

TRAVEL

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Family fun: Alison, Gavin, Henry, Floss

THE HILLS REALLY ARE ALIVE

In summer, snow clears in the French Alps to reveal a fabulous adventure playground. **Alison Tyler**, husband Gavin and children Floss and Henry road-test the best holiday hack ever

HEAD to Paris in summer and you might notice a curious lack of locals. Of course, the French capital is currently hosting the Olympics, but as a rule savvy Parisians don't hang around in the polluted, humid city in August. They make a break for the beach. Or, if they're really

smart, they literally run for the hills.

Many people don't realise that mountain ski resorts aren't just for winter and that they become idyllic natural adventure playgrounds in summer. Friends were downright puzzled when we told them where we were going for our summer break. Surrounded by the most beautiful scenery of wildflower-covered mountains and blue skies, with

clean air and a soundtrack of birdsong instead of traffic, the French Alps are one of Europe's best-kept summer secrets, hiding in plain sight. Best of all, a holiday here in the off-season is an absolute bargain. I almost don't want to share this holiday hack with you.

With an energetic tween and an impossible-to-impress teen, we flew to Geneva and then drove the 80 minutes to Flaine – one of the fastest ski-resort transfers from the airport.

It was built in the 1960s on two levels – the lower town centre Flaine Forum and the upper town Flaine Forêt – and feels like a scene from a stylised Bond film, with bright orange glass-box lifts that connect the two sections of the town, and mid-century, brutalist buildings that now look almost kitsch. Quintessential Alpine postcard pretty it isn't but we weren't there for sightseeing. And besides, the lack of cutesy kerb appeal probably accounts for Flaine being one of the best-value mountain resorts in France.

I was travelling with my husband, Gavin, and the toughest travel critics ever – our 14-year-old daughter, Floss, and son, Henry, 11. So, would it be possible to impress these two, after all?

Our apartment-hotel, Les Terrasses de Vêret in Flaine Forêt (cheaper than Flaine Forum), came with a shared swimming pool and hot tub, a daily bakery-breakfast delivery and balcony looking out to the Grand Massif, where we could watch deer, rabbits and birds while eating our pains au chocolat.

It's also perfectly placed, opposite the glass elevator down to the Forum level out on to the mountain. In winter this would be a



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High life: Enjoy treetop adventures; inset left, local wildlife

RELAXING WITH A BEER WHILE KIDS PLAY SAFELY IS PRICELESS

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ski-in, ski-out location. On day one we headed straight to the tourist office in the centre of the tiny town and picked up our Flaine Festival of Summer wristbands (about £33 for a week; families get four for the price of three). These were our passes to the great outdoor fun park and, in the words of the tourist officer, with these passes 'in Flaine, summer is free'.

The whole area becomes a giant playground, with hundreds of activities and events every week, all included in the pass. There's mini-golf, highwire, orienteering, bungee jumping, tube sliding, rope nets, water slides, archery and trampolining – to name quite a few.

The main resort is car-free, so the kids can roam safely, and some events are free even without the pass, including the live music programme in the central grassed square.

Sitting in a deckchair with a cold beer and a crêpe while the kids went off to play was worth every euro we paid for the pass – freedom

for parents as well as children. It felt as if we'd stumbled upon a real-life, much cheaper Center Parcs that's ideal for slightly older children.

Our highlights included the Giant Air Bag – a ski jump-style tube slide that throws you into the air to land on a giant inflatable crash mat – plus the Go Ape-style highwire course and the laser tag battle in the woods.

A trip on the Grandes Platières cable car to the 2,500m summit and the desert limestone plateau at the top, with views to Mont Blanc, was well worth the euro equivalent of £16.50. From here you can take various hiking trails through the mountains, and we decided to walk the descent back into Flaine (despite grumbling kids) along pristine, blissfully quiet paths.

We enjoyed the daily stroll to the bakery to grab a scenic coffee while trawling the list of daily activities, then regrouping at the end of the day, with a swim and an evening of free live outdoor entertainment in the town centre.

Days filled with high-octane activities left us as exhausted as a day of skiing – and with an appetite for the hearty Savoyard cuisine.

We loved the friendly welcome and delicious food at Sabaudia, including the cheese fondue, tartiflette, burgers and steaks. On the mountain slope and with panoramic views, Le Bissac is a beautiful spot for lunch; while 1967, in the heart of town, offers friendly service, a great atmosphere and stylish modern French fare.

We left feeling we'd only scratched the surface of all the activities, walking routes and

cycling paths, though we'd packed in as much as we could. There'd been something for everyone, and for all of us to do together, which is a rare and special thing with older children.

So now you know where to go to escape from the masses in Paris. Just don't go telling everyone... please.

Getting there

Alison travelled to Flaine with Ski France (skifrance.co.uk). She stayed at Les Terrasses de Véret, where a two-bedroom flat sleeping up to six costs from £403 a week. Return easyjet flights (London to Geneva) from £126pp, return transfers with MV Transport £100pp. A week's Flaine Summer Pass costs about £99 for a family of four (flaine.com).



We found something here for everyone, including for us all to do together, which is a rare and special thing with older kids



It's a bullseye! One of many activities in Flaine



Tiny town that's big on fun:
 Winter skiing makes way for summer entertainment from bungee to tennis in Flaine

