

Surrounded by natural beauty in the heart of the French Alps



Luxury chalet living



A restful outdoor Jacuzzi? Oui!

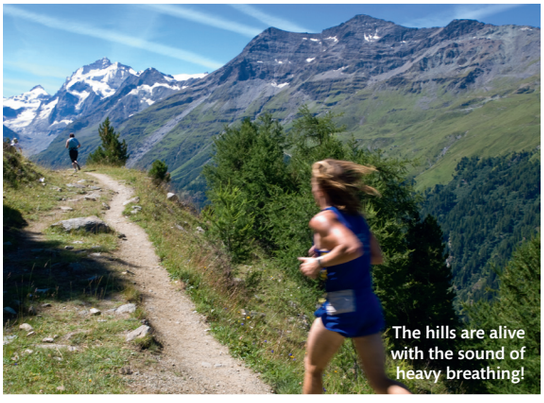
FAST-TRACK TRAILS IN FRANCE

Katy Dartford discovers the thrill of off-road running around Chamonix

Be light, fluffy and bouncy,' I'm told. 'Find a relaxed rhythm and avoid pounding.' While sounding like a recipe for a successful cake batter, this isn't a cookery course, but a trail running camp. 'Shorten your stride, keep your head up and chest forward and you'll cruise those uphills,' says our coach and International Mountain Leader, Julia Tregaskis-Allen. 'And for those tight downhills, think "Michael Schumacher": lean into the corners, using your head to initiate the turn, keep your eyes focused ahead and you'll avoid obstacles like stones and tree roots.'

The trail running camp run by Tracks & Trails in Chamonix is the perfect antidote to pounding the urban jungle. I'm here right at the end of the ski season, as the valleys melt from white to green. I want to get off the beaten track and make my running more technically challenging, but I find it intimidating to do alone when I'm not sure where I'm going. I'm also getting more susceptible to injury, so varying the terrain will help prevent this.

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The hills are alive with the sound of heavy breathing!

We're a small group of four, and surprisingly the others haven't done much running. 'The most I've run is 20 minutes,' says Eric, who's here with his wife Penny. However, they're keen hikers, so more prepared than me for this kind of terrain. There's also Susan, a mountain biker, so everyone is fit, but not necessarily running fit. 'If you can run 10K, no matter how slowly, and enjoy it, you'll be fine,' says our personal trainer and aptly named mountain-running coach, Steph Lightfoot.

We arrive at the charming luxury Chalet Maverick, just outside Chamonix in the pretty village of Les Bossons, where a healthy and hearty lunch is rustled up by Polly, the in-house chef-nutritionist. We tuck into sweet potato and lentil soup, a salad of beans, beetroot and local cheese and fruit with yoghurt. While we wait for lunch to settle, Steph and Julia talk us through everything from nutrition and training to kit and pre-race preparation.

That afternoon, we head up a very steep hill to the Coupeau Cross, with its awesome views of Mont Blanc, for a session on running with poles, which are great for taking the strain off the uphills and stabilising your descent. After the run we head to Steph's gym in Les Houches, for a stretch class and fitness test. Then it's back to the chalet for a scenic dip in the Jacuzzi in the garden, a nutritious three-course dinner and an early night.

The next morning, I'm feeling surprisingly fresh. Julia takes us through some navigation skills after breakfast, where we learn how to plan our own routes; then we take the train to Vallorcine to begin a long run back to Chamonix.

We start by running through snow patches at the Col des Montets which, at 1,461 metres, is higher than Ben Nevis. It's hard work, so I'm relieved to reach the 'petit' balcons, which become clear of snow from 1,300m. We run past stunning hanging glaciers, through alpine meadows, and aromatic pine forests, stopping to refuel after about an hour. I'm actually still feeling quite strong on the 'home run' back into Chamonix town centre. After two-and-a-half hours on our feet, we've completed a steady 16km on a variety of trails. Everyone's amazed how far we've run – and with such ease.

Now I know how to continue exploring and improving my fitness, I'm looking forward to many more off-road adventures!

Travel facts

Six nights with Tracks & Trails (tracks-and-trails.com) costs from £1,095 per person including full board and accommodation in a luxury mountain chalet. See website for schedules and departure dates. Easyjet flies to Geneva from £23.99 one-way.

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