

# THE FRENCH ALPS

The resort towns of Megève and Chamonix offer far more than brilliant skiing, with stylish shops, cozy and inviting chalets, and world-class cuisine. BY VICKY LOWRY

The allures of France are, of course, legendary: all that history, all that culture—all that amazing wine. Americans have been venturing there since the late 1820s, first to Paris, and then, over time, to the Riviera, Provence, Bordeaux, and Brittany. A region we've explored far less—yet one that in-the-know Europeans, especially Parisians, crave for its crisp air and bucolic landscapes—is the French Alps.

Two popular resorts, Megève and Chamonix, lie in the Haute-Savoie, the dramatic, snowcapped mountain range anchored by the colossal Mont Blanc. The villages are a study in contrasts: Megève has cozy, small-town charm with a sophisticated ambience; Chamonix's austere peaks and wooded terrain attract those with an adventurous spirit. Both are less than an hour's drive from Geneva. In winter, each offers pleasures all its own.

Prized for its sunny, wide-open ski slopes, Megève is a quintessential French mountain town, albeit one whose narrow, cobblestone streets

are lined with chic home decor shops and luxury boutiques (Hermès opened back in 1950). Yet it retains its rustic roots: Colorfully painted horse-drawn carriages gather in the town square at dusk for après-ski rides, and 300-year-old chalets punctuate the hilly farmland.

The resort town has the Rothschilds to thank for turning it into a glamorous international retreat. During World War I, Noémie de Rothschild (who married into the famous banking family) headed to the Swiss village of St. Moritz for a break from wartime Paris. When the Jewish baroness encountered a German businessman there, she was so offended that she left, determined to create her own French ski resort in Megève. The lodge she built in 1924, now the Chalet du Mont d'Arbois hotel, became an intimate hub for vacationing society families, and it remains an inviting fixture today.

"Everybody knew one another—it was like a club," Paris-born, New York-based interior designer Robert Couturier recalls of his youth >

service. What began in 1903 as a small, family-run business has been transformed over the decades into a five-star property with a two-Michelin-star restaurant. Meanwhile, the Taittinger family (of Champagne fame) is completing a top-to-bottom renovation of Hotel Mont-Blanc, giving the old-world resort a glamorous 21st-century spin. If you like your lodgings rustic, the intimate Auberge du Bois Prin has irresistible views and its own Michelin-star restaurant.

Whatever you choose to do during your stay—skiing, hiking, snowshoeing, even a quick trip to Italy via the six-mile-long Mont Blanc Tunnel—you'll probably end up on rue Paccard. It's lined with some of the world's best sporting-goods stores (this is where to find the perfect waterproof jacket or hand-tooled hiking boots), but other treasures abound nearby—from farmhouse antiques at Le Dogue Bleu, to the famed horn-handle cutlery at Laguiole, to Le Chalet de Jules's mountain-chic decor (reindeer rugs, stainless steel lanterns). Revive with an espresso and a slice of tart at the new and cool Pie, or an insanely rich hot chocolate at Petits Gourmands, Jacqueline Fattier's pastry shop and tearoom (the Croix de Savoie, a brioche filled with vanilla cream, is the house specialty).

Whether you're sitting on the restaurant terrace of a mid-mountain chalet in Megève with a panoramic view of the Alps, or skiing above the tree line in Chamonix surrounded by blue ice fields and clean, thin air, the net effect is the same. Being outdoors in this pristine yet pampering part of the world reminds you how powerful, restorative, and just plain agreeable nature with a French accent can be. "It's all about the landscape," Claudine Kawiak, owner of Megève's Blu & Berry boutique, declares. "After spending my life in airports, traveling to Moscow, New York, and Beijing, here I breathe." ■

A lounge in Le Lodge Park hotel.



## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW NOW

### WHERE TO STAY

**Le Lodge Park**, 100 rue d'Arly, 4-50-93-05-03; [lodgepark.com](http://lodgepark.com): This glam retreat conjures a trapper's lodge, with fur throws, antler chandeliers, and an inviting lounge for sipping Champagne.