

Rhône-Alpes

Overview

The huge Rhône-Alpes region, stretching south from Burgundy and Jura to the hills of Haute-Provence, Vaucluse and the Riviera beyond, with the Auvergne as its western neighbour, can safely claim to have something for all holidaymakers. Europe's tallest mountain range welcomes both first-time skiers and seasoned off-pisters to its famous slopes in winter, while nature-sporters, ramblers, climbers and outdoor pursuit fans hit the hills in spring and summer to enjoy the abundant flora and fauna. Hearty mountain cuisine and France's leading gastronomic city, Lyon, draw the gourmets while the lakes at Annecy and Geneva provide perfect backdrops for a short break in genteel surrounds.

Main cities and towns

Grenoble in the Dauphiné region is the nominal "capital" of the Alps, a vibrant and cultured student city situated charmingly at the confluence of the rivers Isère and Drac. It's a top spot for a weekend jolly before heading for the mountains, whatever the season. The regional administrative capital is Lyon, a powerhouse of industry and commerce with medieval backstreets lined with bistros, fantastic museums and brilliant shopping opportunities. Add the boho village atmosphere of its Croix Rousse silk weaver's district to a gastronomic reputation beyond compare in all of France and you have the perfect city break destination. Other main towns include St-Etienne and Privas in Ardèche, while along the Rhône Valley are Vienne, home of the jazz festival and Valence, a main TGV stop and gateway to Provence.

Places to visit

Take in the atmosphere of Lyon's Old Town with a wander through the traboules (secret passages) created by silk weavers to protect their creations during bad weather or ride the funiculaire up in the Fourvière area for a stunning view of the city. Lyon is culture central – especially during summer when the Nuits de Fourvière festival brings the city alive with dance, music, cinema and theatre events. In Grenoble, the Musée de Grenoble houses an arresting collection of works by the likes of Matisse and Chagall. Wine lovers should head for Beaujolais, northwest of Lyon, to take a wine tour and sample some fruity reds, while lakeside Annecy offers visitors a dreamy blend of canals, hidden passages and delightful 16th-century buildings.

Things to do and see

The lure of the French Alps during ski season is irresistible – dozens of resorts small and large, modern and traditional, cater to all budgets and tastes, with slopes to suit all abilities. And the sight of a towering Mont Blanc under blue skies, or a tour of Chamonix's glaciers, is the stuff fond memories are made of. In summer, how about a bike trip around Lake Annecy or an altitude stroll among the alpine meadows and streams of the Vanoise National Park (Ecrins and Vercors National Parks are equally beguiling). Or, for something a little different, how about some hair-raising hot air ballooning – Annonay hosts a big festival in June. Water-based activities are plentiful, from canoeing in the stunning Ardèche Gorge to a cooling dip in Champos lake in the Drôme. There is also an abundance of golf courses and spa resorts to choose from.

Food and drink

No visit to Lyon, the gourmet capital of France, is complete without a slow lunch or dinner at a bouchon, a traditional and friendly local eatery. Your meal will probably start with a glass of crème de cassis and continue, if you are feeling brave, with a local speciality, boudin blanc or boudin noir (veal or pork blood sausage). Other regional produce proudly served up in various guises and recipes includes Montélimar nougat, Ardèche chestnuts and truffles from Drôme. But it's in the mountain cookery of the Savoy that the Alps leaves its mark, not least on belt notches as charcuterie, cheeses and meats (think fondues, raclette and tartiflette) more than satisfy the appetites of the hungriest skiers. To drink, the cellars of the Côtes du Rhône produce some fine bottlings like Crozes-Hermitage and Chateauneuf-du-Pape, while the famous Chartreuse, green and boozy, is a famous herb liqueur made by Carthusian monks.

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Family attractions

The Rhône-Alpes is no place for kids to get cooped up indoors – it's fresh air all the way, no matter which season the family break is planned for. Children love the slopes and the sooner you can get them skiing the better, so book them into an École du Ski Français lesson for that all-important first attempt at snow-ploughing. In spring and summer, why not go camping – it's sociable and fun and the region has over 950 sites boasting superb facilities in breathtaking environs. For day-trippers, there are lots of options too – try the zoo at St-Martin-la-Plaine or the brilliant Parc des Oiseaux (Bird Park) at Villar-les-Dombes.