

Visiting the French Alps: Grenoble & Annecy, France

by Cheryl Pendry, *PassPorter Featured Columnist*

Whenever I think of the Alps, I always think of the Swiss Alps, probably because that's where some of the more famous names, such as the Matterhorn are located, but the Alps stretches into France and into Italy (and Italy shares the Matterhorn with Switzerland).

The French section of the Alps is located in the southwest of the country, to the east of Lyon. As we drove from that city towards our next destination, Grenoble, the mountains began to loom from either side of the road. It was almost an unnerving feeling to be driving through a mountain range, with the peaks of the Alps looming above us, for someone like me, who's never really explored mountainous areas or been skiing.

Having said that, it's perhaps no surprise that Grenoble is very much a mountain city, so much so that it was the site of the 1968 Winter Olympics, something they're very proud of. There are still a number of signs and posters, proclaiming that fact, as you explore the place.

The major attraction in this city, which is home to many scientific industries and a university that specialises in science, is its gondola cable car system, known locally as the Teleferique. Since it went into service back in 1934, it's transported more than 13 million people. It was also one of the first urban cable car systems in the world, after Rio de Janeiro and Cape Town, so it's no mean engineering feat. You can learn more about its history in a museum when you reach the top of the system.

Not only does the Teleferique offer some stunning views over Grenoble and the River Isere, which runs straight through the city, but it takes you up to the Fort of the Bastille, where you can really see how Grenoble is surrounded on all sides by the Alps. We were lucky enough to see them with snow still on the peaks, although unfortunately it was a misty day, so we didn't get the best possible views.

As well as having some amazing views, the Fort has an exhibition which explains about its history. Sadly, if you're not a French speaker, you may struggle to understand it, as the audio guide and displays are only written in French, one of the few places we came across this issue in France. It explains about the soldiers who were based here and the battles they undertook in the mountains, and it's a fascinating story.

Those who are brave enough can make their way up to the fort on foot, with my guidebooks cheerfully telling me that it would take an hour to climb up there. We declined that offer and the chance to take the half an hour walk back down into the city, but we could both imagine that it's probably a much more attractive proposition during the busy summer months, when the wait for the Teleferique is probably as bad as one of Disney's E-ticket attractions on a major holiday.

Although Grenoble is home to many modern buildings, thanks to its rich science history, the city's history can be seen around Place St. Andre, with medieval buildings dating back to the 13th century. The city is also proud of its history, with museums dedicated to Grenoble's art through the years and its local history, arts and crafts.

From Grenoble, we headed north through the French Alps, passing various towns on our way, including Aix-les-Bains, famed for its thermal baths, which the Romans enjoyed two thousand years earlier. Bearing in mind this history, it's no surprise to discover that this town is also home to a museum about the Roman artifacts that have been found here.

Our next stop was Annecy, which looked like a pretty town from the photos I'd seen in my guidebook, but even those photos didn't begin to prepare us for the beauty that awaited us. This really is a charming town, built on the northern end of Lac d'Annecy, and it was this lake and the surrounding mountains on its lakeside that produced such picture perfect views for us. Because we were visiting so early on in the season, the shoreline was almost deserted, but we could imagine how popular this must be in the summer, with both locals and visitors.

Amazingly, the town didn't always have such a picturesque place on its doorstep. Step back in time to the 1950s and it was a very different story, with the lake essentially one huge, stinking sewer, with waste water being poured into it. Fortunately, the town realised the impact that was having, not just on the health of people, but the visitors who came to the area. They cleaned up their act and, today, the lake is one of the cleanest in the world, only receiving rainwater, spring water and mountain streams, thanks to years of decontamination.

Away from the lake, there's also an old town to explore and one of the most striking buildings today is the Palais d'Isle, a prison which dates from the 12th century and is located in the middle of the Thiou canal.

We carried on with our journey northwards and, within a few miles, we were indeed heading into Switzerland and experiencing the more famous Swiss Alps. Our journey through the French side, however, is one that will stick with me for many years, with some truly breathtaking

sights along the way.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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