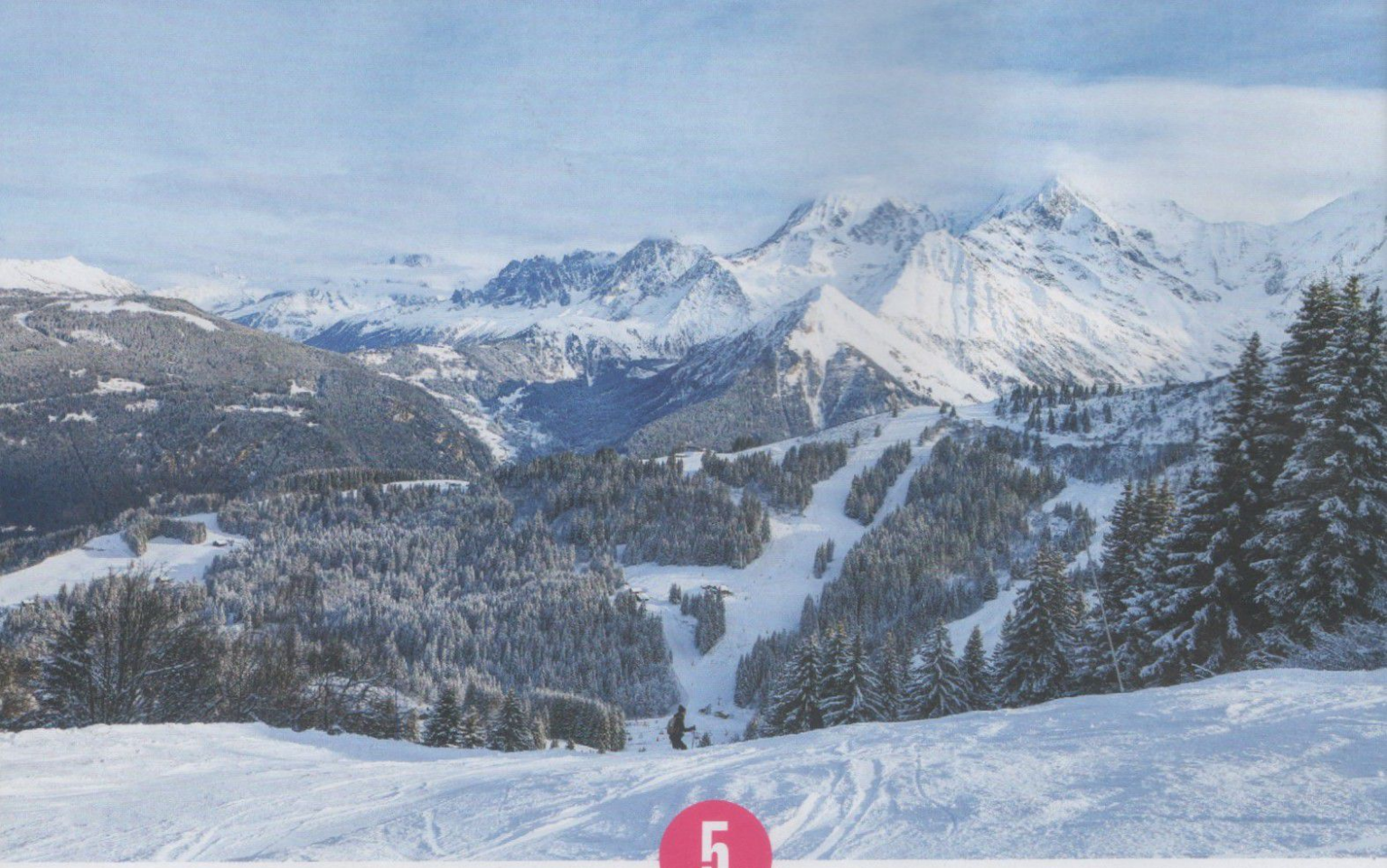


5

RIDE THE RAILS

Soak up the view in Saint Gervais

With new direct rail services, there's never been a better time to let the train take you into the French Alps. Words: Katja Gaskell

"Look at that view," says my suntanned guide Alexis Dautcourt, pointing at the marshmallow-white peaks surrounding us. "There's the Beaufortain, the Aravis, the Fiz and, of course, Mont Blanc."

My French ski school guide has brought me to the top of the Mont-Joly chairlift, 2,353m up in the Evasion Mont-Blanc ski domain. It's a perfect day and the only movement in the blue sky is the steady plume of spindrift whipping off the summit of the Alps' highest mountain. I arrived in Saint Gervais yesterday, travelling by Eurostar from London to Paris before changing onto the speedy TGV train that whisks skiers to the snow in five hours.

The mountain spa town, set in the foothills of mighty Mont Blanc, is one of six villages belonging to the ski domain with 250 miles of pistes. Arriving at Saint Gervais train station, I'd stepped on board Le Valléen, a 10-person gondola that opened in September 2024 after a whopping investment of €45m (£37.5m) to link the mountainside community of Saint Gervais. Five minutes and 300 metres later and I was in the heart of the village, checked in to the cosy Coeur des Neiges hotel.

The following day on Mont-Joly, I tear myself away from the views and set off after Alexis as he heads down perfectly groomed slopes. Over the next three hours, we alternate between zippy blue runs and more challenging reds before taking the black Princess run through the fir trees to stop for lunch on the terrace of Le Boitet. Opened last season, the restaurant is owned by noted French chef Emmanuel Renaut. There I tuck into a gooey *croûte savoyarde* — a cheese toastie for gourmands.

Later that afternoon, I spend several hours resting my weary legs in the naturally warm waters of the town's famed thermal baths. They've been used for centuries to soothe everything from asthma to osteoarthritis.

The Mont Blanc Tramway is St Gervais' slick transport triumph, and it gently takes me up to the top of the Les Houches ski area the following morning. During summer months, the rack-and-pinion railway travels a further 500 metres up to the Voie Royale where, for over a century, adventurers have started their ascent of Mont Blanc.

I spend the day exploring the small but mighty ski area, cruising wide, tree-lined blue and red runs, and bombing down the 3.3km-long Verte des Houches black run. I'm having so much fun that I only just make the last tramway, jumping on board as it pulls out of the station. I get one last glimpse of Europe's most famous peak before the train rounds a corner and trundles back down the mountain.

HOW TO DO IT: Coeur des Neiges has doubles from €105 (£91), B&B. hotelcoeurdesneiges.com eurostar.com raileurope.com tourism.saintgervais.com





Saint Gervais' tramways and train access make it an easy rail-to-piste resort for skiers
Above from left to right: Skiing in Bellvue, Saint Gervais; the French Alpine town of Moûtiers is one of the stops made by Eurostar's 'ski train'

MORE TO TRY

Rail-to-piste resorts

6 Take the ski train

Eurostar's 'ski train' returns this winter, running December to April — outbound on Saturday, inbound on Saturday and Sunday. The 'Eurostar Snow' service will travel between London and the French Alps with a same-station change in Lille, before calling at the ski hub stations of Chambery, Albertville, Moûtiers, Aime-La-Plagne, Landry and Bourg-St-Maurice. eurostar.com

For those who don't want to book train travel, hotels and extras independently, operators including Inghams, Peak Retreats and SNO are selling rail-inclusive packages to the likes of Courchevel, Méribel, Les Menuires, Val Thorens, La Plagne, La Rosière, Les Arcs, Tignes and Val d'Isère. inghams.co.uk peakretreats.co.uk sno.co.uk

7 Access Paradiski & Les Arcs

Even without considering its access via ski train services, Les Arcs is very well served by regular TGV trains that whisk passengers across France from Paris and Lyon depositing them in Bourg-Saint-Maurice — gateway to some of the country's best ski resorts. A speedy funicular runs from the station providing a seamless, car-free link to compact Arc 1600, the original resort of the Les Arcs ski area. With an additional three villages to ski into plus access to the large, interconnected Paradiski area, this is without doubt one of the easiest French resorts to enjoy by train. lesarcs.com

8 Sleep your way to the slopes

This season Travelski launches an overnight charter between Paris and Bourg-Saint-Maurice (December 2025 to March 2026). It joins Nightjet's service (from Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris) to Austria's Alpine hubs, and European Sleeper's routes (from Paris to Venice via the Austrian/Italian Alps) in boosting rail-to-ski resort options.

Travelski Night Express will run outbound Fridays from Paris, returning Saturdays, with 660 berths, a bar-restaurant carriage, solo cabins and women-only spaces.

The service is offered as part of packages that include train travel, resort transfers, accommodation and lift passes, currently on sale for La Plagne, Les Arcs and Peisey Vallandry, Tignes and Val d'Isère, La Rosière and resorts in the Three Valleys.

Test your nerve in La Plagne, a Flocon Vert resort since 2024 (France's sustainable ski badge of honour) aboard Aerolive, a new open-air gondola cabin with 360-degree views. uk.travelski.com la-plagne.com