

Barèges, the largest ski domain in the Pyrénées

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Ski sun-day

With skiing and sunshine, the Pyrénées offer the best of all worlds, says **Nadia Jordan** - and the properties are great value too

Anyone who has looked at property prices near any Alpine resort will have noticed that the region has become so expensive as to be out of the reach of most househunters. However, the good news is that, here in the valleys and foothills of the French Pyrénées, excellent-value properties

can still be found for buyers seeking permanent or holiday homes with easy access to the mountains and year-round activities on the doorstep.

For those also wanting to let out a property, there is still a very good market in the region for renting to skiers in winter, walkers and cyclists out of peak season and holidaymakers in the summer. If you are looking

for a property that is both good for skiing in the winter, perfectly located for enjoying outdoor activities and has a great climate in the summer months, then the Pyrénéan foothills could be the ideal location for you.

Rather than buying property right in a ski resort, your budget will go much further if you choose a property lower down

the slopes, close to - but not in - the mountains, from where you can easily reach a number of ski resorts while enjoying the calm and peace in the villages of rural southwest France.

MORE FOR YOUR CASH

Houses in the ski resorts tend to be smaller and the buildings clustered together. But once you get an hour or so away, you can find properties with more space and larger gardens with room for a pool and a sunny terrace where you can admire the distant, snow-capped peaks and plan your next ski or cycling trip in the mountains.

Most of the resorts in the Pyrénées are smaller and have quicker access from the valleys than those in the Alps, hence they can be easily reached - usually within an hour to an hour and a half - from much of southwest France. For example, Haute-Garonne, Gers and Ariège are all close enough to several ski resorts for a day trip or weekend on the slopes. This means you can enjoy the best of both worlds, with excellent skiing within reach in winter, while having easy access to airports at Toulouse and Tarbes, and the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts.

BEST FOR SKIING

In terms of which ski resorts are best, those in the centre of the Pyrénéan chain tend to be more snow-sure (away from the coasts and also higher in

First resorts

Our pick of resorts to have within striking distance of your home

BAGNÈRES-DE-LUCHON

Bagnères-de-Luchon is both a ski destination and a thermal spa with year-round mountain activities. In winter, it transforms into a chic ski resort with a cable-car right in the centre of town to whisk you up to the lovely ski resort of Superbagnères with its 32km of pistes and runs skiable to 2,260 metres. And for non-skiers, there is also snowshoeing, dog sledding and all sorts of treatments on offer in the thermal baths and spa, which have just been completely refurbished. In summer, there are endless walks for different abilities including children; there are pretty mountain lakes for swimming and paddling such as Lac d'Oô; tennis



courts, a golf course, fabulous fishing and lots of biking trails. In July and August, you can take your bike up to the high trails via the gondola. Plus, of course, Spain is only 10km down the road.

Luchon itself is very stylish with beautiful Belle Époque architecture and awash with lovely cafés and restaurants, plus there is a cinema that regularly shows films in English and lots of festivals throughout the year, so there is something for everyone. In addition, Luchon is soon to have the first hydrogen train in France, which will run from Montréjeau all the way into town, making it accessible directly by train from Toulouse and from all the stations to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean - so there is no need to have a car here.

PEYRAGUDES

Peyragudes (connected to Peyresourde) is situated approximately 20 minutes' drive from Luchon (there is a twice-daily shuttle), and although many British skiers will be unfamiliar with the ski area, some may recognise Peyresourde as the setting for the opening of the James Bond film *Tomorrow Never Dies*. There are 50km of pistes up to 2,400m, accessed by an efficient lift network. The showpiece of this resort is the Vallée

most cases) and many resorts here now link to neighbouring towns to give extensive ski areas, while retaining a quieter, friendlier and more relaxed atmosphere than you find at the huge Alpine resorts.

The majority of the ski resorts that nestle in the mountains of the Pyrénées were thermal spa towns before expanding into skiing. However, over the past few years, there has been huge investment in the skiing infrastructure and the summer activities on offer - as well as upgrades to the spa facilities - in order to attract visitors all the year round.

Moreover, many people, priced out of the Alpine resorts have realised that the Pyrénées offer a better-value alternative; ski passes and ski hire here are much cheaper, as are accommodation and food.

In the mountain villages of the Pyrénées, the restaurants and shops are mostly small family-run enterprises, whose primary aim is simply to make a living. This is not an area where commercial savvy is widespread and most of the small businesses you'll come across have been here for generations. They also tend to operate year-round as part of the local community, as they have done for centuries, as opposed to charging the tourists as much as possible during the few short months of the winter season. It is the same with lift

passes, which cost around half the price you'll pay in the Alps.

If you have had enough of sliding down the white stuff, Peyragudes also offers cross-country skiing, snowshoe treks and even husky rides to make the most of its abundant snow cover. In 2020, the new Skyvall Gondola opened, which means that it is now possible to easily access the pretty village of Loudenvielle, known for its cobbled streets and ancient farmhouses set in the Louron valley with spectacular mountain views. In this valley, you will also find the very popular spa of Balnea, which has a number of themed pools where you can swim from inside to outside and sit in deliciously warm water admiring the snow-capped peaks that seem almost within touching distance.

CAUTERETS

A pretty town in the heart of the Pyrénées, Cauterets is immensely popular with both skiers and non-skiers, and draws visitors in winter and summer. There are two big ski areas to explore, lots of lovely long runs and the location, which is both high and north-east facing, makes it one of the most snow-sure resorts in the Pyrénées. Cirque du Lys is the main

"On days when it is bad weather in the mountains, you can still be sitting by your pool"

passes, which cost around half the price you'll pay in the Alps.

CLIMATE DIFFERENCES

Having a home an hour or so away from the mountains has many advantages in terms of weather because the climate varies greatly between the valleys and the higher mountains. You can, for example, have double-digit temperatures and sunshine in the middle of winter on your terrace down in the valley and yet, within 40 minutes of heading into the mountains - say, above 900 metres - you could reach the snow and minus temperatures. This is

great for skiing in winter, of course, but equally lovely in the summer when you can head into the mountains for some cooler air and a dip in one of the many mountain rivers or lakes. And on days when it is bad weather in the mountains, you can still be sitting by your pool or enjoying walking and cycling locally while watching the storms in the distance over the high peaks.

YEAR-ROUND FUN

The Pyrénées also offer the best for walking, in both winter and summer: fantastic scenery, good temperatures, beautiful views and, above all, variety.

Serious hikers will relish the chance to seek out the unexplored valleys of the high mountains, while those who prefer an easier pace can stay on flatter ground, following the numerous mountain streams. In winter, there are lots of snow-shoe trails and cross-country skiing, as well as dog-sledding and plenty of hiking below the snow-line.

Even on gentle walks there are some staggeringly beautiful ascents and descents, which reward with magnificent views and, if you are lucky, sightings of birds of prey. This part of the Pyrénées is an important migration route for millions of raptors and other birds as they fly north in spring for the northern summer and south in autumn for the winter.

The Pyrénées are a sanctuary for many animal and plant species that are now very rare ▶

St-Lizier in Ariège is a Plus Beaux Village de France



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ski area and is where most visitors spend the majority of their time. They can also enjoy the spa facilities at the famous thermal baths, Les Bains du Rocher, regarded as one of France's best spas. All sorts of sports are on offer year-round and the town is a mecca for foodies, with a great covered market and lots of local delicacies including a huge range of cheeses. It is a very popular resort, but rarely gets crowded.

Cauterets is popular with skiers and non-skiers





or extinct in most other parts of Europe. This includes the brown bear, which has been re-naturalised (not without some objection on the part of local farmers) and the lynx.

The pastures in the valleys and higher up in the mountains are full of wildflowers. This is a testament to the tradition of organic farming in the area. Here spraying chemicals on crops has never been adopted by farmers as it has in many other parts of the world, so the wildflowers have been able to flourish.

All the major walking routes (and many of the minor ones) have been marked throughout the Pyrénées and the

mountains are criss-crossed with footpaths used by the local inhabitants for centuries. The best-known long-distance walking trail in the Pyrénées – and arguably the best long walk in Europe – is the GR10 (*Grande Randonnée*), which runs the whole length of the Pyrénées chain from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. It combines farm tracks, ancient pilgrimage trails, village lanes and steep ledges. It is marked along its entire 500-mile course by red and white painted horizontal bars, in a precise size and style specified by the French equivalent of the Ramblers' Association. In winter, there are also many snow-shoe tracks

to follow and cross-country ski trails, if you're fit enough!

HAPPY GUESTS

When you have a house in southwest France, it tends to fill up in the holidays with lots of friends and relatives, which is why it can be useful to live close to the entertainment offered by the Pyrénées. It means that guests, whatever their ages or inclinations, are spoiled for choice when it comes to deciding how to spend their days. They can head into the mountains for skiing, snowboarding or snowshoeing in winter; and in summer they can go walking or biking, or simply picnicking

and splashing around in the mountain rivers and lakes. For little ones who can't walk too far, there is the option to borrow a donkey for a few hours to take the strain. Those who are looking for adventure, can try their hand at kayaking or canyoning, or even hiking over the Pyrénées mountains and into Spain – either on foot or on horseback.

If all that sounds far too active, there is nothing nicer than sitting on one of the café terraces dotted around the towns and villages here, admiring the mountains from afar – winter or summer.

So, if you are looking for a property with easy access to skiing in winter and other activities in summer, with a great climate, and reachable from airports, but at an affordable price, then southwest France is worth considering. Just do your research to find the right place for you (there are some pointers on ski resorts in the boxouts).

You can definitely have the best of both worlds in the foothills. If we didn't already live here, this is where we'd choose to spend our holidays. ■

Nadia Jordan runs the frenchpropertyfinders.com, a network of property finders covering the most sought-after regions of France, and foothillsoffrance.com, a property search agency in southwest France

First resorts

BARÈGES, LA MONGIE AND GRAND TOURMALET

The largest ski domain in the Pyrénées is Barèges, which links into the neighbouring (less pretty) resort of La Mongie. Barèges was one of the original ski resorts of the Pyrénées, although it's probably better known for being on the route of the Tour de France, the Col du Tourmalet being one of the most gruelling stages. Barèges is a 14th-century French village nestled in dramatic mountain scenery. It has a large ski area on its doorstep, linking into the pistes of La Mongie, its higher, purpose-built neighbour, to give 100km of skiing. It's also a spa resort and many skiers swear by the restorative waters after a hard day's skiing. Napoleon apparently sent his wounded soldiers here to benefit from the curative properties of the thermal spring water.

The crowning glory of the Barèges/La Mongie area is the Pic du Midi observatory at 2,877m. A cable car takes you to the very top where there is a viewing platform, museum and observatory as well as a good restaurant (of course). This high, mountain-top base offers incredible views over the surrounding peaks by day, and unparalleled views of the stars by night. There is a hotel up here, open most of the year for keen stargazers, who get to look at the sky through the

telescopes at night when the day visitors have left. In summer, the air is always cool and the views seem to span the whole length of the Pyrénées from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. Plus, in winter, there is the added advantage that you can be one of the first to ski the fresh snow 1,700m back to the resort in the morning.

ST-LARY

The town of St-Lary is a traditional, 19th-century Pyrénéan village, which just happens to have an excellent ski resort attached to it. It has lots of character, a great choice of restaurants and a huge selection of year-round activities with a relaxed, friendly vibe. The ski resort has around 100km of pistes and is known for being particularly good for families. All of this combined with up-to-date mountain facilities and excellent infrastructure make it a firm favourite in winter and summer.

Visitors include many French families who have been coming for generations from all over France. The Aure valley in which the town sits is unspoiled, green and lush in summer. It's popular with walkers for being on the pilgrimage route of St-Jacques de Compostelle, with lots of other walking and cycling trails, as well as rivers, lakes and waterfalls. Plus, you won't go hungry here as the Vallee d'Aure is known for its gastronomic heritage and local delicacies.