

# Travel

CHAMONIX AND EVIAN, FRANCE

by Joe Walker



Reporter Jo Walker (centre) on the ridge of the Aiguille De Midi mountain

## CHAMONIX

**Where to stay** - 3\* Hotel Bar Bistro Pointe Isabelle. Summer prices start from €139 per room per night (double room) B&B - half board: €32 per person. [www.pointeisabelle.com](http://www.pointeisabelle.com)

**What to do** - Aiguille du Midi. Return cable car ticket to the Aiguille du Midi is €57 for adults, €48.50 for children aged four to 15. [www.compagniedumontblanc.fr](http://www.compagniedumontblanc.fr)

**Mountain guides** - About €400 for the day for two people. [www.chamonix-guides.com](http://www.chamonix-guides.com) Guided tour €10 per person (visits are organised once a week). Spa Heliopic 45-minute massage and lunch for €72. [www.heliopic-hotel-spa.com](http://www.heliopic-hotel-spa.com)

**Where to eat** - Aperitif at 5\* Hotel Albert 1er. [www.hameualbert.fr](http://www.hameualbert.fr) Dinner at La Maison Carrier. Three-course menu starts at €31. [www.hameualbert.fr/fr/restaurant-de-pays-la-maison-carrier](http://www.hameualbert.fr/fr/restaurant-de-pays-la-maison-carrier)

# Tackling the Alps in Primark sunglasses

A chilling wind thunders against my reddened face as I take another step along the icy ridge, a blanket of white surrounding me and a 1,200-metre drop barely three feet to my right.

With each snow-crunching step along the plunging arête, I convince myself I'm the Robert Scott of Kent, risking life and limb to further mankind.

But, while Captain Scott spent three months braving the harsh conditions of the Antarctic, it's a mere 10 minutes before I'm back in the safety of the ice cave at the top of the 3,842-metre Aiguille De Midi mountain in the French Alps.

Despite my slightly less revolutionary achievement, it's safe to say the great explorer wasn't wearing a pair of £1 Primark sunglasses and a wafer-thin golf jacket when he descended on the South Pole.

I'm even sporting some fetching yellow gloves kindly lent to me by our guide, Jacques Mottin, of the Chamonix Guides' Association.

The fact they're more suited to pruning begonias than warming my numbing fingers hasn't escaped the smiling mountaineer, who laughs: "I didn't know what size your hands would be, so I just brought the biggest gloves I own."

We found ourselves out on the ridge, in the shadow of the phenomenal Mont Blanc peak, after our plans to take the gondola cable car across to the Italian side of the range had been scuppered by the weather.

And my brief escapade up and down the sharp descent is more



A mirror-like pool of lake in the Mont Blanc massif and, right, flowers bloom amid a backdrop of mountains in sun-kissed Chamonix

than enough for me, as I fight to restore the feeling to my nose.

It returns as we descend back down the mountain on a cable car, stopping in what feels like a tropical suntrap in comparison.

We hike among the granite rocks, resting at a mirror-like lake which beckons its discoverers to jump in.

I decline to take a dip, but cheer as two young American tourists plunge into the ice-cold water, surfacing with a sharp intake of breath and a comical yelp as they quickly reach for their towels.

On a sheer rock face in the distance, Jacques points out two tiny specks of red.

"They're climbers," he says.

No, they're insane, I think, questioning why anyone would choose to risk life and limb on a Saturday afternoon.

But the area is full of such people. Perrine Maillet - the director at

the two-Michelin star Le Hameau Albert 1er - is one of them.

As we tuck into some fine cuisine as night falls on Chamonix, she shows us a book of recipes, on its cover a table laid out for dinner on the top of Mont Blanc.

"I carried that table on my back to the peak," she says.

I laugh, but she isn't joking. She's just another example of the phenomenal breed of adventure-seekers in this part of the world.

This year marks 150 years since the Golden Age of Alpinism, when many of the peaks in the Alps were still unconquered.

It was when mountaineering became a passion, a sport - when mountains were scaled by showmen instead of scientists.

And despite my brief taste, I understand why.

Gazing up at the snow-covered peaks from the warmth of sun-kissed Chamonix, I get a sense of what those men and women



endured to achieve what no one had before.

No GPS, no weather-watching technology and no weightless climbing gear. They did it the hard way, the real way, and with not a pair of Primark sunglasses in sight.

Things are slightly more relaxed, bordering on horizontal, in Evian, just a 90-minute drive away.

This spa town, world famous for the mineral water which bears its name, sits on the southern banks of Lake Geneva and has the sleepest of feels.

But I get a welcome workout as we stroll along the promenade before making our way to a fountain gushing from a hillside.

Its water comes from the spring that produces every bottle of Evian in the world, emerging from a tunnel at the foot of the mountain a staggering 15 years

after it falls from the clouds.

I fill my bottle and take a sip. It tastes like water, unsurprisingly.

We stop for a quick buffet lunch at the Evian Resort Golf Club, where I fill my face and stare longingly at the course's lush green fairways and immaculate greens.

But it's not long before I get my

fix of sport as we enjoy a spot of kayaking on the warm(ish) waters of Lake Geneva.

We're later given a tour of the Royal Hotel, which first opened in 1909 and has long been a destination for royalty the world over.

In 2013, a complete refurbishment of the hotel began, and we're given a glimpse of its new exclusive suites before its grand opening this month.

With prices starting at €600 a night and rising to €4,000, it's no Premier Inn.

But not to be outdone is the Hotel Hermitage, perched high above the town and just a short ride away on the funicular railway - a tram-like wooden train that taxis guests to the hotel door.

As the carriages rise, so does the level of opulence, and I feel a little out of place. One night in my suite costs more than my mortgage, but this is a place for the finer things in life.

I sip on a cold lager as I look out over Lake Geneva, the light of the moon bouncing off its surface. If Carlsberg made beer gardens, they'd do well to beat this.

## EVIAN

**Where to stay** - Hotel Ermitage, from €296 for a double B&B. The Royal Evian, €600 to €4,000 per night. [www.evianresort.com](http://www.evianresort.com)

**What to do** - Kayaking, €8 per hour to hire a kayak. [www.mjcevia.com](http://www.mjcevia.com)

**Where to eat** - Le Chalet du Golf, buffet lunch (starters,

cheeses, desserts) €27 per person. [www.evianresort.com/fr/restaurant-chalet-golf-evian.php](http://www.evianresort.com/fr/restaurant-chalet-golf-evian.php). La Verniaz, Hotel restaurant La Verniza, [www.verniaz.com](http://www.verniaz.com)

**With thanks to** [www.savoie-mont-blanc.com](http://www.savoie-mont-blanc.com) [www.chamonix.com](http://www.chamonix.com) [www.evian-tourisme.com](http://www.evian-tourisme.com)