

# A WALK IN THE SKY

A narrow river valley which houses everything from rock climbing centers to pulsing bars and pubs and the peaks of the French Alps that explode thousands of feet into the sky. **Sathya Saran** finds the best way to see the wonders of Chamonix.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Mont Blanc mountaineers walking on a snowy ridge.

**T**HE SNOW GLISTENS LIKE HIDDEN DIAMONDS OUTSIDE THE WINDOW OF THE ROOM WE ARE COCOONED IN.

It rests lightly on the rooftops, and in tiny slashes on the roadside. Spring is almost here and winter will soon be a forgotten memory.

On the high slopes of Mont Blanc, the snow lies thicker. The mountain does indeed look like the top of an ice-cream cone, benign and friendly, despite the fact that it has been included among the world's deadliest

mountains. The lesser, rough granite peaks that stand sentinel around it seem more dangerous. Yet myth, mystery, tragedy and triumph have given Mont Blanc its iconic status. Besides, of course the fact that it is indeed Western Europe's highest peak. And one of the reasons Chamonix exists.

In the thick of summer, they say, 100,000 holiday makers throng the streets of this charming village. Most of them come to ride the cog railways or the cable car that takes them to the closest view of Mont Blanc, while others explore the range opposite, with its slopes, lakes, and scenic pastoral views.

But for now, Chamonix is quiet, with only a few winter tourists walking its streets. Nestling as it does in the palm of the valley that is walled in by ranges on either side, Chamonix looks much like a film set. Everything here—from the wooden houses to the quaint shops that sell souvenirs and sports goods, the clock tower and the statues—looks

impermanent and fragile. Give imagination full rein and even the jagged cliffs could well be sharply cut dark chocolate, and Mont Blanc indeed made of ice cream.

The reality is however, different. Many years ago a happy accident led to the discovery of the treasures the mountainscape had held secret for centuries. Since, Chamonix has been a tourist village, popular among mountain lovers and tourists across the world.

The list of famous visitors is impressive. Legend says Mary Shelley and PB Shelley holidayed in the region often and parts of the former's book *Frankenstein* were inspired by Mer du Glace.

Not that we need convincing. Since we arrived here, the heart has beaten just a bit faster. And the excitement has not abated.

Looking upwards, as we are wont to doing we almost miss the wall that we are walking past. It is just a few metres away from the impressive Grand Hôtel des Alpes that is our base camp. An amazing piece of work, the wall reflects the pride and achievement of the inhabitants of Chamonix.

Yet, even the proud French have to admit, that had it not been for two inquisitive, adventurous, chatty Englishmen, Chamonix might never have come into being.

The story of Chamonix begins in the 18th century when two English explorers set their eyes on the mountains that surrounded the

From left: The Church and La Maison de la Montagne near the town centre with the Brévent ski station in the background; three smiling skiers in helmets and goggles ride on the funicular. Opposite: Aiguille Du Midi overlooking the town.



FROM FAR LEFT: IAN DAGNALL/ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK. OPPOSITE: FRANCESCO GAVAZZENI/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE



The historic train, Mont-Blanc Express. **Opposite:** Grand Hôtel du Montenvers on Mer de Glace glacier.



DIDIER ZYLBERYNG/LAMY/INDIAPICTURE. OPPOSITE: HEMIS/LAMY

## POETS, CLIMBERS, MERCENARIES IN SEARCH OF WORK FOUND A PIED-À-TERRE IN CHAMONIX'S HOTELS

Lake Geneva valley. The year was 1741, and as the two men bravely climbed the steep slope leading up towards rough granite peaks, they stopped short at an unexpected sight.

Running through a rift in the mountainscape, shining in the sun like a river of silver, a glacier wound its lazy way down the valley. It shimmered and beckoned, so they took a closer look. To their delight, the explorers discovered the surface was not smooth as expected, but broken up in crevasses. More exciting was the fact that natural causes had created on the surface what looked like waves, frozen solid.

They returned to London, translating into countless tales told repeatedly to friends, and in publications, about the incredible 'Sea of Ice'.

Other explorers followed footsteps but it was several decades the next important exploration took place. Intrigued by the 'white molehill' that lay in the region, and seemed higher than all its surrounding mountains, Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, a scientist who hoped to conduct experiments on the mountain top instituted a prize for anyone who could reach the summit. And so it was that Chamonix-born, and Turin-educated Dr Michel-Gabriel Paccard along with another

local guide Jacques Balmat finally succeeded in summiting Mount Blanc in August, 1786. With no rope to keep them safe, and no axes to bite into the treacherous icy, it must have been a tough climb. However, the weather gods smiled at their attempt and kept snow at bay, even allowing the moon to shine down from an inky clear sky. Chamonix celebrates the pioneers with two statues placed prominently at the centre of the village.

Later, Dr Paccard recovered from snow blindness, but he did not attempt the mountain again. An year later, his friend Saussure's calculated the height of the mountain was at an estimated 4,775 metres. (The recorded height in 2010 was 4,810.75 metres).

Soon Mont Blanc attracted visitors and mountaineers from all over Europe. The tiny village became a meeting point of minds and aspirations. Poets, climbers, mercenaries in search of work found a pied-à-terre in Chamonix's hotels. All the early climbers are there in the wall in Chamonix.



Among them, the first woman to climb the mountain, in her voluminous skirt and bonnet, drawn with an expression of distaste. For reasons known only to history, Maria Paradis, a poor maid servant toiled her way to the top in 1808, with Jacques Balmat expertly showing her the way. Though breathless from altitude sickness at the summit and almost temporarily blinded, Paradis returned safely, and actually told her story with such eloquence as to be able to make a tidy fortune from it. Her immediate successor, Henriette d'Angeville who appeared more cheerful and robust amidst her guides as they released doves to celebrate the summiting in 1838. Henriette is often recognised as the first woman on Mont Blanc. (She climbed 21 peaks in all in her mountaineering career and retired when she turned 65). Her detailed portrait on the wall stands in bold, proud statement of her achievement. A few decades later, in 1876 British-born feminist Isabella Straton scaled the peak, counting it among her many successes in the Alps and Pyrenees ranges.

## THREE NIGHTS IN THE MOUNTAIN AIR AND OUR CHEEKS ARE PINK, EYES BRIGHTER

We however, are made of the same stuff. Neither weather nor opportunity permit us to consider the possibility of a climb. We settle quite happily for the two mesmeric tours: one up to the Mer de Glace and the other to the dizzying height of Aiguille du Midi.

The spire-like construction high on the rock face has been beckoning us from the moment we glimpsed it. At night it would shine its beacon on the village in a hypnotic way. But we defer our curiosity and rein in our eagerness to scale the height and opt to take the cog railway up to the Mer de Glace first.

The tram winds its way at an alarming angle, steady and moving with determination. Such must be the determination of those who brave the slopes and the vagaries of weather to summit a mountain. Below us the forests are snow touched; then the trees bend under their white burden as we gain height. I am not prepared at all for the sight that meets my eyes.

One last lurching turn and a river glistens curving its way down, and it is a river of ice!

From left: Luxurious suite at Grand Hotel de Alpes; a monument dedicated to the first and second climbers to reach the summit of Mont Blanc; a warm morning in the city.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: FILIPPO PONZETTI; SHUTTERSTOCK (2)

A glacier. I have seen glaciers up close before, in the Himalayas. But nothing quite like this. Usually, most of the glacier lies beyond sight. The Sea of Ice however was close enough to reach. It took my breath away by the purity of its white, the waves of ice that stood like tiny turrets on its surface, and its broad, river-like sweep through the mountains. As we watched, skiers from up the mountain came flying by, to stop short at its bank and lower themselves down to solid ground. The indomitable Les Drus looks down on the scene, a sharp straight rock mountain that immediately captures my heart.

A steep slope, bridged by 430 well laid out steps leads to the edge of the glacier and to an ice cave, and we descend slowly, to wander through a cave that men work to carve and maintain, ensuring a fresh approach each year, to keep pace with the glacier's movements. Coloured lights, ice sculptures and historical facts reward our labour.

A memorable lunch at the fine dining restaurant on top, the Grand Hôtel du Montanvers is made more memorable by the fact that poets and mountaineers have sat where we sit, and drunk in the same views and wines!

Quite on another scale is the cable car ride up to the Aiguille du Midi. The car is packed with skiers, who queue up to don their boots and skis to take the dizzying ride from the mountain top to Vallee Blanche and come to a stop at the Sea of Ice. To each his own: we are more than happy drinking in the 360 degree view of the Alps in its never-ending expanse. In the distance, I can see the Toblerone shape of the Matterhorn, and opposite it lies Italy. Mont Blanc itself spans

both countries, and a tunnel now makes it possible to drive under the great mountain from France to Italy—a view of infrastructure that seems to me disrespectful to the mountain, but a necessary part of development, I presume.

We take photos without a pause, then my inadequate, overawed phone gives up. Between us we have more than 500 shots, of which 15 are mine, including a few videos. Our fingers are threatening us with the dire consequences of being ungloved, but we are delirious! I almost feel a twinge of envy for those who work here and must visit the height every day—the guides and staff, even the men in hard hats working at maintenance and rebuilding the now closed, vertiginous transparent box that suspends you literally above the void!

The sight of intrepid climbers scaling up sharp needle-like granite peaks makes us want to take risks too. But we wisely choose to return.

Back at ground level, and we shop around for gifts. A cuckoo clock, a stuffed toy bag, tee shirts. And for a lark, a ride on the Luge which winds down from a respectable height, and a ride in the ski lift to complete our adventures.

Three nights in the mountain air and our cheeks are pink, eyes brighter.

A pale half moon watches us leave as the van takes us through the roads we have walked so often, crosses the rail tracks that the Mont Blanc Express (free for locals and visitors in the village) whistles along on, and follows us till Geneva.

I am sure the man on the moon quite knows how sad we are to leave this wonderful retreat where the mountains sing songs of joy. As Mont Blanc disappears from view, we shake hands, my friend and I, promising to return in summer. +

### T+L Guide

#### Getting there

Fly to Geneva by air and take the hour-long taxi ride from the airport to reach Chamonix. However, to avoid peak traffic times there are trains that operate from Geneva and Paris to Chamonix.

#### EAT

**La Caleche** is a quaint restaurant full of alpine memorabilia and serves excellent fondue along with other local dishes. It dates back to the 1940s.

To celebrate a special occasion, **Le Bistrot** is a wonderful choice. A Michelin star restaurant, the food is not only amazing but astoundingly affordable! Perhaps the easiest on the pocket of all Michelin restaurants. The **Restaurant de Pays la Maison Carrier** is a quiet place to have a wonderful and wholesome meal. A word of advice: Don't miss the desserts. And then of course there is **McDonalds!**