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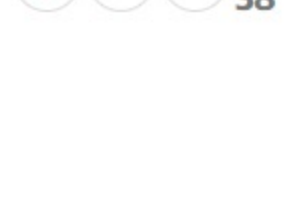
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**Liese Spencer**  
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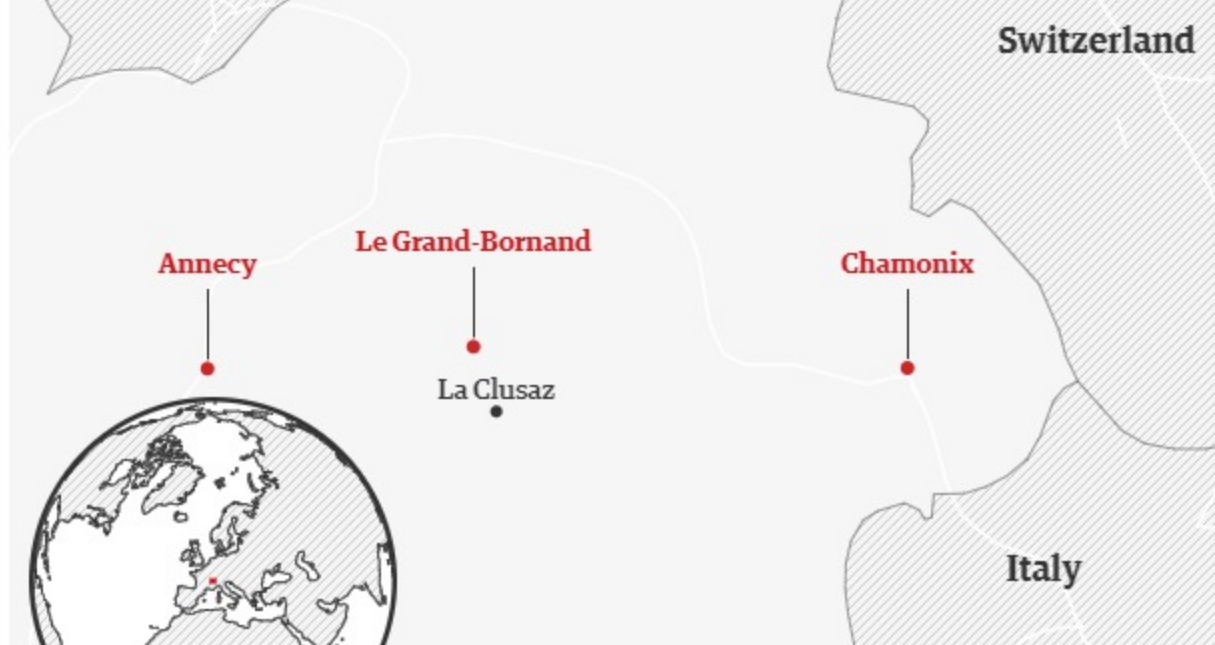
**Who needs snow? Family fun and fromage in the French Alps**



▲ Valley high ... La Clusaz is bright and buzzy in the August sunshine. Photograph: Patrice Coppee/Getty Images

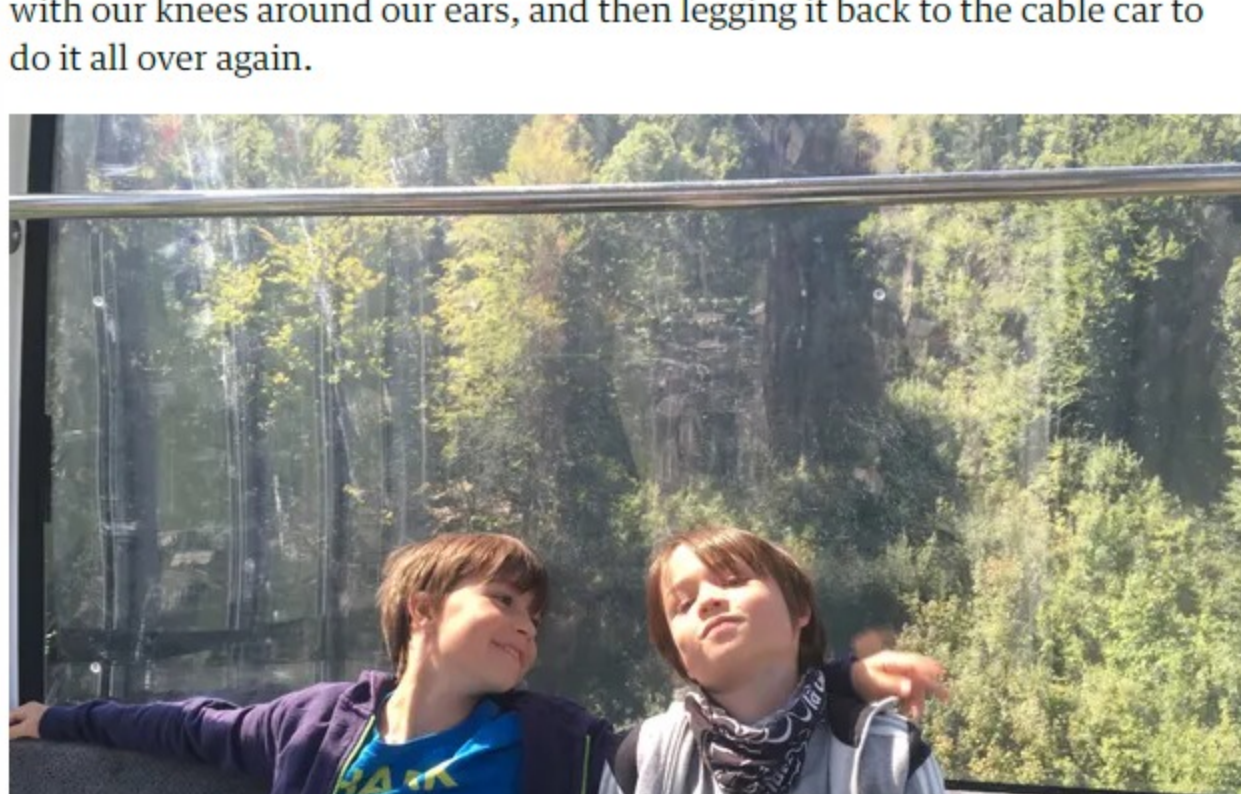
With a wide choice of ways to throw yourself down a mountainside, the ski resort of La Clusaz makes a perfect summer playground

**S**queezed into a rental hatchback, our family of four are climbing up and up into the mountains. We pass fields and farms and small towns. The rock face comes closer and the switchbacks get faster until at last we pull up outside Les Grandes Alpes apartments, and my green-faced son flings open the car door to be copiously sick. I bet this wasn't how Roger Moore announced his arrival in the Alps. Still, we're here, after a 17-hour journey by train and car, and it feels good to stand breathing fresh mountain air and craning our necks at the snow-capped peaks of the Aravis massif.



La Clusaz is a small ski resort in the French Alps, close to the Swiss border, but though lots of champion skiers grew up in these valleys, winter sports are only half the tourism story for the Haute Savoie département. We're here in August, and La Clusaz, with its toy-town bell tower, chalets and bright sunshine, has none of the shut-up feel of an out-of-season resort. At this time of year, the cable cars haul hikers and mountain bikers up the slopes instead of skiers.

Sure, there's a cosy feel to the wood-panelled restaurants with their red gingham curtains and hearty menus, but who needs skiing when there are so many (other ways to throw yourself down a mountain? Ebike, zipwire and the boys' (twins, aged nine) favourite: the *luge d'été* summer toboggan, €4.90). For one afternoon we run a giddy loop, riding the cable car to 800 metres above the village, lining up for our metal sledge, rattling down the fast run with our knees around our ears, and then legging it back to the cable car to do it all over again.



▲ Twin peaks ... Liese Spencer's nine-year-old sons ride the cable car

Our apartment is comfortable and modern. Within the block there's a heated indoor pool, which we often have to ourselves, and a games room where the boys can hang out with kids from other apartments, mostly French and Swiss.

On our first morning, we take a gondola up to the Pointe de Beauregard plateau (squin and you can see Mont Blanc), starting point for many trails. It's busy at the top, but walk for 10 minutes and it's easy to find some solitude. The boys and I follow a dusty path towards the village of St Jean-de-Sixt. We wander over stiles and streams and slopes spotted with wildflowers, occasionally emerging on a high ridge with the cloud-dappled valley laid out below. In an hour, we see two other hikers, who lift their poles in salute; otherwise we have the hills to ourselves.

After London, these shimmering meadows - silent but for the chirping of grasshoppers and clanking of cow bells - feel almost comically pastoral. Watching the golden brown *abondance* cows methodically lining their stomachs with prime Alpine grass, it's easy to forget that these gentle animals are big business. Their milk is made into the much prized reblochon cheese, which, like champagne, has an *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC). While skiing brings millions to the region, reblochon comes a close second.



▲ Comically pastoral ... High meadows above La Clusaz. Photograph: Louisinc/Getty Images

At a farm near Le Grand-Bornand, we follow the process through cool rooms where rows of perfect white moulds are drying on racks like stinky bullion. That visit ends with a slice of the good stuff, and a warning about cheap knockoffs. And there is no shortage of other opportunities to taste reblochon. Another day we walk to La Ferme des Corbassières, and sit on a sunny terrace to demolish a cheese, bacon and potato gratin called *tartiflette*.

On subsequent days, we use racks, wheels and other tabletop instruments of torture to melt more cheese into *fondue savoyarde* or *raclette*. Dipping pickles and boiled potatoes into these savoury puddles makes for fun interactive dining, but by the time our week is up I can't look at another piece of cheese.

With Annecy 40 minutes' drive away, it's easy to make a day trip to the lake. We try paddleboarding but it's so windy the boys get blown to the wrong shore and I have to leave them shivering on the bank while I return to the hire place in my swimming costume to get help.



▲ Old town in Annecy, France. Photograph: Olga Gavrilova/Getty Images

Our outdoor adventure may have ended in an emergency rescue but lunch quickly soothes our nerves. Set within the walled garden of Annecy's historic royal stables, Armony Saveurs is a laid-back, open-air cafe serving food cooked with herbs and vegetables grown on site.

Annecy's medieval lanes are full of antique shops and art galleries but there is plenty of culture out of town, too. In fact, if there's one thing Haute Savoie is really good at, it's festivals. Jazz, yoga, craft ... you name it. (And yes, there is a reblochon festival - in La Clusaz each August.)

For us the big draw is *Au Bonheur des Mômes* (day pass from €3, 25-30 August this year) the town's biggest arts festival for kids. It offers hundreds of puppet shows and plays, and the whole of Le Grand-Bornand takes on a carnival atmosphere as children play on wooden board games set up on every street, bash homemade musical instruments and join a parade of terrifying characters led by a monstrous baby in a pram. There are picnics by the river, candy floss and waffles, and a steam punk carousel where, instead of horses, the kids get to ride an octopus and a grasshopper.



▲ The boys on the Bonheur des Mômes carousel

As the sun goes down, families fill the square to watch Italian clowns teeter around the stage in a brilliant slapstick comedy. The boy who fell out of the car vomiting seven days ago is suntanned and happy, waving a new wolf-headed walking stick, and begging to return next winter to find out what this skiing lark is all about.

● *Travel to Annecy by Eurostar and TGV was provided by Loco2 (two adults and two children from £310 one-way). Car hire and accommodation were provided by Peak Retreats, which has seven nights at Les Grandes Alpes from £841 for four in August. Pass Loisirs Aravis is a pre-loadable smartcard for activity providers available in tourist offices in Saint-Jean-de-Sixt, Thônes, Le Grand-Bornand, La Clusaz and Mégève and giving discounts on a range of activities including the luge d'été*

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