



PROPERTY IN THE FRENCH ALPS

Planning Considerations

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Planning considerations for homes in the French Alps

Amazing views, peace and stillness....lots of snow and plenty of opportunities to ski. There are many reasons why we love the Alps... therefore it is no surprise that the French Alps are a popular location for UK homebuyers as well as other nationalities.

If you are thinking of renovating a property or building a home in the French Alps there are though some specific planning and construction issues that you need to consider.

The French alpine chalet

The Alps are synonymous with the alpine chalet, with low pitched roofs that protect the walls below with large overhanging eaves. The buildings are often compact in footprint - and rarely are higher than three storeys.

The alpine style is similar throughout the alpine regions of Europe, the main differences are in the building materials used for the chalets which historically were local to the chalet or house being built. In some areas the walls of the houses are constructed using timber, in others, stone is used; roof coverings range from thick stone tiles through to timber shingles but nearly all alpine houses use a thick wall construction to give both stability and thermal comfort.

What are the characteristics of a typical Alpine chalet property?

Typically they feature low pitched roofs with a thick roof construction – large eaves overhangs – and thick walls which often have a thicker base than top to give maximum stability. The majority of characteristics unique to the Alps are there to deal with the extreme weather and locations.

Are there specific planning regulations for the French Alps?

Mountainous areas of France are subject to Mountain Law which sits alongside the local planning regulations. The Alps are no exception. All PLU or carte communal regulations must accord with Mountain Law which deal with construction zones, the Mountain Law regarding planning has an aim to limit development within the mountains to existing and established hamlets and towns. The aim is to prevent the overdevelopment of mountainous regions and to protect the environment and agricultural zones.

Are French planning authorities willing to accept contemporary designs as part of a renovation project?

Contemporary design is never rejected without reason and there are many examples of high quality contemporary alpine homes that have been built in the last five years. As long as the design of the building accords with the regulations set within the PLU of the commune, then there is no reason why a contemporary design would not be acceptable.

What are the current trends in French Alpine residential building projects?

The form of contemporary alpine architecture does not seek to separate itself from the traditional feel of the alpine chalet but it does try to move that form forward. Modern alpine architecture is about clean lines, simple forms and natural materials. The use of natural more sustainable materials has become very important in recent years as more and more clients are aware of their own and their homes carbon footprint.

The implementation of high levels of insulation, mixed with large areas of glazing to maximise passive solar gain are popular features. The alpine chalet lends itself in its traditional form to a very sustainable home; thick walls and roofs with large eaves to prevent overheating in the summer but also to allow for low winter sun to provide passive heating. The modern alpine chalet borrows from the past and sits comfortably with its more traditional neighbours whilst also allowing for some contemporary style and simple forms.

Does it take longer to receive planning permission in the French Alps on average?

It doesn't take longer to receive planning permission from the point of submission of the application as the time allowed for the planners to consider the application is the same nationwide. What can elongate this period is if the site of the application is close to a church or building of historic significance or if the area is a protected zone as then the Architect de Bâtiments de France are involved. The design and planning process that leads up to the submission of the application may take longer as there are often more things to consider when designing in alpine regions due to the nature of the construction sites and of the existing buildings that are being renovated/extended.

Why are French Alpine sloping roofs so popular?

The alpine roof is like a trade mark and can be seen on homes from Austria through to France. There is a good reason for its form; in the winter it allows an amount of snow to build up to provide an external layer of insulation, the deep eaves protect the elevations and the close areas from falling snow as it slides off the roof. The structure of an alpine roof is significant as it must manage a lot of additional weight in winter months: an area of 1 m x 1m with a depth of 20cms can weigh in the region of 15 kilos depending on the snow type. The low pitch of the roof also helps with snow management as the snow tends to creep off the roof rather than slide in one large slab.

Further Information

If you are also looking to realise your own plans in France, whether it is a renovation, a new build, an extension or another project, residential or commercial – please get in touch.

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