

# Montagnes du Jura

**Rudolf Abraham** and family explore the varied winter delights of the original Jurassic Park.





**M**ush! shouts the eight-year-old in the sledge next to me – and we're off, our six sleek huskies leaping forwards against their harnesses and the sledge whizzing out across a landscape of deep, unbroken snow and scattered spruce, under a brilliantly clear, deep blue sky.

It's February, and I'm on a winter trip with my daughter – surrounded not by the frozen plains of Santa's Lapland, but by the Montagnes du Jura in France, on the mountainous edge of Bourgogne-Franche-Comté, close to the Swiss border. Not that far from the vineyards of Burgundy, in a region perhaps more famous for its Pinot Noir and its Comté than its winter sports. And yet Jura boasts three ski areas (Les Rouses, Métabief, Monts-Jura) and some 3,000km of cross-country ski trails – not to mention 10,000km of hiking trails – as well as the best husky sledging I've enjoyed anywhere, including some not so very far away from the Arctic Circle. Who knew?

The Montagnes du Jura run in an arc through three French departments (Doubs, Jura and Ain), stretching for around 340km from end to end along the Swiss border and forming the watershed between the Rhône on one side and the Rhine on the other. They are home to a regional nature park (Parc naturel régional du Haut-Jura), and are extremely rich in wildlife, from Chamois to Capercaillie and Eurasian Pygmy-owl – and, in very small numbers and incredibly hard to spot, the elusive Eurasian Lynx, which was reintroduced into the area in the 1970s. The spectacular geology of the Jura mountains' limestone cliffs and gorges gave rise to the term Jurassic in the 19th century, and preserved within their surface are gigantic dinosaur footprints which are among the largest and most extensive discovered anywhere in the world. And they form a wonderful outdoor playground, perfectly suited for family winter adventures.

Les Granges Raguin lies at the end of a winding mountain road, some 18km from the lakeside town of Malbuisson where we're staying. It's our first morning in



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Jura, and after some snowshoeing along one of the trails nearby, we return to Les Granges Raguin for our first taste of ski du fond (cross country skiing). Leaving aside the minor detail that I find myself proving about as competent at this as I am at downhill skiing (by which I mean, really not very good), my daughter picks it up easily enough, and we have a great time gliding about on the gently rolling terrain nearby.

It's easy to spend a full day at Les Granges Raguin. With a little of the afternoon still to spare, we are kitted out with battery packs and a pair of trottinettes électriques (electric scooters), on which we head up into the surrounding hills, following narrow lanes and 4X4 tracks, then descending again across snowy hillsides, before a lunch of delicious cheese and charcuterie platters back at the Alpage des Granges Raguin, loaded with Morbier, Comté and other local and regional specialties. The rest of the afternoon is filled in with rocketing down a nearby hillside on giant inflatable hoops, beside a small but never-ending line of kids (some of them in their forties) hiking back up again for 'just one more go'.

The following morning we're up early, and grabbing our snowshoes and some trekking poles, we take the chair lift from Métabief up to Le Morond. After finding a gap in the steady stream of skiers arriving at the top of the slope, we follow a narrow, snow-covered path down beside a fence, to the edge of the trees where we pick up trail markings for the GTJ.

The GTJ or Grande Traversée du Jura is a well-marked snowshoeing route running 117km from Métabief to Giron, above the cliffs of Mont d'Or and at times just a kilometre from the Swiss border. It's just one of several variants which make



up the GTJ – there's also a 180km GTJ cross-country skiing route, there are cycling and horse riding routes, and a GTJ hiking route stretching nearly 400km through the Montagnes du Jura, taking in gorges and limestone plateaus, a couple of Unesco sites and sections of the GR5 and the GR9.

After stopping to strap on snowshoes, we tramp down through deep, powdery snow, the trail overhung with branches of dark, glistening spruce, then pass the faint outlines of a reservoir on our right and begin following the ridgeline south towards Le Mont d'Or. Although only a short distance from the top of the chair lift and the ski run, we already have the trail almost entirely to ourselves. We've only been going for around 10 minutes when we spot a lone chamois just a short distance from the path, pausing above the increasingly steep slopes on our left, which will soon become the jaw-dropping sweep

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of sheer cliffs which define the eastern face of Le Mont d'Or.

Soon we pass the aptly named Belvédère des Chamois, a viewpoint at the edge of the cliffs (corniced in places), then continue gradually uphill with the broad, flat summit of the 1463m Le Mont d'Or ahead of us. The views from the top when we get there are breathtaking, with an arc of snow-topped cliffs stretching back to Le Morond, and the valley of the Jougna below, where it flows into the Orbe.

We backtrack slightly from the summit,

then strike left, passing an information board highlighting some of the plant life to be seen in the area – if we were to return in May or later, instead of drifts of snow we might find vanilla orchid, martagon lily, monk's hood and mountain everlasting on the slopes hereabouts. Then bearing right we begin a gradual descent through unbroken silence towards La Grangette, a rustic auberge nestled at the base of a hill. We continue for another half an hour or so beyond this, to a nice open snowy spot where we stop for a picnic, and make



an extended family of diminutive snowmen overlooking the trail. As we approach Les Granges Raguin, we cross and recross the route we took on scooters the previous afternoon, and the area where we had practised cross-country skiing.

From Les Granges Raguin, the GTJ continues west to the source of the Doubs, but we return to Malbuisson and spend some time walking along the shore of the slender, elongated Lac de Saint-Point, its reed beds turning golden in the evening light. Just to the southwest, the smaller Lac de Remoray is a nature reserve, where around 230 species of bird have been recorded.

The next day, we drive out to JuraChiens, hidden away down a winding road northeast of Les Fourgs, for some much anticipated husky sledging – as expected, the never-to-be-forgotten highlight of the trip for an eight year old.

You can hear the dogs long before you see them – the team being attached to a sledge are going bonkers with excitement. Michel Nicolier, who together with his wife Lydia has been running JuraChiens for 30 years, accompanies us as our musher, and after my daughter and I have piled into the sledge we head northeast across a wintry landscape that is beautifully empty and still. The only sounds are the swish of snow and the wind rattling the snow-proof covers in the sledge, the fast regular kick of paws, and the occasional shout of encouragement from Michel for the dogs to turn left, or right. We pass a lone farmhouse, which puts us less than 100m from the Swiss border, then turn west, pausing to let other teams race past, following a different route to ours.

An exhilarating hour of sledging passes all too quickly, but my daughter is wearing an enormous grin at the end of it, and we return to Les Fourgs, to finish our trip with some more cross country skiing on two easy circuits, La Coupe and Le Grand Bois.

Jura was our second family trip to Bourgogne-Franche-Comté in under 12 months, and one of the best winter trips we've done anywhere. But don't listen to me – the best endorsement for a family trip to Jura comes from my daughter, who several months later is still talking about its husky sledging, winter walking, heavenly cheese and ski du fond, and asking: 'Hey dad, when can we go back?'



## Travel to Jura

It's extremely easy to reach Jura by rail from London – 2hrs 20mins on the Eurostar to Paris Gare du Nord ([www.eurostar.com](http://www.eurostar.com)), then 2hrs 45mins on a TGV from Paris Gare du Lyon to Frasnay, and from there under 25mins by bus to Malbuisson, with buses timed to meet trains (timetables at <https://www.tourisme-metabief.com/infos-pratiques/transports.html>). The same bus continues to Labergement-Sainte-Marie (for Lac de Remoray), Métabief and Vallorbe.

We stayed at the excellent Hotel du Lac in Malbuisson ([www.hotel-le-lac.com](http://www.hotel-le-lac.com)), just a 5-minute stroll from Lac de Saint-Point and right opposite the bus stop for Frasnay and Métabief. We hired skis at Skiset in Métabief (<https://www.skiset.com/station-ski/metabief-village/magasins/sport-neige>) and Les Rangs in Les Fourgs (<https://www.les-fourgs.com/domaine-nordique/locations-de-materiel/fiche-lei.html?pag=1&lei=334000157>).

Les Granges Raguin (25370 ROCHEJEAN, Tel: +33 (0)6 82 97 41 87, <https://alpage-des-granges-raguin.business.site/>) offer electric scooter hire, snowshoe hire and large inflatable rings to careen down a nearby slope on.

JuraChiens (La Fuye, Les Granges Berrad, 25300 LES FOURGS, Tel: +33 (0)3 81 69 48 19, [www.jurachiens.com](http://www.jurachiens.com)) offer 1hr husky sledging trips (adults €70, children €47.50) and half day excursions (adults €150, children €100–€125). Book in advance.

For more information on the Montagnes du Jura visit [www.tourisme-metabief.com](http://www.tourisme-metabief.com) and [www.bourgognefranche-comte.com](http://www.bourgognefranche-comte.com).

