

# Lofty ideals

The Alps aren't only for skiing. Resorts in France, Switzerland and Austria are also beautiful in summer — and so are the property prices, says Laura Latham



The dramatic Lauterbrunnen valley, in Switzerland

In winter, we can't wait to get out our skis and head to the Alpine slopes, but, come summer, we seem to forget the mountains are there. A pity, because the region is beautiful at this time of year — a point not lost on the Germans and other continental Europeans, who are drawn by the stunning scenery, the temperate climate, the healthy lifestyle and the peace that comes when resorts are free of partying snowboarders.

"British buyers believe the Alps are only worth visiting for skiing," says David Lucas, an estate agent based in the French resort of Chamonix. "Yet in summer it's sunny much of the time, and there's a lot going on. As well as outdoor pursuits such as walking and climbing, there are lots of good restaurants and cafes in Chamonix, and music or food festivals happen in the area almost every week."

Lucas's agency, Leggett Immobilier, handles the upper end of the market and offers chalets from about £445,000 (00 33 6 45 81 81 98, frenchestateagents.com), but he says there are opportunities to buy for less. "The most expensive areas are Les Bois, Les Praz and Chamonix centre. Further out, towards Les Houches or Argentière, property is 15%-25% less, while Vallorcine, Sevoz or La Tour, which are less well serviced, can be 50% cheaper."

This is a good time of year to buy, he argues: "The views are clearer, you get a better idea of a property's surroundings when they aren't covered in snow, and there are often deals to be done." This is partly because there's an assumption that winter visitors, who take expensive chalets and ski packages, have more money than those who come in the summer. "Vendors can be less willing to negotiate in winter."

The glitzier French resorts, such as Courchevel and Megève, are certainly more charming in summer, when they are not full of cash-flashing oligarchs. Out of season, the Three Valleys has much to offer, including golf, riding and *via ferrata*, a type of climbing.

Prices in Megève are comparable with those in Chamonix, but François Marchand, sales director of Ena Low Property, says that prices drop by 60% if you go 10 miles out of town. "Saint Martin de Belleville and Combloux are both much cheaper and charming," he says. "We have flats in Megève at £10,000-£18,000 per square metre, but in Combloux, 4km away, I have a semi-detached two-bedroom chalet at £7,500 per square metre (020 7590 1624 www.emalowproperty.co.uk)."

Many French resorts also have leaseback developments, which give owners guaranteed rental returns. This means the firms that manage them have a financial interest in encouraging summer tourism.

Should you aim high or stay low? The season is longer in resorts further up the mountain, and they are likely to be better proofed against global warming. Conversely, some higher-altitude areas, including Kulmatz, in Austria, or Tignes, in France, can be bleak in summer.

For summer action, Vicky Norman, PR manager for the Ski Club of Great Britain, recommends the Italian resorts of Courmayeur and Sestrière, the Austrian town of Kitzbühel, Grindelwald, in Switzerland, and Chamonix, all of which offer a wide



Wengen is a car-free hideaway high in the Alps



Richard Branson lets out the Lodge, his swish chalet in Switzerland



The crystal-clear lake at Hallstatt, Austria, is ideal for watersports

variety of activities and lively resort centres. Flaine and Val Thorens, also in France, Obertauern, in Austria, and most of the Andoran resorts tend to be quieter.

Richard Branson, who owns and lets out the Lodge, a chalet in the swanky Swiss resort of Verbier, is among those trying to encourage summer tourism. "The Alps are really underrated in summer, but it can be the best time to visit," the Virgin boss says. "There's so much to do. I try to get there for at least three weeks in summer. Verbier has a lot of concerts and festivals, and there's even a beach volleyball tournament."

Branson bought the former 42-bedroom hotel five years ago and gutted it, transforming it into a "cozy and comfortable family home" with nine bedrooms, a children's den, fantastic views, a party room with an entertainment system and a fully equipped spa with a huge pool. The decor is traditional, with lots of wood, yet contemporary and stylish. "I love to find unique properties and transform them into homes," he says.

The rental rates for the property nevertheless reflect the continued popularity of the resort as a winter destination. Weekly prices during the ski season start at £56,300; go

David C. Tomlinson/Stone Images/Oleg Armand Getty

## GLITZY RESORTS ARE NICER IN SUMMER, WHEN THEY AREN'T FULL OF FLASHY OLIGARCHS

when the snow has melted, however, and you can stay at the Lodge for a more modest £5,000 a week (0800 716919, thelodge.virgin.com)

Switzerland has always attracted a wealthy set — partly because of the beneficial tax regime for those who live there. Becoming a resident is not easy, though, while buying as a nonresident can also be difficult. Many resorts require potential owners to get a permit, which can take between three and six months.

It's worth the wait, however, to gain full access to the Swiss lifestyle, with summers so warm that the country produces decent wines, and scenery that combines verdant hillsides with peaks that stay snow-topped and waterfalls thawed from their winter sleep.

The tiny town of Leukerbad, two hours from Geneva, offers just such a glorious backdrop, as well as mineral-rich thermal springs that have created a thriving wellness industry. Although there is some unfortunate modern development, the original village is charming and surrounded by meadows. There is also excellent hiking among nearby peaks and bucolic farmland, or along a waterfall-filled canyon.

Such is the draw of the springs that a new luxury development, 51\*, was recently launched there. The thermal waters are piped directly into the properties; each flat has a sumptuous personal spa with a thermal bath on the terrace. Prices start at £2.1m for a one-bedder, but smaller, cheaper serviced properties will soon be available (51degrees.ch).

In the Jungfrau region, Lauterbrunnen benefits from the 72 waterfalls that cascade from the surrounding mountainsides. Just up the mountain is pretty Wengen, a car-free high-altitude hideaway, accessible only by train, that offers many peaceful hiking trails.

"Both resorts are stunning in summer and are not far from Interlaken, where you can sail or play golf, and Grindelwald, which has lots to do, including a zip wire, a golf course and paragliding," says Simon Malster, owner of the Alpine specialist Investees in Property. "Yet because Wengen and Lauterbrunnen are still a secret, they're far cheaper than these better-known towns."

The firm has two-bedroom properties in Lauterbrunnen, starting at £392,500, and several projects in Wengen, including Chalet Arbendrossa, well-designed flats in a spectacular location, with prices from £330,000 for a one-bedroom home, and Chalet Bergfrieden, where two-bedders start at £545,000 (020 8905 5511, investeesinproperty.com).

Malster says one advantage of househunting at this time of year is that many vendors put their chalets on the market at the end of winter. "You get a better selection of real estate at this time of year, and might find the occasional property that a developer wants to sell at a reduction before starting a new project."

Austria is also attracting attention, thanks to lower prices and less developed resorts. Like Switzerland, it lacks a coastline, so summer visitors are often drawn to its lakes and rivers, and there are plenty of pretty towns with good leisure facilities.

There is also a growth in "wellness tourism", which is fuelling purchases in resorts with spas and thermal springs — a trend noted by Jessica Delaney, director of Alpine Marketing. "More families are looking for dual-season," she says. "They want somewhere that has access to skiing, but not everyone is a hard-core skier, so many buyers also want an interesting location for summer holidays."

She is selling waterfront chalets near the town of Hallstatt, a beautiful Unesco World Heritage Site, from £240,000 for a two-bedder. "You can sail, swim and even scuba-dive, because the water is so clear, and there's summer skiing at the glacier in Dachstein West, 20 minutes away."

Also on her books are properties in Annenheim, by Lake Ossiach — good for bathing and sailing, with prices starting at £250,000 — and in Bramberg, a charming village in the Hohe Tauern National Park, one of the largest nature reserves in Europe. It's near several golf courses and the lakefront resorts of Zell am See and Kaprun, which offers year-round glacier skiing. Two-bedroom flats in the Schloss and Emerald Residences, new spa developments, start at £293,000. (020 8455 0505; alpinemarketing.com).

Delaney also represents several projects in the spa resort of Bad Gastein, which has baths and healing centres that make use of the natural therapeutic waters. Prices start at £160,000 for a one-bedroom flat in a development overlooking the waterfall; luxury chalets with private pools and spas start at £1.97m.

"Buyers are increasingly interested in wellness and relaxation, and see the mountains as a healthy environment," she says. "These locations usually also have good access to skiing, too, so you get the best of both worlds."

**SUNDAY TIMES ONLINE** **ST** Take a photo tour of Richard Branson's luxurious Alpine retreat at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/home](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/home)

## THE HIGH LIFE

Three mountain properties you'll want to slope off to all year round



### Switzerland from £2m

The mineral-rich thermal springs and stunning countryside have attracted visitors to Leukerbad for centuries. Called 51\*, this spa development includes a Ritz-Carlton hotel and 30 luxury flats with thermal waters pumped direct to the bathroom. Prices range from £2m for a one-bedder to £4.48m for a 250 sq metre penthouse. 00 41 22 799 4410, 51degrees.ch



### France £1.93m

This barn in Les Houches, in the Chamonix Valley, has been beautifully renovated to make a large open-plan living space with 10 bedrooms, eight bathrooms and huge terraces. It has a host of energy-saving features, including geothermal water heating, rainwater harvesting and excellent insulation. 00 33 5 53 56 62 54, frenchestateagents.com



### Austria from £300,000

Set on a lake a few minutes from the lovely town of Hallstatt, an hour from Salzburg and within easy reach of the Dachstein West ski region, these new chalets will create a village-style resort with a communal pool and a restaurant. Prices start at £300,000 for a fully furnished two-bedroom flats, rising to £376,000 for a four-bedder. 020 8455 0505, alpinemarketing.com