gondola to 1,400m accesses the start of the ski area, which is divided into three connected sectors. Bonascre is home to a host of easy green beginner slopes and some long flattering blues. Saquet, accessed by gondola or a six-person chairlift, goes up to a respectable 2,300m and has great red and black runs beneath the Tute and Ours chairs. On fresh powder days there is easily accessible off piste through the trees.



Ax les Thermes is not a mainstream resort and has an attractive old town centre

Further over lies the Domaine des Campels sector, reached by the long sweeping blue Savis piste or a choice of much steeper and more demanding reds and blacks.

In terms of size, the slopes here are no match for the giant connected areas of the Alps, but there's plenty to keep beginners and intermediates happy for a week, and in good snow conditions the freeriding will entertain the more advanced. There is also an extensive cross-country ski area at Chioula, a short bus-ride away.

The town is famous for its thermal baths, les Bains de Couloubret, with 60 hot springs. Visitors can soak in the thermal spa waters here from €18.50, or use the free foot spa. On-slope eating is a lot cheaper than in the Alps and, with the proximity to the frontier, there's a big Spanish influence in the tapas bars lining the attractive streets. The two ski schools here are the ESF and ESL.

Where to stay

Les Trois Domaines apartments are right next to the lift station and public foot spa. From £196 self catering, including one channel crossing per apartment, with [Zenith Holidays](#).

Alternatives

[St Lary](#), also in the Pyrenees, is a sensibly-priced alternative. Puy St Vincent in the Southern Alps is loved by French families who count their euros carefully.

Best for weekends

La Clusaz

Close to Lake Annécý and within an easy hour's drive of Geneva airport, La Clusaz has well-groomed intermediate and advanced slopes that are all too often overlooked by skiers and snowboarders driving past on their way towards the Trois Vallées and other famous Tarentaise resorts.

La Clusaz and smaller Manigod share 132km of slopes; 10 minutes away by free shuttle bus are those of Le Grand Bornand and its lift-linked satellite village, St Jean de Sixt. All four are covered by the same Aravis lift pass and comprise a total 220km of terrain.

Most of the slopes are intermediate, but the La Balme area of La Clusaz offers long runs and considerable challenges. Le Grand Bornand has a dedicated freeride area at the back of Lachat that is neither patrolled nor groomed, but is avalanche protected. It is sufficiently extensive and challenging to satisfy even the most demanding visitor. A 200m covered magic carpet lift makes the Rosay plateau area, in Le Grand Bornand, very accessible for beginners.



La Clusaz is within an easy drive of Geneva airport CREDIT: PASCAL LEBEAU

As well as making La Clusaz an ideal spot for the weekend, airport convenience explains in part why so many Britons have bought chalets and apartments here. However, their presence is muted – resorts are mainly frequented by the French, and unlike in some of the big name resorts, holidaying here feels like France. La Clusaz has a life beyond snow and is a thriving community 12 months of the year. Le Grand Bornand is the home of Reblochon cheese, an inescapable inclusion in all its varied forms, from fondue to raclette, on every restaurant menu in the region.

Where to stay

The three-star Hotel Alpen Roc is in the centre of La Clusaz, 150m from the lifts, with panoramic views from the bar/lounge area. Three nights from £467, including Eurotunnel crossings with free FlexiPlus upgrade, with Peak Retreats.

Alternatives

Morzine and Megève are both within a 90-minute drive of Geneva Airport.



