

Le skiing weekend with a flavour of France

Tired of drab Alpine concrete? Picture-box Samoens offers more than snow for those seeking a short getaway, says Charles Starmer -Smith.

Why go?

Last week's snowfall will encourage thousands of skiers to dust down their salopettes and make a dash for the Alps. But before you troop off to the Little England enclaves of Les Trois Vallées, how about considering somewhere a bit different?

Lying less than an hour from Geneva, the French resort of Samoens is ideally placed for a long weekend's skiing. It might neighbour the concrete jungle that is Flaine, but it could not be more different. Here a botanical garden, gothic church, medieval squares, timber-fronted patisseries and picture-box houses make it one of the prettiest of the Alpine resorts.



If it's nightlife you're after, head elsewhere, but if you would rather unwind in a real French village filled with characterful bars and restaurants, Savoyard charm and stunning backdrops, this is the place. And do not be put off by its lowly height. Although set in a glacial valley at only 700 metres above sea level, it is, courtesy of a new high-speed gondola, just eight minutes from the Grand Massive ski area (think Flaine, Les Carroz and Morillon). Here, 265km of pistes and 75 lifts offer some of the most consistent snow cover and varied skiing in the Alps.

Travel by...

Plane: easyJet (0905 821 0905, www.easyjet.co.uk) and British Airways (0870 850 9850, www.ba.com) are among the airlines offering direct flights from the UK..

Car: Samoens is just a 50-minute drive from Geneva airport. Taxi drivers charge in excess of 100 euros for airport transfers; the bus costs 40 euros. There are plenty of car-hire options; visit www.travelsupermarket.com to compare prices.

Stay at...

Le Chateau du Berouze (+33 4 50 34 95 72, www.chateauduberouze.com). The main part of this old chateau dates back to 1485. It was recently restored by a New Zealand couple but retains its old timber beams, stonework, open fires and carved wooden doors. The first-floor apartment offers one family room and two doubles, an open-plan kitchen, living room with all the mod-cons and two bathrooms overlooking an orchard, terrace and lake. From £850 per week for the whole apartment.

Hotel Neige et Roc (+33 4 50 34 40 72, www.neigeetroc.com). The chalet-style, family-run hotel offers spacious rooms and 18 self-catering apartments. Lying just 500 metres from the village centre, it is on the ski-bus route and boasts an indoor and outdoor pool, a sauna, hammam and gym. From 120 euros per person per night, half-board.

Hotel Les Glaciers (+33 4 50 34 40 06, www.hotel-les-glaciers.com), in the town centre, 800 metres from the gondola, offers good-sized, clean and comfortable rooms. It also has an indoor swimming pool, sauna and good, wholesome Savoyard food. From 69 euros per person b&b.

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Spend the morning...

Skiing, of course. The huge Grand Massif ski area is suitable for skiers of all standards, with more than 134 different pistes from meandering blues to steep black couloirs. The introduction of hands-free ski passes two winters ago means there's little queuing.

If you like motorway skiing, the nine-mile run Les Cascades, the longest blue run in Europe, will be a dream descent – from the top of

Les Grandes Platières (2,580m) in Flaine down to the village of Sixt (700m).

For more advanced skiers, the Combe de Gers, a steep black run that rapidly drops 800m into a bowl, is a real thigh burner. There's also plenty of great off-piste action. A three-day pass for the Grand Massif area costs 99 euros.

Lunch in...

The wide choice of piste-side restaurants, from cheap self-service stops to places you can settle in if the weather (or your legs) take a turn for the worst. Le Blanchot (+33 4 50 90 82 44), above Flaine, offers table service with great steaks and tartiflette. Mains from 14 euros. La Cascade (+33 4 50 90 87 66) is another set in a quiet location about 350 metres from Flaine town centre, with open fires. Good-value buffet or table service. Mains 16 euros.

Stroll around...

The narrow streets of Samoens. Once famous for its stone-builders (Frahans), this medieval village is filled with their edifices. Not to be missed are the gothic church built on the foundations of a Roman church in 1438 and the Jaysinia botanical gardens that fill the slope above the old village centre. Finally, wander back through the narrow streets filled with local craft and haberdashery shops and the smells of charcuterie. Those with energy still to burn may head to the local ice rink (eight euros) or opt for a snow-shoeing trip. Visit the local tourist office for details.

Buy...

Pâtisseries. Anyone with a sweet tooth will be spoilt for choice. From its chocolate fountain and confiseries to gateaux aux pistaches and tarte aux pommes, the Pâtisserie à la Jaysinia (+33 4 50 34 40 31) on the main high street is the best and boasts an eat-in, waddle-out coffee room.

Local crafts. Every Wednesday for over 500 years has been market day in Samoens, clustered around the lime tree in the main square. Bring back hand-painted china, interior furnishings, cheese, wine or leather goods.

Have dinner at...

Muscade et Basilic (+33 4 50 53 65 22) on Chemin du Graveruaz; it is probably the best food in town. Choose the three-course 27 euros menu. The foie gras and the lamb medallions were particularly good.

La Clarine (+33 4 50 34 40 11) is ideal for group fondues, raclettes or meat barbecued on hot stones served with mixed salads and mountains of frites. Eat almost as much as you want for no more than 18 euros a head.

Or if pizzas, a glass or three of Kronenbourg and some live music is more your thing then head for La Louisianne (+33 4 50 34 42 83). Mains from 10 euros

Stay up late...

At the local bars. La Clarine is Samoens's version of an ice bar. Cocktails, a DJ most nights and flat screens showing MTV give it a lively atmosphere. The nearby pine-fronted Aspen bar, owned by a whisky-loving Frenchman, offers 250 varieties of Scotch and malt whiskies and Guanacao at the far end of town offers a younger crowd sinking beer by the litre. While the local nightclub Le Tomahawk (about three miles away in Verchaix village) is where the locals go native until 5am.