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Charmed by Chamonix: Sheer pleasure, hard skiing and high luxury in an Alpine icon

By [Belinda Archer](#).

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You can ski the famous Vallee Blanche until the end of the season — and you really should.

This year more than ever, as the French ski resort of Chamonix says snow conditions are the best they've been for 45 years.

But it is not for the faint-hearted. Ahead of me is a group of gnarled male Alpinists, bristling with scary-looking ice axes, crampons and giant, spaghetti-like coils of rope.



Downhill at a mighty dash: Chamonix offers plenty of terrain for the advanced skier

I have never felt so intimidated. Here the skiing is technical, the men are men and the mountains are king.

Chamonix grew up in the late 18th century as a mountaineering resort, and is now one of the most popular destinations for the advanced skier.

Forget Verbier; pah to Val d'Isere; Chamonix remains the *numero uno* destination for hardcore off-piste

adventure.

Thankfully, to counter all this hairy Alpine stuff, the resort has a swathe of chic eateries, slinky bars and super-deluxe accommodation.

I am staying in deep indulgence at Chalet Amazon Creek, complete with every imaginable creature comfort.

Outdoor hot tub with view? Of course. Sauna? Naturally. Cinema room with squishy sofas and state-of-the-art surround sound? Absolutely - as well as stunning reclaimed timber interiors and lush throws, fabulous food and top wine served by the attentive staff.

My descent of the Vallee Blanche is a spectacular affair. This giant off-piste glacial itinerary is a 17km run, taking in some of the most breathtakingly dramatic terrain.

There are vast, untracked fields of pillowy snow, crevasses and giant, broken-up chunks of marbled, blue-green ice. I take so many photographs that I nearly fall down one of the huge holes.



© Chamonix Tourist Office

All in white: The Vallee Blanche offers 17 dazzling kilometres of season-round glacier skiing

At the end of the journey, exhausted and dishevelled, I lunch at La Cabane des Praz, a smart destination restaurant with magical views of the surrounding mountains. The sun is out, the sky a startling blue and I feast on steak and chips washed down with plenty of rosé.

Back at the chalet, a restorative massage is laid on for me in the treatment room, before a champagne-fuelled soak in the hot tub. I begin to find myself getting rather used to all this luxury.

Not for long. Besides the skiing, I am told that another spectacular thing to do is a heli-tour of Mont Blanc massif, so the next morning I meet Pascal Brun of Chamonix Mont-Blanc Helicopters.

I'm not relishing the prospect of swooping at speed around this jagged terrain, but Pascal is reassuringly professional.

We pass just feet above the Argentiere glacier, squeeze through a gap between the teeth of the Grandes Jorasses and speed towards the snowy dome of the highest mountain in the Alps, glittering in the sunlight.

'You have now set foot on Mont Blanc,' he says, as the chopper settles for a moment on the peak, at a dizzy 4,810m.

Chamonix is no ordinary ski resort. It is about drama, adventure and extraordinary mountain experiences.

The resort offers heaps of skiing, of course, as well as all the scarier stuff.

In fact, it is made up of several ski areas — Balme, Brevent-Flegere, Houches and Grands Montets — with each offering a different kind and level of skiing. The Grands Montets area is the most challenging, with a vast array of off-piste terrain.

My heli-tour finishes there. I duly throw myself down some energetic black runs. Accompanying me is Mark de Rosenwerth, a ski instructor who used to train the British Army and the SAS.

He also co-runs a specialist ski company called White Blancmange with his wife Gerry. They organise anything from white stretch Hummer limousines to pick up clients from the airport to laying on one of only two female British mountain guides to take you down the Vallee Blanche.

If it's good enough for the SAS, it's good enough for me.



Bliss at the bottom: Despite the toughness of the skiing, there is distinct prettiness to Le Brevent

Mark gives me some much-needed tips as we descend the more technical runs. On the last day I decide to take it easier and whizz around the magnificent slopes of Brevent, on the opposite side of the valley from Mont Blanc.

Once again the sun is beating down on corduroy pistes groomed to perfection. I could not wish for a more idyllic setting.

Cheeky apres-ski is indulged in at Chambre Neuf, which serves up toffee vodkas with alarming regularity, before I head home, refreshed, bronzed and armed with unforgettable memories.

Travel Facts

White Blancmange (02032 392244, www.whiteblancmange.com) offers one week at Chalet Amazon Creek in Chamonix from £2,136 per person, based on ten sharing. All activities are extra.

Ski passes are available through www.compagniedumontblanc.fr, and ski hire can be arranged with Sanglard Chamonix (www.rentski.com).

Flights from London Heathrow to Geneva with SWISS International, from £106 return (0845 601 0956, www.swiss.com).

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