



THE SUNDAY TIMES

## Love the Alps: Chamonix

Chamonix has long been loved by mountaineers; now the jet set are snapping up its chalets. It's still better value than Val

Sean Newsom Published: 25 January 2015

Graeme Barr is just the kind of person you'd expect to buy in Chamonix. Based near Port William, in southwest Scotland, he's a builder by trade and a mad-keen mountaineer in his spare time. On a winter weekend, you're as likely to find him ice-climbing on Ben Nevis as mooching round the shops.

He first visited the French Alpine town in the winter of 2000, and fell in love with it. Then, in the summer of 2013, Graeme, 39, and his wife, Rhuna, wandered into the local branch of Knight Frank estate agency to discuss the possibility of buying a flat.

"All we wanted to do was register our interest," he recalls. "But they already had the perfect property — a one-bedroom flat in Chamonix Sud for €140,000 [£106,000]." It didn't take them long to make up their minds. "We decided to buy it over dinner that evening."

Now Graeme is in Chamonix at least once a month. "It's such a great feeling, driving up there and knowing that you've got your own place right in the middle of it, with all your equipment inside, just as you left it."

So far, so normal. Ever since the 1850s, when the British first took to mountaineering in the Alps, Chamonix has been a magnet for climbers like Graeme, and you only have to look up from its streets to understand why. Towering above you is the most dramatic array of mountain peaks in western Europe, a mighty wall of crags and cliffs that marches inexorably upwards to its climax in the highest Alp of them all — the distant, snow-covered dome of Mont Blanc, just visible at 4,810 metres.

There's a lifetime of mountaineering contained within that view, and the longer you stick around, the more you discover in the surrounding region, too. Graeme is now hooked on Cogne, on the other side of the tunnel that burrows under the mountain to the Aosta Valley, in Italy. It's home, he says, to the best ice-climbing in the Alps.

These days, however, hardcore climbers aren't the only people buying into what the locals call "the valley". Increasingly, it is attracting more affluent buyers, and you'll find their villas and chalets spreading through the ever more upmarket suburbs of Les Tines, Les Praz and Les Moussoux.

Homes there are not as highfalutin as in Courchevel, Verbier, Megève or Val d'Isère — the mountain resorts favoured by the super-rich. But there are some stunners among them, including Chalet Cragganmore, in Les Praz, a quiet, wooded suburb next to the golf course, just north of town.

Designed by a local hotshot architect, Renaud Chevalier, it has a double-height living area — the new must-have for uber-chalets — a vast floating fireplace and gobsmacking mountain views. There's no pool, but you do get a gym, a cinema, an indoor climbing wall and a hot tub, as well as six bedrooms and six bathrooms, for €3.95m (020 7629 8171, [knightfrank.com](http://knightfrank.com)).



Looking up, it's obvious why Chamonix has attracted British climbers since the 1800s

watching how far and fast mountain sports have developed in recent years. Ski touring, for example, is a mass-participation discipline, practised by 150,000 people in France alone. And the busiest time in the Chamonix calendar is not the ski season, but the week of the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc, at the end of August.

A five-minute walk from the middle of town, on Rue des Pècles, Villa Terrier is a grand old house built in 1910, and a refreshing change from the Alpine norm of wood-everywhere interiors and heavy, sloping roofs. It has elegant rooms with high ceilings, creaking polished floorboards and the biggest clawfoot baths in Christendom. The four-bedroom, four-bathroom home, set in a big plot of land, is on the market for €3m (01483 579242, [collineige.com](http://collineige.com)).

So what brings the jet set to the valley? Actually, it's pretty much the same thing that attracted Graeme Barr: if you really, really love the mountains, it's the obvious place to come. Yes, skiing is part of the attraction, but the kind of gentle, lift-serviced piste cruising enjoyed in Courchevel and Megève is only the start of it.

In winter, Chamonix's inhabitants are just as likely to be walking up the mountains on touring skis or splitboards as sitting on a chairlift. In summer, they go rafting and mountain-biking, as well as climbing and hiking, and take part in the latest Alpine craze, mountain ultramarathons.

And if that sounds a bit far-fetched, then you've not been



A 166km race around the Mont Blanc massif, it entails a lung-busting 9,600 metres of vertical ascent. Along with associated shorter races, the event attracts 10,000 racers a year — demand for places is so high, they have to be allocated by lottery.

There are other reasons for Chamonix’s popularity, one of the most important being accessibility. With a clear run, the drive from Geneva airport only takes an hour. That links the town with flights from all over Britain, at all hours of the day, and makes weekend breaks a doddle.

Graeme Barr, for example, likes to catch a 6.30am flight from Edinburgh to Geneva on a Friday, which means he can be out on the mountain — either climbing or skiing — by lunchtime.

The fact that Chamonix is a proper town, with a population of 10,000 and an unpretentious, workaday atmosphere, adds to the appeal. Andrew Shortland, 47, who works in the City, bought a four-bedroom chalet in Les Tines last year, through Chamonix Immobilier (00 33 4 50 53 50 21, [cham-immmo.com](http://cham-immmo.com)), and loves the fact “that it has this slightly grungy, granola feel. You’re likely to see people on the streets in Gore-Tex and climbing harnesses, rather than wandering around in furs. It’s just not ritzy in any way.”

He and his family fit right in, too. In winter, they ski off-piste; in summer, they go hiking, climbing and biking, as well as swimming in the local lakes.

Yet there’s a palpable sense of uplift in Chamonix. It can be seen on the pretty pedestrianised streets of the town centre and in a wave of hotel refurbishments, including that of the Hôtel Mont-Blanc, which reopened as a five-star resort in late 2013 after being bought by the Taittingers, of champagne fame. La Compagnie du Mont Blanc, the valley’s lift company, has announced a £367m programme of improvements to its skiing infrastructure, running over the next 40 years.



Isatis ski flats start at €286,000 ([ernalowproperty.co.uk](http://ernalowproperty.co.uk))

So is the resort a no-brainer for anyone searching for a second home in the mountains, and some decent snow? Actually, no. Some will find the fact that it’s set in one of the deepest Alpine valleys claustrophobic. Anyone who wants a cute little village in the middle of nowhere will recoil from the endless mini roundabouts that gird the town centre. And those who want to sit in the middle of a big, properly interconnected ski area will be happier in Courchevel or Val d’Isère.

Chamonix may be home to some of the most exciting, snowsure skiing in the Alps, but it comes in little packages, scattered along the length of the valley, and to get between them, you’ve got to jump in the car or hop on one of the valley’s free shuttle buses.

To properly understand its appeal, you’ll have to be skiing at quite an exalted level, too. Yes, there are plenty of gentle pistes, if you know where to look, but it’s Chamonix’s long and steep off-piste descents that make it a must-ski destination. No amount of infrastructure upgrading will change that.

If anything, the sense that not everyone will like it seems to deepen the appeal for those already settled here. It’s

almost as if, by buying into Chamonix, they’ve joined a club for people who really understand the mountains and know how to use them, rather than the lightweights who flirt with them once or twice a winter. This creates a powerful bond.

“The whole business of buying here felt very natural and very right,” Andrew Shortland reflects. “I totally believe that our kids, as well as their future husbands and wives, and our future grandchildren, will be coming back to stay in this chalet for years to come. This is our spiritual home now.”

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Mr Duncan Platt

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