



Châtel

A distinctively French base for touring the Portes du Soleil

COSTS



RATINGS

The slopes

Snow	**
Extent	*****
Expert	***
Intermediate	****
Beginner	****
Convenience	**
Queues	***
Mountain restaurants	***

The rest

Scenery	****
Resort charm	***
Off-slope	**

NEWS

For 2003/04, two new drags were installed – one to improve the link between Châtel and Torgon and the other to serve the terrain-park and boardercross at Super-Châtel. Five new snow-guns were added.

For 2004/05 the old two-seater chair at Pré-la-Joux will be replaced by a much-needed six-pack.

A new piste, Le Gros Nant, will be constructed to link Vonnes, on the road to Morgins, with the lifts at Linga – previously it took two buses to reach Linga from here.

- + Very extensive, pretty, intermediate terrain – the Portes du Soleil
- + Wide range of cheap and cheerful, good-value accommodation
- + Pleasant, lively, French-dominated old village, still quite rustic in parts
- + Local slopes are among the best in the Portes du Soleil and relatively queue-free
- + Easily reached – one of the shortest drives from the Channel, and close to Geneva, but ...

- Village congestion can be a problem at weekends and in peak season, as can lift queues in parts of the Portes du Soleil circuit
- Both the resort and the slopes are low for a French resort, with the resulting risk of poor snow – though snowmaking is now extensive
- Most main lifts are a bus-ride from village centre
- Best nursery slope reached by bus or gondola

Châtel offers an attractive blend of qualities much like that of Morzine – another established valley village in the Portes du Soleil. Morzine is a bit more polished, Châtel (with a claimed 40 working farms) more rustic. But its key advantage is that it is part of the main PdS circuit. There is a gap in the circuit at Châtel, filled by buses; but this is more of an irritant to those passing through than for Châtel residents, for most of whom the excellent local bus services are part of the daily routine. At weekends it's worth trying the slopes of nearby Chapelle d'Abondance, which are pleasantly uncrowded.

THE RESORT

Châtel lies near the head of the wooded Dranse valley, at the north-eastern limit of the French-Swiss Portes du Soleil ski circuit.

It is a much expanded but still attractive old village. Modern unpretentious chalet-style hotels and apartments rub shoulders with old farms where cattle still live in winter.

Although there is a definite centre, the village sprawls along the road in from lake Geneva and the diverging roads out – up the hillside towards Morgins and along the valley towards the Linga and Pré-la-Joux lifts.

Lots of visitors take cars and the centre can get clogged with traffic – especially at weekends. Street parking is difficult but there is underground (paid-for) parking and day car parks at Linga and Pré-la-Joux (where the parking can still get very full in peak season despite the provision of new spaces). Other main French Portes du Soleil resorts are easy to reach by piste, but not by road.

The resort bus service is approved by reporters. A central location gives you the advantage of getting on the ski-bus to the outlying lifts before it gets very crowded and simplifies

après-ski outings – the night bus finishes at 9.30pm. But there is accommodation near the Linga lift if that's the priority.

A few kilometres down the valley is the rustic village of La Chapelle-d'Abondance (see end of chapter).



KEY FACTS

Resort	1200m 3,940ft
For Portes du Soleil	
Slopes	975-2275m 3,200-7,460ft
Lifts	206
Pistes	650km 400 miles
Green	13%
Blue	38%
Red	39%
Black	10%
Snowmaking	252 acres
For Châtel only	
Slopes	1100-2205m 3,610-7,230ft
Lifts	41
Pistes	83km 52 miles

THE MOUNTAINS

Châtel sits between two sectors of the main Portes du Soleil circuit, each offering a mix of open and wooded slopes, and linked by an 'excellent, practically continuous' free bus service. The circuit is easily done by intermediates of all abilities. Going clockwise avoids two snags in Morgins – the excessively sunny lower slopes of Bec de Corbeau, and the uphill walk to the next lift. The booklet-style piste map gives a reasonably clear picture of each resort along the way. Reporters have praised the system of Discovery Routes around the Portes du Soleil – choose an animal that suits your ability and follow the signs displaying it.

THE SLOPES

The circuit breaks down here

Directly above the village is **Super-Châtel** – an area of easy, open and lightly wooded beginner slopes, accessed by a choice of gondola or two-stage chair. From here you can cross the Swiss border, either to quiet Torgon or clockwise around the Portes du Soleil to Morgins, Champoussin and Champéry, before going back into France above Avoriaz. You can also start from Petit Châtel – successive chairs take you to the link with Torgon. A reader recommended this route, but as the bus doesn't go here you need to be staying locally or have a car.

For intermediates and better, the **Linga** area, accessed by a gondola, has some of the most interesting runs in the Portes du Soleil. The fastest way to Avoriaz is to stay on the bus at Linga

and go to Pré-la-Joux. From here a fast quad goes to Plaine Dranse; then it's one more lift and run to Les Lindarets and the lifts to Avoriaz. There is night-skiing on Linga every Thursday.

TERRAIN-PARKS

Head for Super Châtel

There's a terrain-park, with 15 features of varying difficulty, at Super Châtel, plus a 120m/390ft long half-pipe and an 800m/half-mile long boarder-cross course. Music blasts out to help motivate you for the tricks. There's a big air jump on the Stade de Slalom in the Linga sector, and La Chapelle d'Abondance also has a 360m/1,180ft long park with half-pipe.

SNOW RELIABILITY

The main drawback

The main drawback of the Portes du Soleil is that it is low, so snow quality can suffer when it's warm. Châtel is at only 1200m/3,940ft and some runs home can be tricky or shut, especially from Super-Châtel. But a lot of snowmaking has been installed at Super-Châtel and on runs down to resort level. Linga and Pré-la-Joux are mainly north-facing and generally have the best local snow – a regular visitor tells us there is often good snow at Pré-la-Joux until May. But another told us of pistes to Morgins and Lindarets being closed in March.

FOR EXPERTS

Some challenges

The best steep runs – on- and off-piste – are in the Linga and Pré-la-Joux area. Beneath the Linga gondola and chair,



LIFT PASSES

Portes du Soleil

Covers all lifts in all 12 resorts, and shuttle-buses.

Main pass

1 day €35

6 days €171

Senior citizens

Over 60: 6 days €137

Children

Under 16: 6 days €115

Under 5: free pass

Alternative passes

As well as Châtel, local pass covers Torgon, Corbeau sector of Morgins and Braitaz sector of La Chapelle d'Abbondance.

there's a pleasant mix of open and wooded ground which follows the fall line fairly directly. And there's a mogul field between Cornebois and Plaine Dranse which has been described as 'steeper and narrower than the infamous Swiss Wall in Avoriaz'. An area under the Cornebois chair, known to the locals as Happy Valley, is also popular. There are two blacks from the top of the Morclan chair at Super-Châtel, including a long run down to Barbossine which is quite narrow and tricky at the top. But it can be prone to closure because of avalanche risk. There's also a great off-piste route from Tête du Linga down the valley of La Leiche – hire a guide. Two pistes from the Rochassons ridge are steep and kept well groomed.

FOR INTERMEDIATES

Some of the best runs in the area

When conditions are right the Portes du Soleil is an intermediate's paradise. Good intermediates need not go far from Châtel to find amusement; Linga and Plaine Dranse have some of the best red runs on the circuit. The moderately skilled can do the PdS circuit without problem, and will particularly enjoy runs around Les Lindarets and Morgins. Even timid types can do the circuit, provided they take one or two short-cuts and ride chairs down trickier bits. The chair from Les Lindarets to Pointe de Mossettes leads to a red run into the Swiss area, which is a lot easier than the 'Swiss Wall' from Chavanette and also speeds up a journey round the circuit.

Leaving aside attempts to complete the circuit in both directions, there are rewarding out-and-back expeditions to be made clockwise to the wide open snowfields above Champoussin, beyond Morgins, and anticlockwise to the Hauts-Forts runs above Avoriaz – a preferred option for a reporter this year, who found the circuit to involve more time 'travelling the lift-system and poling along flats and traverses than actually skiing any decent terrain'.

boarding

Avoriaz is the hardcore destination in the Portes du Soleil. Châtel is not a bad place to learn or to go to as a budget option, and the terrain-park here might suit non-experts better. But many lifts in the Super-Châtel sector are drags and reporters warn they can be a 'painful experience'. The Linga area also has good, varied slopes and off-piste possibilities, and the Stade de Slalom run there is floodlit every Thursday, is wired for sound and has a big air jump.

FOR BEGINNERS

Three possible options

There are good beginners' areas at Pré-la-Joux (a bus-ride away) and at Super-Châtel (a gondola-ride). And there are nursery slopes at village level if there is snow there. Recent reporters have praised the Super-Châtel slopes and lifts which 'allow the beginner to progress' and 'safely practise' on gentle gradients away from the main runs. Getting up to them is a bit of an effort, though. The home run to the village at Super-Châtel is not recommended – it is narrow, busy and steep at the end which, coupled with often poor and icy conditions, makes it very tricky for beginners and timid intermediates. The Pré-la-Joux slopes are said to have 'less variety of slopes and quite a steep drag-lift'.

FOR CROSS-COUNTRY

Pretty, if low, trails

There are plenty of pretty trails along the river and through the woods on the lower slopes of Linga, but snow-cover can be a problem. The tourist office produces good maps with suggested routes and trail times.

QUEUES

Bottlenecks being eased

Queues to get to Avoriaz have been eased by the high-speed quad at Pré-la-Joux. But there are still a couple of bottlenecks, which tend to be worse at weekends (although we do have reports of little queuing even during half-term and New Year). The worst is at Les Lindarets, where there is often a lengthy wait for the Chaux Fleurie chair-lift to the Col du Bassachaux on the way back to Châtel – there are reports of this being upgraded in the near future but it is unlikely for 2004/05. But the queue the other way up to Avoriaz has been eased since the introduction of the six-pack. You can face queues to get down from Super-Châtel if the slope back is shut by poor snow. Queues for the gondola out of the village form when school parties

The Linga sector offers widely varying terrain above the trees, as well as some sheltered runs →

OT CHÂTEL /
JEAN-FRANÇOIS VUARAND

SCHOOLS

ESF

t 0450 732264
info@est-chatel.com

International

t 0450 733192
ski.surf@freesbee.fr

Stages Henri Gonon

t 0450 732304
ecole.ski@hotel-arcenciel.fr

Francis Sports

t 0450 813251
francis-sports
@valdabondance.com

Snow Ride (Ecole de Glisse)

t 0608 337651

Bureau des Moniteurs

Virages
t 0680 028763

Classes

(ESF prices)
6 half-days (2½/hr am
or pm) €105

Private lessons

€31 for 1hr, for 1 or
2 people

CHILDREN

Le Village des Marmottons

t 0450 733379
contact@
lesmarmottons.com
8.30 to 5.30; ages 3
to 8; ski lessons from
age 3

Moufflets Garderie

t 0450 813819
ages 3mth to 6yr

Ski school

ESF takes children from 5 to 13 (6 half-days €115); Francis Sport takes children from 3 to 8; International, Henri Gonon and Snow Ride take children from age 8



gather: 'It is common to share your lift with a buzz of hyperactivity,' writes a recent visitor. Reporters have also found lengthy queues at the Tour de Don and Chermeu drag-lifts at certain times of day, causing difficulties for skiers rushing back to Super-Châtel to pick up children from ski school.

MOUNTAIN RESTAURANTS

Some quite good local huts

Atmospheric chalets can be found, notably at Plaine Dranse (the Bois Prin, Chez Crêpy, Tàn o Marmottes, Vieux Chalet, Chaux des Rosées and Chez Denis have been recommended). In the Linga area the Ferme des Pistes, 'a cosy alpine barn, complete with stable-door', gets the thumbs up for wholesome and hearty mountain meals. The Perdrix Blanche at Pré-la-Joux scarcely counts as a mountain restaurant, but is an attractive (if expensive and crowded) spot for lunch. At Super Châtel the Portes du Soleil at the foot of the Coqs drags is much better than the big place at the top of the gondola. The Escale Blanche is worth a visit.

SCHOOLS AND GUIDES

Plenty of choice

There are now six ski and snowboard schools in Châtel. The International school has been recommended by a reporter, but another was 'very disappointed' with her private lesson and did not learn anything new. The ESF came in for praise, with comments such as 'very helpful and customer-focused instructors', and 'skiing progressed by leaps and bounds', reinforced in 2004 by a regular reporter.

FACILITIES FOR CHILDREN

Increasingly sympathetic

The Marmottons nursery has good facilities, including toboggans, painting, music and videos, and children are reportedly happy there. 'Mini-Montagnards' is a new games room facility based in Vannes, for children up to 12 years accompanied by an adult. Francis Sports ski school has its own nursery area with a drag lift and chalet at Linga: 'Very organised, convenient and reasonably priced.' The ESF had a rave report again this year, from a regular visitor: 'I continue to be very impressed.' His eight-year old grandson has always received 'sympathetic instruction from English speaking instructors' and made excellent progress.

STAYING THERE

HOW TO GO

A wide choice, including chalets

Although this is emphatically a French resort, packages from Britain are no problem to track down.

Chalets A fair number of UK operators have places here, including some Châtel specialists.

Hotels Practically all the hotels are 2-stars, mostly friendly chalets, wooden or at least partly wood-clad. None of the 3-stars is particularly well placed.

☺☺☺ **Macchi** (0450 732412) Modern chalet, most central of the 3-stars.

☺☺☺ **Fleur de Neige** (0450 732010) Welcoming chalet on edge of centre; Grive Gourmande restaurant does about the best food in town.

☺☺☺ **Lion d'Or** (0450 813440) In centre, 'basic rooms, good atmosphere'.

☺ **Belalp** (0450 732439) Very comfortable, with excellent food.

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GETTING THERE

Air Geneva 75km/
47 miles (1½hr).

Rail Thonon les Bains
(42km/26 miles).

ACTIVITIES

Indoor Bowling,
cinemas, library

Outdoor Ice rink,
walks, dog-sledding,
bob-sleigh, salto
trampolineing, farm
visits, cheese factory
visits, snow-shoe
excursions.

Phone numbers

From abroad use the
prefix +33 and omit
the initial '0' of the
phone number.

TOURIST OFFICES

Châtel

t 0450 732244
touristoffice@
chatel.com
www.chatel.com

La Chapelle- d'Abondance

t 0450 735141
ot@lachapelle
dabondance.com
www.valdabondance.
com

① **Kandahar** (0450 733060) One for
peace-lovers: a Logis by the river, a
walkable distance from the centre.

① **Rhododendrons** (0450 732404)
'Great service, friendly, comfortable,
clean.'

Self-catering Many of the better places
are available through agencies
specialising in Châtel or in self-drive
holidays. The Gelinotte (out of town
but near the Linga lifts and children's
village) and the Erines (5 minutes from
the centre) look good. The Avenières is
right by the Linga gondola. A couple of
reporters have mentioned that Châtel's
supermarkets are small and over-
crowded. There is also a large
supermarket out in the direction of
Chapelle d'Abondance.

EATING OUT

Fair selection

There is an adequate number and
range of restaurants. The Vieux Four is
beautifully rustic with lots of wooden
beams, alcoves and ornaments and
does great steaks and 'tempting and
tasty Savoyard specialties'. The Fiacre
serves similar food and is also popular.
The Fleur de Neige hotel has a pricey
gastronomic restaurant (La Grive
Gourmand). The Pierreir serves
Savoyard specialties. The Moroccan
chef at the Hotel Soldanelles cooks a
'veritable feast' and the Renard is
good for steaks, but is located lower
down the valley. The Ripaille, almost
opposite the Linga gondola, is popular
with the locals and highly rated by
reporters, especially for its fish and the
'fantastic local Gamay wines', but
booking is essential. The hotel
Cornettes in La Chapelle-d'Abondance
is worth a trip – see later section.

APRES-SKI

All down to bars

Châtel is getting livelier, especially at
the weekends. The Tunnel bar is very
popular with the British and has a DJ
or live music every night (the caramel
vodka is recommended). The Avalanche
is a very popular English-style pub and
has internet facilities. The Godille –
close to the Super-Châtel gondola and
crowded when everyone descends at
close of play – has a more French feel.
The 'small and cosy' Isba is the locals'
choice, and shows extreme sports
videos. The bar in the hotel
Soldanelles has been recommended.
The bowling alley, the Vieille Grange,
also has a good bar.

OFF THE SLOPES

Better to stay in Morzine

Those with a car have some
entertaining excursions available:
Geneva, Thonon and Evian. Otherwise
there is little to do but take some
pleasant walks along the river, visit the
cheese factory and the two cinemas, or
join in the daily events organised by
the tourist office.

The Portes du Soleil as a whole is
less than ideal for those who like to
meet their more active friends for
lunch: skiers and boarders are likely to
be above at some distant resort at
lunchtime and very few lifts are
accessible to pedestrians.

La Chapelle-d'Abondance

1010m/3,310ft

This unspoiled, rustic farming
community, complete with old church
and friendly locals, is 5km/3 miles
along a beautiful valley from Châtel. 'A
car and a bit of French are virtually
essential,' says a reporter. It's had its
own quiet little north-facing area of
easy wooded runs for some years, but
has more recently been put on the
Portes du Soleil map by a gondola and
three chair-lifts that now link it to
Torgon in Switzerland and so to Super-
Châtel. Taken together with Chapelle's
own little area, this spur of the Portes
du Soleil is worth exploring – good at
weekends, when Châtel gets crowded,
and 'excellent for beginners' But a
reporter warns of difficult drags on the
return from Torgon – 'steep, icy and
not child-friendly'.

The mountain restaurants also failed
to impress a recent visitor, who
queued for 30 minutes at one.

Nightlife is virtually non-existent –
just a few quiet bars, a cinema and
torchlit descents.

The hotel Cornettes (0450 735024)
is an amazing 2-star, run by the Trincaz
family since 1894, with 2-star rooms
but 4-star facilities, including an indoor
pool, sauna, steam room and hot-tubs.
It has an atmospheric bar and an
excellent restaurant doing extremely
good-value menus (but 'disappointing'
desserts, comments one reporter).
Look out for showcases with puppets
and dolls and eccentric touches, such
as ancient doors that unexpectedly
open automatically. The Alpage and
the Chabi are other hotel options. The
Airelles apartments have received a
favourable report.