



■ Queen Victoria was amused by the beauty of the surroundings

Picture: Pierre Huchette

# Time Victorian favourite is back in vogue

Revel in a spa for Romantic poets, enjoy the spectacular mountain scenery, hire a speedboat and lose your socks

**T**he Brits today tend to ignore France's greatest lake district. We're talking about the lakes of Savoie – or Savoy, from which stems the name of the famous London hotel, built on land once owned by Savoie's lordly family. Mountain-surrounded, upmarket Lac d'Annecy may ring bells, but how many of you would think of its close rival to the south, Lac du Bourget, for a holiday?

In the 19th century, old European royals and new American aristocracy like J P Morgan loved their luxury breaks here. They flocked to the thermal spa resort of Aix-les-Bains, above the lake. Queen Vic was a fan, despite her sour-faced bust now standing somewhat ignored on an Aix street. She enjoyed the natural drama, although she was once terrified by her aide Sir Henry Ponsonby, whose snoring she mistook for an earthquake.

To the French, Lac du Bourget is most famously linked to the country's finest Romantic poet, Lamartine. As a sickly young man, he was sent to Aix in 1816 to recuperate. There, he fell madly in love with the young, married Julie

Charles, undergoing treatment for tuberculosis. She didn't survive to get to their Aix rendez-vous the following year, but Lamartine's expressions of his tempestuous love for her live on.

Lac du Bourget remains a very romantic place for French people. Arriving this June at Le Bourget du Lac, sitting at one of that bijou resort's irresistible waterside restaurant terraces, I almost swooned at the awesome mountain ranges. The muscular Bauges posed immediately opposite; the toothy jaws of the Chartreuse bit savagely at the sky to the south east; and the Belledonne, its triangular peaks still coated in snow, stood divinely aloof in the distance.

Close by, around the dinky ports either side of me, I spotted grebes diving for fish, boys for pleasure.

## Culture vultures

Le Bourget lies opposite Aix-les-Bains, the main resort. Just south of both stands Savoy's historic capital, Chambéry. Each of this trio has its distinct character, Aix-les-Bains more English, Le Bourget more Swiss, Chambéry more Italianate.

Chambéry attracts culture

## TRAVEL TIPS

### ■ TO GET THERE

Fly to Lyon, Geneva or Grenoble. Or consider Eurostar and TGV to Aix-les-Bains or Chambéry.

### ■ TOURIST INFORMATION

Start online at [www.chambery-tourisme.com](http://www.chambery-tourisme.com), [www.aixlesbain.com](http://www.aixlesbain.com) and [www.bourgetdulactourisme.com](http://www.bourgetdulactourisme.com). For Savoy generally, see [www.savoie-mont-blanc.com/en](http://www.savoie-mont-blanc.com/en).

### ■ HOTELS & RESTAURANTS

In historic Chambéry, Le Petit Hôtel Confidentiel is a stunning new boutique hotel. For a charming, cheap retreat, with restaurant, just above town, try Hôtel Pervenche. Last time in the city, I stayed at central, business-like Le Cinq, with indoor pool. At Aix-les-Bains, enjoy slick facilities at impersonal modern waterside hotels like Aquakub or L'Adelphia. Among very stylish B&Bs, try contemporary Suites du Lac, or stay in 19th century grandeur up at Un Balcon au Splendide.

vultures as well as keen shoppers. Museums and monuments are densely packed here. I dropped in first on the castle, dominating one side of the historic centre. Darkened chambers hold a free exhibition explaining Savoy's history, especially as an independent medieval state, when its leaders were nicknamed "the gatekeepers of the Alps".

On guided tours, you visit the castle chapel, once home to a very precious, if now much-disputed, piece of old cloth – the Turin Shroud, acquired by the House of Savoy, was first kept here, not in their other Alpine powerbase.

In Chambéry's main, elegant, arcaded shopping street, Rue de Boigne, is the city's most celebrated monument, the Fontaine des Eléphants, boasting four proud if posterior-deprived pachyderms. The fountain recalls a 19th-century Chambérien adventurer, Benoît de Boigne, who grabbed his fortune in India, left much of it for civic projects in his hometown, but lived some of his later life in Great Portland Street.

A favourite cultural spot of mine stands amidst orchards just above town; at Les Charmettes, that unlikely musician and stirrer of minds, the brilliantly flawed Jean-Jacques Rousseau, shackled up with an older woman to mature his revolutionary ideas in blissful surrounds. Memorably,

one summer, I argued here with Jean-Jacques, or rather, with a reincarnation of him, acting in a theatrical soirée.

Moving across to Aix, the old town boasts Roman roots and thermal springs that have made it periodically popular since ancient times. A feeling of 19th-century opulence still resides on its slopes, even if the palatial hotels that greeted the Belle Epoque beau monde have all been converted into smart apartment blocks. The medicinal thermal establishments have declined. The baths to go to for contemporary wellbeing treatments are the smart Thermes Chevallet. Further up the slope, the Musée Faure conceals a surprising art collection, including a treat for Rodin enthusiasts.

Much less discreet, lording it over the central shopping area, is the Casino Grand Cercle, with its 19th-century wedding-cake architecture. Enter (for free), avert your eyes from the hideous fruit machines and gasp at the glistening, original mosaics.

This is a place for messing around in pédalos at the very least. Or hire a boat, or try water-skiing, wakeboarding, sailing, snorkelling even...

Fishermen get cards from Aix's aquarium, by the Petit Port, the newer, southerly harbour. For swimmers, the lake waters feel bath-like in summer.

Staying on the water's edge, I tested out the new cycle route running right beside the lake from Aix to Le Bourget, encountering families of swans and grebes as well as of locals jogging, roller-skating and cycling, some on wacky solar-powered bikes.

I was taken up to La Chambotte, one of the Victorians' favourite viewing points over the lake. The traditional inn has been replaced by a funky eatery offering fantastic vistas from its glass-walled dining room.

Watching birds of prey gliding past at eye level then swooping over the silvery lake, I was regretting that I wasn't able to go out on the waters this time. But, I told my guide Nicolas, that was no bad thing, given the huge, threatening clouds gathering.

Nicolas clearly likes a challenge. "Shall I take you out on a motorboat now? I'm sure we'll avoid the storm!" He was calmly confident; I was thinking more of Romantic poets drowning in stormy waves.

## Majestic abbey

Before I knew it, Nicolas was racing us across to the lake's wild western side, where the waters are a mesmerizing glassy green. We slowed to pay homage to Lamartine's isolated grotto and to majestic Hautecombe Abbey, resting place of Savoy's dukes – whose successors became kings of Italy.

The storm raged on the lake's southern side. Reaching the northern end, the winds were whipping up a snow of poplar seeds, but speeding back to Aix, we were only troubled by a few drops of rain.

Nicolas was triumphant... although, in his haste to return, the socks that he had removed to drive our boat had been seized by the winds. It seemed a small price to pay for an exhilarating contemporary tour of this heady Romantic destination.



■ A family admire the view

Picture: Pascal Lebeau