

TAKING A HIKE

Our diarist, eager for a dose of the natural, heads for the Alps, where ski resorts in summer provide easy access for footing in the backcountry

Dear Diary,

Sometimes I feel like the only times I can commune with nature are during long walks in urban parks. And so, with the school year approaching and my course preparation complete, I was open for soul satisfaction in true Mother Earth settings and headed for a long weekend of day hikes in the northern French Alps.

The Climbs of Lyon

The easiest part of my trip was the journey from Paris to Lyon. The TGV covered the 289 miles (465 km) in two hours! Yes, yes, even after repeated rail trips in France, I am still blown away by the TGV's heavy, secure speed.

In **Lyon**, I revisited old haunts. From the cobblestone streets of Renaissance **Vieux Lyon**, I gave my legs their first taste of French slopes by striding aggressively up **Fourvière Hill** to the **Basilique Notre-Dame de Fourvière** and one of the best views of the city. Back at the bottom, I followed my boots into the historic **Presqu'île peninsula's** pedestrian shopping zones, via the city's vast **Place Bellecour** and museum-flanked **Place des Terreaux**, up the other set of urban slopes to the **Croix-Rousses** quarter, high atop a set of long staircases.

With the afternoon sun beginning to set, I picked up my rental car and drove the short 11 miles (18 km) to the village of Meyzieu. When night fell, my hotel, **Le Mont-Joyeux** (tel. 04.78.04.21.32, www.lemontjoyeux.fr), nestled in its surroundings, gave me my first sweet taste of pastoral immersion.

Hoofing in the Foothills

I set out bright and early and covered the 51.3 miles (95 km) to **Chambéry** in no time. Once the capital of the sovereign state of Savoie (Savoie) and home to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) for 10 years, Chambéry still breathes with mountain air. Built within easy reach of three great natural parks in the Alps, it was a perfect place to pause, even if I didn't visit the **Savoie Museum** or main **Cathédrale métropolitaine**.



Relais du Silence
Silencehotel

The hotels above belong to the Relais du Silence group of over 260 independent hotels throughout Europe, including manors, inns, châteaux, and cottages. Every care has been taken to ensure that you will find all our hotels as welcoming as they are peaceful. Fine cuisine combining traditional and local specialties will enable you to discover the culinary treasures of every region. For your next vacation, look no further, and tour the genuine France at www.silencehotel.com.



Le Mont-Joyeux



Le Tour de Pacoret



Les Grand Montets

My goal was to get into the nearby hills of the **Parc régional du Massif des Bauges** and to the top of the **Dent du Nivolet** towering above town. To that end, I drove 10 miles (17 km) east and then north to **La Féclaz**, a cross-country skiing center in winter. Parking the car at the base of the chairlift, I set out on a two-hour hike along the marked path No. 2 to the mountain-topping **Croix du Nivolet**, breathtaking views, and a picnic lunch.

The 31-mile (50-km) afternoon ride wound through **Lescheraines** to the narrow **Chéran Valley**, all surrounded by impressive peaks. The road out of the hills and down to the Isère River passed the **Château de Miolans**, an outstanding medieval military structure. At the end

of the day, in Grésy-sur-Isère, I was welcomed into **Le Tour de Pacoret** (tel. 04.79.37.91.59, www.hotel-pacoret-savoie.com), where a dinner of regional specialties and a dip in the pool brought a perfect day to a close.

A Summer in Winterland

Six miles (10 km) along the Isère from Grésy was **Albertville**, site of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games. **Conflans**, Albertville's 14th- through 18th-century town clinging to a rocky spur overhead, made for a pleasant morning walk.

After a 16-mile (26-km) hike through the wooded **Gorges de l'Arly** to **Flumet**, I decided on a detour 10 miles (16 km) up through the deeply cut **Gorges de l'Arondine** to the **Col des Aravis**. There, I once again pulled on my boots for a two-hour up-and-back ramble on the **Chemin du Chalet du Curé** path to the **Croix de Fer** and views that made me feel positively buoyant.

Back in Flumet, I pursued my original course to **Megève**, one of France's foremost ski resorts. Under a bright sun, I set off on my trip-capping trek, a gondola ride up to **Mont d'Arbois**, followed by a five-hour return-trip stomp to **Mont Joly** from which the full circle of great Alpine mountains lay before me, including the awesome **Massif du Mont-Blanc**.

By the time I completed the remaining 22 miles (35 km) to **Chamonix**, capital of French mountaineering, it was already dusk. But I had seen plenty of mountains and knew that the morning views would be there for me. Besides, my hotel, **Les Grands Montets** (tel. 04.50.54.06.66, www.hotel-grands-montets.com), was a sight for sore eyes...and sore feet.

Although I stayed on for a few days longer in Chamonix to take in the gondola-accessible panoramas and hikes, I surrendered my car. My return trip to Paris, from Chamonix down to Sallanches for the five-hour train and TGV ride back north, was as fleeting as the memories of Alpine mountain views are enduring.

RE
RailEurope

When you take advantage of Rail Europe's Rail 'n Drive plans, you are in complete control. It's simple: Board a TGV or classic train, be whisked off to your destination, rent a car at the station, and set off on your explorations. These trips combine the best of both worlds—train travel for longer distances, plus your own rental car for journeying through the countryside. You can purchase additional rail or car days to customize your trip. For details about Rail 'n Drive passes, see pages 36-37 or visit www.raileurope.com. To plan your route, see www.mappy.com or www.viamichelin.com.