

Serre-Chevalier

One on its own, this – more character and less swank than you expect in a big French resort, and more woodland runs

- + Big, varied mountain offering a sense of travel as you ski
- + Lots of good woodland runs
- + One of the few big French areas based on old villages with character
- + Good-value and atmospheric old hotels, restaurants and chalets
- + Very friendly and welcoming locals
- Busy road runs through the resorts – through the heart of Le Monétier
- A lot of indiscriminate new building took place in the 1960s and 70s
- Still too many drags and slow chairlifts at altitude
- Limited nightlife

This is one of our favourite places. It is one of the few French resorts offering the ambience you might look for in a summer holiday – a sort of Provence in the snow, with lots of small family-run hotels and restaurants in old stone buildings. And the slopes are equally distinctive, with the trees reaching appreciably higher altitudes than the Alpine norm. The minus points above shouldn't be ignored – it really is time Serre-Che merited more than *** for fast lifts – but we find they are far outweighed by the plus points.

THE RESORT

Serre-Chevalier is made up of a string of villages set on a valley floor, linked by a busy road.

The valley runs roughly north-west to south-east, below the north-east-facing slopes of the mountain range that gives the resort its name. From the north-west – coming over the Col du Lautaret from Grenoble – the three main villages are spread over a distance of 8km – Le Monétier (or Serre-Che 1500), Villeneuve (1400) and Chantemerle (1350). Finally, at the extreme south-eastern end of the valley, is Briançon (1200) – not a village but a town (the highest in France). As well as the main villages there are nine smaller villages, some of which give their names to the communes: Villeneuve is in the commune of La Salle les Alpes, for example. Confusing? Yes.

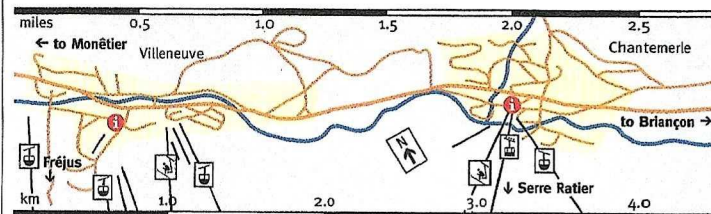
The resort is not at all fashionable and there are no 4-star hotels. But there are more hotels here in the modestly priced Logis de France 'club'

than in any other ski resort. This is a family resort, and it gets especially busy in the February/March French school holidays.

A six-day area pass (or rather your receipt for that pass) covers a day in each of Les Deux-Alpes, Alpe-d'Huez, Puy-St-Vincent, Montgenèvre/the Milky Way, Sestriere. All of these outings are possible by bus, but are easier by car. The road from Grenoble passes over the Col du Lautaret, which may require chains and is occasionally closed.

VILLAGE CHARM ***

Some quaint old parts
Each of the parts of Serre-Chevalier is based on a simple old village, with narrow cobbled streets lined by small shops, cosy bars, hotels and traditional restaurants that give each village a very French feel. Around these older parts there is a lot more modern development ranging in style from brutal to sympathetic. It is not a smart resort in any sense; even the older parts are roughly rustic rather than chocolate-box pretty. (A ban on



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corrugated iron roofs would help.) But when blanketed by snow the older villages and hamlets do have an unpretentious charm, and we find the place as a whole easy to like.

Le Monêtier is the smallest, quietest and most unspoiled of the main villages, with new building which is mostly in sympathetic style. But it is the most seriously affected by traffic – it is bisected by the road to Grenoble, which skirts the other villages; pedestrians stroll about in the road, hoping the cars will avoid them.

Because the resort as a whole is so

spread out, the impact of cars and buses is difficult to escape, even if you're able to manage without them yourself. But reporters seem happy to put up with the road and its traffic.

Briançon's 17th-century fortified upper quarter is a delight, with its traditional shops, auberges, pâtisseries and restaurants; it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. By contrast, the modern functional area around the town's lift station, including good-value lodging and a casino, has little character.

Every year reporters stress how friendly and welcoming the locals are – hardly the norm in France.

CONVENIENCE ***

Good access but expect a walk

All four main resorts have lift access, either by gondola, cable car or fast chairs, to different parts of the ski area. Briançon has a gondola from the bottom of town; your hotel could be next to it, or miles from it. In Chantemerle the old village is not far from the lifts, but a lot of accommodation is further away across the main road. Villeneuve has quite a

KEY FACTS

Resort	1200-1500m
Altitude	3,940-4,920ft
Slopes	1200-2735m
Vertical	3,940-8,970ft
Area	62
Skiable	250km
Distance	155 miles
Green	22%
Blue	28%
Red	37%
Black	13%
Snowmaking	154 hectares

**Ski a high altitude resort with
low prices - see p168**

few lodgings close to its multiple access lifts, but the old village is across the valley; if you want to combine character with convenience, consider the nearby hamlet of Le Bez – set between two gondolas. Le Monêtier has one main access lift, reached from the centre by bus or a 10-minute walk (downhill in the morning, uphill at the end of the day and tricky when ice is around). You can leave your gear at the lift base.

Local ski-buses circulate around the villages, and there are valley buses that link all the villages and lift bases (now until 11.30pm).

SCENERY ***

Great views from the tops

The Serre-Chevalier range is not notably dramatic seen from the valley, though there are great views from Briançon's old town. From the area's high points there are fine views of the rugged 4000m-high Ecrins massif.

THE MOUNTAINS

Trees cover almost two-thirds of the mountain, providing some of France's best bad-weather terrain (we once had a great day here when all the upper lifts were closed by high winds).

Reporters approve of the improved piste signposting – 'We barely looked at the piste map,' says a 2012 reporter. The map is reasonably clear. Piste classification tends to exaggerate difficulty. Many of our 2012 reporters view most blacks as over-rated, and many reds.

EXTENT OF THE SLOPES ****

Interestingly varied and pretty

Serre-Chevalier's 250km of pistes are spread across four main sectors above the four main villages, and you get a real feeling of travel as you move from one to another.

The sector above Villeneuve is the most extensive, reaching back a good way into the mountains and spreading over four or five identifiable bowls. The main mid-station is Fréjus. This sector is linked at altitude and mid-





↑ Above the Fréjus gondola at Villeneuve are beginner slopes and long green runs to progress to

SNOWPIX.COM / CHRIS GILL

LIFT PASSES

Prices in €

Age	1-day	6-day
under 12	35	166
12 to 64	43	208
65 plus	33	187

Free under 6, over 75

Beginner limited pass in each area: eg Villeneuve €17

Notes

Briançon, Villeneuve, Chantemerle and Le Monêtier; 6+ days give one day in Les Deux-Alpes, Alpe-d'Huez, Puy-St-Vincent and Milky Way; reductions for families

Alternative passes

Individual areas of Serre-Chevalier

mountain to the slightly smaller **Chantemerle** sector. The onward link from Chantemerle to **Briançon** is over a high, exposed col via a six-pack. In the opposite direction, the link between Villeneuve and **Le Monêtier** was greatly improved in 2010 by the Vallons six-pack up the Cucumelle valley. Skiing from Le Monêtier to Villeneuve involves the red run down this valley, so timid skiers may prefer to use the bus service.

FAST LIFTS ★★☆☆

Improvements, but slowly

A range of big lifts gets you out of the valley and progress has been made in upgrading some of the higher lifts. But there are still many old, slow lifts at altitude that hinder progress. In particular, the trio of slow chairs from Bachas at mid-mountain above Le Monêtier lead to complaints, though one view is that they keep the Villeneuve crowds away.

QUEUES ★★★☆

Still some bottlenecks

There are few problems getting out of the villages now, but there can be queues further up. Queues on the way to Le Monêtier have been relieved by the Vallons six-pack. Other bottlenecks include the Fréjus chair above the Pontillas gondola from Villeneuve, the Crêtes draglift it links with and the Côte Chevalier chair from the Villeneuve bowl to Chantemerle.

When the resort gets busy in the French school holidays, head for the slow Aiguillette chair at Chantemerle (see 'For intermediates'). And consider riding the gondolas down to avoid busy home runs.

TERRAIN PARKS ★★★☆

Fully featured

The main parks are easily reached from both Chantemerle and Villeneuve. Legendary ripper Guillaume Chastagnat and the Serre Che Brigade have been improving the parks for several years. The Serre Che snowpark is under the Forêt chair (but has a dedicated draglift). It incorporates about 30 different features (plus chill-out and BBQ area) – clearly marked out in three zones for all levels, including tables, wall ride, rails, boxes and hip jump. A major focus has been placed on the great beginner area – 'My kids had a great time,' says a 2012 reporter. A boardercross accessible by the Grande Serre or Combes lifts is 'good, fast and flowing,' says a reporter. The innovative Mélézone, beside the Champcella draglift features various fun jibs built from larch wood in a wooded setting. There's also a small, fun boardercross near the Rocher Blanc chair.

SNOW RELIABILITY ★★☆☆

Good – especially upper slopes

Most slopes face north or north-east and so hold the snow well, especially high up (there are lots of lifts starting at altitudes above 2000m). The slopes above Le Monêtier are high and shady and often have the best snow. The weather is different from that of the northern Alps, and even that of Les Deux-Alpes or Alpe-d'Huez, over the col to the west. Some upper lifts may be prone to closure by high winds.

Snowmaking covers 75% of the pistes, including long runs down to each village. Piste grooming is generally excellent.

Awesome slopes. Woodland runs

Serre Chevalier Vallée Open bowls. France. Oui!



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FOR EXPERTS ***

Deep, not notably steep

There is plenty to amuse experts – except those wanting extreme steepes. Half a dozen slopes – basically, black runs left ungroomed – are identified as 'brut de neige' areas.

The broad black runs down to Villeneuve (Casse du Boeuf – our favourite) and Chantemerle (Luc Alphand) are only just black in steepness. They are regularly groomed, and great fun for a fast blast, with their gradient sustained over an impressive vertical of around 800m. But one or the other may be closed for days on end for racing or training. The rather neglected Tabuc run, sweeping around the mountain away from the lifts to Le Monêtier, has a couple of genuinely steep pitches (which may be heavily mogulled) but is mainly a cruise. For other steepish runs, look higher up the mountain to slopes served by the two top lifts above Le Monêtier and the three above Villeneuve. The runs beside these lifts – on- and off-piste – form a great playground in good snow.

There are huge amounts of off-piste terrain throughout the area – both high-up and in the trees above Villeneuve and Chantemerle. We've enjoyed the La Voie Jackson run accessed from the Yret chair above Le Monêtier, which includes a short climb between rocks to a deserted open bowl. The Cucumelle valley at the western side of the Villeneuve sector offers plenty of gentle off-piste which is now much easier to exploit with the Vallons chairlift in place.

There are plenty of more serious off-piste expeditions, including: Tête de Grand Pré to Villeneuve or Le Monêtier and Couloir de Roche Corneille to Le Monêtier (both a climb from Cucumelle); off the back of l'Eychauda to Puy-St-André (isolated,

beautiful, taxi ride home); l'Yret to Le Monêtier via Vallons de la Montagnolle; Tabuc also to Le Monêtier (steep at the start in a big bowl, very beautiful). The experts' Mecca of La Grave is nearby.

FOR INTERMEDIATES ****

Ski wherever you like

Serre-Chevalier's slopes ideally suit intermediates, who can buzz around without worrying about nasty surprises on the way. On the trail map red runs far outnumber blues – but most reds are at the easy end of the scale. The broad, open bowls above Grande Alpe and Fréjus offer lots of options. The runs on skier's right on the lower slopes of Le Monêtier are gentle, quiet and wind prettily through the woods.

There's plenty for more adventurous intermediates, though. Cucumelle on the edge of the Villeneuve sector is a beautiful long red that is served by a newish chairlift. The red runs off the little-used slow Aiguillette chair in the Chantemerle sector are worth seeking out – quiet, enjoyable fast cruises. Other favourites include Aya and Clos Galliard at Le Monêtier, and the wonderful long run from the top to the bottom of the gondola at Briançon (with great views of the town).

If the reds are starting to seem a bit tame, there is plenty more to progress to. Unless ice towards the bottom is a problem, the usually well-groomed blacks on the lower mountain should be on the agenda; try them early in the day when they are uncrowded and freshly groomed.

FOR BEGINNERS ****

All four areas OK

All four sectors have their own nursery areas, and cheap daily lift passes covering a handful of lifts, including access to mid-mountain where appropriate. At Chantemerle you

generally go up to Serre Ratier – rated as good by a beginner reporter. At Villeneuve there are several slopes at valley level – all 'lovely' according to a skier having a first go this year at boarding – but also slopes up the Aravet gondola. At Le Monêtier the slopes are at the lift base – tipped by past reporters for 'better snow and fewer people' than elsewhere. There are also easy high runs to progress to in each sector – the best probably the green runs above the Fréjus gondola from Villeneuve. There are green paths from mid-mountain to Chantemerle and Villeneuve, though these may not be enjoyable late in the day when the runs become hard and others are speeding past.

FOR BOARDERS ****

Plenty of scope for experts

The term 'natural playground' could have quite easily been coined in Serre-Chevalier. The slopes are littered with natural obstacles that seem made for confident snowboarders. Try the Cucumelle slope and the areas around the Rocher Blanc lift at Prol for such terrain. For less expert boarders, the many draglifts can be a problem, as

can the flat areas. There's a good terrain park for all abilities and ESI Generation in Chantemerle is a school that offers everything from beginners' lessons to freestyle courses.

FOR CROSS-COUNTRY ***

Excellent if the snow is good

There are 35km of tracks along the valley floor, mainly following the gurgling river between Le Monêtier and Villeneuve and going on up towards the Col du Lautaret.

MOUNTAIN RESTAURANTS ****

Some good places

Mountain restaurants are quite well distributed; they are marked on the piste map, but not reliably named. **Editors' choice** At the top of the cable car and chair from Chantemerle, Chalet Hotel Serre Ratier (0492 205288) has a delightful large terrace and pretty dining room, good service and delicious food. Two other options are more expensive. Just above the Casse du Boeuf quad from Villeneuve, the Bivouac de la Casse (0492 248772) is an attractive chalet with both self- and table-service (inside and out). We were mightily impressed by both the food

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and service, and recent reporters endorse our view ('the owner comes round the tables to check everything is OK'). Shame about the plastic chairs on the terrace though. Pi Maï (0492 248363) in the hamlet of Fréjus is cosy on a bad day and charming on a sunny day, and it offers excellent food such as steaks and tartiflette and 'wholesome soup'.

Worth knowing about The Echaillon, just below the Bivouac, is a lofty chalet with open fire and a table-service section: 'quiche and salad just perfect'. The Bercail, near the top of the Aravet lift, is unusual – you order and pay self-service style, then your food is cooked and delivered to your table. The Aravet in the same area does 'deliciously thin and crispy pizzas – very, very good'. Above Chantemerle, we and a 2012 visitor loved the small table-service Troll – great, good-value food and very jolly service. The Grand Alpe self-service is spacious, and a bit cheaper than most places.

In the Briançon sector, the Pra Long chalet at the gondola mid-station has good views and food in both table- and self-service sections. The little Chalet de Serre Blanc, just down from

the top of Prorel, has superb views but gets mixed reports – but 'it's cheap and you get a coffee thrown in' says a 2012 visitor.

Above Le Monétier the enlarged but still tiny Peyra Juana near the bottom is appealingly cosy. The self-service Chapka at mid-mountain does 'simple tasty food' and has a 'welcoming central fire'. Both get packed on bad weather days. But there's plenty of room at the new Flocons, near the Chapka. We had an excellent table-service lunch on the terrace last season; but despite 'lovely decor', a self-service meal inside was 'disappointing', says a reporter.

SCHOOLS AND GUIDES ****

Choice of good outfits

For years we have been recommending British instructor Gavin Crosby, operating as EurekaSki. Last year he started a branch of another British outfit that is an established reader favourite in other resorts, New Generation. Gavin gets good reports time after time: 'terrific teaching, our Italian instructor helped us progress and built our confidence'; 'fantastic'. Classes with a maximum size of six

↑ In March 2012, with valley temperatures reaching summer heights, snowmaking kept the lower runs open and skiable
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(for adults and children) range from beginner to off-piste adventure. We've skied with Gavin a couple of times, and have been greatly impressed. Book well in advance to avoid disappointment. Meanwhile, Gavin's wife Mel offers a kind of concierge service for visitors under the EurekaSki name – see 'Staying there'.

Another British-run school, Ski Connections, also receives positive reports: 'Had the perfect combination of fun, challenge and learning, a great leap forward.' A 2011 reporter enthuses: 'Their all-inclusive bundle of ski hire, lift pass and lessons was very good value for beginners.'

We have received a number of reports on the Ecole de Ski Buissonnière over the years – most of them full of praise ('very good'). Two absolute beginners in one visitor's group were 'satisfied' with their snowboard lessons with ESI Generation.

A 2011 reporter enjoyed a private lesson with Brit Darren Turner of Insight: 'He was able to cope with a range of abilities and help us all.'

The ESF is improving. A 2011 visitor says, 'unrecognizable from the ESF of yore – English speaking instructors always available', while another found they'd take groups out with 'as few as two students'. And a recent reporter says three groups of kids 'had a great time' in their classes. Local chalet operator Hannibals has reported happy clients with the Chantemerle school. We've had positive feedback on the Internationale school. More reports please.

FOR FAMILIES ***

Facilities at each village

Serre Chevalier is popular with French families and there are good family-friendly events and activities. For childcare, Les Schtroumpfs in Villeneuve has been praised in the past. There is a micro-crèche (Les P'tits Loup) in Villeneuve too, taking children from three months to six years. EurekaSki can arrange childcare and private nannies.

STAYING THERE

There is a wide choice of lodging but very little of it has any claim to luxury.

Two resort-based operations EurekaSki (www.eurekaski.com) and Chez Serre Chevalier (www.chezserrechevalier.co.uk) are on hand to simplify life for visitors.

EurekaSki can arrange accommodation, passes, equipment rental, childcare, transfers etc. Chez Serre Chevalier is a tour operator offering accommodation and discounts when booked as a package including catering, transfers, passes, equipment hire, lessons, away days to nearby resorts and après activities.

Chalets Several operators offer catered chalets or chalet hotels. Hannibals has Marmottes, a well-renovated old farmhouse in old Chantemerle, five minutes from the lifts, with rooms all en suite. In Villeneuve, Zenith has two chalets, including the ski-in/ski-out Ridon, and Crystal has three. Inghams is introducing two mid-sized places in good positions here.

Hotels A feature of the resort is the range of attractive family-run hotels – many of them members of the generally reliable Logis de France consortium.

LE MONETIER

***Auberge de Choucas (0492 244273) Smart but small wood-clad rooms; serious restaurant. We have enjoyed a stay there.

**Allée (0492 244002) 'Excellent food and service.'

**Europe (0492 244003) Simple well-run Logis in heart of old village, with pleasant bar, good food; rooms renovated in 2011.

VILLENEUVE

***Christiania (0492 247633) Civilized, family-run hotel on main road, crammed with ornaments.

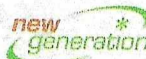
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