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The secret to a simple and sensibly priced French ski trip

An hour from Geneva and with an impressive ski area, Le Grand Bornand lacks international cachet but is the answer to hassle-free holiday

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12 March 2024 • 11:00am



My life-long quest to find a sensibly priced ski trip with the shortest transfer has taken me to [several hundred resorts across the mountains of Europe](#). Finally, I think I've found it in Le Grand Bornand in France.

Where? You may well ask. Le Grand Bornand certainly lacks the international cachet of [Courchevel](#) and [Val d'Isère](#), but, in fact, it's one of the most popular of France's 364 resorts – that is, for the French, who make up most of the visitors and who have been keeping its secrets under wraps.

Ski trip success depends on achieving maximum hours on quality snow with the least travel hassle – particularly if you have small children in tow. With a theoretical choice of nearly 4,000 resorts in Europe, finding the ideal destination with these criteria *should* be an easy task. However, once you factor in a suitable ski area for your party's skill set, acceptable prices, warm ambience and sufficient snow cover, your options shrink dramatically.

For me, the key to all this lies in the shortest possible transfers, which are all too often prolonged, stressful and exhausting experiences. I once flew to Ljubljana airport in Slovenia, grabbed my skis and bag off the luggage carousel and was riding the gondola at Kravavec within 25 minutes of touchdown – it was a lightbulb moment.



Le Grand-Bornand has impressively reliable snow cover thanks to its proximity to the Mont Blanc massif | CREDIT: TILBY VATTARD

If you're drawn to skiing in the Alps' biggest resorts, finding comparable convenience in France is tricky. So when asked by friends working in Geneva to suggest a *sympa* ski resort nearby for a joint week together, I phoned Xavier Schouller. French-born Schouller founded British self-drive tour operator Peak Retreats in 2002. Initially, he used his native insider knowledge to concentrate on sending UK clients to small French destinations that were largely unknown to the British public.

“Easy,” he said: “Go to Le Grand Bornand. It’s great for all standards. You won’t regret it.”

In the Aravis mountains, Le Grand Bornand is just a five-minute car journey or free ski bus ride from better-known La Clusaz. Together with little St Jean de Sixt and Manigod, they share a lift pass and an impressive 230km of pistes.

Importantly, the resort is located just an hour by road from Geneva airport and 30 minutes from the lakeside town of Annécý – making it easily accessible from all directions. Our friends drove, my wife and I flew by easyJet from Bristol and took the resort’s minibus shuttle (aravis-shuttle.com) that runs six times daily and costs only €40pp each way.



Although Le Grand Bornand lies at just 1,000m, with a top altitude of 2,100m, it has impressively reliable snow cover thanks to the “fridge effect” caused by its proximity to the Mont Blanc massif.

Snow cover during our late-January visit was remarkable in this mixed winter and, with pastures rather than rocks beneath the piste, a base of only a few centimetres was required in order to open the ski runs.



Peter Hardy on his trip to Le Grand Bornand

The resort also has a life outside skiing. Since the 13th century, Le Grand Bornand has been the spiritual home of Reblochon cheese, the key ingredient in tartiflette and other dishes from the Haute-Savoie. In the Middle Ages, the church and feudal lords based their annual milk production tax on the number of buckets filled at the afternoon milking.

The canny farmers in the region only half-milked their cows in front of the tax collectors. They found that when they completed the task under cover of darkness the second stage produced much creamier milk that was ideal for cheese-making.

Seemingly, you're never far from a cow here. When more than 2,000 of them emerge in springtime from their winter quarters on the 45 working farms the cacophony of bells

haunts the whole mountainside.

As a traditional destination, rather than purpose-built giant, it's important to understand the resort's geography. Le Grand Bornand is made up of two accommodation bases: Le Chinaillon is officially the resort's ski centre with its ski school, nursery slopes and easy chairlift access to the mountain. It has the most chalets and the majority of hotels. 10 minutes away by road and linked by piste, is the ancient village of Le Grand Bornand – our base for the week.



Les Chalets de Joy

Les Chalets de Joy is an imposing new complex of five-star apartments, situated on the hillside just above the two mountain access gondolas. Two-bedroom apartments with views across the village come with two bathrooms and a well-equipped open plan living area and kitchen. There's also a pool, gym and wellness area and a lounge and bar.

A short walk away, the Joyère gondola takes you up to a secluded area with easy greens and blues. Le Rosay, which departs from the same station, brings you to the heart of the skiing and the pistes leading down to Le Chinaillon.

Mont Lachat at 2,100m is the starting point for a whole series of surprisingly challenging runs, as well as a dedicated and steep freeride sector of the mountain. However, one of the key advantages of the resort is that it really does suit all standards.



The wellness area at Chalets de Joy

In all there's 90km of pistes served by 24 lifts, three beginner areas, and a renowned snowpark with lines for all levels. The mountainside is dotted with welcoming huts for a drink or a lazy lunch. Papi Jo just below the green Serpentine slope at Le Chinaillon was one of our favourites – it has an outdoor terrace and a barbecue in good weather. The centre of the atmospheric village also has a good choice of relatively inexpensive restaurants and bars.

Further afield, the free ski bus presents the opportunity to explore larger La Clusaz. Here, the spread-out ski area is divided into separate sectors – Balme, located the furthest from the village, was a personal favourite.

The journey home? Our friends drove us to Geneva airport, and we were sitting smugly in the departure lounge within 75 minutes of reluctantly departing our holiday apartment.

Essentials

[Peak Retreats](#) offers a week's stay at Les Chalets de Joy apartments from £1,999 total, for a two-bedroom apartment, self catering, including Eurotunnel crossing. If you choose to fly rather than drive, the price is discounted. Equipment rental with [Intersport](#) costs from €74 for six days, with free overnight lockers. Lift passes cost €280 for six days. Find out more at legrandbornand.com

Peter was a guest of Peak Retreats

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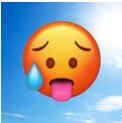
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