

French Alps & the Jura



Mont Blanc, Grandes Jorasses and Barre des Écrins for mountaineers. Val d'Isère, Chamonix and Les Trois Vallées for adrenalin 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.

Their magnetic beauty has played no small part in their soaring popularity: people will take four-hour bus trips from the airport, pay an arm and a leg for a lift pass and give up creature comforts for a piece of Alpine wonder. The summit bug is incurable and terribly infectious.

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.

Celebrity chefs and DJs ride the popularity wave and compete for the best spots, resorts outbid each other in outlandish activities, and spa-chalet hotels rival in obscene luxuries. Get away from the mad, trendy circus deep inside the national parks or the Jura forests.

Summer too provides some respite, a wild-flower infusion of walking, wildlife-spotting and lake swimming. Life on a farm slows the clock and that's where you realise what this is all about: life that little bit closer to nature.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Go mountaineering or head down the mythical Vallée Blanche in **Chamonix** (p532) before a drink or three at the town's **bars** (p537)
- Swim in beautiful Lac d'Annecy before strolling in its chic lakeside namesake, **Annecy** (p541)
- Experience life (not to mention a feast of a dinner) on a **Jurassien farm** (p574)
- **Trek** in one of the Alps' two national parks and four regional parks (p524)
- Go green and learn the ropes of eco-living and eating at **La Juliane** (p569)
- Make sure you enjoy one of the Alps' supreme cheese **raclettes** or **fondues** (p551)



■ POPULATION: 3,313,000

■ AREA: 210,000 SQ KM



History

Migrant tribes of Celtic, Gaulish and Teutonic origin arrived in the Alps first, and by the time of Christ, permanent communities were well established, especially around the lakes of Geneva, Bourget and Annecy, and the Tarentaise and Maurienne Valleys.

During the Roman conquest the Alps were a strategic stronghold, falling under Roman control during Augustus' reign. The Frankish kings of the Merovingian and Carolingian empires laid the foundations for the modern Alps with their distinctive dialects, traditions and cultures.

The 13th and 14th centuries saw the feudal houses of Savoy, the Dauphiné and Provence fiercely contesting the Alps. The ensuing cen-

turies were marked by successive wars and occupations, with each side swapping and reoccupying territories. This cycle ended with the union of Savoy with France in 1860. Savoy was split into two *départements*, Savoie (73) and Haute-Savoie (74).

The Industrial Revolution bombarded the region with heavy industry. The first holidaymakers made their way to the area around Chamonix and Mont Blanc in the late 19th century.

German and Italian forces occupied the Alps during WWII, while the mountains became one of the main strongholds for the French resistance. Modern industry, the development of hydroelectric energy, huge urban development and large-scale tourism

all contributed to the regeneration of the Alps in the postwar years.

Climate

Extreme climatic diversity and weather conditions that change alarmingly quickly are the main characteristics. Snow covers even lower-altitude stations most years from December to April. Pick up the latest weather report at the tourist office, your hotel reception or call:

Local Weather Report (☎ 08 36 68 02 plus 2-digit *département* number; www.meteofrance.com)

Snow & Avalanche Report (☎ 08 36 68 10 20)

National & Regional Parks

Wildlife is carefully protected in two national parks (Vanoise and Écrins), although even in these, there are large zones in which industry and human habitation is 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.

The Jura is home to the Parc Naturel Régional du Haut-Jura.

Dangers & Annoyances

Avalanches (opposite) pose a danger in snow-bound areas. An accident in an isolated area can be fatal, so never ski, hike or climb alone. At high altitudes, where the sun's ultraviolet radiation is much stronger than at sea level (and is intensified by reflection off the snow), wear sunglasses and put sunscreen on.

The air is dry in the Alps. Carry water when hiking, and drink more than you would at lower altitudes. Always bring extra layers too: the weather can turn very suddenly, and be aware of the possibility of hypothermia after a long climb or a sudden storm, as you'll cool off quickly while enjoying the cold, windy panorama.

Litter on the slopes is nasty and annoying. Smokers can buy a *cendrier de poche* (pocket ashtray) from the local tourist offices to hang around their neck and stick butts in.

Skiing & Snowboarding

Alpine slopes are busier than ever as bumper numbers of winter holidaymakers hit the 200-plus resorts in the French Alps to ski, snowboard and après-ski in the sun and snow. The season starts just before Christmas and ends in late April. High-season prices kick in over Christmas, New Year and during French school holidays in late February and early March, which you should avoid if you can; low season is the start and end of the season and most of cold January.

Dependent on snow conditions, summer Alpine skiing on glaciers in high-altitude resorts Val d'Isère, Les Deux Alpes and Alpe d'Huez runs for anything from two weeks to two months, June to August.

Downhill skiing (*ski alpin*) is faster than ever, rendering helmets a sensible idea. Helmets can be rented alongside skis (Alpine, cross-country, monoski, telemark), snowboards, boots and poles at sport shops in every resort. Rental typically costs €40/170 per day/six days for Alpine equipment, €35/150 for snowboarding gear and €15/65 for cross-country; reserving in advance online invariably yields a 15% discount. Lost equipment must be paid for by you or your insurance policy; rental shops offer insurance for a small additional charge.

Downhill runs range from a few hundred metres to 20km and are colour-coded to indicate how kid-easy or killer-hard they are: green (beginners), blue (intermediate), red (advanced) and black (very advanced). Summer glacial skiing is on short greens or blues. Snowboarders are brilliantly catered for in larger resorts with a riot of snowparks kitted out with half-pipes, quarter-pipes, shape kickers, gaps and ramps. Long, rambling

TOP SURFS

ANENA (www.anena.org, in French) Get to the bottom of what makes an avalanche with the in-depth studies of the National French Association for the Study of Snow & Avalanches.

Natives (www.natives.co.uk) Perfect to find that dream season job in Méribel or Les Deux Alpes.

pistehors.com (<http://pistehors.com>) Essential surfing for anyone heading off-piste.

Planet Subzero (www.planetsubzero.com) Book seasonal and long-term accommodation online.

Ski France International (<http://ski-resort-france.co.uk>) Excellent website to prepare your holiday in the Alps, winter or summer, with detailed resort guides, maps, snow reports and more.

AVALANCHE AWARENESS

People die from avalanches every year. We can't repeat it enough. Casualties peaked at an all-time high in 2005–06, with 55 deaths. Figures have since levelled, with 20 deaths and fewer avalanche incidents in 2007–08. Whether it is due to increased awareness or better climatic conditions for the last couple of seasons (or a combination of both) is hard to say.

Ski resorts announce the daily avalanche risk through signs and coloured flags outside ticket kiosks, at the base of ski lifts and dotted around the resort and slopes. Yellow means 'low risk', black-and-yellow checks stand for 'heightened risk' and black is 'severe risk'. Ignoring an avalanche warning can be the death of you. Once buried beneath snow, you have no more than 15 minutes to get out.

Off-piste (*hors piste*) skiers should never leave home without an avalanche pole, ARVA transceiver, a shovel – and, most importantly, a professional local mountain guide. Staying firmly on piste is safer still.

Essential surfing for snow adventurers is **pistehors.com** (<http://pistehors.com>), an excellent English-language website devoted to French off-piste and snowboarding news. **Henry's Avalanche Talk** (☎ 04 79 06 16 58; www.henrysavalanchetalk.com), among other things, translates the daily avalanche forecast issued by Météo France into English during the ski season and runs links to other useful avalanche-related sites. Val d'Isère-based Henry also runs mountain-safety and avalanche-awareness clinics – something more and more resorts are doing in a bid to, bluntly put, save lives. Most are free.

The French courts have adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards irresponsible skiers and boarders who trigger avalanches.

cross-country (*ski de fond*) trails are at their most scenic in the Jura.

France's leading ski school, the **École de Ski Français** (ESF; www.esf.net) – its instructors wear red – teaches snowboarding and skiing. It has a branch in every resort and touts competitive rates against the crop of smaller private schools it competes against; lessons typically cost €40/50 per hour for two/four people and €30 per person for a two-hour group lesson. Kids can start learning from the age of four; from the age of three, nappyless tots can lark about in the *jardin de neige* (snow garden).

LIFT PASSES

You must buy a lift pass (*forfait*) to ride the various *remontées mécaniques* – drag lifts or buttons (*téléskis*), chairlifts for two to eight people (*télésièges*), gondolas (*télécabines*), cable cars (*téléphériques*) and funicular railways (*funiculaires*).

Passes – a big chunk out of your budget, €200 or thereabouts for a week in big resorts – give access to one or more ski sectors. They can be valid for a half or full day or as many days as you want, and rarely require a passport photo. Any self-respecting lift pass is 'hands-free' – like a credit card with a built-in chip that barriers detect automatically – and can be bought and recharged online.

One-way and return tickets are available on chairlifts and cable cars for walkers.

Children aged under five ski for free but still need a pass; bring along a passport as proof of age. Many places offer the same deal to veterans aged 75 or more.

Cheaper passes – usually around €6 a day – are also needed for cross-country ski trails, although passes are rarely checked.

INSURANCE

When buying your lift pass, think about insurance – a vital necessity. If you're hurt on the slopes, all the services that come to your aid – the helicopter, the guy who skis you and your stretcher down the mountain, the doctor who treats you – charge a lot of money (we're talking up to €2000 here).

Most packages include insurance or you might have the **Carte Neige** (www.ffs.fr/site/carte_neige, in French), an annual policy that covers mountain-rescue costs and medical treatment. It costs €35 to €42 per year (€30 for cross-country skiing only), depending on the level of cover you choose and where you buy it. Resorts sell it (usually through the ESF, left) and it's sold online.

If you are not insured, buy **Carré Neige** (www.carreneige.com) with your lift pass. Every resort offers the daily insurance scheme – effectively

RESORT RECCE

Resort	Profile	Elevation	Alpine Runs
Chamonix-Mont-Blanc	Good off-piste but too much transport; trendy & full of fun	1037m	182km
St-Gervais & Megève	Pricey & a bit snobby	810m & 1113m	445km
Les Portes du Soleil	12 connected resorts luring families	1000-1800m	650km
Morzine-Les Gets	Busiest & biggest resort in Portes du Soleil	1000m	110km
Avoriaz	Chic 1960s Portes du Soleil village-resort	1800m	80km
La Clusaz	Cheaper spot; ski for the day from Annecy	1100m	128km
Le Grand Bornand	Day trip from Annecy, hot locally	1000m	90km
Savoie Grand Révard	Day trip from Chambéry; cheap, local & big on cross-country	1100m	50km
Les Trois Vallées	Hot, trendy, vast & fast ski area	2000m	600km
Méribel	Heavy traffic & Brit-packed bars in Les Trois Vallées	1450m	150km
Courchevel	Superchic 'Three Valleys' skiing	1550, 1650m & 1850m	150km
Val Thorens	Europe's highest; third of the 'Three Valleys' trio	2300m	140km
St-Martin de Belleville	Authentic, picture-postcard Savoyard village linked to Les Trois Vallées	1450m	160km
Val d'Isère	Unrivalled winter/summer skiing & boarding; buzzy nightlife	1850m	300km
Tignes	Ruthlessly modern (ugly); summer skiing & glacial snowpark for boarders	2100m	300km
Chamrousse	Weekend skiing from Grenoble	1700m	92km
Les Deux Alpes	Snowboarders' delight; summer ski & board	1660m	225km
Alpe d'Huez	Snowboarding park; Europe's longest black run; summer skiing	1860m	245km
Serre-Chevalier	Door-to-door skiing from 13 resorts; best sunshine	1200m	250km
Métabief Mont d'Or	Predominantly cross-country in the Jura	1000m	40km
Les Rousses	Predominantly cross-country; ideal for French & Swiss day trippers	1100m	50km

a daily version of *Carte Neige* – that covers mountain rescue, transport and medical costs and costs €2.50 a day.

Getting There & Away

On a clear day the view through the plane window is the best introduction to the Alps you could dream of: chances are you're landing at **Lyon St-Exupéry airport** (p515; www.lyon.aeroport.fr), 25km east of Lyon; or **Geneva Airport** (Aéroport International de Genève; www.gva.ch) in neighbouring Switzerland.

From both airports there are buses to numerous ski resorts with Geneva's **Aeroski-Bus** (☎ +41 22 798 20 00; www.alpski-bus.com) and Lyon's **Satobus-Alpes** (☎ from abroad 04 79 68 32 96, ☎ within France 08 20 32 03 68; www.satobus-alpes.com); fares and frequencies are listed in this chapter under Getting There & Away in resort sections.

Traffic on steeply climbing, winding mountain roads leading to resorts can be hellish, es-

pecially on Friday and Saturday. After heavy snowfalls, you may need snow chains. Winter tyres (automatically provided with most hire cars picked up at Lyon and Geneva airports) are a good idea. The Fréjus and Mont Blanc road tunnels connect the French Alps with Italy, as do several mountain passes. Road signs indicate if passes are blocked.

Eurostar ski trains (see p965) provide a more environment-friendly alternative between London and Moûtiers or Bourg St-Maurice. Within France, train services to the Alps are excellent.

SAVOY

'The Alps par excellence' could be the strap line of this northern half of the French Alps. Glaciers and lakes, mineral deserts and dense Alpine forests, magnificent land-

Cross-Country Trails	Difficulty	Lifts	One-/Six-Day Lift Pass
36km	Intermediate, advanced, serious off-piste	47	€47/225
75km	Beginners, intermediate	108	€34.50/166
214km	All abilities	209	€39/200
69km	All abilities	48	€28.20/141.50
45km	All abilities, super kid-friendly	36	€32/na
86km	Beginners, intermediate	45	€28.50/149.50
60km	Beginners, intermediate	31	€26.50/121.80
140km	Beginner, intermediate	16	€15.20/na
130km	All levels, advanced	200	€44/220
33km	All abilities, kid-friendly	57	€37/178
66km	All abilities, advanced	62	€37/178
0km	All abilities	26	€36.50/172
28km	All abilities	36	€35.50/172
44km	Intermediate, advanced, off-piste	89	€42/202.50
44km	Intermediate, advanced, off-piste	89	€42/202.50
44km	Beginner, intermediate	23	€26.50/139
15km	Intermediate, advanced	51	€36.40/172
50km	All abilities	87	€38.20/198.50
35km	All abilities, off-piste	66	€38/181
200km		20	€19/100.50
220km		40	€19.80/103.40

scapes and everlasting snow, this is what would qualify as proper mountains in most people's books.

Flanked by Switzerland and Italy, Savoy (Savoie, pronounced sav-wa) rises from the southern shores of Lake Geneva, Europe's largest Alpine lake, and culminates at the roof of Europe, Mont Blanc's mighty 4810m. In between is a collection of adrenalin-pumped ski resorts such as Chamonix and party-central Val d'Isère, as well as some lesser-known nonskiing gems starting with the historical château towns Annecy and Chambéry to the southwest.

As well as skiing, Savoy is big for...sailing. Glacial lakes from Lake Geneva in the north to Lac d'Annecy and France's biggest natural lake Lac du Bourget in the south make for great nautical playgrounds.

Rural life, unchanged for centuries, strikes in the region's most remote realms

like the Bauges massif (so little known it is often mistaken for the northeastern Vosges region), and the wild Parc National de la Vanoise.

CHAMONIX

pop 9086 / elevation 1037m

Cliché as it sounds, Chamonix is the mecca of mountaineering, its birthplace, its flag-bearer, its heart and soul. Its surrounding landscapes have enthralled and inspired countless adventurers and other thrill-seekers. Even James Bond thought it worthy of one of his adrenalin shots: that spectacular stunt-riddled ski chase by 007 in *The World Is Not Enough* (1999) was filmed in Chamonix.

Chamonix retains a hard-core mountain image for most French people, but over the last decade, young Brits have brushed off any preconceived ideas and gradually adopted Chamonix as their favourite winter party

place (even stag dos have started coming). It does mean there is growing discontent among some locals that bar staff don't speak French, but the upshot is that if you want good après-ski, you're in for a treat.

More diplomatic Chamoniards say that it's only fair: Chamonix after all was 'discovered' by Brits William Windham and Richard Pococke in 1741, and much of the early tourism in Chamonix was British. The town's popularity grew and reached consecration in 1924 with the organisation of the first Winter Olympics.

To this day, fun is indeed on an Olympic scale in Chamonix: there are more winter and summer activities than you'll be able to fit in your holiday and, French-English rivalry aside, 250 years on, the wow factor is still there.

Orientation

Chamonix town runs along the banks of the River Arve for about 2km, wedged in a valley between the Mont Blanc massif (east) and the Aiguilles Rouges massif (west) with 2525m-high Le Brévent as its peak.

Sports and souvenir shops, restaurants, cafés and bars line the main street, pedestrianised rue du Docteur Paccard and its continuation, rue Joseph Vallot. Cross the river to reach the bus and train stations and the happening Chamonix Sud quarter where hip bars and clubs cluster around the foot of the Aiguille du Midi cable car (p530).

Chamonix' most exceptional downhill skiing is in Les Grands Montets (1235m to 3300m), a ski area accessible from Argentière, 9km north of Chamonix; shuttle buses (p538) link the two.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Maison de la Presse (☎ 04 50 53 29 76; 93 rue du Docteur Paccard; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Sun) Huge selection of books, maps, topoguides and the press in six languages.

Photo Alpine Tairraz (☎ 04 50 53 14 23; 162 av Michel Croz) Skiing and walking guides, maps, mountaineering books and local guidebooks.

EMERGENCY

PGHM (Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute-Montagne; ☎ 04 50 53 16 89; 69 rue de la Mollard) Mountain-rescue service for the entire Mont Blanc area.

Police Station (☎ 04 50 53 00 55; 111 rue de la Mollard)

SOS

If you need help getting off the mountain, the Gendarmerie de Montagne is the emergency service to SOS. Comprising 15 Pelotons de Gendarmerie de Haute-Montagne (PGHM) and five Pelotons de Gendarmerie de Montagne (PGM) country-wide, these highly skilled mountain-rescue specialists are based in key towns and stations in the French Alps:

Anney (☎ 04 50 09 47 47; 33 av Plaine)

Bourg St-Maurice (☎ 04 79 07 01 10; 945 av Maréchal Lederer)

Briançon (☎ 04 92 22 22 22; 37 rue Pasteur)

Chamonix (☎ 04 50 53 16 89; 69 rue de la Mollard)

When an emergency strikes, if you don't know which number to call, don't waste time looking for it; simply call ☎ 17.

INTERNET ACCESS

Surf for free on your own laptop in the wi-fi-savvy tourist office (p530). Mojo's (p536) also has six computers for use (per minute/two hours €0.10/10) as does Camp de Base (p537).

Shop 74 (☎ 04 50 90 73 17; impasse du Bartavel; per hr €6; ☎ 10am-8pm)

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.chamonix.com Tourist office website.

www.chamonix.net Independent companion site; advice on accommodation, entertainment and nightlife.

www.compagniedumontblanc.com Buy ski passes online, get weather forecasts and snow conditions, download piste maps and ski-area opening hours.

LAUNDRY

Laverie Automatique (174 av de l'Aiguille du Midi; 7/16kg wash €5.50/10; ☎ 8am-10pm)

MEDICAL SERVICES

The tourist office (p530) has a list of doctors, dentists, pharmacists, physiotherapists etc.

Duty Dentist (☎ 04 50 66 17 19)

Duty Doctor (☎ 15)

Hospital (Centre Hospitalier; ☎ 04 50 53 84 00; 509 rte des Pélerins) In Les Favrand, 2km south of Chamonix centre.

CHAMONIX

0 300 m
0 0.2 miles

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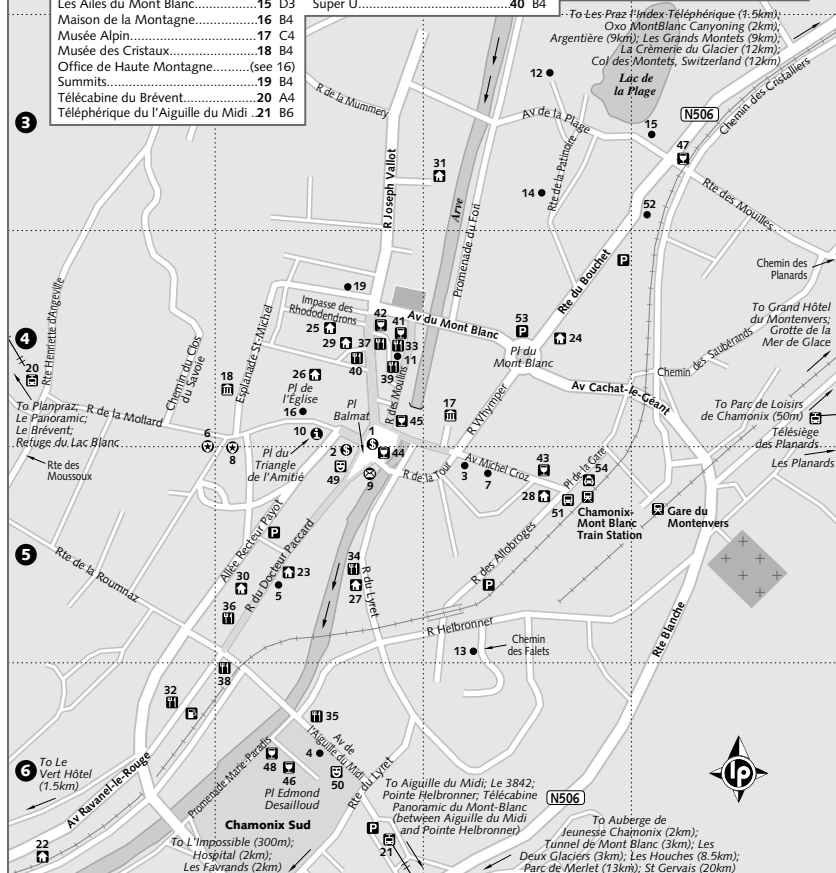
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-To Les Praez: Index Téléphérique (3.5km);
Oxo Mont-Blanc Canyoning (2km);
Argentière (9km); Les Grands Montets (9km);
La Crémierie du Glacier (12km);
Col des Montets, Switzerland (12km)



MONEY

There are several seasonal exchange places between the tourist and post offices.

Banque de Savoie (☎ 04 50 53 30 25; 1 place Balmat; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.40-5.30pm Mon-Thu, 8.30am-12.30pm & 2-7pm Fri-Sun high season, closed weekends low season) Exchange bureau.

Banque Laydernier (☎ 04 50 53 26 39; 2 place Balmat, ☎ 8.40am-noon & 1.45-5.50pm Mon-Fri)

POST

Post Office (89 place Balmat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 50 53 00 24; www.chamonix.com; 85 place du Triangle de l'Amitié; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm daily Dec-Apr, 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9am-12.30pm Sun May-Nov) Accommodation and activity information, sells ski passes.

Sights**AIGUILLE DU MIDI**

A jagged pinnacle of rock rising above glaciers, snowfields and rocky crags, 8km from the domed summit of Mont Blanc, the **Aiguille du Midi** (3842m) is one of Chamonix' iconic landmarks. If you can handle the height, the unique panoramic views from the summit are breathtaking and unforgettable.

Year-round the **Téléphérique du l'Aiguille du Midi** (Aiguille du Midi Cable Car; ☎ 04 50 53 30 80, advance

reservations 24hr 04 50 53 22 75; 100 place de l'Aiguille du Midi; adult/4-15yr/family return €38/30.40/114, adult/4-15yr return to midstation Plan de l'Aiguille €21/16.80; ☎ 6.30am-6pm Jul & Aug, 8.30am-4.30pm late-Dec-Mar, hours vary rest of year) links Chamonix with the Aiguille du Midi; its halfway point, Plan de l'Aiguille (2317m) is an excellent place to start hikes or paraglide in summer. Be prepared for long queues, especially in summer when you need to obtain a boarding card (marked with the number of your departing *and* returning cable-car cabins) from the ticket desks in addition to a ticket. Making advance reservations by phone or online incurs a €2 booking fee. The ascent is not recommended for children aged under two. Even in summer the temperature rarely rises above -10°C at the top – so bring warm clothes!

From the Aiguille du Midi, between mid-May and mid-September the unrepentant can continue for a further 30 minutes (5km) of mind-blowing scenery – think suspended glaciers and spurs, seracs, snow plains and shimmering ice fields – in the smaller bubbles of the **Télécabine Panoramic Mont Blanc** (Panoramic Mont Blanc Cable Car ☎ 04 50 53 30 80; adult/4-15yr return from Chamonix €54/44; ☎ 8.50am-4pm mid-May-Jun & Sep, 8.15am-4.30pm Jul & Aug) to **Pointe Helbronner** (3466m) on the French-Italian border. From Pointe Helbronner another cable car descends to the Italian ski resort of Courmayeur.

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

There is so much more to the mountains than Alpine skiing in winter and hiking in summer. So we thought we'd whet your appetite with what could be an action- and fun-packed holiday.

Winter

Cross-country skiing is fantastic for discovering forested landscapes and wildlife rather than flying downhill on infinitely white slopes with 5000 other skiers the only fauna for miles. Try it in the Jura (p579) or Savoie Grand Révard (p550).

Ski touring (p533) is another good one to try with the help of a guide. For more scenic discoveries, but less demanding physical activity, **snowshoeing** is ideal. Most resorts now have dedicated snowshoeing itineraries; there are otherwise plenty of organised trips.

For more of a buzz, **sledging** on a variety of contraptions is all the rage (see p563 and p553). Sliding still, learn the art of **mushing** (dog sledging, see p552) for a taste of Eskimo life.

Summer

Take to the waters! Try **white-water rafting, kayaking, canoeing, canyoning** (exploring river canyons by a combination of wading, sliding down chutes, abseiling, climbing, swimming, jumping and generally having a great time). Or fly: go **paragliding** (p534); or bomb it on a **mountain bike** (p539). These summer activities are available in every Alpine resort so you'll just be able to pick and choose.

ADVENTURE KNOW-HOW

These guides have it. So go, create your own adventure:

Association International des Guides du Mont Blanc (☎ 04 50 53 27 05; www.guides-du-montblanc.com; 98 rue des Moulins) Chamonix-based international guides; extreme skiing, mountaineering, glacier trekking, ice and rock climbing, and paragliding.

Aventure en Tête (☎ 04 50 54 05 11; www.aventureentete.com; 620 rte du Plagnolet, Argentière) Ski touring and ski-alpinism expeditions, heli-skiing/boarding, free ride and off-piste security courses; mountaineering and climbing in summer.

Chamonix Experience (☎ 04 50 54 09 36; www.chamex.com; 141 rue Charlet Straton, Argentière) Courses in off-piste skiing, avalanche awareness, heli-skiing, ice climbing and ski touring; in summer, rock and alpine climbing.

Compagnie des Guides (☎ 04 50 53 00 88; www.chamonix-guides.com; 190 place de l'Église) Crème de la crème of mountain guides, founded in 1821 and the oldest organisation of its kind in the world. Guides for skiing, mountaineering, snowshoeing, ice climbing, hiking, mountain biking and every other Alpine pastime.

LE BRÉVENT

The highest peak on the western side of the valley, **Le Brévent** (2525m) has fabulous views of the Mont Blanc massif and a multitude of hiking trails, ledges to paraglide from and a summit restaurant (p536).

Reach it from the **Télécabine du Brévent** (☎ 04 50 53 13 18; 29 rte Henriette d'Angeville; Chamonix-Brévent adult/4-15yr/family return €22/17.40/66, Chamonix-Planpraz adult/4-15yr return €12/9.60; ☎ 8am-5.45pm Jun-Aug, 8.45am-4.45pm mid-Dec-Apr), from the end of rue de la Mollard to midstation **Planpraz** (2000m), then continuing on another cable car to the top.

MER DE GLACE

The **Mer de Glace** (Sea of Ice), the second-largest glacier in the Alps, is 14km long, 1800m wide and up to 400m deep. During a visit to Chamonix in 1741, Englishman William Windham was the first foreigner to set eyes on the glacier, which he described as 'a sort of agitated sea that seemed suddenly to have become frozen' (hence the name). The glacier moves 45m a year at the edges, and up to 90m a year in the centre, and has become a popular tourist attraction thanks to the rack-and-pinion railway line built between 1897 and 1908.

Since 1946, the **Grotte de la Mer de Glace** (☎ late Dec-Apr & mid-Jun-Sep) – an ice cave – has been carved every spring. The interior temperature is between -2°C and -5°C. Look down the slope for last year's cave to see how far the glacier has moved. Be prepared to climb 100 or so steps to access the cave.

A quaint red mountain train links **Gare du Montenvers** (☎ 04 50 53 12 54; 35 place de la Mer de Glace; adult/4-15yr/family €21/16.80/63; ☎ 9am-4.30pm mid-Dec-Apr, 8am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, hours vary rest of year) in Chamonix with Montenvers (1913m), from

where a cable car transports tourists in summer down to the glacier and cave. The journey takes 20 minutes and admission includes entry to the caves and the cable car. Before catching the train back to Chamonix, nip into the **Grand Hôtel de Montenvers** (1880; p536) for a gander at its nine-room local-history museum and a drink on its dramatically placed terrace.

The Mer de Glace can be reached on foot via the Grand Balcon Nord trail from Plan de l'Aiguille. The two-hour uphill trail from Chamonix starts near the summer luge track. Traversing the glacier and its crevasses requires proper equipment and an experienced guide.

MUSEUMS

Pay for one Chamonix museum and visit the other for free. Discounts also apply for *carte d'hôte* (p538) pass-holders.

The town's illustrious Alpine history (the cliffhanging tale of local crystal-hunter Jacques Balmat and doctor Michel Gabriel Paccard summiting Mont Blanc for the first time in 1786, the creation of the winter season etc) zooms into focus at the **Musée Alpin** (Alpine Museum; ☎ 04 50 53 25 93; 89 av Michel Croz; adult/carte d'hôte/12-18yr €5.20/4/1.50; ☎ 2-7pm, also 10am-noon school holidays).

Rocks, minerals and geology are examined in the **Musée des Cristaux** (Crystal Museum; ☎ 04 50 55 53 93; Esplanade St-Michel; adult/carte d'hôte/12-18yr €5.20/4/1.50; ☎ 2-7pm, also 10am-1pm school holidays), in addition to fantastic temporary exhibitions such as the history of mountaineering or the impact of climate change on mountains.

Activities

WINTER ACTIVITIES

Make the **Maison de la Montagne** (190 place de l'Église; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 3-7pm), across the square

from the tourist office, your first port of call for finding out everything about the Mont Blanc area.

Inside is the highly regarded **Compagnie des Guides** (p531); the **École de Ski Français** (ESF); Argentière (☎ 04 50 54 00 12; www.esf-argentiere.com; 329 rue Charlet Straton); Chamonix (☎ 04 50 53 22 57; www.esf-chamonix.com); and the **Office de Haute Montagne** (OHM; ☎ 04 50 53 22 08; www.ohm-chamonix.com), which has information on trails, hiking conditions, weather forecasts and *refuges* (mountain huts), and runs a huge library of topoguides and maps that are free to consult.

Skiing & Snowboarding

The biggest problem with skiing in Chamonix is that there is so much transport involved since many of its areas are very spread out and not connected. Of Chamonix' nine main skiing and snowboarding areas, the best for beginners are Le Tour, Les Planards and Les

Chosalets. Brévent-Flégère, above Chamonix (connected by *téléphérique*), and Les Grands Montets, accessible from Argentière, 9km north of Chamonix, offer accomplished skiers the greatest challenges. For boarders, there is a snowpark with half-pipe, kicker ramps and other thrill-filled obstacles in Les Grands Montets, and a natural half-pipe in Le Tour.

The region has several marked but un-groomed trails suitable for skiers looking for off-piste thrills. The famous 20km **Vallée Blanche descent** – a lifelong dream for most serious skiers – is one of the world's most celebrated runs. The route leads from the Aiguille du Midi over the Mer de Glace and through the forests back to Chamonix, covering a drop in altitude of up to 2800m. It must *only* be tackled with a guide; the route crosses the crevasse-riddled glacier and passes through avalanche-prone areas. It takes four to five hours and a guide costs €270 per group

VINCENT LAMEYRE

Age: 43

Guide since: 1993

Mont Blanc ascents: about 70 (rough average; the record is 400, by a guide from St-Gervais)

Vallée Blanche descents: too many to remember

Likes: skiing and touring in winter; rock climbing in summer

Dislikes: people who think mountaineering is a walk in the park – there are plenty

How does one become a member of the Compagnie? Obviously you have to be a qualified guide (state diploma). Then you have to be born here. If there are no native applicants one year, 'foreigners' are accepted. That's my case; I'm from Paris. The first foreigner to be accepted was Roger Frison-Roche (legendary mountaineer, explorer, journalist and author) in 1930, 109 years after the creation of the organisation! Applicants become lifelong members after a two-year introduction; they are consecrated at the annual Fête des Guides on 15 August. That was one of the most beautiful days of my life.

What is it like within the organisation? The organisation is unlike anything I've ever seen: we're all pretty strong-minded. You have to be; on the mountain you're the sole judge, there's no room for meekness. But when you put 180 strong tempers together, you get a lot of sparks! It's never serious though: we'll argue and then make up over a beer. It's very sociable and there is a lot of solidarity.

What's changed over the years? Twenty years ago, we hardly worked in winter. But the Compagnie has marketed itself well for the past 10 years, and now we do a huge amount of off-piste skiing, the Vallée Blanche in particular. There's nothing else like it in the world. The downside of all this commercialisation is that many people think mountaineering is fun. It's not. It's a different sensation and it's a lot of effort. You also need good technique.

Any highlights or a favourite ascent? For me it's about having the right people at the right place at the right time. And there's something exciting about taking beginners: you know they have a whole mountaineering career ahead of them.

Have you ever been scared? Of course, we're always scared. That's what keeps you on your toes. That's also what makes you stop: you become very weary after 30 years of guiding. We are, statistically, very exposed. Every year we lose colleagues: it's sinister when it happens, but we're a little fatalistic about it. The show must go on.

Vincent Lameyre is a guide at the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix

CHAMONIX CLIFFHANGERS

Cliffhanging is an understatement for many of the 18 *refuges* (mountain huts) that the **Club Alpin Français** (CAF; ☎ 04 50 53 16 03; www.clubalpin-chamonix.com; 136 av Michel Croz; ⌚ 3.30-7pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat Sep-Jun, 9.30am-noon daily Jul & Aug) runs in the Mont Blanc massif, poised perilously on the mountain edge or teetering precariously over a stomach-churning drop.

Most *refuges* are staffed by a warden from around mid-June to mid-September and must be reserved in advance by telephone. Snow permitting, many are open – albeit without a warden – for several more months of the year. Expect to pay anything from €8 to €15 for a dorm bed (with or without a warden) plus around €6/15 for breakfast/dinner prepared by the hut-keeper.

(for up to four people; €16 per person for additional people up to eight people max) through the Compagnie des Guides, ESF or any of the Chamonix guides (opposite). Snowboarders require an even better level than skiers and mixed skier/boarder groups are not possible.

Lift Passes

The tourist office, some hotels and kiosks next to ski lifts sell hands-free ski passes for the Chamonix area. The **Chamonix Le Pass** (1/6 days €37/185) gives access to all Chamonix' ski domains but does not include the Aiguille du Midi (for the Vallée Blanche), nor the Montanvers train nor the higher reaches of Les Grands Montets. Cheaper passes covering single ski areas are available, as is the more expensive **Ski Pass Mont Blanc**, which covers basically everything (including the Courmayeur ski area in Italy; one/six days €47/225). View all options and buy passes online at www.compagniedumontblanc.com.

Ski Touring & Heli-Skiing

Ski de randonnée (ski touring, generally between March and May) is big in Chamonix, the range of tours being seemingly endless. The king of ski tours is the classic six-day **Haute Route** (from €825 per person including guide and full board in *refuges*) from Chamonix to Zermatt in Switzerland, opened by guides in 1927. Skiers need to be experienced in off-piste skiing and extremely fit. Shorter two-day trips (about €310 per person) are suitable for experienced skiers but *ski de randonnée* novices.

Heli-skiing (€300 to €540 per person) is reserved strictly for top-level skiers, as proficient off as on killer-black pistes: contact the Compagnie des Guides (opposite), ESF (opposite) or **Chamonix Mont-Blanc Hélicoptères** (CMBH; ☎ 04 50 54 13 82; www.cmbh.net, in French).

Mushing

Huskydalen (☎ 04 50 47 77 24; www.huskydalen.com, in French; chemin des Falets) runs introductory courses in **mushing** (dog sledging, €65 for 1½ hours) from December to April, as well as various summer activities including an original version of dog-walking: it's the dog that walks you (or rather pulls you from a harness).

SUMMER ACTIVITIES

Walking

From late spring until October, 310km of spectacular walking trails open up to hikers. The most rewarding are the high-altitude trails reached by cable car; lifts shut down in the late afternoon but in June and July it is light enough to walk until at least 9pm.

From the top of Les Praz l'Index cable car (€16) or La Flégère (€10), the line's midway point, easy 1¼- to two-hour trails lead to **Lac Blanc** (literally 'White Lake'), a turquoise-coloured lake ensnared by mountains at 2352m. Star-lovers can overnight in the **Refuge du Lac Blanc** (☎ 04 50 53 49 14; dm with half board €47; ⌚ Jun-Sep), a wooden chalet with romantic Mont Blanc views.

The **Grand Balcon Sud** trail along the western side of the valley stays at around 2000m and also affords fabulous Mont Blanc views. Reach it on foot from behind Le Brévent's *télécabine* station.

Several routes start from Plan de l'Aiguille, including the **Grand Balcon Nord**, which takes you to the Mer de Glace, from where you can walk or take the Montanvers train down to Chamonix.

For the less ambitious, **Parc de Merlet** (☎ 04 50 53 47 89; www.parcdemerlet.com, in French; adult/4-12yr €5.50/3.50; ⌚ 10am-6pm May, Jun & Sep, 9.30am-7.30pm Jul & Aug) in Les Houches offers a unique opportunity to see marmots, chamois and other typical Alpine animals close up. Some marked

footpaths through the animal park are wheelchair- and pushchair-friendly.

White-Water Sports

Cham' Aventure (☎ 04 50 53 55 70; www.cham-aventure.com; 190 place de l'Église), with an office inside the Maison de la Montagne, organises canyoning (half-/full day €64/98 per person), rafting (€36/130 for two hours/day) and hydrospeed (€47 for two hours) on Chamonix' River Arve and the Dora Baltea in neighbouring Italy (an hour's drive). Most of these activities are unsuitable for children under 10, sometimes even 13.

Chamonix guide companies (p531) arrange canyoning, as does **Oxo MontBlanc Canyoning** (☎ 06 77 88 24 50; www.canyoning-chamonix.com; 44 chemin de l'Ordon), a smaller set-up that offers some excellent expeditions.

Summer Luge

The highlight of the **Parc de Loisirs de Chamonix** (☎ 04 50 53 08 97; www.planards.com, in French; ☎ 2-6pm Sat & Sun Apr, May & Oct, 2-6pm daily Jun & Sep, 10am-7.30pm daily Jul & Aug), the **summer luge track** (luge d'été; 1/6 descents €5/25, 1/1½hr €12.50/15), winds through trees at an electrifying speed near the chairlift in Les Planards. Kids under six ride for free with an adult. Other activities for kidding around include trampolines, electric cars, a forest-adventure obstacle course and funfair rides.

Cycling

Lower-altitude trails like the Petit Balcon Sud (250m) from Argentière to Servoz are perfect for biking; for bike rental see p538. Most outdoor-activity specialists arrange guided mountain-biking expeditions.

Paragliding

The sky above Chamonix is often dotted with paragliders wheeling down from the snowy heights. Tandem flights from Planpraz (elevation 2000m) cost €90 per person (€220 from the Aiguille du Midi). Paragliding schools include **Summits** (☎ 04 50 53 50 14, 06 84 01 26 00; www.summits.fr; 27 allée du Savoy) and **Les Ailes du Mont Blanc** (☎ 04 50 53 96 72, 06 20 46 55 57; www.lesailesdu montblanc.com; 24 av de la Plagne).

Ice Skating, Swimming et al

The **ice-skating rink** (☎ 04 50 53 12 36; carte d'hôte adult/child €4.80/2.85, skate rental €3.40; ☎ 2-5pm Thu-Tue, 2-5pm & 9-11pm Wed, high season only) provides skiing alternatives when the weather packs up, as do

activities offered at the **Centre Sportif Richard Bozon** (☎ 04 50 53 23 70; http://sports.chamonix.com; 214 av de la Plage), a sports complex with indoor and outdoor **swimming pools** (carte d'hôte adult/child €4.80/2.85; ☎ noon-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 2-7.30pm Sat & Sun), **sauna and hammam** (incl pool & gym €14.50), **climbing wall** (€4.20), **squash** (€8) and **tennis courts** (per hr €14.50). Gentlemen, the French have a penchant for tiny speedos – you can buy one there if all you have is trunks.

Festivals & Events

The two-day **Fête des Guides** in mid-August sees Chamonix' illustrious Compagnie des Guides welcome new members (see boxed text, p532) and honour lost ones with a dramatic son et lumière, fireworks, concerts and mountaineering displays.

Sleeping

Most establishments close in May and November. The tourist office-based **Centrale de Réservation** (Central Booking Office; ☎ 04 50 53 23 33; www.chamonix.com) accepts reservations by telephone or online. In high season many hotels, hostels and *refuges* only take weekly bookings or half-board deals.

BUDGET

Chamonix sports a dozen campsites, open May or June to September or October. In summer, the **Grand Hôtel du Montenvers** (see boxed text, p536), dramatically perched at the foot of a glacier, has an atmospheric *refuge*-style dormitory.

Les Deux Glaciers (☎ 04 50 53 15 84; les2glaciers.com; 80 rte des Tissières; 2-adults tent pitch €14.30; ☎ mid-Dec-mid-Nov) The only campsite to stay open almost all year (it has heated bungalows for rent), the Two Glaciers sits at the foot of its namesakes in Les Bossons, 3km south of Chamonix. Ride the train to Les Bossons, or the Chamonix bus to the Tremplin-le-Mont stop.

Gîte Le Vagabond (☎ 04 50 53 15 43; www.gite vagabond.com; 365 av Ravanel-le-Rouge; dm €16.80, with breakfast/half-board €19.40/38.60; ☎ reception 8-10am & 4.30-10pm; ☎ ☒) This legendary bunkhouse, where cool dudes free-ride by day and eat, drink and party by night, is run and populated almost exclusively with Brits. Find Chamonix' hippest hostelry in a 150-year-old stagecoach inn on the edge of town. Beds are in four- or six-person dorms.

Auberge de Jeunesse Chamonix (☎ 04 50 53 14 52; www.fuaj.org; 127 montée Jacques Balmat; dm incl sheets &

breakfast €18, half-board €27.80; ☎ reception 8am-noon, 5-7.30pm & 8.30-10pm Dec-May & Jun-Sep) A very FUAJ (Fédération Unie des Auberges de Jeunesse) establishment: bright, spacious, well run, with impeccable two- to six-bed dorms. The only downside is that it is 2km south of Chamonix in Les Pélerins. Take the Chamonix-Les Houches bus line and get off in Les Pélerins d'en Haut (in front of the hostel). There's no kitchen but bargain half-board deals.

Hôtel El Paso (☎ 04 50 53 64 20; www.cantina.fr; 37 impasse des Rhododendrons; s/d/tr/q from €25/35/50/60, with shower & toilet from €35/45/55/65) The accommodation leg of nightclub Cantina Club (p537), rooms at El Paso are basic but clean and superconvenient for Tex-Mex food and party downstairs. The upshot is that if you'd like to sleep, you'll have to invest in ear plugs.

Le Vert Hôtel (☎ 04 50 53 13 58; www.verthotel.com; 964 route des Gaillands; low season s/d/tr/q from €25/40/60/75, high season €62/78/108/122) Self-proclaimed 'Chamonix' house of fun, sports and creativity', this hotel 2km out of town takes itself almost too seriously. Rooms are unremarkable (some with bathroom cabins the size of an aeroplane toilet), but what people really come for is the all-happening bar: polished, ultrahip, and a regular venue for DJs and live music.

Hôtel Les Crêtes Blanches (☎ 04 50 53 05 62; www.cretes-blanches.com; 16 impasse du Gényépy; s/d/tr/chalet summer from €50/56/78/105, winter from €62/76/96/119) The good news? This tip-top establishment in the centre of Chamonix with crisp, modern bedrooms is excellent value for money. The bad news? Student tour operator STA has been quick to spot the bargain and books much of the hotel in advance. There is also a funky five-person chalet in the courtyard with a self-catering kitchen.

Hôtel Gustavia (☎ 04 50 53 00 31; www.hotel-gustavia.com; 272 av Michel Croz; s/d/tr from €50/80/111) Going strong since 1890, this charming manor-house hotel with bottle-green wooden shutters and wrought-iron balconies oozes soul. Rooms are elegant with their denim-coloured duvets and amber wood furnishings, and the clientele is young and fun, thanks partly to Chambre Neuf (p537) – its stylish après-ski bar.

Hôtel Richemond (☎ 04 50 53 08 85; www.richemond.fr; 228 rue du Docteur Paccard; s incl breakfast €58-66, d €91-106, tr €110-133, q €123-148) Run by the same family since 1914, Hôtel Richemond has had a tumultuous history: WWII saw the hotel taken over by the Gestapo (who painted a huge red cross on the roof to avoid it getting bombed). English and American prisoners were kept

on the 5th floor. Nowadays it's still the same grand building, with imposing volumes and thick carpets (and very flowery wallpaper), but the bathrooms and corridors look like they've seen better days.

MIDRANGE

Hôtel Faucigny (☎ 04 50 53 01 17; www.hotel faucigny-chamonix.com; 118 place de l'Église; d/tr/q low season €68/82/98, high season €79/93/112; ☎ mid-May–mid-Nov & mid-Dec–mid-Apr; ☎) This tidy hotel has been carefully and cleverly renovated by owners Jacqueline and Guy Écochard to optimise space and comfort (made-to-measure furniture, heating mirrors etc) in a charming old building. There is a lovely flower-decked terrace at the front with vertigo-inducing views of Mont Blanc.

Hôtel Gourmets & Italy (☎ 04 50 53 01 38; www.hotelgourmets-chamonix.com; 96 rue du Lyret; d €78-99, tr €104-150; ☎) One of Chamonix' most understated addresses: rooms are fairly neutral in beige but comfortable, with great designer bathrooms. The cosy downstairs lounge is perfect to read the paper or use the wi-fi to catch up on emails. You can also wind down in the sauna or swim in the pool in summer, with unrivalled Mont Blanc views to gawp at.

Hameau Albert Ter (☎ 04 50 53 05 09; www.hameau.albert.fr; 38 rte du Bouchet; d summer/winter from €125/160; ☎ ☎) Five generations of Carriers have run this exquisite hotel – a hamlet of traditional Savoyard farms and wooden chalets turned exclusive resort thanks to an unusual mix of ultramodern and period furniture and no end of luxurious comforts (on-site spa, huge plasma-screen TV etc).

TOP END

Grand Hôtel Les Alpes (☎ 04 50 55 37 80; www.grandhoteldesalpes.com; 89 rue du Docteur Paccard; d low/high season from €140/330; ☎ mid-Dec–mid-Apr, mid-Jun–Sep; ☎ ☎ ☎) Dating from 1840, this grand old dame goes down in the chronicles of Chamonix history as one of the resort's first and finest. What distinguishes this hotel from other high-end places, however, is its friendliness: in winter, a scrumptious cake buffet greets skiers back from the slopes, and evenings start off with a similar spread of nibbles, the perfect opportunity for people to mingle.

Clubhouse (☎ 04 50 90 96 56; www.clubhouse.fr; 74 promenade des Sonnaillies; d 3-nights full-board from €865; ☎ Dec-Sep; ☎) Provocatively decadent, the Clubhouse lures a moneyed set into its luxurious lair – Chamonix' only remaining

A LOFTY LUNCH

Feast on fine fodder and even finer mountain views at these high-altitude favourites:

Grand Hôtel du Montenvers (☎ 04 50 53 87 70; 35 place de la Mer de Glace; half-board per person dm/d €38.50/54.40, dm/d per person with breakfast €23.60/38.50, menus €8-10; ☞ hotel Jul & Aug, restaurant late Dec–mid-Oct) Ride the red mountain train up to Montenvers and dine in Alpine splendour at the foot of the Alps' second-largest glacier. The place dates back to 1880 and has kept many of its original features (parquet floors, enormous fireplace).

Le 3842 (☎ 04 50 55 82 23; Aiguille du Midi; menu €38, mains €8-10; ☞ restaurant mid-Jun–mid-Sep, snack bar all year) Stylish summit dining and drinking at the top of the Aiguille du Midi in what claims to be Europe's highest café. Make sure you don't gawp at the view with your mouth full.

La Crèmerie du Glacier (☎ 04 50 54 07 52; 766 chemin de la Glacière; mains €6-15) Crazy as it sounds for a piste restaurant, you might have to book to get a chance to bite into La Crèmerie's world-famous *croûtes au fromage* (chunky slices of toasted bread topped with melted cheese). Ski to it with the red Pierre à Ric piste in Les Grands Montets.

Le Panoramic (☎ 04 50 53 44 11; Le Brévent; menus from €15; ☞ mid-Dec–Apr & Jun-Sep) Views of Mont Blanc are included in the menu of cheeses, cured meats and BBQ fare. For something a little more frugal, a *vin chaud* (hot mulled wine) at the terrace will do just fine.

art-deco mansion, dating from 1927, a cross between a James Bond movie set and a retro Alpine chalet. The seven quirky rooms scream design (from the dirty-weekend suite to the big kids' – 30-something boys – bunk rooms). Members only (membership €150 for a year), and stays are restricted to three, four or six nights. All rates are full-board.

Eating

Most restaurants are open seven days a week in season but have reduced hours out of season. Check ahead to check.

Mojo's (21 place Balmat; sandwich €5-6; ☞ 9am-8pm)

The latest arrival on the tasty sandwich scene, Mojo has also bagged the best location in town: smack bang on the main square, with views of Le Brévent to the right, a Mont Blanc full-frontal straight ahead and l'Aiguille du Midi to your left. *Bon appétit*.

Annapurna (☎ 04 50 55 81 39; 62 av Ravel-le-Rouge; mains €10-15; ☞ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun, dinner Tue) Named after the 8000m-plus Himalayan mountain first summited by French Alpine climbers in 1950, this mountain restaurant doesn't disappoint. The menu contains all the regulars (tandoori, biriani, korma etc), which you can also order as takeaway.

Casa Valério (☎ 04 50 55 93 40; 88 rue du Lyret; mains €10-20; ☞ lunch & dinner, closes at 2am) One of Chamonix' most popular eateries, this restaurant doubles up as a happening hang-out in the evenings when young 'seasonaires' crowd the front of the restaurant to devour pasta or pizza by the bar counter.

Le Sanjon (☎ 04 50 53 56 44; 5 av Ravel-le-Rouge; menus €12-35; ☞ lunch & dinner) The usual cheese overload on the menu, with the slightly more unusual additions of *Potée Savoyarde* (*dîot* sausage, potatoes, onions and, yes, cheese) and *Moëlleux Savoyard* (cheese cooked in pine-tree bark with a dash of Génépi for good measure and served with potatoes and smoked ham).

Le Bistrot (☎ 04 50 53 57 64; www.lebistrotchamonix.com; 151 av de l'Aiguille du Midi; lunch menu €17, dinner menus €42 & €65; ☞ lunch & dinner) Chamonix' very own gastronomic wonder, this is a real foodie's place where chef Mickey's prowess will bowl over even the most discerning crowd. The warm chocolate macaroon with a raspberry and red pepper coulis is out of this world.

Munchie (☎ 04 50 53 45 41; 87 rue des Moulins; mains €17-25; ☞ dinner Mon-Sun) Think fusion at this trendy hang-out with great pan-Asian food. Mains include sashimi, sushi, laksa, fish cakes and spare ribs, all delicious and beautifully presented. It is, predictably, very popular so book if you can.

Le Panier des Quatre Saisons (☎ 04 50 53 98 77; 24 Galerie Blanc Neige, rue du Dr Paccard; mains €20-25; ☞ dinner Thu, lunch & dinner Fri-Sun & Tue Dec-May & mid-Jun–Oct) Incredibly (for France), this little place offers veggie options that are actually worth having. The menu changes every season and always delivers. Don't let its location at the back of a somewhat drab shopping mall put you off.

L'Impossible (☎ 04 50 53 20 36; 9 chemin du Cry; mains €20-30; ☞ lunch & dinner daily Dec-Apr, Jul & Aug) In a barn dating back to 1754 near the Aiguille du Midi cable car, this stunning rustic-chic

eating space – lots of wood, warm lighting, gilded gold frames and period paintings – serves quintessential French cuisine with a modern twist.

SELF-CATERING

A food market fills place du Mont Blanc on Saturday morning.

Camp de Base (☎ 04 50 18 47 76; 107 rue des Moulins; ☎ 3-8pm) For those in need of a PG Tips cup of tea or chocolate digestive biscuits, an English grocery shop, combined with internet café (per hour €5).

Le Refuge Payot (☎ 04 50 53 18 71; www.refugepayot.com; 166 rue Joseph Vallot) Local produce: cheese, smoked and air-dried meats, sausages, wine, honey etc.

Super U (117 rue Joseph Vallot) A supermarket.

Drinking

Chamonix nightlife rocks. In the centre, quaint old riverside rue des Moulins touts a line-up of drinking holes. **Bar'd Up** (☎ 04 50 53 91 33; 123 rue des Moulins; ☎ 4.30pm-2am) and **Le Privilège** (☎ 06 33 76 86 00; 26 rue des Moulins; ☎ 4pm-2am) are still going strong. Elsewhere, young 'n' fun **Bar Le Vagabond**, at Gîte Le Vagabond (p534), and Le Vert Hôtel's **bar** (p535) are worth checking out. Online, go to www.lepetitcanardchx.com.

Many of these après-ski joints serve grub alongside grog:

Bistrot des Sports (☎ 04 50 33 00 46; 182 rue Joseph Vallot; ☎ 11am-midnight) This inconspicuous brasserie is steeped in history: an old meeting place for muleteers and guides on their way up or down the mountain, it was bought by legendary mountaineer and explorer Roger Frison-Roche in 1934. It's changed hands since but the place has kept an undeniable charm and a certain authenticity. The street terrace is perfect for a mellow drink.

Chambre Neuf (☎ 04 50 55 89 81; 272 av Michel Croz; ☎ 8pm-1am) Particularly popular with Scandinavians, this is one of the liveliest party places in Chamonix, with raucous après-ski drinking and conversations about monster jumps, epic off-pistes and, like, totally mental, man, at every table.

Elevation 1904 (☎ 04 50 53 00 52; 259 av Michel Croz; ☎ 7pm-2am) Alpine paraphernalia lines the walls of this merry bet by the train station. The snack shack outside dishes out panini and salads more or less all day. Inside, words flow as much as the drinks late into the night.

ourpick MBC (☎ 04 50 53 61 59; www.mbchx.com; 350 rte du Bouchet; ☎ 4pm-2am) This trendy micro-

brewery run by four Canadians is fab. Be it with their burger, cheesecake of the week, live music or amazing locally brewed and named beers (Blonde de Chamonix, Stout des Drus, Blanche des Guides etc), MBC really delivers.

Monkey Bar (☎ 04 50 96 64 34; 81 place Edmond Desaillood; ☎ 1pm-2am) Popular with locals (foreign staff have actually made an effort to speak French) and visitors alike, Monkey has a slight retro feel with its Brooklyn-style brick wall and fairy lights. It's an easygoing place for a fun but mellow evening.

La Terrasse (☎ 04 50 53 09 95; www.laterrassechamonix.com; 43 place Balmat; ☎ 4pm-2am) Race the clock for cheap drinks (5pm €5, 6pm €6 etc) and take position on the strategically placed balcony and terrace on Chamonix' main square. There's live music (of varying quality) every night of the week.

Le ToF (☎ 04 50 53 45 28; 158 place Edmond Desaillood; ☎ 10pm-4am) Chamonix' gay scene struts its stuff in the town's only gay bar and disco. Sip aperitifs, munch tapas and dance to house, new wave and retro in a trendy lounge atmosphere.

Office (☎ 04 50 54 15 46; www.the-office-bar.eu; 274 rue Charlet Stratton, Argentière; ☎ 3pm-2am) Sunday roast, English footie and a load of Brits, this is Argentière's party headquarters. Wi-fi throughout.

Entertainment

NIGHTCLUBS

Le Garage (☎ 04 50 53 64 49; 200 av de l'Aiguille du Midi; ☎ 1am-4am) An electro-house club that opens for a short and sweet three hours of pumping beats every night.

Cantina Club (☎ 04 50 53 83 80; www.cantina.fr; 37 impasse des Rhododendrons; ☎ 7pm-3am) Deep house, Afrobeat, drum and bass, breakfast and hip hop are the varied DJ sounds pumped out at this happening underground club. The street-level restaurant cooks up Tex-Mex food from 7pm.

CINEMA

Films are shown in English at **Cinéma Vox** (☎ 04 50 53 03 39; cour Bartavel; adult/student €7.50/6.50). Check out the program at www.chamonix.com.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From **Chamonix bus station** (☎ 04 50 53 01 15; www.altibus.com; ☎ 6.45-10.30am & 1.25-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 6.45-11am Sat & Sun), located next to the train station,

THE GREEN CARD

Chamonix has long battled with air-pollution problems: the valley is a major road axis between France and Italy, and with 2000m-plus summits on either side, exhaust fumes just stagnate above Chamonix. In a bid to encourage locals and visitors to leave the car at home, the Chamonix valley now offers free public transport. All you have to do is get a **carte d'hôte** from your hotel or campsite and on you go for freeeeee!

The card also offers reductions for a number of activities. Details are listed on the card leaflet.

there are buses to/from Geneva airport and bus station (one way/return €35/55, 1½ to two hours, three daily) and Courmayeur (one way/return €11/18, 45 minutes, two to three daily). Advanced booking is required for both.

CAR

Approaching Chamonix from Italy, you arrive via the 11.6km-long **Tunnel de Mont Blanc** (www.atmb.net; toll one-way/return €32.30/40.30), which enters town in the southern suburb of Les Pélerin. From France, the A40 motorway – the Autoroute Blanche – hooks up with the Chamonix-bound N205, dual carriageway for the last leg.

Parking in town can be tricky although **Parking du Mont-Blanc** (☎ 04 50 53 65 71; place du Mont Blanc; 1st hr free, then per hr/24hr/week €2/9.50/35) is a reliable car park. Other car parks are scattered along rte du Bouchet, around rue des Allobroges and in Chamonix Sud.

Car-rental companies include **Europcar** (☎ 04 50 53 63 40; 36 place de la Gare).

TRAIN

From Chamonix–Mont Blanc **train station** (☎ 04 50 53 12 98; place de la Gare) the Mont Blanc Express narrow-gauge train trundles from the St-Gervais–Le Fayet station, 23km west of Chamonix, to Martigny, 42km northeast of Chamonix in Switzerland, stopping en route in Les Houches, Chamonix and Argentière. There are nine to 12 return trips between Chamonix and St-Gervais (€9.10, 40 minutes). Travelling between Servoz and Vallorcine is free with the *carte d'hôte* (see boxed text, above).

From St-Gervais–Le Fayet, there are trains to most major French cities (see opposite).

Getting Around

BICYCLE

Le Grand Bi Cycles (☎ 04 50 53 14 16; 240 rte du Bouchet; ☎ 9am–7pm Jul & Aug, 9am–7pm Tue–Sun Sep–Jun, closed Nov) rents out bikes for €25 a day and can advise you on where to go.

BUS

Local bus transport is handled by **Chamonix Bus** (☎ 04 50 53 05 55; www.chamonix-bus.com; 591 promenade Marie-Paradis; ☎ 7am–7pm winter, 8am–noon & 2–7pm Jun–Aug).

From mid-December to the end of April lines to the ski lifts and central car parks depart every 10 minutes or so between 7am and 7pm (town-centre shuttles 8.30am to 6.30pm). All buses are free with the *carte d'hôte* scheme (see the boxed text, left), except the Chamonix–Nuit night buses linking Chamonix with Argentière and Les Houches (last departures from Chamonix 11.30pm or midnight; €2).

TAXI

There's a **taxi stand** (☎ 04 50 53 13 94) outside the train station. Minibuses for two to eight people are available from **Chamonix Transfer** (☎ 06 07 67 88 85, 06 62 05 57 38; www.chamonix-transfer.com, in French).

MEGÈVE & ST-GERVAIS

A chic ski village developed in the 1920s for a French baroness disappointed with Switzerland's crowded St-Moritz, **Megève** (population 3878, elevation 1113m) looks almost too perfect to be true: horse-drawn sledges, exquisitely arranged boutique windows and carefully grown pot plants spill into medieval-style streets. In winter it attracts a rather snobby, moneyed crowd, but the attitude is more laid-back in summer.

Sitting snug below Mont Blanc, 36km southwest of Chamonix, Megève's neighbour is **St-Gervais-les-Bains** (better known as simply St-Gervais, population 5400, elevation 850m), another picture-postcard winter and summer resort linked to Chamonix by the legendary Mont Blanc Express.

Information

Megève Tourist Office (☎ 04 50 21 27 28; www.megeve.com; 70 rue de Monseigneur Conseil; ☎ 9am–7pm daily mid-Dec–mid-Apr, Jul & Aug, 9am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm Mon–Sat Sep–mid-Dec & mid-Apr–Jun)

St-Gervais Tourist Office (☎ 04 50 47 76 08; www.st-gervais.net; 115 av Mont Paccard; ☎ 9am–noon &

2-7pm daily mid-Dec–mid-Apr, Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2-6pm Mon–Fri Sep–mid-Dec & mid-Apr–Jun)

Activities

Skiing is the winter biggie, with Megève downhill split into three separate areas: Mont d'Arbois-Princesse (linked to St-Gervais), Jaillet-Combloux and Rochebrune-Côte 2000. Ski passes for the 445km of piste served by 108 lifts are sold online at **SAEM** (www.skimegeve.com, in French); a one-/six-day pass covering the entire area costs €34.50/166 but cheaper passes valid for one area are available.

Megève's **ESF** (☎ 04 50 21 00 97; www.megeve-ski.com) and **Compagnie des Guides et Accompagnateurs** (☎ 04 50 21 55 11; www.guides-megeve.com) are inside the **Maison de la Montagne** (176 rue de la Poste). The latter organises off-piste skiing, heli-skiing, ice climbing, rock climbing and paragliding.

Summer hiking trails in the Bettex, Mont d'Arbois and Mont Joly areas are accessible from both villages. Mountain biking is also popular; some of the best terrain is found along marked trails between Val d'Arly, Mont Blanc and Beaufortain. **Accro'bike** (☎ 04 50 47 76 77; 78 impasse Bédière) in St-Gervais runs guided biking expeditions (from €35).

For staggering mountain views with no legwork, hop aboard France's highest train. The **Tramway du Mont Blanc** (☎ 04 50 47 51 83; rue de la Gare; adult/4-15yr/family return €18/14/54; ☎ mid-Dec–mid-Apr, Jul & Aug) has laboured up to Bellevue (1800m) from St-Gervais–Le Fayet in winter and further up to the Nid d'Aigle (Eagle's Nest) at 2380m in summer since 1913.

Sleeping & Eating

Both tourist offices run an **accommodation service** Megève (☎ 04 50 21 29 52); St-Gervais (☎ 04 50 47 76 08).

Alp Hôtel (☎ 04 50 21 07 58; www.alp-hotel.fr; 434 rte de Rochebrune; d €55-100) This two-star chalet with 20 tidy if a little old-fashioned rooms near the Rochebrune cable car is the cheapest you'll get in pricey Megève. Count another €8 for a wholesome *petit déjeuner* (breakfast) each morning.

Au Coeur de Megève (☎ 04 50 21 25 30; www.hotel-megeve.com; 44 rue Charles Feige; d mid-/high season from €148/164, Jul & Aug from €100) For a little Alpine fantasy at just about affordable prices, this is a very nice option. Bang-slap in pedestrian Megève, this three-generation family affair has delightful rooms fragrant with candles and woodwax, lined with flowered balconies.

Les Fermes de Marie (☎ 04 50 93 03 10; www.fermesdemarie.com; chemin de Riantte Colline; d low/mid-/high season from €177/250/396; ☎ mid-Dec–mid-Apr, Jul & Aug; ☎ ☎) One of the most renowned Alpine spa resorts, this gorgeous nine-chalet hamlet oozes opulence. Rooms look like they're permanently arranged for a glossy-magazine photo shoot, and the trio of restaurants within the hotel – formal dining room, rotisserie specialising in roast meats, and fondue-driven bistro – pleases the most demanding of palates.

L'Igloo (☎ 04 50 93 05 84; www.ligloo.com; 3120 rte du Crêt; mains €5-15; ☎ lunch & dinner mid-Jun–mid-Sep & mid-Dec–mid-Apr) Feast on a fiesta of incredible Mont Blanc mountain views at this high-altitude eating joint plump on the top of Mont d'Arbois (1833m). Ski here or ride the Télécabine du Mont d'Arbois. In summer the Igloo has an open-air swimming pool.

Getting There & Away

From **Megève bus station** (☎ 04 50 21 25 18), there are seven daily services to/from St-Gervais–Le Fayet and Sallanches train stations. In winter, airport shuttles run three times daily to/from Geneva airport (one way/return €40/70, 1½ hours) from both villages.

The closest train station to Megève is in Sallanches, 12km north; for train information in Megève go to the SNCF information desk inside the bus station.

St-Gervais is the main train station for Chamonix and is linked to the latter by the Mont Blanc Express (opposite). Services to/from St-Gervais include several day trains and one night train to/from Paris' Gare d'Austerlitz (€83.10, five hours; overnight train €92.20, 9½ hours), Lyon (€29, 3½ hours), Annecy (€12.70, 1½ hours) and Geneva (€11.40, 1½ hours).

LES PORTES DU SOLEIL

Poetically dubbed 'the Gates of the Sun' (elevation 1000–2466m; www.portesdusoleil.com), this gargantuan ski area – the world's largest – is formed from a chain of villages strung along the French-Swiss border. Some 650km of downhill slopes and cross-country trails criss-cross it, served by 209 ski lifts covered by a single ski pass (one/six days €39/200), or a cheaper, more restricted pass valid for one pocket. In spring and summer mountain-bike enthusiasts revel in 380km of invigorating biking trails, including the 100km-long circular Portes du Soleil tour.

Morzine (population 3000, elevation 1000m) – the best known of the 12 interconnected ski

resorts – retains a smidgen of traditional Alpine village atmosphere. It's frantically busy in winter but summer sees the pace slow down as enchanting visits to Alpine cheese dairies and traditional slate workshops kick in. For local know-how on summer activities – hiking, biking, climbing, canyoning and paragliding – contact the **Bureau des Guides** (☎ 04 50 75 96 65; www.bureaudeguides.net), which can advise on mountain-bike hire and Morzine's heart-stopping 3300m-long **bike descent** (free; ☞ Jun-Sep) from the top of the Plénéty cable car (one/10 ascents €4.50/35). Accommodation can be booked through **Morzine Réservation** (☎ 04 50 79 11 57; www.resa-morzine.com) inside the **tourist office** (☎ 04 50 74 72 72; www.morzine-avoriaz.com; place de la Crusaz).

our pick **Farmhouse** (☎ 04 50 79 08 26; www.thefarmhouse.fr; Morzine; d with breakfast €94-370, dinner €40) is Morzine's oldest and loveliest building, a 1771 farmhouse run for the past 17 years by the charming Dorrien Ricardo. The Farmhouse is your quintessential wood-beamed manor house. Five rooms (some with Victorian-style bathrooms to die for, and one room called the Cell which was indeed, once upon a time, Morzine's only prison cell) are in the main house, and a trio of cottages (including the old *mazot*, or miniature mountain chalet, where the family Bible and deeds of the house would have been stored) sit in the lovely grounds. Dining – open to nonguests too and strictly around one huge long table – is a lavish affair and very much an experience in itself.

Chic but small **Avoriaz** (elevation 1800m), purpose-built a few kilometres up the valley atop a rock, appeals for its no-cars policy. Horse-drawn sleighs piled high with luggage romantically ferry new arrivals – wealthy families in the main – to and from the snowy village centre where wacky 1960s mimetic architecture gets away with an 'avant-garde' tag. The place is so hip that French chef Christophe Leroy has opened a restaurant at **Hôtel des Dromonts** (☎ 04 94 97 91 91; www.christophe-leroy.com, in French; place des Dromonts; d from €199, full board extra €29; ☞ mid-Dec–mid-Apr; ☐). The hotel looks a little outdated with its 1970s rendering and thinning carpets, but definitely edgy with its weird volumes and minimalist decor.

With just three other hotels, accommodation in Avoriaz is limited to self-catering studios and apartments, which can be booked through the **tourist office** (☎ 04 50 74 02 11; www.avoriaz.com; place Centrale). Motorists unload in bays

close to the resort but must park in car parks (€7/43 per day/week) a short walk away.

Arriving by road via Cluses you hit **Les Gets** (population 1300, elevation 1172m) – smaller, less pretentious than Morzine and Avoriaz, and a good deal for families and those looking to save a bob. Its **tourist office** (☎ 04 50 75 80 80; www.lesgets.com; place de la Mairie) and **accommodation service** (☎ 04 50 75 80 51; reservations@lesgets.com) can point you in the right direction. For ski-pass information see www.sagets.fr.

Should scrimping not be your priority, check into spa-clad **Ferme de Montagne** (☎ 04 50 75 36 79; www.fermedemontagne.com; full board per person per week €1450-2100; ☞ Jun-Sep & Nov-Apr), an exclusive five-star Savoyard farmhouse labelled one of Europe's top boutique ski hotels by glossy-map critics.

Getting There & Away

Free shuttle buses serve the lifts of Télécabine Super Morzine, Télécabine du Plénéty and Téléphérique Avoriaz.

During the ski season, Morzine (one way/return €33.50/55.50), Avoriaz (€37/63) and Les Gets (€30.50/51) are linked by bus to Geneva airport, 50km-odd west. From Morzine there are regular **SAT buses** (☎ 04 50 79 17 73) to Les Gets and Avoriaz. There are also buses from Morzine to its closest train stations: Thonon-les-Bains (34km north) and Cluses (31km south).

THONON-LES-BAINS

pop 30,700 / elevation 430m

Just across the water from the Swiss city of Lausanne on the French side of Lake Geneva (Lac Léman), Thonon-les-Bains – a fashionable spa town during the belle époque – sits on a bluff above the lake. Winter is deathly dull, but its summer lake cruises and lakeside strolls appeal.

A 230m-long **funicular railway** (☎ 04 50 71 21 54; one way/return €1/1.80; ☞ 8am-11pm Jul & Aug, 8am-9pm mid-Apr–Jun & Sep, 8am-12.30pm & 1.30pm-6.30pm Mon-Sat & 2-6pm Sun Oct-Mar) links the upper town and **tourist office** (☎ 04 50 71 55 55; www.thononlesbains.com; place du Marché; ☞ 9am-12.15pm & 1.45-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-12.15pm & 1.45-6.30pm Sat Sep-Jun, 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat Jul & Aug) with the marina. Buy boat tickets (www.cgn.ch) at the lakeside **tourist office chalet** (☎ 04 50 26 19 94; ☞ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Jul & Aug).

You can fill your water bottle with Thonon mineral water for free at the mosaic-lined

TAKING THE WATERS

Trot 9km east from Thonon along Europe's largest Alpine lake and you hit **Évian-les-Bains** (population 7800), the spa town from which that world-famous mineral water originates. Dubbed the 'Pearl of Lake Geneva', lakeside Évian was a favourite country retreat of the dukes of Savoy, razed during the Wars of Religion and reinvented as a luxury spa resort in the 18th century when wallowing in tubs of mineral water was all the rage. Wallowing in a tub of Évian can still be done at **Les Thermes Évian** (☎ 04 50 75 02 30; www.lesthermesevian.com; place de la Libération; 🕒 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat), although it is the bottled mineral water that accounts for the biggest chunk of the town's economy. The water takes 15 years to trickle down through the Chablais Mountains, gathering minerals en route, before emerging at a constant temperature of 11.4°C. It was 'discovered' in 1790 and has been bottled since 1826.

Tours (☎ 04 50 26 80 29; visits-usine-evian@danone.com; admission free, transport €2; 🕒 Jun-Sep) of the Évian bottling plant, on an industrial estate 5km out of town, can be arranged through the factory. The **tourist office** (☎ 04 50 75 04 26; www.eviantourism.com; place d'Allinges) can also help.

Fontaine de la Versoie in the Parc Thermal de Thonon. Locals do it too by the jerrycan.

Château de Ripaille (☎ 04 50 26 64 44; www.ripaille.fr, in French; 1hr guided tour €6; 🕒 1-5 tours daily Feb-Nov, grounds 10am-7pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, 10am-4.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr), 1km east along quai de Ripaille, is a turreted castle rebuilt in the 19th century on the site of its 15th-century ancestor. It has vineyards, a garden for summer dining (mid-June to mid-September) and forested grounds to explore.

The beautiful fortified medieval village of **Yvoire**, 16km west of Thonon on the shores of Lake Geneva, makes for a great day trip. A riot of cob houses and geranium-lined streets, you can get familiar with its 700-year history on a 1½-hour **guided tour** (€5.50; 🕒 Jul & Aug) organised by the **tourist office** (☎ 04 50 72 80 21; www.yvoiretourism.com).

The garden-clad **Hôtel à l'Ombre des Marronniers** (☎ 04 50 71 26 18; www.hotellesmarronniers.com, in French; 17 place de Crête; d from €50) is an in-town sleeping option, but out-of-town **La Ferme du Château** (☎ 04 50 26 46 68; www.lafermedu.chateau.com; Hameau de Maugny; d €85; 🕒 📶), 10km inland in Draillant, is way more charming. Sophie and Didier run the *chambre d'hôte* in a renovated 18th-century stone Savoyard farm and cook up excellent evening meals (€25 with wine).

From **Thonon bus station** (place des Arts), **SAT** (☎ 04 50 71 00 88) runs regular buses to/from Évian-les-Bains (€1.50, 30 minutes) and into the Chablais Mountains, including to Morzine (€11, one hour). The **train station** (place de la Gare) is southwest of place des Arts, the main square. Trains run to/from Geneva (€6.90, one hour) direct or via Annemasse (€5.50, 30 minutes).

ANNECY

pop 51,000 / elevation 448m

As you stroll along the shores of shimmering Lac d'Anancy, it seems impossible to think that Anancy's biggest asset very nearly became its downfall in the 1950s: a reeking, insalubrious mess, the lake was an open-air sewer for every town and village in the vicinity. Public health issues aside, the city quickly realised that unless it cleaned up its act, its burgeoning tourism would disappear.

Forward 60 years and Lac d'Anancy is now one of the purest in the world, receiving only rainwater, spring water and mountain streams thanks to an extensive decontamination plan. Swimming in the lake surrounded by snowy mountains really is an Alpine highlight, as is strolling in the warren of geranium-lined medieval streets of Vieil Anancy. So much so in fact that Anancy gets a whopping two million visitors a year, the bulk of it in summer. Luckily there is plenty to do away from the crowds, with walking and cycling galore in the surrounding mountains.

Orientation

The train and bus stations are about 500m northwest of Vieil Anancy, also called the Vieille Ville (Old Town), which is huddled around the River Thiou (split into Canal du Thiou to the south and Canal du Vassé to the north). The town centre is between the post office and the purpose-built shopping mall, Centre Bonlieu, near the shores of Lac d'Anancy.

Anancy-le-Vieux, a primarily residential quarter not to be confused with Vieil Anancy, straddles the lake's north.

Information

EMERGENCY

Hospital (☎ 04 50 88 33 33; 1 av de Trésun)

Police Station (☎ 04 50 52 32 00; 15 rue des Marquisats)

INTERNET ACCESS

Larache Télécom (☎ 04 50 33 08 95; 3 rue de l'Industrie; per 15min/1hr €1/3; ☎ 9am-11pm)

Planète Telecom (☎ 04 50 33 92 60; 4 rue Jean Jaurès; per hr €3; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm)

LAUNDRY

Lav'Confort Express (6 rue de la Gare; ☎ 7am-9pm)

MONEY

Crédit Lyonnais (1 rue Jean Jaurès, Centre Bonlieu)

POST

Post Office (4bis rue des Glières)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 50 45 00 33; www.lac-annecy.com; 1 rue Jean Jaurès, Centre Bonlieu; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.45-6pm Mon-Sat mid-Sep-mid-May, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat mid-May-mid-Sep, 10am-1pm Sun Mar-May)

Sights & Activities

Wandering around the Vieille Ville and the lakefront is the essence of Annecy. Just east, behind the Hôtel de Ville, are the **Jardins de l'Europe**, linked to popular park **Champ de Mars** by the poetic iron arch of **Pont des Amours** (Lovers' Bridge).

VIILLE VILLE

With labyrinthine narrow streets and colonnaded passageways, the old town retains much of its 17th-century appearance. On the central island, imposing **Palais de l'Isle** (☎ 04 50 33 87 30; 3 passage de l'Île; adult/concession €3.40/1, 1st Sun of month Oct-May free; ☎ 10.30am-6pm daily Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Wed-Mon Oct-May) was a prison, but now hosts local-history displays. A combined ticket covering the palace and the Musée Château costs €6.20.

CHÂTEAU D'ANNECY

In the 13th- to 16th-century castle above town, the eclectic **Musée Château** (☎ 04 50 33 87 30; adult/concession €4.80/2; ☎ 10.30am-6pm Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Wed-Mon Oct-May) explores traditional Savoyard art, crafts and Alpine natural history.

SUNBATHING & SWIMMING

Parks and grassy areas in which to picnic and sunbathe line the lakefront. Public beach **Plage d'Annecy-le-Vieux** (admission free; ☎ Jul & Aug) is 1km east of Champ de Mars. Closer to town, privately run **Plage Impérial** (admission €3.50; ☎ Jul & Aug) slumbers in the shade of the elegant pre-WWI **Impérial Palace**.

Plage des Marquisats (admission free; ☎ Jul & Aug) is 1km south of the Vieille Ville along rue des Marquisats. Located next door is a water-sports centre, the **Piscine des Marquisats** (☎ 04 50 33 65 40; 29 rue des Marquisats; ☎ May-Aug), with three outdoor swimming pools (€3.95).

WALKING

A fine stroll goes from the Jardins de l'Europe along quai Bayreuth and quai de la Tournette to the Stade Nautique des Marquisats and beyond. Another excellent walk begins at Champ de Mars and meanders eastwards around the lake towards Annecy-le-Vieux.

Forêt du Crêt du Maure, south of Annecy, has many walking trails, as do **Bout du Lac** (20km from Annecy on the southern tip of the lake) and **Roc de Chère** (10km from town on the eastern shore of the lake); Voyages Crolard buses (see Billetterie Crolard, p546) serve both.

Walking guides and maps, including IGN's excellent *Lac d'Annecy* (No 3431OT; 1:25,000) or *Walks and Treks Lake of Annecy* which details 15 itineraries in the area (€6.50), are sold at the tourist office and neighbouring sports shop, **Go Sport** (Centre Bonlieu).

CYCLING & BLADING

Biking and blading are big, thanks to 46km of cycling tracks – equally popular with roller-bladers – around the lake. The tourist office and rental outlets (p546) have free maps.

The Friday-evening jaunts around town organised by local rollerblading club **Roll'n'Cy** (☎ 06 76 73 47 12; www.roll-n-cy.org, in French; ☎ 8pm Fri Mar-mid-Dec) are fun, free and open to anyone on roller-blades. The club meets on place de la Mairie.

WATER SPORTS

From late March to late October, pedal boats and small motorboats can be hired at several points along the quays of the Canal du Thiou and Canal du Vassé.

From June to September the **Stade Nautique des Marquisats** (31 rue des Marquisats) is an aquatic-activity hub: the **Canoë-Kayak Club d'Annecy**

ANNEY

INFORMATION

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To Plage d'Anney-le-Vieux (500m);
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La Maison de Marc Veyrat (1km);
Mention-St-Bernard (10km);
Roc de Chère Reserve (10km);
Auberge du Père Bise & Talloires (11km).

To Cariole-Kayak Club d'Anney (300m);
Stade Nautique & Piscine des Marquissats (300m);
Plage des Marquissats (300m);
Société des Régates à Voile d'Anney (300m);
Sérier (5km);
Bout du Lac Reserve (16km).

(☎ 04 50 45 03 98) rents kayaks and canoes, and the **Société des Régates à Voile d'Anney** (SRVA; ☎ 04 50 45 48 39; 31 rue des Marquissats) rents sailing boats from €30 for two hours. Nearby, **Anney Plongée** (☎ 04 50 45 40 97; www.anneyplongee.com; 6 rue des Marquissats) rents and sells diving gear and arranges baptism dives.

On the other side of the lake, Station Roller (p546) also rents kayaks (per hour/day €7/20).

Festivals & Events

Highlights include a **Venetian carnival** in February, fireworks over the lake in August

during the **Fête du Lac**, and **Le Retour des Alpes**, a street festival celebrating Savoyard traditions and folklore in October. The night-time streets of Annecy are taken over by street performers during **Les Noctibules** in July.

Tours

From May to October, the tourist office organises **guided tours** (adult/under 12yr €5.70/free) of the Vieille Ville, available in English once a week in July and August. If you're visiting outside the summer months or prefer to explore on your own, the tourist office distributes *Annecy Town Walks*, a leaflet outlining five walks in the centre, with explanation on monuments and the town's history.

Compagnie des Bateaux (☎ 04 50 51 08 40; www.annecy-croisieres.com; 2 place aux Bois; 1/2hr lake cruise adult €11.40/14.60; ☎ mid-Mar–Oct) runs lake cruises departing from Canal du Thiou on quai Bayreuth. Tickets are sold 15 minutes before departure at blue wooden huts on the lakeside. May to September boats also sail across the lake to Menthon-St-Bernard (€4.90), Talloires (€6) and other villages.

Sleeping

In July and August cheap hotels are hard to find; book in advance.

BUDGET

There are several campsites near the lake in Annecy-le-Vieux and a handful of *chambres d'hôtes* around the lake; the tourist office has details.

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 50 45 33 19; www.fuaj.org; 4rte du Semnoz; dm incl breakfast & sheets €17.60; ☎ reception 8am–noon & 3–10pm mid-Jan–Nov; ☒) Annecy's smart wood-clad hostel sports tip-top facilities (bar, kitchen, wi-fi, TV room, reading room) and ultrafriendly staff. Dorms are a tad small but all have en-suite showers (toilets are on the landing). It's a 10-minute walk to the centre, and in summer a bus links the hostel with the train station.

Central Hôtel (☎ 04 50 45 05 37; www.hotelcentral.annecy.com, in French; 6bis rue Royale; d/tr €33/42, with shower €40/47, with shower & toilet €45/52) Spread across three floors in a rambling building, the rooms at this establishment are simple but cosy. The owner has been gradually improving the place and the eight rooms (out of 16) with balconies overlooking the canal are big hits with visitors. Stick a pin in your country

of origin on the map in the breakfast room before leaving.

Hôtel du Château (☎ 04 50 45 27 66; www.annecy-hotel.com; 16 rampe du Château; s/d/tr/q Oct–Apr €43/55/73/83, May–Sep €49/68/73/83) This hotel's trump card is its sun-drenched, panoramic breakfast terrace. Rooms are sweet with their pine furniture and pastel tones, but a little small.

Auberge du Lyonnais (☎ 04 50 51 26 10; www.auberge-du-lyonnais.com; 9 rue de la République; s €45-70, d €50-75, menus from €23) Idyllically located along the canal at the heart of the Vieil Annecy, this is a great little place. Rooms are sweet and comfortable, and the restaurant downstairs is renowned for its seafood; it doesn't come cheap but the €23 three-course *menu* is an absolute steal.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Les Jardins du Château (☎ 04 50 45 72 28; jardindu.chateau@wanadoo.fr; 1 place du Château; d €65-90, tr/q €100/130) If you're planning on spending a few days in the area, this is where you should stay: all rooms and studios at this *chambre d'hôte* are equipped with kitchenettes and many have balconies and terraces where you can eat, sunbathe and generally chill whilst taking in the view. There are discounted weekly rates and breakfast is included in summer.

Hôtel du Palais de L'Isle (☎ 04 50 45 86 87; www.hoteldupalaisdelisle.com; 13 rue Perrière; s/d from €67/83; ☎) Guests slumber in the heart of old-town action at this 18th-century house where the crisp contemporary decor is an oasis of peace after the tourist mayhem outside. Rooms sport assorted views of the Palais, the castle or the old town's sea of roofs.

Le Pré Carré (☎ 04 50 52 14 14; www.hotel-annecy.net; 27 rue Sommeiller; s €145-195, d from €225; ☎) One of Annecy's chicest hotels bears all the hallmarks of a modern four-star place: Zen colours, balconies and terraces for most rooms, jacuzzi, wi-fi, business corner. The staff also happen to know all the best addresses in town so you're in very good hands.

Eating

The quays along both sides of Canal du Thiou in the Vieille Ville are jam-packed with touristy cafés and restaurants.

Chez Barnabé (☎ 04 50 45 90 62; 29 rue Sommeiller; mains from €3.60; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Sat) The concept of hot or cold buffet from which you can fill different-sized boxes is nothing new (imported from the US) but when it's done as well

LAKESIDE LEGENDS

Dining à la lakeside legend requires a certain amount of nous and loads of dosh.

La Maison de Marc Veyrat (☎ 04 50 60 24 00; www.marceyvat.fr; 13 vieille rte des Pensières, Veyrier; d €300-670, menu €368; ☹ Thu-Sun late May-Sep) Small fortune needed aside, snagging a table is tough at Marc Veyrat's lakeside 'Maison Bleue', a baby-blue house with a handful of extraordinary hotel rooms, 1km east of the centre. Cuisine is highly creative and flamboyant, reflecting Veyrat's signature use of herbs.

Auberge du Père Bise (☎ 04 50 60 72 01; www.perebise.com; rte du Port, Talloires; d €240-580, menus €82, €130 & €175; ☹ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon) The other big name on Lake Annecy's chic shores, this one is substantially more affordable in the form of a fab brunch worth-every-last-cent feast (€32, served at weekends in June and September and every day in July and August). You'll still need to book about a week in advance though. Père Bise has been run by four generations of Bise since 1901; female chef Sophie Bise currently heads up the kitchen.

as it is here (everything is fresh and prepared on the premises), it's a winning formula. The brownies and cookies are just the ticket to undo the goodness of the salad bar.

Au Fidèle Berger (☎ 04 50 45 00 32; 2 rue Royale; ☹ 9.15am-7pm Tue-Sat) This old-England style tearoom serves decadent cakes, mountains of macaroons and home-made ice creams for the sweet-toothed among you. Breakfast is a treat, with delicious pastries and a cup of thé.

Ah! La Belle Excuse (☎ 04 50 51 20 05; cour du Pré Carré, 10 rue Vaugelas; mains €10-15; ☹ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) In a funky, red-and-green wood-clad house with an unbeatable summer deck, the Beautiful Excuse serves up unpretentious grub of grilled meats, salads and *parmentiers* (mashed potato baked with different toppings).

Contresens (☎ 04 50 51 22 10; 10 rue de la Poste; mains €15; ☹ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) The menu looks a little bit like a mathematic formula but it all becomes clear in the end: starters are annotated A, mains B, sides C and desserts D, and you can order any combination of the above for set prices. The food is as creative as the menu (sun-dried tomato, Beaufort cheese and rocket salad burger, mussel ravioli, Nutella mousse with Rice Krispies squares etc) and totally divine.

L'Étage (☎ 04 50 51 03 28; 13 rue du Pâquier; mains €15; ☹ lunch & dinner) Glorious, glorious cheese! At L'Étage *le fromage* is given pride of place, even if you're not having a Savoyard speciality (think steak with cheese sauce, yum). The decor is a little passé but the cheerful staff more than make up for it (a word of warning though, they do not take kindly to people not finishing their plate).

Brasserie des Européens (☎ 04 50 45 00 81; place de l'Hôtel de Ville; mains €15-25; ☹ lunch & dinner) Hang in there for the mother of all seafood platters (a cool €185 for four people) and seven different types of steak tartare (raw beef, plain, with toast, parmesan, peppercorns, Mexican spices etc), this is the real McCoy of French brasseries.

Nature & Saveur (☎ 04 50 45 82 29; www.nature-saveur.com; place des Cordeliers; lunch €18-22, dinner with/without wine €36-42/52; ☹ lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Fri & Sat) The new kid on the 'alternative' block, Nature & Saveur only uses organic and wholesome ingredients from local farms, from obscure legumes to freshly ground flours, extra fresh farm eggs or locally raised meat and almond milk. But don't be fooled: this is no tree-hugger's hut. Chef Laurence Salomon's restaurant is sophisticated and attracts a discerning boho-chic clientele.

La Ciboulette (☎ 04 50 45 74 57; cour du Pré Carré, 10 rue Vaugelas; mains €30-35; ☹ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) In a sophisticated amber-coloured dining room, this is Annecy's affordable gastronomic gem. The works of locally born chef Georges Paccard, it specialises in fish and wonderful seasonal food. This being Savoy, the cheese platter is phenomenal.

SELF-CATERING

In the Vieille Ville, there is a **food market** (rue Faubourg Ste-Claire; ☹ 8am-noon Sun, Tue & Fri).

Entertainment

Théâtre d'Annecy (☎ 04 50 33 44 00; www.bonlieu-annecy.com, in French; Centre Bonlieu) is the main stage in Annecy for theatre.

For a chilled evening beer, **Le Munich** (☎ 04 50 45 02 11; quai Perrière; ☹ 8am-2am daily Jun-Sep, 10am-2am

Tue-Sun Apr, May & Oct, 10am-2am Wed-Sun Nov-Mar) is a great place to watch the world go by on the edge of the canal. Choose from 13 draught beers. Disco-bar **Happy People** (☎ 04 50 51 08 66; 48 rue Carnot; admission €11; ☎ 11pm-5am), Annecy's main gay venue, is also worth checking out for a few late ones.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From the **bus station** (Gare Routière Sud; rue de l'Industrie), adjoining the train station, the **Billetterie Crolard** (☎ 04 50 45 08 12; www.voyages-crolard.com; ☎ 7.15am-12.30pm & 1.30-7.15pm Mon-Sat, plus Sun high season) sells tickets for hourly buses to other lakeside destinations including Menthon-St-Bernard (€2.30, 20 minutes) and Talloires (€2.70, 30 minutes), and for local ski resorts La Clusaz and Le Grand Bornand (single/return/return with lift pass €8/13.50/27, 50 and 60 minutes respectively). It also runs up to five buses daily to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (one way/return €30/45, two hours).

Next door, **Autocars Frossard** (☎ 04 50 45 73 90; ☎ 7.45-11am & 2-7.15pm Mon-Fri, 7.45am-1pm Sat) sells tickets for Geneva (€10.50, 1¼ hours, up to 12 daily), Thonon-les-Bains (€16.50, two hours, twice daily), Évian-les-Bains (€18.50, 2½ hours, twice daily) and Chambéry (€6, one hour).

TRAIN

From Annecy's **train station** (place de la Gare), there are frequent trains to/from Aix-les-Bains (€6.80, 30 minutes), Chambéry (€8.60, 45 minutes), St-Gervais (€12.70, 1¼ hours), Lyon (€21.60, 2¼ hours) and Paris' Gare de Lyon (€69.80, four hours).

Getting Around

BICYCLES & ROLLERBLADES

Bikes can be hired from **Vélonicy** (☎ 04 50 51 38 90; place de la Gare; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1.30-6.30pm Wed-Sat, 1.30-6.30pm Tue), situated at the train station, for adult/student €15/3 per day. People with a valid bus or train ticket qualify for a €5 per day tariff.

Roul' ma Poule (☎ 04 50 27 86 83; www.annecy-location-velo.com; 4 rue des Marquisats; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-8pm Jul & Aug) rents rollerblades (€9/14 per half-/full day), bikes (€10/15), tandems (€18/28) and trailers (€7/11). They can recommend excellent day trips in the area.

Near the Impérial Palace at the start of the lakeside cycling path, **Station Roller** (☎ 04 50 66 04 99; www.roller-golf-annecy.com, in French; 2 av du Petit Port; ☎ 9am-10pm) is another bike and blade outlet.

BUS

Get info on local buses at **Espace SIBRA** (☎ 04 50 10 04 04; www.sibra.fr; 21 rue de la Gare; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Sat), opposite the bus station. Buses run from 6am to 8pm and a single ticket/day pass/carnet of 10 costs €1.10/2.70/9.

TAXI

Taxis hover outside the bus and train stations. Otherwise call ☎ 04 50 45 05 67.

AROUND ANNECY

When the sun shines, the villages of **Sévrier**, 5km south on Lake Annecy's western shore, and **Menthon-St-Bernard**, 7km south on the lake's eastern shore, make good day trips (p544). South of Menthon, **Talloires** is the most exclusive lakeside spot. All have wonderful beaches.

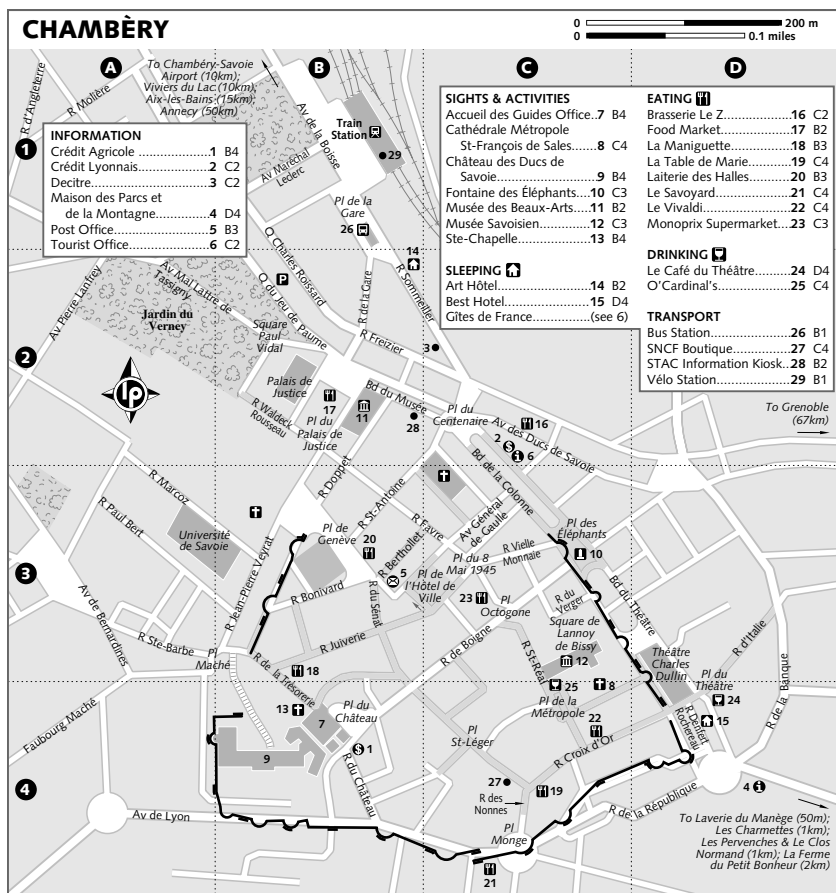
In winter, ski-keen Annéciens make a bee-line for the cross-country resort of **Semnoz** (elevation 1700m; www.semnoz.fr, in French), 18km south; or downhill stations **La Clusaz** (elevation 1100m; www.laclusaz.com), 32km east, and **Le Grand Bornand** (elevation 1000m; www.legrandbornand.com), 34km northeast.

CHAMBÉRY

pop 57,800 / elevation 270m

On paper, Chambéry has everything going for it: strategic Alpine location at the crossroads of the main Alpine valleys, scenic setting near Lac du Bourget and two regional parks and a rich heritage of alternately French, Italian and Savoy rules. But in practice, the city doesn't quite meet these expectations: the centre is quiet, a little neglected even, the sights few and not easily accessible and the hotel scene in the centre drab (thankfully much better on the outskirts). There is plenty to see and do in the surrounding area, however, so Chambéry makes a logical base. And on the plus side, there are some very nice little restaurants in town.

The city was Savoy's capital from the 13th century until 1563 when the dukes of Savoy shifted their capital to Turin in Italy. The castle – which once served as the seat of power for the House of Savoy, founded by Humbert



I (the Whitehanded) in the mid-11th century – now houses the administration for the Savoie *département*.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Decitre (☎ 04 79 62 80 80; 75 rue Sommeiller) English-language novels, travel guides and maps.

LAUNDRY

Laverie du Manège (393 rue de la République; per 8kg €4.50; ☎ 7am-9pm)

MONEY

Crédit Agricole (place du Château)

Crédit Lyonnais (26 bd de la Colonne)

POST

Post Office (11 place de l'Hôtel de Ville)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 79 33 42 47; www.chambery-tourisme.com; 24 bd de la Colonne; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun Jul & Aug) Guided old-town tours, including night visits, as well as information on the local cheese and wine routes.

Maison des Parcs et de la Montagne (☎ 04 79 60 04 46; www.maisondesparcsdetelamontagne.fr, in French; 256 rue de la République; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) Stocks information and exhibitions on the three local parks: national park La Vanoise, and regional parks Les Bauges and La Chartreuse.

CHAMBERY PASS

Available from the tourist office, the card costs €4 and offers a number of reductions across sights in Chambéry and nearby attractions such as the Abbaye d'Hautecombe, the Musée de la Grande Chartreuse or the Maison des Jeux Olympiques d'Hiver in Albertville (see p550). The pass also includes discounts on activities from swimming to ice skating, horse riding and bike rentals.

Sights**CHÂTEAU DES DUCS DE SAVOIE**

Now home to the region's *Conseil Général* (County Council), Chambéry's forbidding 14th-century **Château des Ducs de Savoie** (place du Château; adult/student/under 18yr €4/2.50/free; ☎ tours 2.30pm Mon-Fri May, Jun & Sep, 10.30am, 2.30pm, 3.30pm & 4.30pm Mon-Fri Jul & Aug) can only be visited by guided tours. Tours depart from the **Accueil des Guides office** (☎ 04 79 33 42 47; place du Château), opposite the château steps.

Tours take in the adjoining **Ste-Chapelle**, built in the 15th century to house the Shroud of Turin. Chambéry lost the relic to Turin in 1860 when Savoy became part of France. Visit the 70-bell **Grand Carillon** in Ste-Chapelle – Europe's largest bell chamber – on a guided tour or enjoy it in full concert on the first and third Saturdays of the month at 5.30pm.

FONTAINE DES ÉLÉPHANTS

With its four mighty carved elephants, this bizarre **Fontaine des Éléphants** (place des Éléphants) could be the model for an Indian postage stamp. It was sculpted in 1838 in honour of Général de Boigne (1751–1830), a local who made his fortune in the East Indies. When he returned home, he bestowed some of his wealth on the town and was honoured posthumously with this monument. Among his various local projects was the construction of the arcaded street that leads from the fountain to Château des Ducs de Savoie.

MUSEUMS

Admission is free on the first Sunday of the month.

South of the fountain in an old Franciscan monastery, near the 15th- and 16th-century **Cathédrale Métropole St-François de Sales** (place de la Métropole; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6.30pm), is the fantastic **Musée Savoisien** (☎ 04 79 33 44 48; sq de Lannoy de Bissy;

adult/student/under 18yr €3/1.50/free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon), home to various local archeological finds including a gallery of 13th-century wall paintings discovered behind a false roof inside a local mansion. Traditional Savoyard mountain life zooms into perspective on the 2nd floor with temporary exhibitions such as the history of sledging.

Musée des Beaux-Arts (☎ 04 79 33 75 03; place du Palais de Justice; admission free except during exhibitions; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) houses a small collection of 14th- to 18th-century Italian works.

French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived with his lover, Baronne Louise Éléonore de Warens, at **Les Charmettes** (☎ 04 79 33 39 44; 890 chemin des Charmettes; admission free; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, to 4.30pm Oct-Mar), 1km southeast of the town, from 1736 to 1742. The late-17th-century house has been wonderfully maintained. A trail leads through the rich garden of herbs, flowers and plants where you can learn more about Rousseau's passion for botany.

Sleeping

Gîtes de France (☎ 04 79 33 22 56; www.gites-de-france-savoie.com; 24 bd de la Colonne) takes bookings for *chambres d'hôtes* (B&Bs) and self-catering accommodation in or around Chambéry; find it inside the tourist office on the 4th floor. The nearest hostel is in Aix-les-Bains (p550).

Art Hôtel (☎ 04 79 62 37 26; www.arthotel-chambery.com; 154 rue Sommeiller; s/d/tr €48/56/66) There's nothing artistic about this hotel, be it its flag-lined concrete facade or drab rooms. But it is a well-run place, conveniently located halfway between the town centre and the train station, which is why so many business people and visiting academics to the Université de Savoie stay here.

Best Hotel (☎ 04 79 85 76 79; www.besthotel.fr/chambery; 9 rue Denfert Rochereau; s/d/tr €55/63/79) The decor at this hotel won't rock the design world but rooms are comfortable, clean and the best ones overlook place du Théâtre. It's also supercentral. The buffet breakfast is €9 – watch out for the egg-cooking machine, it practically takes an engineer to get it going.

Les Pervenches (☎ 04 79 33 34 26; 600 chemin des Charmettes; r €60-80) In a quiet hamlet just 1km from the centre and 200m from Rousseau's former house Les Charmettes, Les Pervenches offers nine cosy rooms with bucolic views of the surrounding hills. The on-site restaurant, Le Clos Normand (mains €15), serves plenty of cheesy

goodies but from a different part of France this time (the owners' native Normandy).

La Ferme du Petit Bonheur (☎ 04 79 85 26 17; www.fermedupetitbonheur.fr; 538 chemin Jean-Jacques; s/d/tr €75/85/105) It really will be 'little happiness' if you choose to stay with Eric and Chantal at their wonderful *chambre d'hôte* in the hills. Eric is a musician, Chantal a painter, and their exquisite tastes show throughout their five beautifully appointed rooms and the amazing home-made croissants for breakfast. In summer, Toscare the Labrador will beg children to throw the ball one more time, and for those long winter nights, what better than reading a book by the wood-burning stone in the cosy living room?

Eating

Le Vivaldi (☎ 04 79 33 58 42; 32 rue Croix d'Or; mains from €8; ☎ lunch & dinner) Decorated as if this were someone's living room, Le Vivaldi serves excellent pizzas and pasta for trivial prices. The streetside terrace fills up the minute the sun starts shining, but if you can't get a seat, you can always opt for takeaway.

Le Savoyard (☎ 04 79 33 36 55; 35 place Monge; mains €10-20; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The decor is resolutely non-Alpine (think urban design den rather than Savoyard chalet), but the menu sure is with a wondrous selection of cheesy specialities. Those on a diet or in search of alternative flavours will be pleased to know that there is plenty to cater for them too, such as scallop risotto or steak with home-made *frites*.

Brasserie Le Z (☎ 04 79 85 96 87; www.zorelle.com, in French; 12 av des Ducs de Savoie; mains €10-25; ☎ lunch & dinner) In rather quiet Chambéry, this is a very pleasant surprise indeed: tall tables, bizarrely shaped plates, chandeliers and psychedelic colours play host to some very fine and beautifully presented food (grilled fish, tasty meats, creamy risottos). Even more surprising (and welcome!), Le Z is open seven days a week, rescuing you from picnic leftover gloom on Sunday night.

La Table de Marie (☎ 04 79 85 99 76; 193 rue Croix d'Or; mains €12; ☎ lunch Wed-Sun, dinner Sat only) This pocket-sized restaurant is an odd combination of prim, flowery decor which seems suitable for the tea-house part of the business (scrumptious cakes washed down with organic tea and hot chocolate), but less so perhaps for the lunchtime steaks and Savoyard specialities!

La Manigquette (103 rue Juiverie; mains €16, 3-course menu €29; ☎ lunch Tue, lunch & dinner Wed-Sat) The

strapline of this restaurant is *Chercheurs de Goût* (Taste Explorers), and everything here does go the extra mile to add a touch of originality: the bread is home-baked, the menu changes every month and always adds a far-away twist to local flavours.

SELF-CATERING

Chambéry's Saturday morning **food market** (on place du Palais de Justice until 2010 while the covered market on place de Genève gets some much-needed renovation) is a gastronome's rendezvous. Pedestrian rue du Sénat otherwise boasts butcher, baker and chocolate-maker shops.

Laiterie des Halles (☎ 04 79 33 77 17; 2 place de Genève; ☎ 7.30am-12.15pm & 3-7.15pm Tue-Sat) Cheese fiends will go gaga at this dairy shop.

Monoprix supermarket (place du 8 Mai 1945; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Sat)

Drinking

The huge open square of place St-Léger is the summertime heart of Chambéry's drinking scene.

O'Cardinal's (☎ 04 79 85 53 40; 5 place de la Métropole; ☎ 5pm-1.30am Sun & Mon, 10am-1.30am Tue-Sat) Leather banquet seating, superfriendly staff and great pub grub (noon to 2pm Tuesday to Saturday) have turned this into Chambéry students' favourite pub. In warmer – and since the smoking ban even cold – weather the cheer spills out onto cathedral-shaded place de la Métropole.

Le Café du Théâtre (☎ 04 79 33 16 53; place du Théâtre; ☎ 7am-1.30am) This tiny café seems like a concentrate of Chambéry's local life. Business people stop for a coffee on the way to work, retired people come for a pre-lunch drink with their mates, schoolchildren order a crêpe on their way home and students come here to kick-start or even spend the evening. Join them all, whatever the time of day.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Chambéry-Savoie Airport (☎ 04 79 54 49 54; www.chambery-airport.com), 10km north in Viviers du Lac, is serviced by no-frills flights to/from Oslo, Stockholm and a bunch of regional British airports; see p961 for details.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 04 79 69 11 88; place de la Gare; ☎ ticket office hours vary) there are buses

to/from local ski resort La Féclaz (€7.10, 50 minutes, up to seven daily), Aix-les-Bains (€3, 25 minutes, two daily), Annecy (€9.20, one hour, seven daily) and Grenoble (€5.10, two hours, 10 daily). There are three daily buses to/from Geneva airport (€30, 1½ hours) and up to five a day to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (€20, one hour).

TRAIN

From Chambéry **train station** (place de la Gare; ☎ ticket office 5.45am-9pm Mon-Thu & Sat, 5.25am-11pm Fri, 5.45am-10pm Sun) there are major rail connections running to/from Paris' Gare de Lyon (€68.20, three hours, 11 daily), Lyon (€15.20, 1½ hours, 12 daily), Annecy (€8.60, 45 minutes, 25 daily), Geneva (€14.60, 1½ hours, five daily) and Grenoble (€9.90, one hour, 10 to 13 daily). Trains also run through the Maurienne Valley to Modane (€14.30, 1¼ hours, nine daily) and onwards into Italy.

In town, buy tickets at the **SNCF Boutique** (21 place St-Léger; ☎ 9am-12.45pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-5.30pm Sat).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Frustratingly, there are no bus services from Chambéry centre to the airport. The 15-minute journey by taxi costs around €17 – call **Allo Taxi Chambéry** (☎ 04 79 69 11 12).

BICYCLE

Pick up wheels for €1/5/10 per hour/day/week and advice on marked trails and itineraries from **Vélo Station** (☎ 04 79 96 34 13; ☎ 6.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, closed Sun Nov-Mar) at the train station. The greater Chambéry area boasts 66km of cycling lanes.

BUS

City buses run from 6am to around 8pm Monday to Saturday and are operated by **STAC** (☎ 04 79 68 67 00). A single ticket/carnet of 10 cost €1.10/6.78. They are sold at tobacconists and the **STAC information kiosk** (23 bd du Musée; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 1-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm Sat).

Buses 3, 5, 6, 7 and 9 link the train station with Fontaine des Éléphants.

AROUND CHAMBÉRY

Chambéry is sandwiched by two green-rich regional nature parks. Southwest, the **Parc Naturel Régional de Chartreuse** (www.parc-chartreuse.net, in

French) safeguards the wild forested slopes of the Chartreuse massif, dubbed the 'desert' by the Chartreux monks who settled here more than 1000 years ago, and best known for the bright-green herbal liquor made here by the monks since 1737. The **park headquarters** (☎ 04 76 88 75 20; www.chartreuse-tourisme.com) in St-Pierre de Chartreuse, 40km south of Chambéry, has information on visiting the **Voiron distillery** where the liquor is produced, as well as the **Musée de la Grande Chartreuse** (☎ 04 76 88 60 45; www.musee-grande-chartreuse.fr; La Corrière, St-Pierre de Chartreuse; adult/student €4/2; ☎ Feb-Oct), which explores the monastery's millennium-long history and the monks' reclusive lifestyle.

Northeast, outdoor enthusiasts can delve into 800 sq km of royal hiking and biking opportunities in the little-known **Parc Naturel Régional du Massif des Bauges** (www.parcdesbauges.com) with its endless pastures and plateaux. Several marked trails kick off from the **Maison Faune-Flore** (☎ 04 79 52 22 56; adult/7-18yr €2.50/1.50; ☎ 10.30am-1pm & 1.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Wed & Sun May, Jun, Sep & Oct) in École, where you can learn how to spot some of the 600-odd chamois and plethora of mouflons inhabiting the park.

Snow fiends could do worse than **Savoie Grand Révard** (www.savoiegrandrevard.com), the nearest ski resort to Chambéry, where Baujus (people from the Massif des Bauges) ski at weekends. Downhill skiing is limited to 50km of pistes (€15.20 per day), but cross-country skiing (€8) is big with 140km of trails (the biggest domain in France), as is snowshoeing with 60km of marked itineraries. Tourist offices in **Le Revard** (☎ 04 79 54 01 60), **La Féclaz** (☎ 04 79 25 80 49) and **Le Châtelard** (☎ 04 79 54 84 28; www.lesbauges.com) – the main office in the park – have more information.

Self-pamperers can seek solace in **Aix-les-Bains** (population 27,500), a small thermal spa 11km northwest of Chambéry from where you can sail, swim, pedal-boat, stroll or skate around France's largest natural lake, **Lac du Bourget**. Contact **Compagnie des Bateaux** (☎ 04 79 63 45 00; www.gwel.com) at the waterfront Grand Port or the **tourist office** (☎ 04 79 88 68 00; www.aixlesbains.com; place Maurice Mollard) in town about lake cruises. A two-hour cruise costs €15.50 and a return trip to the 12th-century **Abbaye d'Hautecombe** on the other side of the lake is €12.20.

The highs and lows of the 1992 Winter Olympics are colourfully retold at **Maison des Jeux Olympiques d'Hiver** (☎ 04 79 37 75 71; 11 rue Pargoud; adult/family €3/8; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-7pm

SAY CHEESE!

Every restaurant in the Alps worth its regional reputation offers **raclette**, **tartiflette** or **fondue**. To save on pennies but maximise the cheese, opt for the DIY option. Most dairy or grocery shops will lend you the required apparatus provided you buy the ingredients from them. So here's a quick 'how to' guide for your own cheesy fest.

- Fondue Savoyarde:** The age-old favourite is made with three types of cheeses in equal proportions (Emmental, Beaufort and Comté) and dry white wine (proportions should be about 0.4L of wine for 1kg of cheese). The mix should be melted in a cast-iron dish on a hob, which can then be kept warm with a small burner on the table (that'll be the fondue set for you). As for eating, dunk chunks of dry bread or baguette in the cheesy goo. **Our tip:** Rub or add garlic to the dish – you'll have cheesy breath anyway, so what the hell.
- Raclette:** Named after the Swiss cheese of the same name (with just a quick gender change in the process: *Le Raclette* is the cheese, *La Raclette* the dish), a raclette is a combination of melting cheese, boiled potatoes, charcuterie (deli meats) and baby gherkins. Traditionally, half a Raclette cheese is placed under a grill and the top layer regularly scraped in all its melting glory. Less spectacular but far more practical, is the home raclette kit: an oval hot plate with a grill underneath and individual dishes to melt slices of cheese. **Our tip:** Try to squeeze cheese, potato, charcuterie and gherkins in every mouthful (not a whole potato obviously).
- Tartiflette:** Easy-peasy. You don't even need special equipment with that one, just an ovenproof dish and the oven to put it in. Buy one whole Reblochon cheese. Slice it in half lengthwise (ie you should end up with two thinner rounds, not two semicircles). In the dish, mix together slices of parboiled potatoes, crème fraîche, onions and lardons (diced bacon). Whack the two cheese halves on top, bake for about 40 minutes at 180°C, and ta-da! **Our tip:** More crème fraîche and more lardons (a sprinkle of nutmeg is also really good)!

Sun Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-Jun)
in Albertville, a disappointingly uninspiring town 39km east of Chambéry.

Sleeping

our pick **Château des Allues** (☎ 06 75 38 61 56; www.chateaudesallues.com; Les Allues, St-Pierre d'Albigny; d €100-140, q €170, dinner adult/child €40/18) Be prepared to be wowed by this beautiful 19th-century bourgeois mansion perched at the top of a hill and proffering sweeping views of the Belledonne range. Painstakingly restored by Stéphane and Didier, it's taken three years of gutting, scrubbing, painting and trawling antique markets up and down the region to get it in that shape, but what a result. The whole place oozes charm, elegance and originality: the wood panelling in the dining room was salvaged from a 17th-century pharmacy, the floor tiles are the château's original – as is the re-enamelled bath-tub with legs in one of the five spacious, lavishly furnished rooms – and Didier's old childhood toy cars crowd the lobby's glass shelves. Stéphane's cooking is as stylish as the rest of the house, with

many of the fresh products coming from the vegetable garden.

LES TROIS VALLÉES

Named after its valley trio, this sought-after ski area is vast, fast and the largest in the world – 600km of pistes and 200 lifts across three ritzy resorts: **Val Thorens**, Europe's highest at a heady 2300m; wealthy old **Méribel** (elevation 1450m) created by Scotsman Colonel Peter Lindsay in 1938; and trendsetting **Courchevel** (a fave of Victoria Beckham), a series of purpose-built resorts at altitudes of 1550m, 1650m and 1850m, where fashion is as hot on as off the slopes. In between is a sprinkling of lesser-known villages – **Le Praz** (elevation 1300m), **St-Martin de Belleville** (elevation 1450m) and **La Tania** (elevation 1400m), linked by lifts to their big-sister resorts.

Information

Courchevel 1850 Tourist Office (☎ 04 79 08 00 29; www.courchevel.com; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul-Aug & Dec-Apr, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Nov, May & Jun) Sister offices at 1650m, 1550m and 1300m.

Méribel Tourist Office (☎ 04 79 08 60 01; www.meribel.net; Maison du Tourisme; ☎ 9am-7pm Dec-Apr, 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 9am-noon Wed & Sat Sep-Nov, May & Jun, 9am-noon & 3-7pm Jul & Aug)

Val Thorens Tourist Office (☎ 04 79 00 08 08; www.valthorens.com; Maison de Val Thorens; ☎ 8.30am-7pm)

Activities

The three valleys will appease the feistiest of outdoor-action appetites, Méribel Valley alone boasting 57 downhill ski runs (150km), 57 ski lifts, two snowboarding parks, a slalom stadium and two Olympic downhill runs. In Courchevel there's another 150km of downhill piste to explore and a superb 2km-long floodlit toboggan run (a great adrenalin-pumping après-ski alternative); while Val Thorens, though smaller, proffers summer skiing on the Glacier de Pécllet. A Trois Vallées pass costing €44/220 for one/six days covers the entire area, but cheaper single-valley passes are also available.

Courchevel is big on alternative snow action, the key info point being **La Croisette** (place du Forum; ☎ 7am-8pm) in Courchevel 1850, where the **ESF** (☎ 04 79 08 07 72; www.esfcourchevel.com) resides in winter and the superfriendly **Maison de la Montagne** year-round. The latter takes bookings for guided off-piste adventures, heli-skiing, snowshoeing and ski mountaineering as well as go-karting or driving on ice, snowmobile treks and snow-rafting, and is home to the **Bureau des Guides** (☎ 04 79 01 03 66; www.guides-courchevel-meribel.com). You can also try your hands at mushing with **Traineau Évasion** (☎ 04 79 08 81 55; Le Plantain, La Tania; per hr €55); this is surprisingly hard work and not suitable for children under 12.

In summer, rock climbing, mountain biking, hiking and paragliding are rife in all three valleys. In July and August **Chardon Loisirs** (☎ 04 79 08 39 60; www.chardonloisirs.com; La Croisette) organises canyoning and rafting on the Doron de Belleville and Isère Rivers.

Sleeping & Eating

All three resorts have a **central accommodation service** (Courchevel ☎ 04 79 08 14 44; www.courchevel-reservation.com; Méribel ☎ 04 79 00 50 00; infos@meribel-reservations.com; Val Thorens ☎ 04 79 00 01 06; www.valthorens.com/resa).

Hôtel Olympic (☎ 04 79 08 08 24; rue des Tovets, Courchevel 1850; d €42-99, per week €279-659) This is Courchevel's cheapest hotel and a nice place

to boot. Rooms are unpretentious, with white walls, crisp colourful duvet covers and balconies. In the evenings, chill out by the fireplace in the bar-lounge; and fill up for a day of fun at the gargantuan buffet breakfast in the morning.

Le Doron (☎ 04 79 08 60 02; hotel_doron@wanadoo.fr; rte de la Chaudanne, Méribel; low/high season d €96/146, tr €117/177) Among the cheapest options – not cheap – is this place, above a rowdy Brit-styled pub opposite Méribel tourist office.

Les Peupliers (☎ 04 79 08 41 47; www.lespeupliers.com; Le Praz; summer only d €110, half-board per person d low/high season €130/190) This hotel has managed the rare feat of combining authentic village feel with plush, stylish creature comforts such as hammam and jacuzzi. The downstairs bar fills up every night with a jolly après-ski crowd, many of whom then move to La Table de Mon Grand-Père, the hotel's restaurant.

La Bouitte (☎ 04 79 08 96 77; www.la-bouitte.com; St-Marcel; summer d/tr from €200/250, winter €248/417; 2-/3-course menu €69/86, mains €50-100; ☎ Jul, Aug & mid-Dec-Apr) This is a fairy-tale chalet, with everything just the way you'd imagine it to be in a perfect Alpine world. The eight exquisite rooms are an ode to centenary-old wood, and the food at the two-Michelin-starred restaurant is out of this world. Find it in the hamlet of St-Marcel, 1km south of St-Martin de Belleville.

There are plenty of very expensive hang-outs in Courchevel, but normal human beings can hang out at **Prends Ta Luge et Tire-Toi** (Take Your Sledge And Piss Off; ☎ 04 79 08 78 68; www.laluge.com; Le Forum, Courchevel 1850; ☎ 9am-2am daily), an odd combination of surf shop, Caribbean-themed bar and internet café (€8 per hour). Extra points awarded for the most random name ever.

Getting There & Away

The four-lane A43 links Chambéry (88km northwest) with the nearest town, Moûtiers, 18km north of Méribel. All ski resorts are signposted as you approach Moûtiers.

Shuttle buses link all three resorts with Geneva (€70, 3½ hours) and Lyon St-Exupéry (€64, three to four hours) airports. There are also regular weekend buses between Chambéry airport and Moûtiers (€40, one hour), from where you can catch the shuttles to the resorts.

Moûtiers is the nearest train station, with trains to/from Chambéry (€11.70, 1¼ hours) and TGVs galore to Paris between late

A BOWL OF FARM AIR

Unlike many purpose-built ski resorts, Val d'Isère is a genuine village with year-round inhabitants. Claudine is one of them and she runs one of the town's most delectable shops, **La Fermette de Claudine** (☎ 04 79 06 13 89; www.lafermettedeclaudine.com; Val Village). All dairy products – fresh unpasteurised milk, the wonderful cheeses, the yoghurts – come from her dairy farm, **La Ferme de l'Adroit**, just 1km down the road in the direction of Col de l'Iseran. The farm is open to the public and you can watch cheese production (Tomme, Avalin, Beaufort) in the morning or milking in the afternoon. As well as fab cheeses, the town shop sells wondrous *saucissons* (sausages) and can lend you raclette and fondue kits.

December and March (€76.80, 4¾ hours). **Eurostar** (www.eurostar.com) also operates direct trains to/from London during the winter season (return from €220, eight hours, overnight or day service, weekends only).

Transdev Savoie (☎ 08 20 22 74 13; www.altibus.com) operates up to 12 regional buses daily between Moûtiers and Méribel (€12.50, 45 minutes), Courchevel (€9.70 to €12.50, 40 to 60 minutes) and Val Thorens (€16, one hour).

VAL D'ISÈRE

pop 1660 / elevation 1850m

It's hard to say what people come to Val d'Isère for, whether it's for the awesome skiing or the never-ending party. The fact that you can actually dance on the slopes has somehow blurred the distinction. If you're seeking traditional Alpine atmosphere, you may have to reconsider your choice of destination, which is ironic since Val d'Isère is one of the few ski resorts to have a year-round village life. The resort is located in the upper Tarentaise Valley, 31km southeast of Bourg St-Maurice, and attracts a mostly young, foreign crowd.

Lac du Chevril looms up large on the approach to Val d'Isère. The dark reservoir lake and its dam slumber on the grave of Tignes-le-Lac, the village flooded by the 1950s electricity-generating project. Out of its ashes rose **Tignes** (elevation 2100m), a purpose-built lakeside village that – together with Val d'Isère – forms the **Espace Killy** skiing area (named after home-grown triple Olympic gold medallist Jean-Claude Killy). In February 2009 it staged the World Alpine Skiing Championships.

Information

Tourist Office (☎ 04 79 06 06 60; www.valdisere.com; place Jacques Mouffier; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Dec-Apr, Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri rest of the year) Internet access here costs €9 per hour or €5 for wi-fi.

Activities

WINTER ACTIVITIES

Espace Killy offers fabulous skiing on 300km of marked pistes between 1550m and 3450m. Ski touring is also excellent, especially in the Parc National de la Vanoise. The snowboarders' Snowspace Park in La Daille has a half-pipe, tables, gaps, quarter-pipes and kicker ramps, while the runs around Tignes are popular with both snowboarders and skiers. In July and August you can ski on the glacier.

Ski schools teaching boarding, cross-country and off-piste skiing are a dime a dozen. The **ESF** (☎ 04 79 06 02 34; carrefour des Dolomites; www.esfvaldisere.com) is in Val Village, a hub of shops and services backing onto the slopes. Nearby, **STVI** (☎ 8.30am-7pm Mon-Fri & Sun, 8am-8pm Sat Dec-Apr) sells lift passes covering Espace Killy (one/six days €42/202.50) and – for five-day or longer passes – one day's skiing in La Plagne, Les Arcs, Les Trois Vallées or Valmorel. Unusually, beginner lifts opposite Val Village are free. Glacial summer skiing starts in late June and lasts for anything from two weeks to two months.

Helicopter skiing in Italy (it is illegal in France), ice climbing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, mushing and paragliding with skis (to land!) are other snow-driven activities. Fun-driven are the floodlit airboarding and snake-gliss sledging sessions held four times a week on the Savonette nursery slope opposite Val Village.

SUMMER ACTIVITIES

The valleys and trails from Val d'Isère into the nearby Parc National de la Vanoise (p555) proffer an orgy of outdoor action. Be it walking, mountain biking, trekking or rock climbing, the **Bureau des Guides** (☎ 06 14 62 90 24; www.guide-montagne-tarentaise.com) in the Killy Sport shop next to the tourist office can arrange it.

ALPINE PARADISE

Valérie Graziano, owner of **La Ferme d'Angèle** (☎ 04 79 41 05 71; www.ferme-angele.com; Le Noveray, Séez; half-board per person dm/d €70/75), has turned this beautiful 1830 stone mountain farm into the Alpine equivalent of a '1001 night' palace. Beds disappear under enormous feather duvets, bathroom sinks are made of old brass tubs, thick Afghan rugs cover original stone floors, the reading room looks out to scenic Alpine skyline, and whole legs or shoulders of meat roast in the roaring fireplace while home-made soups bubble up in a Harry Potter-sized cauldron. Rooms vary from double to six-people duplex and all have access to the sauna and outdoor hot tub. La Ferme d'Angèle is only a couple of minutes away from La Rosière ski area (cross-border with Italy) or half an hour by car to Les Arcs or 45 minutes to Val d'Isère.

Find La Ferme d'Angèle 4km from Bourg St-Maurice, in the direction of Italy and La Rosière in the hamlet of Le Noveray above Séez.

Sleeping

Find out about availability and make hotel reservations (essential in high season) through the **Centre de Réservation Hôtellerie** (☎ 04 79 06 18 90; valhotel@valdisere.com). For self-catering accommodation, contact **Val Location** (☎ 04 79 06 06 60; vallocation@valdisere.com). Prices vary widely, pricey being the common factor.

Hôtel Bellevue (☎ 04 79 06 00 03; d with half-board per person €80, with bathroom & half-board per person €105) This central, family-run hotel on the main street screams 1960s. Rooms in the hotel, annexe and chalet are basic but good value for skiers who are in town to ski rather than self-pamper. Half-board is a no-frills home-cooking kind of deal.

Relais du Ski & La Bailletta (☎ 04 79 06 02 06; http://lerelaisduski.valdisere.com; rte Fornet; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast Relais from 70/88/102/124, Bailletta from 117/136/171/196; ☎ Dec-Apr, Jul & Aug) A 500m stroll from the centre, this is effectively two hotels rolled into one. La Bailletta does comfortable midrange rooms while Relais du Ski has nine basic rooms with shared bathrooms reminiscent of student accommodation. Both hotels share the buffet breakfast, which is a feast. Half- and full-board deals available.

Eating

Many restaurants cater to a largely English clientele, making quality varied and unpredictable. Better deals can be had opting for full-board in your hotel. Goodies, lots of them, are sold at main-street **Maison Chevalot** (☎ 7am-8pm).

Quicksilver & Billabong Coffee Shops (☎ 04 79 06 09 54; burgers & wraps €8-15; ☎ 9am-10pm) What do you get when you mix two of the trendiest surf brands in a French Alpine resort? An

American diner! With massive burgers, huge portions of *frites* and gooey brownies.

Bananas (☎ 04 79 06 04 23; mains €15; ☎ 11.30am-2am) A bizarre, but somehow very popular, mix of Tex-Mex and Indian is dished up at this party shack at the bottom of La Face, behind the Bellevue Express. It starts filling as skiers pack up for the day and doesn't empty till close.

La Fruitière (☎ 04 79 06 07 17; mains €20; ☎ lunch Dec-Apr) At the top of the La Daille bubble at 2400m, this piste-side oasis of fine dining is legendary. Snuggle under a rug to keep warm on the terrace and savour traditional but creative cuisine in a hip dairy setting.

Sur la Montagne (☎ 04 79 40 06 12; mains €20; ☎ lunch & dinner) Pizza à la Val d'Isère: Italy may only be on the other side of the mountain but at La Montagne, mozzarella has been trumped by local cheeses St-Marcellin and Reblochon. There are some creative pasta, fish and meat dishes too.

Le Blizzard (☎ 04 79 06 02 07; mains €20-30; ☎ lunch & dinner) Fine dining in a refined chalet atmosphere is what one of Val d'Isère's chicest hotel-restaurants offers. Views from the dining room's bay windows are stupendous. It's just a shame diners are not allowed to use the tantalisingly close pool.

Casino (☎ 7.30am-1.30pm & 3-9pm) Supermarket on the main street opposite the Boutique Autocars Martin.

Drinking & Entertainment

Get hold of a copy of the free weekly *Mountain Echo* (a tongue-in-cheek resort mag put together by the resort's anglophone seasonal workers) or *Valscope* (which lists events, film screenings and other organised fun) to find

out what's happening. Here's our pick of the hottest bars:

Dick's Tea Bar (☎ 04 79 06 14 87; www.dicksteabar.com; admission before/after midnight free/€13.50; ☎ 8am-4am) Val d'Isère's party HQ. Live music starts from 4.30pm; DJs follow later on in the night, all night.

La Folie Douce (☎ 04 79 06 01 47; ☎ 11am-5.30pm) If you can't wait to party until you're back in the village, DJs and live bands big it up every day on this outdoor terrace at the top of La Daille's cable car from 3pm. Ibiza in the Alps.

Le Lodge (☎ 04 79 06 02 01; ☎ 11.30am-2am) Attracting a slightly more discerning (dare we say it, older) crowd, Le Lodge is definitely more of a bar than a pub.

Le Petit Danois (☎ 04 79 06 27 97; ☎ 8am-1.30am) Cheap beer and lairy crowd; thank God they serve full English breakfast the next morning to mop up the mess.

Warm Up (☎ 04 79 08 27 00; ☎ 11.30am-2am) Oh the cosy retro leather sofas, the beers, the free wi-fi, the pool table, the fun; it's the perfect après-ski spot.

Getting There & Away

Six daily buses in season link Val d'Isère with Tignes (€7.20) and Bourg St-Maurice train station (€13.10, 45 minutes). Tickets must be reserved 48 hours in advance at the **Boutique Autocars Martin** (☎ 04 79 06 00 42; ☎ 8.30-11am & 12.30-7pm Mon-Fri, 6.30am-7pm Sat, 6.30-11am & 12.30-7pm Sun) on the main street in the resort centre. The **SNCF desk** (☎ 10am-12.30pm & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sat) here sells train tickets.

SNOWMAN'S LARDER

Whenever you think every good business idea under the sun has been taken up, something else comes up and you think, genius! **Snowman's Larder** (☎ 06 24 09 20 09; www.snowmans-larder.com) is one of those: online shopping for self-catering skiers.

It's cheaper than resort supermarkets and you can either pick and choose from their list or go for their ready-made packs of groceries, some of which include ingredients for staple meals such as spaghetti bolognese or chicken curry. Party animals will like the booze-packed kit while families will thank the mother in Snowmans' Larder who remembered the fruit and veg and the mini Baby Bells in the Kids' pack.

Snowman's Larder delivers in Val d'Isère and Tignes in winter.

In Bourg, you can connect to buses for Chambéry airport (one way/return €40/70, 1½ hours weekend only). Other seasonal bus services include three or four daily to/from Geneva airport (one way/return €70/118, four hours) and two to five daily to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (one way/return €62/94, four hours). Again, advance reservations are obligatory. **Eurostar** (www.eurostar.com) operates direct winter weekend services between Bourg St-Maurice and London (return from €220, nine hours, overnight or day service).

PARC NATIONAL DE LA VANOISE

A wild mix of high mountains, steep valleys and vast glaciers, the **Parc National de la Vanoise** (www.vanoise.com) sports 530 sq km of spectacular scenery between the Tarentaise (north) and Maurienne (south) Valleys: snowcapped peaks mirrored in icy lakes is just the start! It was the country's first national park in 1963 and is very much a green haven. Five designated nature reserves and an inhabited peripheral zone embracing 28 villages border the highly protected core of the park where marmots, chamois and France's largest colony of Alpine ibexes graze freely and undisturbed beneath the larch trees. Overhead, 20 pairs of golden eagle and the odd bearded vulture fly in solitary wonder.

A hiker's heaven, yes, although **walking trails** are limited and accessible for a fraction of the year – June to late September usually. The **Grand Tour de Haute Maurienne**, a hike of five days or more around the upper reaches of the valley, takes in the very best of the national park. The **GR5** and **GR55** cross it, and other trails snake south to the Park National des Écrins (p563) and east into Italy's Grand Paradiso National Park.

Lanslebourg and **Bonneval-sur-Arc**, two pretty villages along the southern edge of the park, are the main accommodation bases from which to explore. The **Maison du Val Cénis** (☎ 04 79 05 23 66; www.valcenis.com; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-7pm mid-Dec-Apr, Jul & Aug, shorter hr rest of year) in Lanslebourg, and Bonneval-sur-Arc's **tourist office** (☎ 04 79 05 95 95; www.bonneval-sur-arc.com; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat high season, to 5.30pm rest of year) stock practical information on the limited skiing (cross-country and downhill), walking and other activities in the park. In Termignon-la-Vanoise, 6km southwest of Lanslebourg, the tiny national park-run

Maison de la Vanoise (☎ 04 79 20 51 67; admission free; ⏰ hr vary) portrays the park through ethnographical eyes.

Getting There & Away

All three mountain passes linking the national park with Italy – the Col du Petit St-Bernard, Col de l'Iséran and Col du Mont Cénis – are shut in winter.

Trains serving the valley leave from Chambéry and run as far as Modane, 23km southwest of Lanslebourg, from where **Transdev Savoie** (☎ 08 20 22 74 13; www.transavoie.com) runs three to four daily buses to/from Termignon-la-Vanoise (€7.90, 40 minutes), Lanslebourg (€10.60, 50 minutes) and Bonneval-sur-Arc (€15.90, 1¼ hours).

DAUPHINÉ

Apart from its celebrated gratin (*gratin dauphinois*), the Dauphiné's other big legacy to the French lexicon is historical. In 1339 Dauphiné ruler Humbert II established a university in Grenoble. A decade later, lacking money and a successor, he sold Dauphiné to the French king, Charles V, who started the tradition whereby the eldest son of the king of France (the crown prince) ruled Dauphiné and bore the title 'dauphin'.

Now a defunct administrative entity, the Dauphiné refers to territories south and southwest of Savoy, stretching from the River Rhône in the west to the Italian border in the east. It includes the city of Grenoble and, a little further east, the mountainous Parc National des Écrins. The gentler terrain of the western part of Dauphiné is typified by the Parc Naturel Régional du Vercors, much loved by cross-country skiers. In the east, the town of Briançon stands guard on the Italian frontier.

GRENOBLE

pop 155,100

One of the great things about Grenoble is that every corner you turn and every street you take yields spectacular views of the surrounding Alps. It's intoxicating to think this is only the tip of the iceberg and that there are 10 times more mountain marvels just on your doorstep...

But Grenoble isn't just an Alpine base: since the 1960s the city has grown into a leading technology hub, with cutting-edge

work in nuclear physics and nanotechnology. Culturally too, Grenoble has some outstanding museums showcasing world-class modern art and a busy performing-arts scene, which the city's 60,000 students lap up. So whatever you go to Grenoble for, you'll certainly get a lot more than you bargained for.

Orientation

Grenoble is tricky to negotiate from behind the wheel thanks to the bewildering one-way system and disorientating tram network. The old city is centred on place Grenette and place Notre Dame, both 1km east of the train and bus stations. The main university campus is a couple of kilometres east of the old centre, on the southern side of the River Isère.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Décitre (☎ 04 76 03 36 36; 9-11 Grande Rue) Mainstream bookshop with English titles.

EMERGENCY

Duty Pharmacy (☎ 04 76 63 42 55)

Grenoble University Hospital (☎ 04 76 76 75 75)

Hôpital Nord La Tronche (av de Marquis du Grésivaudan; tram stop 'La Tronche' on tramway line B); Hôpital Sud (av de Kimberley, Echirolles; bus 11 & 13)

INTERNET ACCESS

Log in to the tourist office's two computers (below) for €2 per 15 minutes or €5 an hour.

Celsius Café (☎ 04 76 00 13 60; 15 rue Jean-Jacques Rousseau; per 30/60min €1.50/2.50; ⏰ 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, 1-8pm Sun) Top location and facilities.

Neptune Internet (☎ 04 76 63 94 18; 2 rue de la Paix; per 30/60min €2.50/3.50; ⏰ 1-7pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) A funky, tidy place with lots of QWERTY keyboards.

Pl@net Internet (☎ 04 76 47 44 74; 1 place Vaucanson; per hr €3.50; ⏰ 8.30am-10pm Mon-Sat)

LAUNDRY

Pay about €3.50 to wash a 7kg load:

Au 43 Viallet (43 av Félix Viallet; ⏰ 7am-8pm)

Laverie Berriat (88 cours Berriat; ⏰ 7am-8pm)

POST

Post Office (rue de la République) Next to the tourist office.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Office (☎ 04 76 42 41 41; www.grenoble-isere-tourisme.com; 14 rue de la République; ⏰ 9am-

6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun Oct-Apr, 10am-1pm & 2-5pm May-Sep) Inside the Maison du Tourisme. Sells maps and guides, arranges city tours.

Sights

FORT DE LA BASTILLE

Looming above the old city on the northern side of the River Isère, this grand 16th-century fort is Grenoble's best-known landmark. Built to control the approaches to the city, the stronghold has long been a focus of military and political action.

These days, the strategic importance of **Fort de la Bastille** (498m; www.bastille-grenoble.com) is of the touristy variety thanks to its spectacular mountain views. Three viewpoint indicators explain the surrounding vistas, and panels map out hiking trails, some of which lead down the hillside.

To get to the fort, hop aboard the riverside **Téléphérique Grenoble Bastille** (☎ 04 76 44 33 65; quai Stéphane Jay; adult/student/under 5yr one-way €4.15/3.35/free, return €6.10/4.85/free; ☎ Feb-Nov). The ascent in egg-shaped pods, which climb 264m from the quay over the swift waters of the River Isère, is almost more fun than the fort itself. Unsurprisingly, it gets crowded in summer – leave early to avoid the worst queues. Or better, walk: it's a pleasant one hour uphill and just over half an hour down.

MUSEUMS

The city has a wealth of great museums, many free.

Musée de Grenoble

The sleek glass and steel exterior of Grenoble's boldest museum spans an entire block between the river Isère and av Maréchal Randon. Also called Musée des Beaux-Arts, **Musée de Grenoble** (☎ 04 76 63 44 44; www.museedegrenoble.fr, in French; 5 place de Lavalette; adult/student €/5/2, 1st Sun of month free; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Wed-Mon) is renowned for its distinguished modern collection, including various works by famous artists Chagall, Matisse, Modigliani, Monet and Picasso, among others. Its classic collection is equally impressive, spanning works from the 13th to 19th century.

Centre National d'Art Contemporain (CNAC)

Housed in the city's other architectural biggie, Grenoble's **Centre National d'Art Contemporain** (CNAC; National Centre of Contemporary Art) is a must-see.

Considered one of Europe's leading centres of contemporary art, it is dramatically placed in **Le Magasin** (☎ 04 76 21 95 84; www.magasin-cnac.org; 155 cours Berriat; adult/student/under 10yr €3.50/2/free; ☎ 2-7pm Tue-Sun), a vast and hugely impressive glass and steel warehouse built by Gustave Eiffel. There are two exhibition areas: the 1000-sq-metre space with a huge glass roof called 'La Rue', in which artists create works designed specifically for this space, and a flexible 900-sq-metre space known as 'The Galleries' which is adapted to the artist's work. Take tram A to Berriat-Le Magasin stop.

Musée Dauphinois





The **Musée Dauphinois** (☎ 04 57 58 89 01; www.musee-dauphinois.fr, in French; 30 rue Maurice Gignoux; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, until 6pm Oct-May) beautifully documents the cultures, crafts and traditions of Alpine life, including a fantastic exhibition devoted to the region's skiing history. The museum occupies a beautiful 17th-century convent, nestled at the foot of the hill below Fort de la Bastille. From the city centre, it is most easily reached by the Pont St-Laurent footbridge.

Musée de l'Ancien Évêché

On place Notre Dame, the imposing **Cathédrale Notre Dame** and adjoining 14th-century **Bishops' Palace** – home to Grenoble's bishops until 1908 – form the **Musée de l'Ancien Évêché** (☎ 04 76 03 15 25; www.ancien-eveche-isere.com; 2 rue Très Cloîtres; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Wed-Sat & Mon, 10am-7pm Sun, 1.30-6pm Tue). The palace museum traces local history from prehistory to the 21st century, and takes visitors beneath the cathedral square to a crypt safeguarding old Roman walls and a baptistery dating from the 4th to 10th centuries.

Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère

The moving **Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère** (Museum of Resistance and Deportation of Isère; ☎ 04 76 42 38 53; www.resistance-en-isere.com, in French; 14 rue Hébert; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon & Wed-Fri, 1.30-6pm Tue, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun Sep-Jun, 10am-7pm Mon & Wed-Sun, 1.30-7pm Tue Jul & Aug) examines the deportation of Jews and other 'undesirables' from Grenoble to Nazi camps during WWII in a cool-headed way. It also documents the role of the Vercors region in the French Resistance. Captions are in French, English and German.

INFORMATION	SLEEPING 	DRINKING 
Au 43 Viallet.....1 B3	Hôtel Acacia.....16 C2	Barberousse.....38 E2
Celsius Café.....2 D2	Hôtel de la Poste.....17 D3	Le 365.....39 E2
Decitre.....3 D2	Hôtel de l'Europe.....18 D2	Le Code Bar.....40 B4
Laverie Berriat.....4 A3	Hôtel Lux.....19 A3	Le Couche Tard.....41 D1
Neptune Internet.....5 E2	Hôtel Suisse et Bordeaux.....20 A2	Le Tord Boyaux.....42 E2
PL@net Internet.....6 D3	Hôtel Terminus.....21 A2	Momento.....43 E4
Post Office.....7 E2	Splendid Hôtel.....22 C4	Styx.....44 D2
Tourist Office.....8 E2		Subway.....45 C4
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	EATING 	ENTERTAINMENT 
Bishop's Palace.....(see 9)	Café de la Table Ronde.....23 D2	Fnac.....46 D2
Bureau des Guides de Grenoble et Accompagnateurs.....(see 11)	China Moon.....24 A3	La Nef.....47 C2
Cathédrale Notre Dame.....9 E1	Ciao a Te.....25 E2	La Soupe aux Choux.....48 B1
Club Alpin Français de l'Isère.....10 B2	La Fondue.....26 E2	Les 6 Rex.....49 D3
Maison de la Montagne.....11 D3	La Panse.....27 E2	
Musée Dauphinois.....12 D1	L'Amphitryon.....28 E1	TRANSPORT
Musée de Grenoble.....13 E1	Le Mal Assis.....29 E2	Bus Station.....50 A2
Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de l'Isère.....14 F2	Le Mandala.....30 D3	Car Rental
Musée de l'Ancien Evêché.....(see 9)	L'Épicurien.....31 E1	Companies.....51 A2
SIPAVAG.....(see 11)	Les Archers.....32 C3	Eurolines.....(see 50)
Téléphérique Grenoble Bastille.....15 D2	Les Dix Vins.....33 C2	Métrovélo.....52 A2
	Les Halles Ste-Claire.....34 E2	SNCF Boutique.....53 E2
	Monoprix Supermarket.....35 D2	TAG Office.....54 A2
	Pivano.....36 B3	TAG Office.....(see 8)
	Shaman Café.....37 E2	

Activities

The authorities on mountain activities around Grenoble – skiing, snowboarding, ski mountaineering, ice climbing, walking, mountain biking, rock climbing etc – reside in the **Maison de la Montagne** (☎ 04 76 44 67 03; 3 rue Raoul Blanchard; ☞ 9.30am–12.30pm & 1–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–1pm & 2–5pm Sat). Staff are a mine of information and can help you plan day trips and treks with *refuge* stays, or book activities. They also sell a number of maps and walking books, including the excellent *TopoGuides* series, and run a library of more than 700 maps and walking references that are free to consult. For walks around Grenoble, ask for the free **SIPAVAG** (☎ 04 76 24 48 59; www.sipavag.fr, in French) maps and itineraries (*La Carte des Sentiers des Franges Vertes* or *Guide Balades*, in French).

If it's a guide you're after, the **Bureau des Guides de Grenoble et Accompagnateurs** (☎ 04 76 44 67 03; www.guide-grenoble.com, in French; Maison de la Montagne) runs the whole gamut of summer and winter activities.

You can also try the **Club Alpin Français de l'Isère** (☎ 04 76 87 03 73; 32 av Félix Viallet; www.club-alpin-grenoble.com, in French; ☞ 2–6pm Tue & Wed, 2–8pm Thu & Fri). They run most of the *refuges* in the area. Their program of activities is posted in the window.

To jump lift-pass queues in Grenoble's surrounding ski resorts (p563), buy your pass in advance from the tourist office or the *billetterie* inside Fnac (p562).

Tours

The tourist office organises imaginative thematic **walking tours** (adult €6–12.50, student €4–12.50, in French only), including a two-hour stroll in the footsteps of Grenoble-born novelist Stendhal, museums and various industry-focused tours. Those who'd rather go it alone can rent an MP3 audioguide (English available; €7 plus €80 deposit; two-hour tour with 13 stops) at the tourist office.

Festivals & Events

Jazz greats have hit Grenoble for a fiesta of concerts during the annual **Grenoble Jazz Festival** (☎ 04 76 51 65 32; www.jazzgrenoble.com, in French; tickets free–€30, 3-/6-evening pass €42/65) in March since 1973; the venue for many concerts is MC2 (p562).

Sleeping

Sleeping in Grenoble is a bit of a let-down. Hotels tend to be soulless and the reluctant preserve of passing business people. Parking can also be expensive (few street spaces, expensive public car parks).

Auberge de Jeunesse (☎ 04 76 09 33 52; grenoble@fuaj.org; 10 av du Grésivaudan; B&B €16.70; ☞ reception 7.30am–11pm) This excellent hostel has everything you could possibly want: a lively bar, a self-catering kitchen (and a huge supermarket two minutes away to fill up the fridge), a wicked sun deck, private car park and impeccable two- to four-bed dorms, many with en suite. The only downside: it's 5km

south of the train station in the Echirolles district. From cours Jean Jaurès, take bus 1 to the Quinzaine stop (just outside the Casino supermarket) or tram A to La Rampe stop and walk 15 minutes.

Hôtel de l'Europe (☎ 04 76 46 16 94; www.hoteleurope.fr; 22 place Grenette; s with washbasin/shower €31/42, d €40-80) This is a good bet for cheap accommodation in the centre as there are a few non-en suite rooms. The catch: the shared bathroom is on the 2nd floor, which is a bit of a bummer if your room is two floors up. You'll have a choice of grand spiral staircase or lift to get around.

Hôtel de la Poste (☎ 04 76 46 67 25; 25 rue de la Poste; s/d/tr €34/41/50) Beautifully renovated and oozing old-school charm, the rooms in the rambling flats that make up Hôtel de la Poste are Grenoble's best-kept secret. Some have shared bathroom and toilets but these facilities are so clean you won't have a second thought about using them. And best of all, you even get the use of the kitchen. Rooms B3 and B5 are top picks.

Hôtel Lux (☎ 04 76 46 41 89; www.hotel-lux.com; 6 rue Crépu; s €37-50, d €51-55) Despite its name, Hôtel Lux is not a luxurious affair: rooms are pretty basic and the decor neutral, but its charming owners keep the place spotless. It's close to the station and has wi-fi throughout.

Hôtel Acacia (☎ 04 76 87 29 90; 13 rue de Belgrade; s €40, d €44-62) As boxy and boring as it is, this dead-central hotel could not be closer to the action. Rooms with shared toilets (but their own shower) are cheaper. Definitely go for a nonsmoking room though to avoid the smell.

Hôtel Suisse et Bordeaux (☎ 04 76 47 55 87; www.hotel-sb-grenoble.com; 6 place de la Gare; s/d/t €48/57/69) They've gone a little overboard with the old flowery bedspread and matching curtains, but it's otherwise spacious and clean. Rooms overlooking the backyard are much quieter than those at the front, but then you'll miss out on the balconies.

Splendid Hôtel (☎ 04 76 46 33 12; www.splendid-hotel.com; 22 rue Thiers; s €57, d €71-89) Colourful, fresh and with funky paintings on the walls, this is a welcome break from the dreary two-star scene in Grenoble. Rooms are simple but cosy, some with air-con and all with wi-fi. There is a lovely garden at the back, a great breakfast buffet and last but not least, a car park. A great choice all round.

Hôtel Terminus (☎ 04 76 87 24 33; www.terminus-hotel-grenoble.fr; 10 place de la Gare; d €68-149; ☎ ☎)

The rooms are comfortable and rather spacious, the staff helpful and the buffet breakfast copious, but there is no escaping the fact that it is a chain (Best Western), attracting a mostly 'passing-by' clientele.

Eating

Unlike its sleeping options, Grenoble boasts some excellent restaurants, thanks partly to its vibrant student crowd. As Dauphiné capital, Grenoble is *the* place to sample that quintessential French dish *gratin dauphinois* (finely sliced potatoes oven-baked in cream and a pinch of nutmeg).

RESTAURANTS

L'Amphitryon (☎ 04 76 51 38 07; 9 rue Chenoise; mains €10; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) The decor is an odd, slightly tacky mix of cardboard cut-out dunes, steel door, blue lights and 16th-century building. Thankfully, no such identity crisis on the menu: a resolutely modern oriental cuisine, the house speciality being *brik*, a thin pastry stuffed with mouth-watering fillings.

Shaman Café (☎ 04 38 37 23 56; 1 place Notre Dame; menu from €12.50; ☎ 8am-midnight) With its oriental decor and big chill music, this place smacks of Buddha Bar wannabe. It's not quite there yet but it is still a decent option, particularly for lunch with a three-course meal for €12.50. The cuisine is in turn Japanese, Lebanese, Chinese or Thai.

Ciao a Te (☎ 04 76 42 54 41; 2 rue de la Paix; mains €15; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, closed Aug) A genuinely Italian address, so don't come here for pizza but for the real, rich and generous Italian cuisine: lots of veal, seafood and superfresh pasta. Unsurprisingly, Ciao has become one of Grenoble's most popular restaurants, so book.

Le Mandala (☎ 04 76 44 49 80; 7 rue Raoul Blanchard; mains €15; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) The outside looks a little stern but the mood inside Le Mandala is anything but: behind his glass kitchen wall, Joël cooks up a storm (do try his *tarte au citron*: you've never had anything like it) while Cyril hands out menus, dishes and jokes in the small but perfectly formed dining room.

Les Archers (☎ 04 76 46 27 76; 2 rue Docteur Bailly; mains €15; ☎ 11am-2am Tue-Sat, 11am-1am Sun & Mon) This green-fronted, old-school French brasserie is the perfect place for a seafood platter, a load of snails or a winter-warming sauerkraut, and late-night eating generally speaking. In summer, tables spill into the square.

La Fondue (☎ 04 76 15 20 72; 5 rue Brocherie; fondue per person €17; ☎ dinner Mon, lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) No surprise here, La Fondue does what it says on the tin: 16 different types of fondue (with G n pi, chartreuse, kirsch, different types of cheeses etc), including the dessert variety (chocolate). There is also an assortment of raclettes and *tartiflettes* to complete the mountain cheese trilogy (see boxed text, p551).

Les Dix Vins (☎ 04 76 17 14 72; 4 rue Belgrade; menus €17-38; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The seriously funky decor (pink chairs, purple walls and oddly shaped lampshades) is matched by a fun (and very affordable) cuisine, a formula that attracts a young crowd keen for a bit of the action. There's also a very well-supplied bar if you'd just like to take in the atmosphere.

La Panse (☎ 04 76 54 09 54; 7 rue de la Paix; menus €18, €22 & €34; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) The food, the decor, the crowd, the atmosphere, it's all very sophisticated here, except for the bill: surprisingly small for a place of that calibre. Which means you'll be able to tuck into your *croustillant de Reblochon* (little parcels of Reblochon cheese and apple) and your *entrec te aux morilles* (a tender piece of beef with a creamy morel sauce) even more merrily.

Le Mal Assis (☎ 04 76 54 75 93; 7 rue Bayard; mains €20; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat) 'The Badly Seated' is an intimate little place where traditional French dishes turn up as the usual tasty mains (*andouillette*, an aniseed-flavoured fish stew, and *bourride*, a type of sausage) or the less conventional platters (crostini, foie gras, terrines) for a more tapas-style meal. And really, the seats are not that bad; there are just not that many of them, so book ahead.

L' picurien (☎ 04 76 51 96 06; 1 place aux Herbes; mains €20; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, closed Aug) In a rustic setting with sloped beamed ceiling and a mezzanine, L' picurien serves solid French cuisine: the rabbit with apricot and foie gras is a-okay and the *gratin dauphinois* a mound of creamy goodness. And let's have one last squeeze for the regional dessert of choice, the *tarte aux noix*. No mercy for the stomach.

CAF S & QUICK EATS

Pivano (☎ 04 76 50 62 13; 33 av Alsace Lorraine; mains €5; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Sat) 'Gastronomic snacks' are the hallmark of this chic boutique caf . Their breakfast formula beats any of the neighbouring hotels' morning offerings: €3.80 for supertasty bread with lovely spreads and a hot drink. They even have wi-fi.

China Moon (☎ 04 76 43 14 15; 52 av Alsace Lorraine; mains from €4; ☎ 9am-11pm daily) Fried rice, sweet and sour pork, spring rolls and dumplings, this is perfect to grab a quick bite that is not a sandwich on your way to or from the station. Takeaway is also available.

Caf  de la Table Ronde (☎ 04 76 44 51 41; 7 place St-Andr ; dishes €10-22; ☎ 7am-midnight Mon-Sat) All hail the *ardoise du jour* at this historic 1739 caf  opposite the Palais de Justice, and Stendhal and Rousseau's favourite haunt: there's something for every purse from €9 cheapies such as hot goat's cheese salad to carnivorous treats like *Tournedos Rossini* (€20), a succulent piece of beef served with a pan-fried slice of foie gras and a Madeira wine sauce – sinful!

SELF-CATERING

Les Halles Ste-Claire (place Ste-Claire; ☎ 7am-1pm Tue-Thu & Sun, 7am-1pm & 3-7pm Fri & Sat) Grenoble's lovely old covered market since 1874.

Monoprix (22 rue Lafayette; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Sat) Supermarket with street-level *boulangerie* (bakery; rue Raoul Blanchard entrance).

Drinking

Like every good student city, Grenoble does a mean party. Here are just a few places to get you started.

Le 365 (☎ 04 76 51 73 18; 3 rue Bayard; ☎ 3pm-1am or 2am Tue-Sat) If Dionysos (god of wine) had a house, we reckon that's what it would look like: an irresistible clutter of bottles, frames, candles and ultrareaxed atmosphere, the ideal setting for sipping one of the many wines on offer or a decadent *chocolat chartreuse* (hot chocolate with herbal liquor chartreuse, quite the winter-warmer!)

Le Tord Boyaux (☎ 04 76 44 18 90; 4 rue Auguste Gach ; ☎ 6pm-2am) More than 30 flavoured wines, some of them quite extravagant (violet, chestnut, G n pi, fig etc), and a blind test every Tuesday night to see how many your taste buds can recognise: how's that for a good night out?

Barberousse (☎ 04 76 57 14 53; 8 rue Hache; ☎ 6pm-2am Tue-Sat) If you're after cheap drinks and a boogie, this is the place to come: shots and loud music are regular fixtures, as is the lairy crowd of students who down aromatic rum and sing on top of their head as if there was no tomorrow.

momento (☎ 04 76 26 21 59; 2 rue Beccaria; ☎ noon-1am Sun-Wed, to 2am Thu-Sat) A feast of fluoro lights, this establishment is a bit like an American

GAY GRENOBLE

Student-studded Grenoble enjoys a rich gay life, kicking off with a wealth of gay organisations (think everything from rugby to mountain sports, singing and a support network for gay and lesbian parents) spearheaded by **CIGALE** (Collectif Inter-Associations Gays et Lesbiennes; www.cigalegrenoble.free.fr, in French; 8 rue Sergent Bobillot). The fabulously cutting-edge **Festival Vues d'en Face** (www.vuesdenface.com), an international gay and lesbian film festival, is held each year in April.

Le Georges V (☎ 04 76 84 16 20; 124 cours Berriat; admission €12; 🕒 11pm-5.30am Wed-Sun) is a happening gay nightclub and **Le Code Bar** (☎ 04 76 43 58 91; 9 rue Étienne Marcel; 🕒 6pm-1am Tue-Sun) a hip and friendly gay bar.

diner à la 21st century: big burgers, big cocktails (pitchers), big music. Its location is a bit odd: next to a multistorey car park and fairly out-centred.

Subway (☎ 04 76 87 31 67; 2 rue Lakanal; 🕒 8.30am-1am Mon-Wed, 8.30am-2am Thu & Fri, 2pm-2am Sat, 4pm-1am Sun) The favourite local drinking hole of an unpretentious young crowd. It's happy hour all night on Thursday, wahey!

Styx (☎ 04 76 44 09 99; 6 place Claveysson; 🕒 1pm-2am Mon-Sat) If you're too cool for school, this is the place for you: designer cocktails, DJs, soft red light and attitude by the shaker-load. The terrace is the place to hang out on sunny afternoons or warmer evenings.

Le Couche Tard (☎ 04 76 44 18 79; 1 rue du Palais; 🕒 7pm-2am Mon-Sat) The 'go to bed late' grungy pub must be the only place on earth that will encourage you to graffiti its walls, so make the best of it! Happy hour is until 10pm every day, even better.

Entertainment

Pick up the weekly *Grenews* and *Le Petit Bulletin* (both free) at the tourist office to discover what's happening when and where.

La Nef (☎ 08 92 68 00 31; 18 bd Édouard Rey; tickets €7.50) shows a great selection of art-house and independent films. For new releases try **Les 6 Rex** (☎ 08 92 68 00 31; 1 rue Émile Augier; tickets €7.80-8). Find programs (in French) at www.cine-loisirs.com.

The most exciting all-rounder for theatre, dance, opera, jazz (p559) and other music is **MC2** (Maison de la Culture; ☎ 04 76 00 79 00; www.mc2grenoble.fr, in French; 4 rue Paul Claudel; 🕒 box office 12.30-7pm Tue-Fri, 2-7pm Sat), 2km south of the centre on tram line A (tram stop MC2).

La Soupe aux Choux (☎ 04 76 87 05 67; <http://jazzalaloupe.free.fr>, in French; 7 rte de Lyon; show only/dinner & show €10/28; 🕒 8pm-1am Tue-Sat), going strong

for 25 years, is the tip-top address for getting down to live jazz. Get into the groove of dozens more venues with flyers at the *billetterie* (ticket office) inside **Fnac** (☎ 08 25 02 00 20; 4 rue Félix Poulat; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Sat).

Getting There & Away

AIR

A clutch of budget airlines, including Ryanair and easyJet, fly to/from **Grenoble-Isère Airport** (☎ 04 76 65 48 48; www.grenoble-airport.com), 45km northwest of Grenoble, from London, Glasgow, Stockholm and Warsaw; see p961 for details.

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 04 76 87 90 31; rue Émile Gueymard), next to the train station, is the main terminus for several bus companies, including **VFD** (☎ 08 20 83 38 33; www.vfd.fr, in French) and **Transisère** (☎ 08 20 08 38 38; www.transisere.fr, in French). Destinations include Chambéry (€5.10, two hours), Geneva airport (€43, 2½ hours), Lyon St-Exupéry airport (€20, one hour), Chamrousse (€4, 1¼ hours), Bourg d'Oisans (€5.10, 50 minutes), Les Deux Alpes (€5.10, 1¼ hours) and the Vercors ski stations (opposite).

Eurolines (☎ 04 76 46 19 77; www.eurolines.fr; 🕒 10am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) handles international destinations (p964).

TRAIN

From the **train station** (rue Émile Gueymard), next to the Gare Europole tram stop, trains run to/from Paris' Gare de Lyon (from €74.70, 3½ hours), Chambéry (€9.90, one hour, 10 to 13 daily) and Lyon (€18, 1½ hours, five daily). Train tickets are sold at the station and in town at the **SNCF boutique** (15 rue de la République; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Sat).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Shuttle buses run by **Transisère** (☎ 08 20 08 38 38) to/from Grenoble-Isère Airport use the bus station (one-way/return €4/8, 45 minutes, four to eight daily).

BICYCLE

Métrovélo (☎ 08 20 22 38 38; 🕒 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-noon Sat & 2-7pm Sun Nov-Mar), underneath the train station, rents out bikes for €3/5 per half-/full day. Helmets, child's seat and locks are free. You'll need an ID and a €50 deposit per bike.

BUS & TRAM

Grenoble's three pollution-free tram lines – called A, B and C – run through the heart of town. A single-trip bus and tram ticket costs €1.30 from ticket machines at tram and bus stops or drivers. Time-stamp tickets in the blue machines at stops before boarding. Carnets of 10 tickets (€10.90) and day passes (€3.60) can only be bought at the **TAG office** (☎ 08 20 48 60 00; www.semitag.com; 🕒 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat) inside the tourist office or next to the train station. Trams run from around 5am to 1am; buses stop between 6pm and 9pm.

CAR

Find the major car-rental agencies in the Europole complex underneath the train station.

TAXI

Call the **central reservation line** (☎ 04 76 54 42 54) to order a taxi.

AROUND GRENOBLE

Grenoble's low-altitude surrounds lure city dwellers seeking a weekend fix of snow action. The Vercors is sweet for cross-country, while family-driven **Chamrousse** (elevation 1700m), built for the 1968 Winter Olympics 35km southeast from Grenoble, is OK for beginner-level downhill – its **tourist office** (☎ 04 76 89 92 65; www.chamrousse.com, in French; 42 place de Belledonne) has the full lowdown. Serious skiers must head east to Les Deux Alpes, Alpe d'Huez and La Grave for serious action.

Several daily VFD buses link Grenoble with all the surrounding resorts (details listed in respective sections), including Chamrousse (€4, 1¼ hours). For day trippers, the Skiligne

operated by VFD to 13 different ski resorts in the region are a good deal; rates (from €13 in Chamrousse and Villard de Lans to €35 for Les Deux Alpes and Alpe d'Huez) include a one-day ski pass as well as return bus fare.

Parc Naturel Régional du Vercors

Immediately southwest of Grenoble, this gently rolling nature park (1750 sq km) is a slow-paced oasis of calm and an ideal family destination, cheaper, easier and smaller than big Alpine resorts. If you're not an adrenalin junkie, you'll love it here. Known for its cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, caving and hiking, it was also a Resistance stronghold during WWII, nicknamed *Forteresse de la Résistance*.

From humble **Lans-en-Vercors** (population 2300, elevation 1020m), 25km southwest of Grenoble, buses shuttle downhill skiers 4km east to its 14-piste Montagnes de Lans ski area. **Villard de Lans** (population 4000, elevation 1050m), 9km up the valley, is linked by ski lifts to **Corrençon-en-Vercors** (population 358, elevation 1111m) for 125km of winter-wonderland downhill pistes at melting prices (€28 for a day). For alternative fun, the **Colline des Bains** (half-/full day €6/8), in Villars-de-Lans, offers six sledging tracks: pick your vehicle (sledge train for extra chaos, solo sledge, rubber ring or bobsleigh), pick your track and whiz down.

Villard de Lans' dynamic **tourist office** (☎ 04 76 95 10 38; www.villarddelans.com; place Mure Ravaud) should be your first port of call for activities in the Vercors (which run the gamut of mountain fun, from paragliding to canyoning). Their booking service **Vercors Réservations** (☎ 04 76 95 96 96; www.vercors-reservations.com) can help with accommodation throughout the park, including farmstays. **Les Accompagnateurs Nature et Patrimoine** (☎ 04 76 95 08 38; www.accompagnateur-vercors.com, in French) organises great guided walking or snowshoeing trips to learn about the park's flora and fauna.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Up to seven **VFD** (☎ 08 20 08 38 38; www.vfd.fr, in French) buses daily link Lans-en-Vercors with Grenoble (€4, 45 minutes), Villard de Lans (€1.80, 15 minutes) and Corrençon-en-Vercors (€1.80, 35 minutes).

Parc National des Écrins

The spectacular **Parc National des Écrins** (www.les-ecrins-parc-national.fr), France's second-largest

INSIDE TASTE

The Vercors has some amazing chalets and farmhouses to stay in. Here is a selection of this author's favourites.

Les Allières (☎ 04 76 94 32 32; www.aubergedesallieres.com, in French; Lans-en-Vercors; half-board per person €51, mains €20) It takes about half an hour from the nearest car park to walk to Les Allières, a forest chalet 1500m up in the mountain that offers basic accommodation (bunk beds and shared toilets) and wondrous mountain food. The wood-fire raclette and *tarte aux myrtilles* (blueberry tart, a regional speciality) are legendary. Take the direction of Montagnes de Lans from Lans-en-Vercors. Park in the first car park on your left (about 1.5km up the road); the path to Les Allières is signposted across the road.

À la Crécia (☎ 04 76 95 46 98; www.gite-en-vercors.com, in French; Lans-en-Vercors; s/d/tr/q €52/57/72/87; dinner €17) Goats, pigs, poultry and lambs rule the roost at this authentic 16th-century farm, renovated with zeal by Véronique and Pascal who run this charming *chambre d'hôte*. Stylish rooms are rustic but modern with wooden beams, delicate natural tones and stunning mosaic bathrooms. Hot water and heating in winter come courtesy of the roof's solar panels.

Gîte La Verne (☎ 04 76 95 21 18; <http://gite.laverne.free.fr>; La Verne, Méaudre; d with half board €124, apt for 4/8 people per week €500/780) Not your average *gîte* (cottage for rent) at all, La Verne is a beautiful Alpine chalet split into six exquisite flats that can be rented out on a *gîte* (self-catering) or *chambre d'hôte* (half-board) basis. Flats are fitted with fully equipped kitchens. But whatever the formula, you'll be able to enjoy the hammam and outdoor Norwegian bath as well as owner Edwige's brilliant aperitifs and her wonderful hospitality.

national park (918 sq km), was created in 1973. Stretching between the towns of Bourg d'Oisans, Briançon and Gap, the area is enclosed by steep, narrow valleys, and sculpted by the Romanche, Durance and Drac rivers and their erstwhile glaciers. It peaks at 4102m with the legendary summit Barre des Écrins (a mountaineer's dream).

Bourg d'Oisans (population 3352, elevation 720m), 55km southeast of Grenoble, and **Briançon** (p566), another 67km in the same direction, are good bases for exploring the park. In Bourg d'Oisans, the **Maison du Parc** (☎ 04 76 80 00 51; rue Gambetta; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 3-7pm Jul & Aug, 9-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun) sells maps and guides. The town's **tourist office** (☎ 04 76 80 03 25; www.bourgdoisans.com; quai Girard; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Jun, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Sep-mid-Dec & mid-Apr-May, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9-11am Sun mid-Dec-mid-Apr) is also useful. The **Oisans website** (www.tourisme-oisans.com) is an excellent source of information on the area, with accommodation and activities listings.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

In Bourg d'Oisans the **Musée des Minéraux et de la Faune des Alpes** (☎ 04 76 80 27 54; place de l'Église; adult/6-18yr €4.60/2; ☎ 2-6pm Wed-Mon Sep-Jun, 10am-6pm Jul & Aug) paints park geology, flora and fauna, including ibexes, chamois and stoats.

In summer you can mammal-spot amid spectacular scenery from the window of **Chemin de Fer de la Mure** (☎ 08 92 39 14 26; www.trainlamure.com; adult/student/4-16yr return €19/12.50/9.50; ☎ 2-4 departures daily Apr-Oct), a small red 1920s mountain train that chugs 30km (1½ hours) between St-Georges de Commiers and La Mure.

Age-old footpaths used by shepherds and smugglers centuries before – 700km in all – ensnare the national park, making it prime **hiking** territory. **Kayaking** along the Drac's turquoise waters, rock climbing, *via ferrata*, **paragliding** and **mountain biking** are other activities; tourist and park offices have details.

SLEEPING & EATING

The tourist office in Bourg d'Oisans knows about **gîtes d'étape** (walkers' guesthouses; dm €13-21) open year-round.

There are campsites galore in and around Bourg d'Oisans, open June to September, including the pretty **La Cascade** (☎ 04 76 80 02 42; www.premiumwanadoo.com/lacascadesarenne; rte de l'Alpe d'Huez; 2-adult tent pitch €17.50-25; ☎ mid-Dec-Sep; 📍), 1.5km from the centre; and well-equipped **Le Colporteur** (☎ 04 76 79 11 44; www.camping-colporteur.com; Le Mas de Plan; 2-adult tent pitch €19-24; ☎ mid-May-mid-Sep, 📍 📍), with a restaurant-bar, a two-second hop from town.

Bourg has a clutch of uninspiring hotels. Instead try **Au Fil des Saisons** (☎ 04 76 30 07 01; www.chambresdhotels-afs.com, in French; Ferme du Cros, Les Côtes de Corps; d with B&B €50, dinner €17; 📅 Feb–mid-Dec). It is a beautiful 1731 mountain farm with beamed and vaulted ceilings where Dany (Danielle) and Domi (Dominique) welcome you with incredible warmth. Dinner is a regal but wholesome spread of home-made everything: the bread is home-baked as are all the cakes, the vegetables are home-grown, the honey is Domi's very own (he's a beekeeper in his spare time) and the lamb and cheeses come from their son's sheep farm next door. Find the Ferme du Cros 2km from Corps in Les Côtes de Corps; follow the southbound N85 from Grenoble. Advance reservations essential.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Bourg d'Oisans **bus station** (av de la Gare), on the main road into town, there are two or three buses daily to/from Briançon (€13.90, two hours), Les Deux Alpes (€1.80, 40 minutes) and Alpe d'Huez (€1.80, 40 minutes), and up to eight daily to/from Grenoble (€5.10, 50 minutes).

Les Deux Alpes

elevation 1600m

It's Glacier du Mont de Lans – an enormous 3200m- to 3425m-high glacier – and its year-round skiing that creates the buzz in Les Deux Alpes, a busy ski resort 28km southeast of Bourg d'Oisans. The village's lowly beginnings as mountain pasture for sheep flocks are belied by the never-ending stream of traffic that clogs up the main street, av de la Muzelle.

Free-riders come from far and wide to tackle the mythical **Vallons de la Meije** descent in **La Grave** (www.la-grave.com), 21km east. The stuff of legend, the off-piste run plummets 2150m and is strictly for the crème de la crème of off-piste riders.

INFORMATION

Slope-side **Maison des Deux Alpes** (place des Deux Alpes) is the key source: inside you'll find the **tourist office** (☎ 04 76 79 22 00; www.les2alpes.com; 📅 8am–7pm mid-Dec–mid-Apr, Jul & Aug, 9am–noon & 2–6pm Mon–Fri rest of year), **accommodation service** (☎ 04 76 79 24 38; reservation@les2alpes.com), **ESF** (☎ 04 76 79 21 21; www.esf2alpes.com) and the **Bureau des Guides** (☎ 04 76 11 36 29; www.guides2alpes.com, in French).

SIGHTS

Metre-tall animals, Alpine flowers and shepherds are among the monumental ice sculptures filling the **Grotte de Glace** (Ice Cave; admission €4; 📅 10am–3pm), a cave carved into the Glacier du Mont de Lans at Dôme de Puy Salié (3425m). To reach it, ride the Jandri Express *télécabine* to 3200m (change of *télécabine* at 2600m) and then a lift down the underground Funiculaire Dôme Express to 3400m. Allow an hour to get there. A ticket covering cable cars and the cave costs €20.90/16.70 per adult/under 13 years.

Go for a scenic ride aboard a caterpillar-track minibus on **La Croisière Blanche** (The White Cruise; ☎ 04 76 79 75 03; per ride €6; 📅 10.30am–3pm Sun–Fri mid-Dec–mid-Apr, 10am–3pm Jul & Aug). It is very gimmicky but it does allow nonskiers to tickle the summit at 3600m and enjoy breathtaking 360° views. Wrap up as you would when skiing: the temperature is in the minus and the ride takes about 50 minutes. Cruise plus cable cars plus ice cave costs €26.90/22.70 for adult/child. You *must* book before you head off.

ACTIVITIES

Les Deux Alpes sports 225km of marked downhill pistes and a snowpark (2600m) with an 800m-long axe pipe, 120m-long half-pipe, and numerous jumps as well as technical courses along cornice drops, canyons and corridors in the 'slide' zone. The main skiing domain at Les Deux Alpes lies below La Meije (3983m), one of the highest peaks in the Parc National des Écrins. A one-/six-day pass covering the entire area costs €36.40/172; access to La Grave and La Meije off-piste is free for six-day (or more) Les Deux Alpes lift-pass holders and costs €12 a day for one- to five-day pass holders. Riders wanting to access La Grave from Les Deux Alpes are pulled by a snowcat from the top of the Dôme de la Lauze lift.

Skiing and snowboarding aside, snow fiends can bomb downhill on a mountain bike at the Bike Park des Lutins, nip around the rink in an ice-glider (dodgems on ice) or go on a snowmobile (*motoneige*) expedition. Contact the **Bureau des Guides** (left) for organised ice climbing, snowshoeing, off-piste skiing and mountaineering. In summer guides run rock climbing, walking, canyoning and biking expeditions.

The summer skiing season on the glacier – Europe's largest summer skiing area against

a panoramic backdrop of Mont Blanc, Massif Central and Mont Ventoux – runs from mid-June to the end of August. Otherwise there are 26 nail-biting descents and five cross-country trails for mountain bikers, numerous hiking trails and plenty of paragliding. Phew!

SLEEPING

The fun, action-packed **Auberge de Jeunesse** (☎ 04 76 79 22 80; www.fuaj.org; dm €17.60, full board only in winter 1 night €35-42, 6 nights incl 6-day lift pass €335-455; ☑ Dec-Apr & mid-Jun-Aug) offers very good-value full-board deals in winter, where you can nip down for lunch to fill up on hot food or order a pack lunch to eat on the slopes.

The tourist office can help you find anything from a self-catering flat to a hotel room.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

VFD buses link Grenoble and Les Deux Alpes (€5.10, 1¼ hours, up to 10 daily) via Bourg d'Oisans; return journeys to Grenoble must be booked 72 hours in advance in Les Deux Alpes at **Agence VFD** (☎ 04 76 80 51 22; 112 av de la Muzelle) or the tourist office. There are also services to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (one-way/return €29/44, 3½ hours).

Alpe d'Huez

elevation 1860m

Number of hairpin bends: 21. Length: 14km. Average slope gradient: 7.9%. Record time: 37 minutes 35 seconds. Portrait of a mythical *étape* of the Tour de France between Bourg d'Oisans and Alpe d'Huez, a purpose-built resort in the Massif des Grandes Rousses. Apart from legendary cycling, Alpe d'Huez has 245km of motorway pistes that range from dead-easy to deadly; at 16km La Sarenne, accessible from the Pic Blanc cable car, is the French Alps' longest black run. Experienced skiers can also ski in July and August on glaciers ranging from

2530m to 3330m. Off the slopes, speed fiends can ice-drive... in a Porsche.

Views from Pic du Lac Blanc (3330m), the highest point accessible year-round by the Tronçons and Pic Blanc cable cars, take in about a fifth of the French territory as well as neighbouring Italy and Switzerland. Summer unveils mountains threaded through with marked hiking and biking trails.

Information hub **Maison de l'Alpe** (place Paganon) sells ski passes (one/six days €38.20/198.50) and houses the tip-top **tourist office** (☎ 04 76 11 44 44; www.alpedhuez.com; ☎ 9am-7pm high season, 9am-12.30pm & 2.30-6pm Mon-Fri low season), **accommodation reservation centre** (☎ 04 76 80 90 00; www.alpe-vacances.com) and **ESF** (☎ 04 76 80 94 23; www.esf-alpedhuez.com).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

VFD buses (left) link Alpe d'Huez and Grenoble (€5.10, 1¼ hours, up to 10 daily) via Bourg d'Oisans. Buses shuttle skiers from Alpe d'Huez to Les Deux Alpes (return €6, 45 minutes, twice daily).

BRIANÇON

pop 12,100 / elevation 1320m

Strolling along the old town's ramparts, it's obvious why Briançon got its fortifications: five valleys tumble down into a plateau crowned by the rocky outcrop that is Briançon Vieille Ville. Italy is a mere 20km away, the town therefore played a major border-control role for centuries.

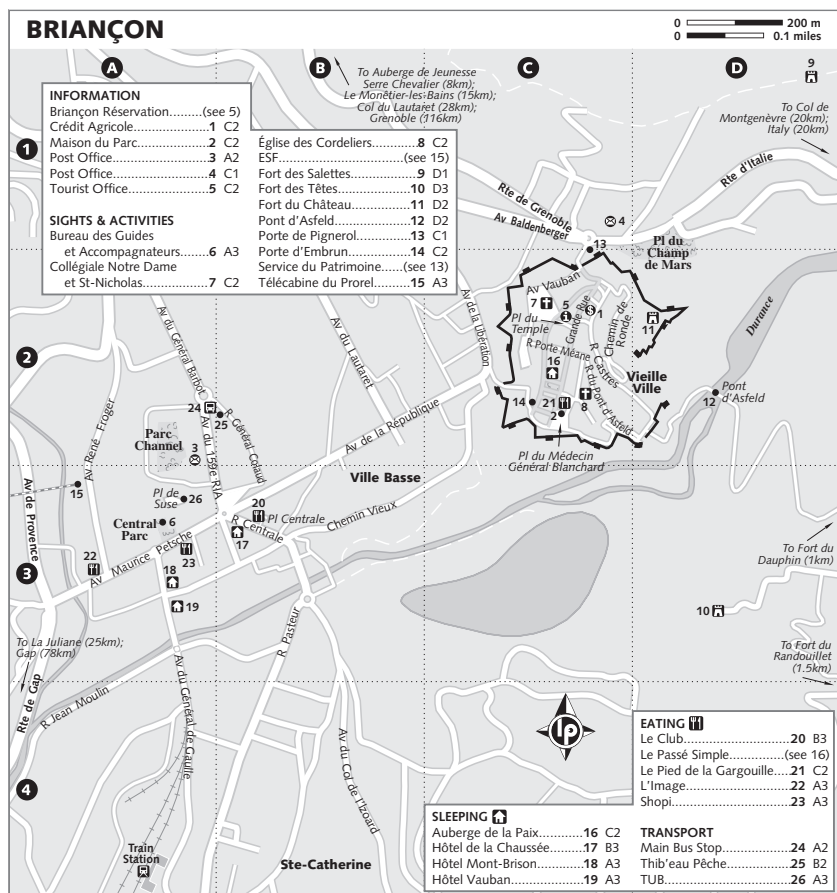
Invasions and wars over, Briançon still manages to play the location card: at 1320m and boasting 300 days of sunshine a year, air quality is excellent, with little pollution and humidity, making it an ideal destination for athletes and asthmatics in need of fresh air.

Military engineering and acclimatisation aside, cheap skiing (with no après-ski scene

MOUNTAIN TECHNOLOGY

Ever wondered where all that snow comes from? Take a tour of Alpe d'Huez's hi-tech **Usine à Neige du Plat des Marmottes** (Plat des Marmottes Snow Factory; admission & cable car €15; ☎ 2pm Thu) at 2300m, where artificial snow is made for up to 200 of the resort's 785 snow-making machines. Access Plat des Marmottes with the Marmottes cable car.

Roughly ten per cent of France's electricity comes from hydroelectric plants, many of them in the Alps. The excellent **Musée Hydrelec** (☎ 04 76 80 78 00; www.musee-hydrelec.fr; Le Verney, Vaujany; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 2-6pm weekends & school holidays mid-Sep-mid-Jun) explores the ins and outs of this form of energy. There is plenty of info in English and loads of interactive displays. Find Hydrelec halfway between Allemont and Vaujany on Lac du Verney, off the D526.



or nightlife to speak of) and walking are the best reasons to bed down in Briançon. Serre Chevalier (p568) offers 250km of fine pistes with sunshine on a plate, while the nearby Parc National des Écrins (p563) and Parc Naturel Régional du Queyras are criss-crossed by miles of scenic trails.

Information

Crédit Agricole (10 Grande Rue; ☎ 8.15am-noon & 1.30-4.45pm Mon-Fri, until 3.45pm Sat) Bank with currency exchange.

Maison du Parc (☎ 04 92 21 42 15; ecrins.brianconnais@espaces-naturels.fr; place du Médecin Général Blanchard; ☎ 10am-noon & 3-7pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun) Comprehensive information on the Parc National des Écrins (p563).

Post Offices (place du Champ de Mars; av du 159e RIA)

Tourist Office (☎ 04 92 21 08 50; www.ot-briancon.fr, in French; Maison des Templiers, 1 place du Temple; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 3-5pm Sun Sep-Jun, 9am-7pm Jul & Aug) In Vieille Ville.

Sights

Briançon's star attraction is its extensive 17th- and early-18th-century Vauban heritage, including the Vieille Ville (Old Town) signature star-shaped fortifications, surrounding forts (**Fort des Têtes**, **Fort des Salettes**, **Fort du Dauphin** and **Fort du Randouillet**) and bridge (**Pont d'Asfeld**). This architectural ensemble was in fact listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 2008 along with 11 other Vauban sites

across France, a belated recognition of the pioneering genius of this engineer.

Inside the old town, the main street is the steep Grande Rue, also known as **Grande Gargouille** (Great Gargoyle) because of the drain that gushes down its middle. It links the two main gates, **Porte de Pignerol** in the north, just off the Champ de Mars, and **Porte d'Embrun** lower down, at the top of av de la République. The coral-pink **Collégiale Notre Dame et St Nicholas** (place du Temple), another of Vauban's works, is worth a look for its baroque painting, as is the **Église des Cordeliers** (visible only with guided walks), a disused church in which rare 15th-century paintings of the four evangelists were uncovered.

Crowning the old city is the slumbering **Fort du Château**, affording magnificent mountain views from its battlements. If you can't face the hike up, av Vauban along the town's northern ramparts affords equally spectacular views of the snowy Écrins peaks.

Activities

Serre Chevalier (www.serre-chevalier-ski.com) – which is properly called Le Grand Serre Chevalier – links 13 villages and 250km of piste along the Serre Chevalier Valley between Briançon and Le Monétier-les-Bains (variously spelt Monétier or Monétier), 15km northwest. From the Briançon–Serre Chevalier station at 1200m in Briançon's lower town, it takes just a few minutes to reach the slopes with the **Télécabine du Prorel** (Prorel Cable Car; av René Froger; ☎ mid-Dec–mid-Apr & mid-Jun–mid-Sep, hours vary). A one-day Briançon/Grand Serre Chevalier ski-lift pass costs €25/38.

The **ESF** (☎ 04 92 20 30 57; www.esf-serrechevalier.com; 7 av René Froger; ☎ 8.45am–6pm Dec–Apr) runs a seasonal office inside the Prorel cable-car station. The **Bureau des Guides et Accompagnateurs** (☎ 04 92 20 15 73; www.guides-briancon.fr, in French; Central Parc) organises the usual off-piste outings as well as treks, paragliding, rafting, cycling, canyoning and via ferrata in summer. For information on walking in the nearby Écrins national park, the Maison du Parc (p567) has plenty of info and maps.

The tourist office also hands out the excellent booklet *Guide des Itinéraires dans la Vallée de Serre Chevalier* (sadly in French only) detailing cultural walks and snowshoeing itineraries for those not so keen on skiing.

Tours

The **Service du Patrimoine** (☎ 04 92 20 29 49; www.ville-briancon.fr; Porte de Pignerol; ☎ 2-5.30pm Mon, 9.30am–noon & 2-5.30pm Tue–Fri Oct–Mar, to 6pm Tue–Sat May–Sep), tucked in one of the old town's city gates, organises guided old-town walks (€5.35, 1½ hours), some in English.

Sleeping

Contact the tourist office–run accommodation service, **Briançon Réservation** (☎ 04 92 21 01 01; commercial@ot-briancon.fr), for the complete lowdown. Hotel parking in the pedestrian old town is a headache; park along the ramparts and walk.

Auberge de Jeunesse Serre Chevalier (☎ 04 92 24 74 54; www.fuaj.org; Le Bez, Serre Chevalier 1400; dm summer incl breakfast & sheets €12.10; ☎ late Dec–Apr & mid-Jun–mid-Sep) Eight kilometres northwest at Serre Chevalier-le-Bez near Villeneuve-la-Salle, this hop-on-your-skis-and-go hostel is right at the foot of the pistes. It's all very collective (big dorms, big canteen, big parties) and friendly. Half- or full-board on a weekly basis is compulsory during winter school holidays; otherwise you can check in for one night on a full-board basis. Weekly rates include a six-day ski pass. Dorm accommodation with half-board is €277/322/360/407 per week with ski pass in winter low/mid-/high/very high season. Camping in summer is just €6. Hop aboard a bus heading to Monétier-les-Bains, get off at Villeneuve Pré Long and walk 600m.

Hôtel Mont-Brisson (☎ 04 92 21 14 55; www.hotel.montbrisson.com; 3 av du Général de Gaulle; d with sink/shower/bathroom €30/40/53; ☎ closed May & Nov–mid-Dec) It looks pretty sweet from the outside but the rooms inside are very uninspiring, not to say shabby, with paper-thin mattresses. On the plus side, there is free wi-fi and most rooms have balconies with good views.

Auberge de la Paix (☎ 04 92 21 37 43; www.auberge-de-la-paix.com; 3 rue Porte Méane; d/tr €43/53, with bathroom €49/64) Three floors, no lift, creaky wooden floors, minuscule windows and plenty of 1960s flower power are the trademarks of Briançon's oldest hotel, an old-town inn dating from 1845. The attached restaurant Le Passé Simple (open for lunch and dinner Tuesday to Saturday and lunch Sunday) is part of the Vauban menu club (menu €22); it also serves a vast range of regional specialities (€20).

Hôtel de la Chaussée (☎ 04 92 21 10 37; www.hotel-de-la-chaussee.com; 4 rue Centrale; d/tr/q €65/75/90) The

UNLEASH YOUR GREEN SELF

Perched on a hill surrounded by the majestic peaks of the Écrins national park, this story-book chalet is also a textbook example of responsible tourism. At **La Juliane** (☎ 04 92 23 47 49; www.lajuliane.com; Le Martouret, Pelvoux; dm/d €17/44, incl half-board per person €37/41.50) electricity comes from solar panels (which also provide heating and hot water), a wind mill and a micro-hydroelectric turbine. The chalet is built out of logs of *mélèze* (a local tree) and dry stone and the insulation is a mix of sheep wool and hemp. So no hairdryers or leaving the lights on, and no letting the water run while you brush your teeth.

Despite this rustic-sounding set up, La Juliane is wonderfully cosy with pretty rooms and delicious (mostly organic) food prepared by owner Jean-Claude. The setting helps too: many are the guests who have forsaken a day on the slopes for the simple pleasure of enjoying one of the area's 300 days of sunshine on the terrace.

For the energetic types, snowshoeing, skiing, hiking, climbing and mountain biking are available locally. As for curious minds, Jean-Claude runs wild plant-picking and cooking courses in the spring, where you can learn to prepare anything from jams to gratins mountain-style.

La Juliane is 25km southwest of Briançon in the Vallée de la Vallouise: from Pelvoux-le-Saret turn right on route de l'Eychauda. Drive 500m up the hill until you get to a large car park. From there, La Juliane is signposted up a small path (muddy and/or snowy in winter): it takes about 15 minutes to walk and Jean-Claude can come and pick up luggage and young children by 4WD.

renovated rooms on the 2nd and 3rd floors should fulfil every Alpine chalet fantasy: wooden-clad, beautifully furnished, subtly scented and oh so cosy. The restaurant downstairs follows suit with tasty comfort food and a touch of originality thanks to its Vauban menu. Definitely the best hotel in town.

Hôtel Vauban (☎ 04 92 21 12 11; www.hotel-vauban.fr; 13 av du Général de Gaulle; d €70-95; 🏠) The corridors are depressing and there is a bit of a nostalgic atmosphere at Hôtel Vauban, but the rooms are comfortable, there is a sauna and the place is well run and friendly.

Eating

Briançon is milking the Vauban heritage in every possible way, and that includes eating. Five restaurants across town have agreed on a cartel of Vauban menus: no one is allowed to copy the others' recipes of 17th-century fare (think pigeon, rabbit stews and never-heard-of vegetables). The tourist office has a list of participating venues.

Le Club (☎ 04 92 21 99 06; 3 place Centrale; mains €8; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Think local café gone hip at this 'kitchen and bar' establishment. The decor is definitely trendy and the food international (burgers, big desserts), but the atmosphere has retained that of a local hang-out with its permanently propped counter and popular sunny terrace.

L'Image (☎ 04 92 20 66 66; 7 av Maurice Petsche; lunch menu €11, mains €10.50-16.60; 🍷 lunch & dinner Mon-Sun) The idea of a restaurant in a casino might normally make you want to steer clear but on this particular occasion, the contemporary decor, glass fireplace and excellent food (sublime mushroom and white-truffle ravioli and sinful chocolate fondue) mean that Casino Barrière's restaurant is a top choice.

Le Pied de la Gargouille (☎ 04 92 20 12 95; 64 Grande Rue; menus €17.50 & €19.50; 🍷 dinner Mon-Sun) The Gargoyle's Foot – an old-town homage to fondue, raclette and tartiflette (see boxed text, p551) – is a Briançon staple. Call ahead to reserve the house speciality, *gigot d'agneau à la ficelle* (whole leg of lamb strung over an open fire), and bring three friends to finish it.

SELF-CATERING

Shopi (av Maurice Petsche; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 8.45am-12.30pm Sun) A supermarket.

Getting There & Away BUS

Grenoble-based **VFD** (☎ 08 20 28 38 38; www.vfd.fr) runs buses to/from Grenoble (€27.50, 2¾ hours, two or three daily) via Bourg d'Oisans. Tickets must be booked at least 72 hours in advance either online or at the fishing shop **Thib'eau Pêche** (☎ 04 92 21 36 09; 16 av du 159e RIA; 🍷 9am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) which acts as a bus-ticket office (very odd indeed).

Other services operated by **SCAL** (☎ 04 92 51 06 05) and leaving from the bus stop on the corner of av du 159e RIA and rue Général Colaud include seven daily buses (except Sunday) to/from Gap (€9.50, two hours), Marseille (€29.80, five to six hours) and Aix-en-Provence (€26.70, five hours). Buses shuttle skiers and boarders to/from Villeneuve-la-Salle every 20 minutes (€40 for a six-day pass, 20 minutes). In winter **Altibus** (☎ 08 20 32 03 68) also runs two daily services to/from Lyon St-Exupéry airport (one-way/return €52/90, four hours).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The Col de Montgenèvre (1850m) is the main road link between Briançon and neighbouring Italy. It stays open year-round, as does the nearby Col du Lautaret (2058m) that links Briançon and Grenoble. Both do occasionally get snow-bogged; to check road conditions call ☎ 04 92 24 44 44.

TRAIN

From the **train station** (av du Général de Gaulle), about 1.5km from the Vieille Ville, there is an overnight train to Paris' Gare d'Austerlitz (€93.20, 10½ hours). There are speedier daytime services between Paris and Oulx (€95, five hours) in Italy, about 30km from Briançon, with regular shuttle buses between Oulx and Briançon (€10.50, one hour). Other destinations include Gap (€12.20, 1½ hours, seven daily) and Marseille (€36.60, five hours, two daily).

Getting Around

Local buses run by **TUB** (☎ 04 92 20 47 10; tub@wanadoo.fr; place de Suse; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri) connect the train station with place du Champ de Mars and the Prorel cable-car station. A single ticket/carnet of 10 costs €1.10/8.

THE JURA

From its fragrant yellow wine to liquid cheese, *Jésus* sausage and authentic farmstays, Jurasien travel really is a memorable feast. Moreover, the dark wooded hills and granite plateaux of the Jura Mountains that stretch in an arc for 360km along the Franco-Swiss border from the Rhine to the Rhône are one of the least explored pockets in France. If it is peace, tranquillity and a true taste of humble mountain life you're seeking, the Jura is an instant winner.

The Jura – from a Gaulish word meaning 'forest' – is France's premier cross-country skiing area. The range is dotted with ski stations and every year the region hosts the Transjurassienne, one of the world's toughest cross-country skiing events.

The region is not short of culture or history either. From heavy metallurgy to precious gem-cutting, its contribution hasn't gone unnoticed in the country's economy, neither has its historical role as the hotbed of the French Resistance during WWII.

BESANÇON

pop 116,100

Old town, young heart: that's Besançon, capital of the Franche-Comté region. The city boasts one of the country's largest foreign-student populations and an innovative spirit, most obvious in its hip buzzing bars and historic quarters such as the Battant (originally the winemakers' district).

First settled in Gallo-Roman times, Besançon became an important stop on the early trade routes between Italy, the Alps and the Rhine. This historical transport role is about to come full circle with the opening of a new TGV station outside Besançon (in the village of Auxon, 10km north) in December 2011 on the new Rhine-to-Rhône TGV line (allowing connections from Germany all the way to the south of France without going through Paris). Once again, Besançon will be at the centre of Europe.

Orientation

The old city is encased by the curve of the River Doubs (Boucle du Doubs). The tourist office and train station sit just outside this loop. The Battant quarter straddles the north-west bank of the river around rue Battant. Grande Rue, the pedestrianised main street, slices through the old city from the bank of the river to the gates of the citadel.

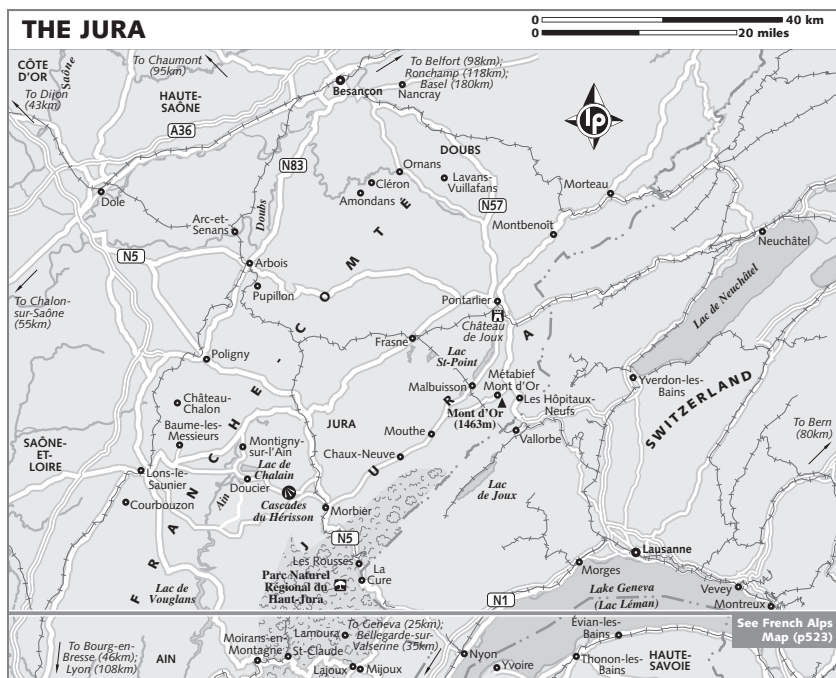
Information

ID PC (28 rue de la République; per hr €3; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Sat) Computer shop with internet terminals.

Le Lavoir (14 rue de la Madeleine; per 5kg €3.50; ☎ 8am-8pm) Laundrette.

Post Office (23 rue Proudhon; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) In the old city.

Tourist Office (☎ 03 81 80 92 55; www.besancon-tourisme.com; 2 place de la 1ère Armée Française;



🕒 9.30am-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Mon, 11am-1pm Sun) Sells city maps and guides; organises thematic city tours (in French only).

Sights

MUSEUMS

Built by Vauban for Louis XIV between 1688 and 1711, Besançon's **citadel** (☎ 03 81 87 83 33; www.citadelle.com; rue des Fusillés de la Résistance; adult/4-14yr €7.80/4.50; 🕒 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-5pm Nov-Mar) is a steep 15-minute walk from **Porte Noire** (Black Gate; rue de la Convention), a triumphal arch left over from the city's Roman days, dating from the 2nd century AD. Inside the citadel walls there are three museums to visit: the **Musée Comtois** zooms in on local traditions, the **Musée d'Histoire Naturelle** covers natural history, and the harrowing **Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation** examines the rise of Nazism and fascism, and the French Resistance movement.

Less sobering are the insects, fish and other animals inhabiting the **insectarium** (including some meaty tarantulas), **aquarium**, **noctarium**

and **parc zoologique**. Citadel admission covers entry to all the museums.

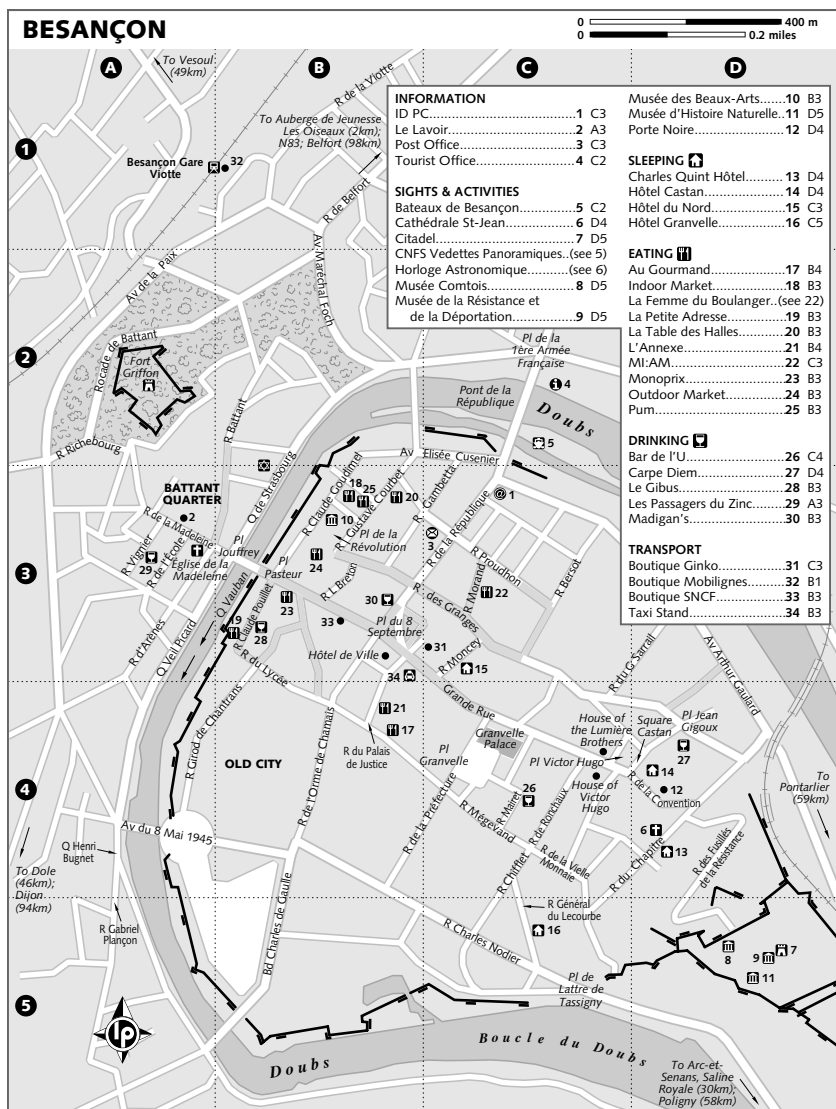
Thought to be France's oldest museum, the **Musée des Beaux-Arts** (☎ 03 81 87 80 49; www.musee-arts-besancon.org; 1 place de la Révolution; adult/student €5/2.50; 🕒 9.30am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) houses an impressive collection of paintings, including archeological, medieval and Renaissance works in a very modern building.

HORLOGE ASTRONOMIQUE

Housed in the 18th-century **Cathédrale St-Jean** (rue de la Convention; adult/under 18yr €3/free; 🕒 7 guided tours Wed-Mon Apr-Sep, Thu-Mon Oct-Mar), this incredible astronomical clock has 30,000 moving parts, 57 faces, 62 dials and, among other things, tells the time in 16 places around the world, the tides in eight different parts of France, and the time of the local sunrise and sunset. It really has to be seen to be believed.

Tours

In summer vessels dock beneath Pont de la République to take passengers on 1¼-hour



river cruises along the Boucle du Doubs, organised by **Bateaux de Besançon** (☎ 03 81 68 13 25; www.sautdudoubs.fr, in French; adult/child €10.50/8; ☽ Apr-Oct) and **CNFS Vedettes Panoramiques** (☎ 03 81 68 05 34; www.vedettes-panoramiques.com, in French; adult/child €10.50/8; ☽ Jul & Aug). In summer there are usually three trips a day. Both companies

sail along a 375m-long tunnel underneath the citadel.

Sleeping

Les Oiseaux (☎ 03 81 40 32 00; www.ftlesoiseaux.fr, in French; 48 rue des Cras; dm incl breakfast €23; ☽ reception 8am-8pm) This hostel is about 2km east of the

train station. The tower block which houses the rooms is quite a bit of an eyesore but the rooms themselves are clean and good value. Take bus number 7 from the tourist office in the direction of Orchamps and get off at Les Oiseaux.

Hôtel du Nord (☎ 03 81 81 34 56; www.hotel-du-nord-besancon.com; 8 rue Moncey; d €39-61, q €61-77) Right in the centre of town, this is a good-value hotel: rooms are fairly old-fashioned but clean, there is free wi-fi, a private garage just 200m from the hotel and lovely staff at hand. Ask for a nonsmoking room if you don't like the smell of cold tobacco.

Hôtel Granvelle (☎ 03 81 81 33 92; www.hotel-granvelle.fr; 13 rue Général du Lecourbe; d €50-60, tr €62-71) You'll find 30 clean, functional rooms in this lovely stone building at the back of a courtyard below the citadel. 'Interactive' rooms are equipped with internet-linked computers; otherwise there's free wi-fi in the rest of the hotel. Good wheelchair access.

Charles Quint Hôtel (☎ 03 81 82 05 49; www.hotel-charlesquint.com; 3 rue du Chapitre; d €87-138; ♿) Besançon's stunning boutique hotel in an 18th-century town house oozes charm, with waxed parquet floors, period furniture, sumptuous fabrics, a heavenly garden with a tiny green swimming pool and splendid wood-panelled dining room. Find this nine-room oasis of old-style elegance slumbering in the shade of the citadel, behind the cathedral.

Hôtel Castan (☎ 03 81 65 02 00; www.hotelcastan.fr; 6 square Castan; d €110-170; ♿; closed 2 or 3 weeks Aug; ♿) Original monumental fireplaces, canopy beds, hunted stag heads, terracotta floors and ornate grandfather clocks add authenticity to this lovely ivy-covered 18th-century town house, exquisitely furnished by a retired dentist with a passion for collecting antiques. Find Besançon's grandest hotel on a peaceful old-town square.

Eating

Au Gourmand (☎ 03 81 81 40 56; 5 rue Mégevand; mains from €7; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Fri, lunch Sat) With its vinyl-coated tablecloths, salt straight out of the supermarket pot and profusion of knick-knacks on the walls, this is a no-frills but charming place. Food is simple, with the humble potato being king, particularly in the form of *les parmentières* (a mound of mashed potato with various toppings).

Pum (☎ 03 81 81 18 47; cnr rue Jean Petit & rue Gustave Courbet; mains from €7.50; ☺ lunch & dinner, until 1am

Sun-Thu, to 2am Fri & Sat) Bright-orange Pum is a great place for tight budgets: the restaurant downstairs follows the popular 'hot-seating' formula, where you take a seat wherever there's space on one of the long wooden tables. Thai staples such as stir-fries and green curries feature prominently. Upstairs, the bar serves cocktails and beers with an exotic Thai twist.

La Petite Adresse (☎ 03 81 82 35 09; 28 rue Claude Pouillet; mains €15; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) Enjoy some solid regional cooking in the gregarious atmosphere of this tiny hole-in-the-wall establishment on Besançon's most happening street. The owner sometimes organises competitions whereby if you recognise the song he plays, you win... a sausage. Need we say more?

MI:AM (☎ 03 81 82 09 56; 8 rue Morand; mains €15; ☺ 11.30am-midnight Tue-Sun) *Apéro dînatoire* (a light casual dinner) is what trendy MI:AM (as in YUM!) is best at. Waltz through the heavy velvet curtain to enter or snag a seat on the buzzing street terrace. The lunchtime *tartines* (thick slice of toasted bread topped with various ingredients) are not bad either.

La Femme du Boulanger (☎ 03 81 82 86 93; 6 rue Morand; ☺ 8am-7pm Mon-Sat), run by the same set as MI:AM next-door, is paradise for cake and tart lovers.

La Table des Halles (☎ 03 81 50 62 74; 22 rue Gustave Courbet; lunch/dinner menus €16/20; ☺ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) The urban loft decor wouldn't look out of place in New York's trendy meat-packing district: industrial rigging for the lights, starch-white walls and massive bay windows instead of walls. But in the plate, the cuisine is resolutely French and regional: Morteau sausages with Mont d'Or mash, poultry in savagnin (a local white wine) sauce or banana gratin with praline mousse. Fabulous.

L'Annexe (☎ 03 81 53 17 12; 11 rue du Palais de Justice; mains €20; ☺ lunch & dinner Mon-Fri, dinner Sat) Small, swanky and super-trendy, L'Annexe attracts a chic crowd seeking a fun but sophisticated evening. The menu is as small as the restaurant but as refined too, emphasising fresh market products and premium ingredients (beef, scallops etc).

Self-caterers can shop for food at the **indoor market** (cnr rue Paris & rue Claude Goudimel), the **outdoor market** (place de la Révolution; ☺ Tue, Fri & Sat morning) or the supermarket, **Monoprix** (10 Grande Rue; ☺ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Sat).

Drinking

Nightlife is concentrated in the old Battant quarter and around the river along rue Claude Pouillet and parallel quai Vauban.

Madigan's (☎ 03 81 81 17 44; 19 place du 8 Septembre; ☎ 7.30am-1am) French pop music and a young crowd for Irish-style shenanigans on one of town's main squares.

Le Gibus (☎ 03 81 81 09 99; 11 rue Claude Pouillet; ☎ 5pm-1am) A rocking crowd gathers in the 1950s pin-up decor most evenings for live or recorded music and always plenty of good times.

Carpe Diem (☎ 03 81 83 11 18; 2 place Jean Gigoux; ☎ 9am-1am Mon-Thu, 9am-2am Fri & Sat, 9am-8pm Sun) The archetypal local French café with a crowd of regulars, on the respectable side of 60 during the day and the carefree side of 30 at night. Regular gigs feature, when a drink surcharge of €0.40 kicks in.

Les Passagers du Zinc (☎ 03 81 81 54 70; 5 rue Vignier; ☎ 5pm-1am Tue-Fri, 5pm-2am Sat & Sun) A grungy bar and club with battered leather sofas and multicoloured lights, the regular live bands and music nights keep this place high on the list of best venues in town. Step through the bonnet of an old Citroën DS to reach the cellar.

Bar de l'U (☎ 03 81 81 55 95; 5 rue Mairet; ☎ 8am-1am Mon-Thu, to 2am Fri, 11am-2am Sat, 5pm-midnight Sun) Live music most nights and slamming competitions every second Monday of the month, this is student mainstay. Many events require a student card to attend.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There is no bus station in Besançon. Daily services to Ornans (€3.30, 45 minutes) and Pontarlier (€7.50, 1¼ hours) stop at the train-station bus stop. You can buy tickets at the **Boutique Mobilignes** (☎ 08 25 00 22 44; www.mobilignes.com, in French; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat), at the far end of the Besançon Gare Viotte train station.

TRAIN

From Besançon Gare Viotte, 800m uphill from the city centre, there are trains to/from Paris' Gare de Lyon (€63.60, 2¾ hours, three daily), Dijon (train/TGV €13.30/17.60, 50/70 minutes, 20 daily), Lyon (€31, 2¼ hours, seven daily), Belfort (€14, 1¼ hours, 15 daily), Arbois (€8.10, 45 minutes, eight to 10 daily) and Arc-et-Senans (€6.10, 30 minutes, up to 10 daily). Buy tickets at the train station or

THE STUFF OF DREAMS

Get away from it all at these two more-idyllic-than-idyllic Jurasien hideouts.

Amondans (☎ 03 81 86 53 53; www.amondans.com; place du Village, Amondans; half-board s/d/tr €71/102/141; ☎ May-Oct) This funky find of a village inn – a stunning 18th-century farm 30km south of Besançon in sleepy Amondans (population 87) – fuses retro 1930s to 1960s furnishings (picked up in second-hand shops and jumble sales) with century-old features to create a contemporary eating and sleeping space. Rooms overlook open fields and are vast and minimal. Guests – groups and couples rather than families – are very much hip, happy, outdoor types who mountain-bike, hike, canoe, cave or horse-ride by day and hang out after dinner in the inn's magnificent *coin salon* – an entire converted barn with the most enormous fireplace you're ever likely to see. Swiss couple George and Geneviève, who run the place, can organise most outdoor activities, rent out mountain bikes (€15 per day), supply picnics (€10) and occasionally serve a barbecued dinner in the hills.

Ferme Auberge du Rondeau (☎ 03 81 59 25 84; http://ferme-rondeau.fr.cc; Lavans-Vuillafans; s/d €42/53, menus €23-33; ☎ mid-Jan-Nov; ☎) Coo over 200 goats, 50 boar and a handful of dairy cows at this idyllic organic farm, 2km from the village of Lavans-Vuillafans. Run by the friendly Bourdier family for three generations, this farm really is the stuff childhood dreams are made of: cosy rooms are wood-panelled and breakfast is a veritable feast of farm produce – home-made yoghurt and jam, fresh farm-baked bread and brioche. And 90% of what you'll eat for dinner or lunch comes from the farm: *sangler* (boar) saucisson, seven different types of *chèvres* (goat's cheese) and a main course of goat, kid or boar depending on the season. You can also buy a range of unbelievably warm hand-knitted mohair plaids and jumpers made with the wool of the farm's angora goats. Advance reservations for eating, sleeping or both are essential.

LIQUID GOLD

Jura's signature wine, *vin jaune* (yellow wine), is made following a unique vinification. Savagnin grapes are harvested late, their sugar-saturated juices left to ferment for a minimum of six years and three months in oak barrels. A thin layer of yeast forms over the wine to prevent it from oxidising, and evaporation (called *la part des anges*, 'the angels' share') is not compensated by additional top-ups. It is this long and undisrupted fermentation process that gives the wine its unique flavour. In the end, 100L of grape juice ferment down to 62L of *vin jaune* (lucky bloody angels), which is then bottled in special 0.62L bottles called *clavelin*. *Vin jaune* is actually renowned for its ageing qualities, with prime vintages easily keeping for more than a century. The oldest bottle enjoyed was a 1774 vintage, a cool 220 years old when sipped by an awestruck committee of experts in 1994.

Legend has it that *vin jaune* was invented when a winemaker rediscovered a forgotten barrel, six years and three months after he'd initially filled it, its content miraculously transformed into a gold-coloured wine (hence the name).

Myth or reality, the tradition lives on. **La Percée du Vin Jaune** festival takes place every year in early February to celebrate the first tasting of the vintage produced six years and three months earlier. Villages in the Jura wine area take it in turn to hold the two-day celebrations when the new vintage is blessed and rated, and street tastings, cooking competitions, cellar visits and vintage auctions keep a crowd of *vin jaune* aficionados fulfilled. Check www.jura-vins.com or www.percee-du-vin-jaune.com (both in French) for more info.

from the **Boutique SNCF** (44 Grande Rue; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat) in town.

Getting Around

Borrow a bicycle, pushchair or shopping caddie on wheels to cruise around town – free with a valid bus ticket – from the local bus company office, **Boutique Ginko** (☎ 08 25 00 22 44; www.ginkobus.com; 4 place du 8 Septembre; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat). The boutique sells bus tickets costing €1.15/3.50/9.80 for a single ticket/day ticket/carnet of 10.

Call a **taxi** (☎ 03 81 88 80 80) or pick one up next to the town hall.

AROUND BESANÇON

Saline Royale

Envisaged by its designer, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, as the 'ideal city', the 18th-century **Saline Royale** (Royal Saltworks; ☎ 03 81 54 45 45; www.salineroyale.com, in French; adult/16-25yr/6-15yr €7.50/5/3.50; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-5pm Nov-Mar, closed Jan) in **Arc-et-Senans** (population 1400), 30km southwest of Besançon, is a showpiece of early Industrial Age town planning. Although his urban dream was never realised, Ledoux's semicircular saltworks is now listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Regular trains link Besançon and Arc-et-Senans (€6.10, 30 minutes, up to 10 daily).

Route Pasteur

Almost every single town in France has at least one street, square or garden named after Louis Pasteur, the great 19th-century chemist who invented pasteurisation and developed the first rabies vaccine. In the Jura, it is even more the case since the illustrious man was a local lad, born and raised in the region, and a regular visitor for holidays (he worked mostly in Paris).

Pasteur was born in **Dole**, 20km west of Arc-et-Senans along the D472. His childhood home, **La Maison Natale de Pasteur** (☎ 03 84 72 20 61; www.musee-pasteur.com; 43 rue Pasteur; adult/student/under 12yr €5/3/free; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar), overlooking the Canal des Tanneurs in the old town, is now an atmospheric museum housing letters, artefacts and exhibits including his university cap and gown.

In 1827 the Pasteur family settled in the rural community of **Arbois** (population 3509), 35km east of Dole. His laboratory and workshops in Arbois are on display at **La Maison de Louis Pasteur** (☎ 03 84 66 11 72; 83 rue de Courcelles; adult/7-15yr €5.80/2.90; ☎ guided tours hourly 9.45-11.45am & 2-6pm Jun-Sep, 2.15-5.15pm Apr, May & 1-15 Oct). The house is still decorated with its original 19th-century fixtures and fittings.

Route du Vin

No visit to Arbois, the Jura wine capital, would be complete without a glass of *vin jaune*. The history of this nutty 'yellow wine' (see boxed text, p575), is told in the **Musée de la Vigne et du Vin** (☎ 03 84 66 40 45; museevignevin@wanadoo.fr; adult/child €3.50/2.70; ☎ 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Mar-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Wed-Mon Nov-Feb). Don't miss out on doing the **Chemin des Vignes**, a 2.5km-long walking trail that wends its way in a loop through vineyards from the museum. Cyclists might prefer the 8km-long **Circuit des Vignes**, a mountain-bike trail likewise through vineyards.

Complete the wine trip with lunch at Arbois' **La Balance Mets et Vins** (☎ 03 84 37 45 00; 47 rue de Courcelles; menus €24/32; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Mon, lunch Tue), a fantastic restaurant making the very best of local specialities. Its signature rooster casserole, *coq au vin jaune et aux morilles*, and *crème brûlée* doused in local *vin jaune* are must-tastes, as are the wine menus with five different glasses of either Jurassienne wine (€16) or *vin jaune* (€27, including one from 1976). La Balance also dabbles in that most non-French of practices: the doggy bag!

High above Arbois is **Pupillon** (population 220), a cute yellow-brick village famous for its wine production. Some 10 different *caves* (wine cellars) are open to visitors. Mountain bikers can follow the **Circuit de Pupillon** (13km) marked trail from Arbois.

Arbois **tourist office** (☎ 03 84 66 55 50; www.arbois.com; rue de l'Hôtel de Ville; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) has cycling itinerary information, a list of *caves* where you can taste and buy the local vintage and a treasure-hunt itinerary (in French) for kids.

Trains link Arbois and Besançon (€8.10, 45 minutes, eight to 10 daily).

POLIGNY TO BAUME-LES-MESSIEURS

Comté is indisputable king of the Jura, small-town **Poligny** (population 4518) serving as the capital of the industry that produces 40 million tonnes of the venerable cheese a year. Learn how 450L is transformed into a 40kg wheel of cheese and smell some of its 83 different aromas at the **Maison du Comté** (☎ 03 84 37 78 40; www.comte.com; av de la Résistance; adult/student/6-16yr €4/3/2.50; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm May, June & Sep, 2-5pm Tue-Sun Apr & Oct). There are dozens of *fruitières* (dairy cooperatives where farmers combine their milk productions to make

cheese) open to the public. Poligny **tourist office** (☎ 03 84 37 24 21; tourisme.poligny@wanadoo.fr; place des Déportés; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat, 2-6pm Mon) stocks an abundance of cheesy info.

Heading south, wiggle along the pretty D68 to Plasne, then continue south to **Château-Chalon** (population 167), the pretty hilltop village of medieval yellow stone ensnared by vineyards known for their legendary *vin jaune* (see boxed text, p575). There is an excellent **tourist office** in the nearby village of Voiteur (☎ 04 84 44 62 47; www.hauteseille.com; 3 place de la Mairie; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm Mon-Fri Sep-Jun, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri school holidays) with plenty of info on surrounding villages, wine and walking in the area (the €3 *Walking and Mountain-Biking Tours in the Coteaux of Haute Seille* is worth its weight in gold).

Enchanting **Baume-les-Messieurs** (population 196) is another extraordinarily pretty village of cob houses and red-tiled rooftops, wedged between three glacial valleys, 20km south of Poligny. Its abandoned Benedictine **Abbaye Impériale** (Imperial Abbey; ☎ 03 84 44 99 28; admission €3.60; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm mid-May-Sep) can only be visited by guided tour. Nearby, the 30-million-year-old **Grottes de Baume** (Baume Caves; ☎ 03 84 48 23 02; adult/children €5/2.50; ☎ 10am-5pm mid-Apr-mid-Jun, 10am-6pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, guided tours only) feature some impressive stalagmites and stalactites.

Immediately east lies the Jura's **Région des Lacs** (Lakes District), the highlight being the majestic waterfalls of the **Cascades du Hérisson**.

Sleeping & Eating

From November to April, it can be difficult if not impossible to find somewhere open for dinner in rural areas on week nights.

Le Comptois (☎ 03 84 25 71 21; www.lecomptois.doucier.com; Doucier; d €35-45, half-board per person €50, mains €12-18) This simple village restaurant opposite the post office with eight rooms up top (four dead-basic for hikers) really has no airs and graces, but it serves excellent food with a wonderful wine list to match.

Le Grand Jardin (☎ 03 84 44 68 37; www.legrandjardin.fr; rue des Grands Jardins, Baume-les-Messieurs; s/d/tr/q incl breakfast €39/47/57/74; ☎ Feb-mid-Dec) Book well ahead in summer to snag one of the three rooms at this delightful *chambre d'hôte*, enviably placed opposite the abbey in Baume-les-Messieurs. Rooms, one of which sleeps seven, are quainter than picture-postcard quaint.

Au Douillet Gourmet (☎ 03 84 51 27 24; www.au-douillet-gourmet.com; rue du Château, Montigny-sur-l'Ain; s/d/tr incl breakfast €40/50/63, incl dinner €55/80/108) If you decide to stay at Pascal and Christelle's gregarious and slightly chaotic dairy farm, this is your chance to learn and even help with milking the cows, bottle-feeding the calves or collecting eggs from the hen hutch. Christelle also does wonderful home-made food and pretty much everything you'll eat comes from the farm.

our pick Escargot Comtois (☎ 03 84 24 15 29; www.escargot-comtois.com, in French; 215 rue de Montorient, Courbouzon; s/d incl breakfast €41/49, tr incl breakfast €59-69, dinner with/without snails €23/20; 🍷) Spending a night at this highly original *chambre d'hôte* makes a great story to tell the folks back home. This is one of France's 400 snail farms so, between May and September, you'll witness a hive of snail activity, from the 200,000 gastropods binging on grass in their 'pen' to harvesting. The result lines the shelves and fills the freezers of the snail lab on the ground floor of Muriel and David Blanchard's lovingly restored 1747 stone village house. Rooms are cosy and sport a computer with internet access. Evening meals are around a shared table, the optional entrée being snails. Find Courbouzon 22km south of Baume-les-Messieurs.

Le Relais des Abbesses (☎ 03 84 44 98 56; www.chambres-hotes-jura.com; rue de la Roche, Château-Chalon; d incl breakfast €65-68, dinner €24) An unusual B&B in the heart of beautiful Château-Chalon: Agnès and Gérard have decorated their rooms with Asian antiques acquired over many years. They are both fine cooks, and their *table d'hôte* is a treat, be it in the view-studded dining room or the garden.

Café Restaurant de l'Abbaye (☎ 03 84 44 63 44; Baumes-les-Messieurs; menu €20; 🍷) Lunch & dinner Mon-Sat May-Sep, shorter hr rest of year) Tucked in one of the abbey's old buildings, this old-fashioned eating and drinking venue hits the spot as far as tasty lunches go. Try the *cassolette franc-comtoise* (a casserole of potatoes, onions, cheese and local sausage) for a real taste of the country.

BELFORT

pop 50,700

Squeezed between north and east, France and Germany, art and industry, Belfort has grown into its own distinctive identity (it calls itself a *territoire*, not a *département*). Historically part of Alsace, it only became part of the Franche-Comté region in 1921 and is best known today

as the manufacturer of the speedy TGV train and host to three-day open-air rock festival **Les Eurockéennes** (www.eurockeenes.fr) in early July and international film festival **Entre Vues** (www.festival-entrevues.com) in late November.

The city centrepiece is a **Vauban citadel** (p65), host to open-air concerts in summer and the **Musée d'Histoire** (☎ 03 84 54 25 51; ☎ 10am-6pm, Wed-Mon Jun-Sep, 10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon Oct-May). On duty at its foot is an 11m-tall lion sculpted in sandstone by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi (of Statue of Liberty fame) to commemorate Belfort's resistance to the Prussians in 1870-71. While the rest of Alsace was annexed as part of the greater German Empire, Belfort stubbornly remained part of France.

Belfort **tourist office** (☎ 03 84 55 90 90; www.ot-belfort.fr; 2bis rue Clémenceau; 🕒 9am-noon & 1.45-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 9am-noon & 1.45-6pm Mon-Fri, to 5.30pm Sat mid-Sep-mid-Jun) distributes free city maps and has plenty of information on accommodation and things to see and do around Belfort. Car enthusiasts can visit the **Musée de l'Aventure Peugeot** (☎ 03 81 99 42 03; www.musee-peugeot.com; Carrefour de l'Europe; adult/10-18yr/under 10yr €7/3.50/free; 🕒 10am-6pm), 12km south in Sochaux; the modernist **Église du Sacré Cœur**, 4km southeast in Audincourt, is an architecture-buff must; and outdoor adventures are bountiful in the **Massif du Ballon d'Alsace** (1247m), 20km north of Belfort in the southern Vosges Mountains.

Ronchamp

The only reason to rendezvous in Ronchamp, 20km west of Belfort, is to visit Le Corbusier's striking modernist chapel on a hill overlooking the old mining town. Built between 1950 and 1955, the surreal **Chapelle de Notre Dame du Haut** (Chapel of Our Lady of the Height; ☎ 03 84 20 65 13; www.chapellederonchamp.fr, in French; adult/student €3/2; 🕒 9.30am-7pm Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Oct & Mar, 10am-4pm Nov-Feb) with a sweeping concrete roof, coloured-glass windows and plastic features is one of the 20th century's architectural masterpieces. It's a pilgrimage site for thousands of architects every year, and 3000-odd religious pilgrims each year on 8 September (the Virgin Mary's birth day).

A 15-minute walking trail leads uphill to the chapel from the centre of Ronchamp village; the **tourist office** (☎ 03 84 63 50 82; 14 place du 14 Juillet; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat, 1.30-6pm Mon) can guide you.

Sleeping & Eating

Don't leave Belfort without biting into a *Belflore*, a scrumptious almond-flavoured pastry filled with raspberries and topped with hazelnuts.

Relais d'Alsace (☎ 03 84 22 15 55; www.arahotel.com; 5 av de la Laurencie; s/d/tr/q from €38/50/60/70) Just like Belfort's signature festival, this place rocks! Run by the legendary Kim, this is the coolest place to hang out within a 200km radius: partysome but chilled, laid-back but impeccably held, Kim has effortlessly managed to combine professionalism and fun. Rooms are simple but bright with funky animal cartoons sketched on the doors. At the time of research Kim had just bought the next-door restaurant and hoped to soon be able to serve solid regional snacks.

Getting There & Away

Connections from Belfort **train station** (av Wilson) include Paris' Gare de Lyon via Besançon (from €72.30, four hours, seven daily), Montbéliard (€3.40, 20 minutes, 20 daily), Besançon (€14, 1¼ hours, 14 daily) and Ronchamp (€4.10, 20 minutes, four daily).

MÉTABIEF MONT D'OR

pop 907 / elevation 1000m

Métabief Mont d'Or, 18km south of Pontarlier on the main road to Lausanne, is the region's leading cross-country ski resort. All year, lifts take you almost to the top of Mont d'Or (1463m), the area's highest peak, from where a fantastic 180° panorama stretches over the foggy Swiss plain to Lake Geneva (Lac Léman) and all the way from the Matterhorn to Mont Blanc.

Métabief is famed for its unique *Vacherin Mont d'Or*. It has been produced alongside Comté and Morbier by the Sancey-Richard family at the **Fromagerie du Mont d'Or** (☎ 03 81 49 02 36; 2 rue Moulin; 🕒 cheese shop 9am-12.15pm & 3-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) since 1953. To see cheese being made, arrive with the milk lorry around 9am.

The closest **tourist office** (☎ 03 81 49 13 81; www.tourisme-metabief.com, in French; 1 place de la Mairie, Les Hôpitaux-Neufs; 🕒 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-noon Sun) open year-round is in Les Hôpitaux-Neufs. The annexe in Métabief is closed out of season, much like everything else in the village. Family-run **Hôtel Étoile des Neiges** (☎ 03 81 49 11 21; www.hoteletoiledesneiges.fr, in French; 4 rue du Village; s/d/tr/q €54/66/80/94, half-board €65/96/132/160; 🚻) stays open more or less year-round. The restaurant looks a little like a hospital canteen but the rooms are spotless, with great mezzanine family rooms. Good wheelchair access.

Getting there and away: use your own wheels!

AROUND MÉTABIEF MONT D'OR

Skiers can break from the slopes at **Parc Polaire** (Polar Park; ☎ 03 81 69 20 20; www.parcpolaire.com, in French; adult/4-11yr €7/5.40; 🕒 10am-6pm Jul & Aug, 2-6pm Tue-Sun Mar, April & Jun, 2-6pm Mon-Fri & Sun Sep & Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Jan & Feb), a husky-and-reindeer park in Chaux-Neuve where Claude and Gilles Malloire will introduce you to their 40 huskies and their life as a pack.

The dramatic **Château de Joux** (☎ 03 81 69 47 95; www.chateaudesjoux.com, in French; adult/student/6-14yr €5.80/4.70/3; 🕒 9am-6pm Jul & Aug, 10-11.30am & 2-4.30pm Apr-Jun & Sep-mid-Nov, guided tours only), 10km north of Métabief, used to guard the

HOT BOX, CHRISTMAS ICE & JESUS

It's hot, it's soft and it's packed in a box. *Vacherin Mont d'Or* is the only French cheese to be eaten with a spoon – hot (or cold for that matter). Made between 15 August and 15 March with *lait cru* (unpasteurised milk), it derives its unique nutty taste from the spruce bark in which it's wrapped. Connoisseurs top the soft-crust cheese with chopped onions, garlic and white wine, wrap it in aluminium foil and bake it for 45 minutes to create a *boîte chaude* (hot box). Only 11 factories in the Jura are licensed to produce *Vacherin Mont d'Or*.

Mouthe, 15km south of Métabief Mont d'Or, is the mother of *liqueur de sapin* (fir-tree liqueur). *Glace de sapin* (fir-tree ice cream) also comes from Mont d'Or, known as the North Pole of France due to its seasonal subzero temperatures (record low -38°C). Sampling either is rather like ingesting a Christmas tree. Then there's *Jésus* – a small, fat version of *saucisse de Morteau* (Morteau sausage), easily identified by the wooden peg on its end, attached after the sausage is smoked with pinewood sawdust in a traditional *tuyé* (mountain hut).

GRANDE TRAVERSÉE DU JURA

Cross-country skiing, mountain biking, walking or even snowshoeing, the Grande Traversée du Jura (GTJ) – the Grand Jura Crossing – is a cross-country track running some 200km from Villers-le-Lac (north of Pontarlier) to Hauteville-Lompnes (southwest of Bellegarde). The exact itinerary varies between disciplines but the track peaks at 1500m near the town of Mouthé (south of Métabief) and follows one of the coldest valleys in France. After the first 20km the route briefly crosses into Switzerland, but mostly runs along the border on the French side. Well maintained and very popular, the track takes 10 full days of skiing to cover – a feat even for the ultrafit.

Part of the GTJ, the 76km from Lamoura to Mouthé is covered each year by 4000 skiers during the world's second-largest cross-country skiing competition, the **Transjurassienne** (www.transjurassienne.com) held in early February, and several hundred rollerbladers and rollerskiers during the **Trans' Roller** (www.transroller.com) in September.

For complete information on the GTJ, including maps and accommodation along the route, contact **Les Grandes Traversées du Jura** (☎ 03 84 51 51 51; www.gtj.asso.fr; 15 & 17 Grande Rue, Les Planches-en-Montagne).

route between Switzerland and France. Today it houses France's most impressive arms museum, and a 100m-deep well (watch your guide pour water into it and hold your breath until you hear it hit the bottom, several long seconds later). Guided tours are gripping, full of anecdotes and stories, and available in English (ring ahead). In summer, torch-lit night-time tours are organised for extra spookiness.

PARC NATUREL RÉGIONAL DU HAUT-JURA

Experience the Jura at its rawest in the Haut-Jura Regional Park, an area of 757 sq km stretching from Chapelle-des-Bois in the north almost to the western tip of Lake Geneva. Each year in February its abundant lakes, mountains and low-lying valleys host the Transjurassienne, the world's second-longest cross-country skiing race (above). Forget about exploring the region without a car.

A great place to start is the **Maison du Parc** (☎ 03 84 34 12 30; www.parc-haut-jura.fr; Lajoux; adult/child €5/3; ☞ 10am-noon & 2-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun Jul, Aug & school holidays, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Fri rest of year), an interactive sensorial museum that will help you discover the region and its history through sounds, films, touching, feeling and smelling.

There's not much to **St-Claude** (population 12,296) – the largest town in the park – bar its illustrious diamond-cutting industry which, unfortunately, is off-limits to visitors. Further west, however, is a gem of another kind very much within your reach: **our pick** **Les Louvières**

(☎ 03 84 42 09 24; www.leslouvieres.com, in French; Pratz; 2-/3-course menu €28/34; ☞ lunch & dinner Wed-Sat, lunch Sun), a solar-powered farmhouse restaurant to rave about in the middle of nowhere. Philippe's creations in the kitchen (foie gras maki-zushi with maple syrup, fish in wasabi sauce etc) are strictly fusion, and Canadian waiter Sol's welcome in the very hip dining room is warm enough to make Jura winter snow melt.

The so-called French capital of wooden toys, **Moirans-en-Montagne**, 14km west, hosts the **Musée du Jouet** (Toy Museum; ☎ 03 84 42 38 64; www.musee-du-jouet.fr, in French; 5 rue du Murgin; adult/6-15yr/3-5yr €5/2.50/2; ☞ 10am-6.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 2-6pm Sat & Sun Sep & Apr-Jun, 2-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar) – a far-from-playful 'look but don't touch' (rather than interactive) museum.

Fall asleep to absolute silence at the nearby **Le Clos d'Estelle** (☎ 03 84 42 01 29; www.leclosdestelle.com; Hameau La Marcantine, Charchilla; d/tr incl breakfast €70/82, dinner incl wine €25), four *chambres d'hôtes* run by the lovely Christine and Jean-Pierre Thévenet, Jura locals through and through, who'll enthusiastically share their knowledge of the area with you.

Les Rousses (population 3018, elevation 1100m), on the northeastern edge of the park, is the park's prime sports hub, winter (skiing) and summer (walking and mountain biking) alike. Dubbed *la station aux quatre villages* (the four-village resort), it comprises four small ski areas – predominantly cross-country with a dash of downhill thrown in for good measure: Prémamon, Lamoura, Bois d'Amont and the village Les Rousses. Find out more at the **Maison du Tourisme** (square du 19 Mars 1962;

CROSS-BORDER

'I think you're going to sleep very well, with your head in Switzerland and your feet in France,' the owner said. He was right. **Hôtel Franco-Suisse** (☎ 03 84 60 02 20, +41 22 360 13 96; www.arbezie-hotel.com; La Cure; s/d/tr/q €49/59/69/79, for half-board per person add €29; 🍷 bistro lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) is a unique bistro inn with both French and Swiss telephone numbers (!) that sits smack on the French-Swiss border, 2.5km from Les Rousses. Run by the Arbez family since 1920, the decor is best described as Parisian bistro meets Alpine chalet. Rooms are simple but comfortable (those in the annexe have been done up in real chalet style) and the next-door neighbour is the Douane La Cure (La Cure customs and border crossing). Find Hôtel Franco-Suisse in the hamlet of La Cure, wedged between the Col de la Faucille (France) and Col de la Givrine (Switzerland).

🚠 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-12.30pm Sun, longer hr in high season), home to the **tourist office** (☎ 03 84 60 02 55; www.lesrousses.com, in French), **ESF** (☎ 03 84 60 01 61; www.esf-lesrousses.com) and **Espace Loisirs Les Rousses** (☎ 03 84 60 02 55) where ski passes for both Les Rousses and the neighbouring ski resorts of La Dôle and St-Cergue in Switzerland are sold. Lunch, dinner and/or kip the night on the Swiss border (above).

The Jura's most staggering view is from the **Col de la Faucille**, 20km south of Les Rousses. Savour incredible views (extra incredible at sunset) from the restaurant terrace (or the pool in summer) of **La Mainaz** (☎ 04 50 41 31 10; www.la-mainaz.com; 5 rte du Col de la Faucille; d from €77; 🍷 mid-Dec-mid-Oct; 🚗), a hotel-restaurant midway along the mountain pass.

As the N5 twists and turns its way down the Jura Mountains past the small ski resort of **Mijoux**, the panoramic view of Lake Geneva embraced by the French Alps and Mont Blanc

beyond is equally startling. For the best vantage point, ride the **Telesiège Val Mijoux** (chairlift; return €6; 🚠 9am-1pm & 2.15-5.30pm Fri-Sun mid-Jul-mid-Aug) from Mijoux to the foot of the **Télécabine du Mont Rond** and continue up to Mont Rond (elevation 1533m).

Continuing a further 25km southeast you arrive at the French-Swiss border, passing through **Ferney-Voltaire** (☎ tourist office 04 50 28 09 16; www.ferney-voltaire.net), 5km north of Geneva en route. Following his banishment from Switzerland in 1759, Voltaire lived in Ferney until his return to Paris and death in 1778. Guided tours (55 minutes) of his humble home, **Château de Voltaire** (☎ 04 50 40 53 21; allée du Château; admission free; 🚗 tours 10.30am, 11.30am, 2.30pm, 3.30pm & 4.30pm Tue-Sun mid-May-mid-Sep), take in the château, chapel and surrounding 7-hectare park. Past visitors include Auden, Blake and Flaubert, all of whom wrote about the philosopher's home in exile.

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