



ON THE EDGE IN CHAMONIX

In the spiritual home of alpinism, glacier harnesses are as ubiquitous as ski goggles. Chamonix is the ski town you visit to scare yourself.

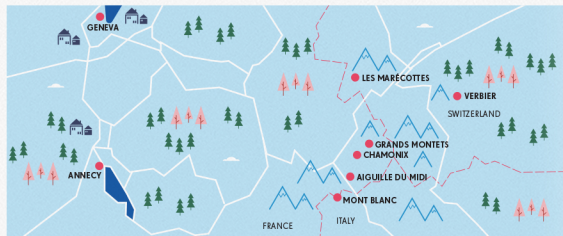
When we stepped off the Mont-Blanc Express train in Chamonix, France, the wheels of our overweight ski bag rumbled across the centuries-old cobblestones.

It was early spring, and espresso-sipping tourists and tiny hatchbacks sprinkled the streets. The sound was of ski boots clanking on the feet of mountaineers, who were strolling through town with climbing gear and ice screws jangling from their glacier harnesses. The sun had already disappeared behind the skyscraping valley walls and a chill from the incoming storm was setting in.

It was one of the snowiest seasons in Chamonix for almost 50 years and the previous day's ski tracks in the high peaks were

filling up again daily. My buddy Ryan and I lugged our stuff past the legendary après bar, Elevation 1904, where an electric current of stoke — that almost physical sense of excitement — was buzzing among hardcore alpinists and pro skiers. The scene was intimidating, foreshadowing the intensity of our month-long trip into this hub of extreme, steep, high-stakes ski mountaineering. I'd been living on the front range of Colorado for a few years and my own home runs had come to feel passé. Here, there would be no wasting in.

But I'd been looking to feel that thrill of hanging on the edge of comfort in a way that demands intense focus. Chamonix is the perfect place for that fix. You don't necessarily have to throw yourself





IX GRAVE TIDINGS

When the weather's against you, it's worth a stroll through the Chamonix Cemetery at the foot of the mountains where more than five generations of legendary mountaineers have been laid to rest. There you can recognise the names of pioneers including Edward Wilmser (first to ascend the Matterhorn, in 1865) and Maurice Herzog (first to climb Annapurna, in 1950) alongside graves adorned with ice axes, crossed skis, and coiled ropes.

'You don't necessarily have to throw yourself down a cliff every morning to taste the wonders of the Chamonix Valley'



From top: there are more mountain guides than school teachers in Chamonix; the resort offers a respite from scarier terrain. Previous page: signature steps

down a cliff every morning to taste the wonders of the Chamonix Valley on skis or a snowboard, and hiring a guide is always an option. You can arrange one in the morning, and discuss your goals and intentions ahead of time to match your level of skiing.

It's never a bad idea to start with an accessible ski down the Vallée Blanche – a descent of 9200ft (2800m) over 14 miles (23km), which can feel like standing on a conveyor belt with panoramic views of the Mt Blanc massif and its surrounding peaks – while scoping out potential lines and linking up alternative descents in your mind. Expert skiers with avalanche safety training can brush up on basic crevasse knowledge and drop off the back side of the Grand Montets ski area onto the Argentière Glacier, where steep, sustained powder runs await just outside the rope boundary, and a boundless amphitheatre of couloirs in all directions funnels down another long glacier descent to the valley floor.

But if you're looking for more serious fun in Chamonix, it is best to buddy up with someone familiar with the terrain. One who's comfortable with basic glacier rescue techniques in the event of a crevasse fall, or something more serious. On just our second day riding, we linked up with a young British alpinist named Luke, who was nursing some frostbitten fingers and living in his van, when not crawling at his girlfriend's feet. A storm had come in right side up and cooled the steep runs with fresh, high Alpine powder.

We shuffled into line with all the other hungry snow hippos packing the first tram of the day, which would take us in 20 minutes from the centre of town at an elevation of 3400ft (1025m), to the top of the Aiguille du Midi peak at over 12,600ft (3800m). Built in 1955, the cable car still holds the record for the world's highest vertical ascent. The top of the tram station has a museum, a panoramic viewing platform and a gift shop for sightseers, but we hustled to the top of our first classic line: the Cosmiques Couloir, a 45- to 50-degree sustained 2900ft (900m) run on the west face of the Midi, exiting onto the Glacier des Bossons. It is a test-piece line with the steepest section over a small, exposed cliff band.

As Luke set up the first 200ft (60m) rappel into the couloir from the bobbed balcony at the entrance, two Frenchmen dropped in above us, skipping the rope work thanks to ample snow coverage and sinking fresh tracks from under us. It made little difference. Every one of our turns was perfect: deep, buff, fast and powerful, showing up rooster tails that put us in the white room for a moment – where our vision was obscured by all that snow – before the clouds parted to reveal a wide-open view of the glacier valley below. This we repeated until we couldn't scream any more without choking on snow and we eventually regrouped in a safe spot mid-couloir, shrieking in disbelief at what was waiting for us on arrival. We were only halfway down, and the second half was of equal transcendence, rolling over a mostly covered bergschrund (a crack caused by moving glacier ice) and through a vast crevasse field before wrapping around a moraine bench at the bottom of a rocky spur.

After the Cosmiques descent, we rode down to the entrance of the Tunnel du Mont-Blanc and hatched a ride to town before hopping

right back on the Midi and hustling over to the Glacier Rond, another powder-stacked couloir with an exposed, 1300ft (400m) entrance traversing left onto a shoulder that exits the same way as the Cosmiques. There are few tracks in it and, like its neighbour, it's an ideal entry point for this type of extreme skiing, with rappels, cliffs, hazardous exposure and crevasses. But in good snow conditions it's not too hairy a line, with some calculated risk.

This double-header of adjacent lines is what locals call the 'Home Run' and to get both in such optimal conditions shatters any notion of prerequisite patience. It's quite the opposite: when Chamonix gives you the goods, you have to be ready to receive them or you might miss your shot. We lived this mantra for weeks, waking up early and cramming into the first tram to follow various gung-ho lunatics onto some of the most aggressive and memorable lines of our lives, calming our nerves each afternoon with a round of tall beers.

As much as Chamonix can be about testing one's mettle and getting rad, it's just as much about savouring a warm, fatty pastry in the morning and stopping mid-glacier to slice up a meat and cheese charcuterie snack while toasting your giddy, powder-stoked friends. There's a lifetime of skiing to keep you engaged and on your toes, but if you get too caught up in the thrills and don't stop to gaze at the mountain landscape and absorb it all on a daily basis, then you're missing your shot at receiving the gifts that Chamonix has to give. **SV**

DIRECTIONS

Best time to go // March

Gear required // Skis with touring-capable bindings or a splitboard and skis, avalanche safety gear, glacier harness with an ice screw and 9-to-1 pulley system.

Nearest town // Chamonix

Getting there // Fly to Geneva, Switzerland and either take the scenic, Mont-Blanc Express train from Geneva Cornavin station, which takes around three hours, or a quicker van shuttle from the airport with Alpybus (www.alpybus.com/chamonix).

Where to stay // Hôtel Le Morgane

Things to know // Le Mulet bus takes you all over town for free and runs every 10 minutes, while other buses will take you up-valley to La Flégère and Les Grand Montets for a few euros or free with your ski pass. The Grand Montets tram station was gutted by fire in 2018 and is being repaired.

Opposite: on the pistes of Verbier, you're surrounded by famous peaks, including the Matterhorn and Dent d'Hérens

MORE LIKE THIS TESTING EUROPEAN SKI TOWNS

VERBIER, SWITZERLAND

There's a reason that the annual grand finale of the Freeride World Tour is held in the Swiss resort of Verbier, having originated in 1996 on the 40- to 60-degree north face of the Bec des Rosses, where there's a near 2000ft (600m) drop through a rocky maze of cliffs and couloirs. The occasionally high-consequence terrain is massive and scoops snowfall out of the sky, but doesn't require as much rope work or put you over as much hazardous exposure as other more extreme areas of the Alps. It's also accessible, with an advanced network of lifts connecting a vast amount of terrain. Many skiers will show up and head straight to the Col de Chassouse to test their skills on the Chassouse-Tortin 'wall', or up to the peak of the imposing Mont-Gale, where options abound from its 9918ft (3023m) summit. Regardless of what you decide to ski, make sure ractlette is on the après menu.

Nearest town // Martigny

LA GRAVE, FRANCE

'Sorry, no rescue.' You might hear this phrase in France's La Grave, though hopefully not when you're in dire straits. With no ski patrol, grooming, avalanche control or marked runs, La Grave epitomises extreme skiing. A 48-mile (77km) drive southeast of Grenoble, off a sketchy road cut through the Romanche valley, the 12th-century farming village is home to some of the world's most accessible no fall zones (where there's nothing to stop you if you tumble), where some of the best skiers in history have mistapped and lost their lives. The two-part gondola ride will bump you up to over 7000 vertical feet (2100m) of steep, technical skiing down glaciers and couloirs, but don't just ride it up and follow tracks – some will lead you off cliffs that others have jumped with a parachute strapped to their back. It's best to hire a guide here to take you down lines off the Glacier de la Girose and other classics.

Nearest town // Grenoble

LES MARÉCOTTES, SWITZERLAND

This small resort village in the Martigny region of Switzerland sucks deep powder out of passing storms thanks to the lake effect produced by several nearby bodies of water. Beyond the piste, sheer peaks and knife-edge rides shoot up and cut the sky with bold spine lines and deep chutes (narrow sections between two rock walls). Steep-skiing and freeride star Jérémie Heitz has called these surrounding peaks home his entire life and it's where he learned to race his Alpine giant-slam turns on the open faces of 55-degree slopes. Head to Les Marécottes during the right storm cycle, watch the snow coat the terrain and you'll see why some folks call it 'Little Alaska'. Martigny train station – which connects to Geneva in less than two hours on a scenic ride – is nearby, and the resort itself has spectacular views, from Mont Blanc to Grand Combin.

Nearest town // Martigny

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