

Walking on sunshine

Winter in the Alps is magical, there's no denying it. But when the blankets of white melt away, these glorious landscapes transform into something entirely different – pine-forested slopes rolling into deep-cut valleys, purple willowherb fringing mirror lakes, cows grazing in the meadows, bells jingling in the distance – and Verbier is no exception.

When I visited in summer, it was peaceful and nigh-on empty – I could walk for hours without encountering anyone

or anything other than the odd cow, and the air was so crisp, it felt like swallowing a pack of menthols.

But while there are adventures galore here, you needn't limit it to super-active types. Remote and peaceful surroundings, excellent local food and a cluster of vineyards make the resort an excellent spot for anyone wanting to tune out for a few days, whether seasoned explorer or take-it-easy wanderer. Here are some of the highlights for anyone tempted by the warmer months.

► EXPLORE ON FOOT

Visiting the Alps in summer without embarking on a hike or two would be sacrilege, and Verbier is blessed with scenic trails criss-crossing cow-strewn meadows, serene lakes and trickling waterfalls. They range from easy, paper-flat strolls along Les Bisses, a network of canals used to transport water to vineyards, to strenuous clambers up near-vertical slopes, with rewarding views at the peaks.

For some of the best hikes, suggest hopping on a cable car to Les Ruinettes, where

routes of various lengths and difficulties spider out. My highlights included a gentle walk to La Chaux via the Verbier 3D Sculpture Park, a collection of contemporary outdoor works, and a slightly more challenging hike up to Les Attelas via Lac de Vaux, a pool of perfect cobalt nestled deep in the mountains.

But just as rewarding were the carefree ambles I took following no specific route. I found myself strolling for hours on end along scree-covered slopes cloaked in jets of mist, and it was so utterly silent and remote it felt like ➔

Laura French heads to Verbier to see what this illustrious ski resort offers come summer

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→ being on another planet – a far cry from the hordes of skiers that come tumbling down the slopes when winter dawns.



The best part is you can take the bikes on chair lifts to save tough climbs, then let gravity do the rest

► **BIKE DOWN THE SLOPES**
It's mountain biking for which this region is really renowned, though, with nearly 500 miles of cross-country trails scattered among the slopes of the Val de Bagnes, and a dedicated bike park with beginner and advanced routes.

Hard-core riders flock here in their droves – almost every other person I encountered was here to whizz down on two wheels – but it's not just for the pros, with green and blue trails offering options for novice riders and families too; the descent from Verbier to Le Châble is especially pleasant and easily manageable.

The best part is you can take the bikes up on chair lifts to save tough climbs, then let gravity

RIGHT: Verbier bike park

FAR RIGHT: Paragliding



► **GO WINE TASTING**

But it's not only about the active stuff here. Swiss wine might not carry the same clout as that of its neighbours, but it's been getting a name for itself in recent years, and Verbier is at the heart of the country's biggest

wine-producing region, Valais.

There are regular tastings at Macbire – the resort's oldest winery, set right in the centre and home to an impressive score of mountain vintages – and there's a string of vineyards in the valley for those wanting

to sample a tipple or two in emerald-green surroundings that brochures can't do justice. Excursions can be arranged from the town and The Lodge can organise tastings at Provins, the biggest wine producer in Switzerland.

► **PARAGLIDE OVER THE MOUNTAINS**

For daredevils wanting to admire the Alps from another perspective, suggest paragliding. Soaring several hundred metres above the ground while dangling from a parachute might sound a little daunting, but reassure clients it's surprisingly peaceful.

I can't say my heart didn't flutter as I stepped into my harness, strapped on my helmet and launched off the edge of a hill, but as soon as we took off, I felt a sense of serenity. Winding trails, olive-green hills and pine forests quickly shrank to the size of a postcard, and the world disappeared into a blissful silence as we floated like graceful birds, wind whistling in my ears, total harmony all around. Verbier Summits offers tandem flights from £123 per person. If this is what the Alps are about, I'm coming back every year.

✓ **Tried & Tested**

THE LODGE

There are chalets, and then there's this – Richard Branson's nine-bedroom luxury ski lodge. One of seven Virgin Limited Edition properties, it takes all the elements you'd expect from Virgin – quirky touches and a laid-back, understated feel that isn't stuffy or pretentious – and fuses them with the feel of a traditional Swiss timber chalet.

Roaring fireplaces, wood-panelled walls, furry throws and splashes of colour characterise its rooms and suites, and there's a lounge, entertainment room, spa, indoor pool and two bars to keep guests occupied.

Meals are served on a long, communal table, and the food is exceptional, with a real emphasis



on local, just-foraged produce and wines straight from the valley.

The location is excellent, with the centre of town a few minutes' walk away, and it's all so peaceful, with balconies overlooking layer upon layer of mountain. **Book it:** Rooms start at £720 per night from June 7 to September 22. In winter, it's available for exclusive hire only. virginlimitededition.com/en/the-lodge

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Alpine ADVENTURES

Looking for more adventure? [Laura French](#) rounds up other activities to help you sell this region in both summer and winter

MOUNTAIN SCOOTERS

For an adrenaline-pumping way to see the mountains, suggest whizzing down on a mountain scooter. They can be hired from lift operator TélEVERbier at Les Ruinettes, with various routes available, including a 20-minute run down to Médran, right back in the centre of Verbier.



ROCK CLIMBING

The Val de Bagnes region is a hotspot for serious rock climbers with more than 30 climbing sites, but there's plenty to suit beginners and intermediates too. Key areas nearby include La Barme – a huge, craggy rock jutting up from the forest – and Madzeria. Verbier also has an indoor climbing wall at its sports centre for those wanting to do a bit of prep first.



MOUNTAINSIDE YOGA



Wellness is the buzzword of the decade, and where better to balance mind and body than on the edge of a mountain, soothed by the sounds and sights of nature? Wholey Cow offers exactly that, enabling yogis to choose their location – one way to take in some fresh air and get the limbs moving.

GOLF

Verbier transforms into a golfers' playground in the summer, with two beginner slopes, Les Esserts and Les Moulins, turning into short, 18-hole golf courses. They're set at a stealthy altitude, offering picture-perfect views over the surrounding mountains and glistening streams for clients playing a round to enjoy.



WINTER WILDS

Winter is when the crowds descend, but get here early – skiing in Verbier starts as early as November – and you can enjoy empty runs under crisp blue skies. There are runs to suit all levels (blue to black) across what is the largest ski area in Switzerland, with one of the Alps' steepest slopes found at nearby Mont-Fort. There's also a sledge run at La Tzoumaz, reachable by gondola from Verbier.



WATER SPORTS

For clients with time to spare, suggest adding a visit to Montreux on the shores of Lake Geneva, about an hour's drive from Verbier. You'll find plenty of water sports including kayaking, windsurfing, waterskiing and paddleboarding, with the ornate, Unesco-listed Château de Chillon as a backdrop.

