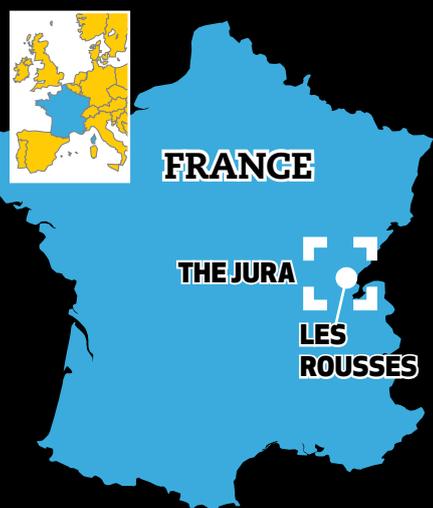




Mountain trail running

The Jura is a charming, little-known mountainous region of France – and trail running is the perfect way to explore, says **Sarah Stirling**

FAST FACTS



What: Trail running and gourmet eating
Where: The Jura region of France, 90 minutes from Geneva
How long: A long weekend to a week
How tough: About 20km a day, suitable for regular runners with some off-road running experience
Look out for: Fortresses full of cheese, nosey cows, relaxing running, knickers on rucksacks



“So, they keep cheese in it nowadays,” explains Julia.

We’re in a forest, looking at the immense ramparts of the second largest fortress in France. During the 1800s, 1,500 workers spent 30 years building the Fort des Rousses’ 50,000m/sq of vaulted rooms and miles of galleries. It’s a significant clue to the Jura region’s culture that all this now protects cheese. Apparently it’s the ideal ambient temperature.

The Jura is famous for wine as well as cheese, and gourmet French cooking in general, but that’s not the only appeal, although it is a big one after a day on the trails. In the Jura there are towering forests and fresh-tasting rivers, UNESCO World Heritage Sites and vineyards and lakes. Then you’ll pop out in a sunny valley with jangling cowbells, traditional farm buildings and flowery meadows.

The Jura is one of France’s charming,

lesser-known rural mountain regions, and I’m loathe to spread the word, but I promised Editor Rosie. It’s possible to run, mountain bike, walk, cross-country ski or snowshoe a ‘Grand Traverse of the Jura Mountains,’ by various routes, or you can just do a few sections of the ‘GTJ.’ It’s easy to drop down to a traditional village for the night at any point. It’s generally amazing and – sigh – you should go.

It’s easy to get to as well. Like many adventure lovers I’ve got to know Geneva airport quite well, as I pass through often to visit Chamonix, France’s mountain capital, which is 90 minutes’ drive east of this Swiss city. The Jura lies 90 minutes drive (or train ride) in the opposite direction from Geneva. The Jura Mountains are a lowly 1,719m maximum, but that makes them an ideal balcony for viewing the higher Alps in the distance, and you won’t have to hike or run uphill for hours just to get above the tree-line, like you do in Chamonix. It’s, well, quite relaxing, really.

I’m here with my friend Julia Tre-gaskis-Allen: international mountain leader, nordic ski instructor, trail cycle leader, restless adventure-lover who never sits still for more than five minutes. She’s recce-ing a route she’s plotted for a week-long, point-to-point running trip. Julia is a huge fan of the Jura, and spends many weeks a year there both summer and winter, guiding trips. But still, she wanted to check out the exact route before running it with clients.

“Ooh they do wonderful *tartes aux citron* in that cafe!” she calls as we trot through a village, and darts in to check their opening hours and ask if they have rooms. “That’s good,” she reports. “They open at 11. I’ll be passing through around then with the group, and the

Non-stop Sarah: perfect running trails





Best kept secret: France's charming Jura mountains

Ⓒ Julia's gone so lightweight she's only brought two pairs of pants, washing them as she goes and flying the spare pair from her rucksack like a flag to dry in the wind as we run ☺

sun will be right on this terrace.”

On other detours we call into restaurants to pick up their latest menus; we also pop into lodges and make notes of the ones that have hot tubs, saunas and other delights. We don't have time to stop ourselves, and I begin to get jealous of Julia's clients, who are going to have a wonderful stress-free trip, all their luggage taken onwards for them, enjoying nights in eco lodges and mountain chalets.

Meanwhile we're carrying our minimal luggage on our back. Julia's gone so lightweight she's only brought two pairs of pants, washing them as she goes and flying the spare pair from her rucksack like a flag to dry in the wind as we run. The route Julia has planned is 100km of running over six days, with a rest day in the middle. We're doing it in three. We brought mountain bikes for the first half of the recce, and ditched them at a hotel half way to run the rest.

We run up hills and down them, through spruce woods and across meadows. When we stop for lunch, nosey cows gather. In the evenings, in lodges

and chalets we practise our schoolgirl French over several courses of traditional dishes. Our hosts rarely speak English. It's wonderful to be really immersed in real France complete with red wine, local meat and cheese. So different from tourist centres like Chamonix.

The highlight for me was 20km of running along the Monts Jura, a rolling ridgeline with sheer limestone cliffs on one side and a plateau of wild flowers on top, which offered lovely views and easy running up to the Cret de la Neige (1,717m) and then le Reculet (1,719m) – the highest summit of the Jura chain. We then dropped down to Menthieres for the night.

That was it for our recce, but Julia's clients would have one more day to go. They'd climb back up to the crest and run to the Cret de la Goutte and then the Grand Cret d'Eau (1,621m) from where there are apparently superb panoramic views, then descend to Lancrans for a celebratory dinner. From there it would be easy to catch a train back to Geneva. Not that they'd want to leave – I certainly didn't. **AT**

NEED MORE INFO?

Get there

The Jura is easily reached by road, rail or air. Initially make for Geneva, then take the train to La Cure, which is 3km from Les Rousses (our start point), on the Swiss / French border. The journey from Geneva to La Cure takes around 90 minutes, with one change at Nyon, and there are beautiful views of the lake and the Alps from the small tourist train. Once in La Cure you can get a taxi to Les Rousses.

There are flights from the UK to Geneva from many operators and airports; EasyJet is probably cheapest. Train times are available at www.sbb.ch and a single train ticket from Geneva to La Cure is around €25.

Stay there

We stayed in lodges and chalets along the way. In Les Rousses we stayed at the traditional La Ferme du Pere Francois (www.perefrancois.fr), which is right in the centre of the village for restaurants and supplies. Then the Auberge Nordique in La Pesse (www.auberge-nordique.fr) is a lovely, traditional *auberge* with plenty of red wine, cheese and local meat and lots of farm animals outside – great for families.

Running in the mountains

Don't expect to be able to run as far as you do on road. The terrain will be steeper, but also more technical – you'll be looking out for rocks and tree roots. When running downhill keep glancing up and ahead so you know what's coming. Keep your arms aloft for balance. Check the forecast and always carry a warm layer – the weather can change fast in the mountains, and if there's a mishap you'll be glad of it. Train by doing hill reps – find a hill and run up it then jog down a few times. This is great for stamina. Go easy on the downhill as your quads (front thigh muscles) are going to hurt the next day if you're not used to it!

Maps and more info

For further information on where to sleep and eat in the Jura, see www.haut-jura.com. As far as I'm aware there aren't any guidebooks on the Grand Traverse of the Jura Mountains in English, but any tourist information will give you a stack of leaflets on it. The best map is the IGN (Institut Geographique National) Carte de Randonnée number 3328 OT, Crêt de la Neige, d'Oyonnax et de Lélex. It's available from www.lacompagniedescartes.fr.

Go guided

This run is offered as a guided trail run by Adventures in the Alps: <http://summer.adventuresinthealps.com>. It costs £900 per person including seven nights' accommodation, baggage transfers to hotels each day, breakfast and pack-lunches. There's also the option to join for a long weekend from £550. Adventures in the Alps says the trip is designed for regular runners, with some off road experience. The average distance run a day is 20km.