

Travel | FRANCE

I am stepping into the void – shuffling like a penguin into a suspended glass cube that juts out from the main building and allows intrepid visitors to gaze at the magnificent French Alps, 1,000 metres under their feet, through the glass floor. Through the glass below my feet, I look at fields of soft snow, deep crevasses and giant, broken-up chunks of ice. I walk slowly outside, drawing my jacket closer around me as its cold and windy and the boardwalks are slippery. The wonderful panorama around me is surreal; I see intrepid skiers getting ready to whizz down a sea of snow.

The Chamonix area was first settled by monks in the 13th century. The scenic splendor of Chamonix was largely a local secret until 1741, when two young Englishmen on a Grand Tour of Europe “discovered” the tiny Alpine village.

“Very soon the locals gave up grazing their goats and put their energies into starting inns and providing mules and sedan chairs to transport tourists up the mountain. Hunters turned into guides. The myths about dragons disappeared, and soon there was a steady stream of summer explorers,” explains my sprightly guide Bernadette, with a twinkle in her eyes.

I also hear about Albert Smith, who was another person responsible for Chamonix’s popularity as a resort. After a famous ascent in 1851, while carrying gourmet food, he celebrated by running a show about it in London’s Piccadilly called *The Ascent of Mont Blanc*. His popular show ran for six years; he even performed it for Queen Victoria and created a Mont Blanc-themed board game! From then on, Chamonix-Mont-Blanc became the place to visit for British residents on the lookout for an active summer vacation.

Today the old priory is the iconic Mountain guide centre. “The Chamonix Guides Company, established in 1821, is the oldest and largest guides association in the world,” explains Bernadette. There are more than 200 mountain guides here who have world-class training and knowledge. I meet Jean-Claude Charlet, the present president of the organisation and he says to me: “Our lives revolve around the mountains... they are full of mystique and excitement – you can feel their soul. International climbers visit Chamonix in order to train as professional guides by taking the rigorous and testing course, which eventually enables them to become a member of the highly-respected Guides Company.”

Most people head here to get a close look at Mont Blanc. For lazy people like me, there is a superb trip on the cable

## AMID THE SPLENDOR OF THE FRENCH ALPS, KALPANA SUNDER DISCOVERS THE MAGIC THAT HAS MADE CHAMONIX A MUST-VISIT FOR TRAVELLERS







# Frozen in time

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car takes two legs: first we hurtle across to the *Plan de l'Aiguille* from where daring para-gliders launch themselves over the valley, and the second takes us across the *Des Pelerins* glacier and rises up the north face of the *Aiguille du Midi*. I get out of the cable car and take the footbridge to the Central Piton terrace for spectacular views of the peaks of the Mont Blanc Massif. *L'espace vertical* (The Vertical Space), a cave-like room, gives me an insight into mountain-climbing in the Alps; I discover climbing equipment such as crampons, ice axes and skis, used by famous alpinists. Down below I watch enthusiastic and intensely-athletic skiers descend with their skis or snowshoes to discover the area.

Back in town, I love an old mansion now called *La Maison des Artistes* located in the small park behind the casino, which is now a place for creativity in all its forms, such as art, music and literature. It was last lived in by Maurice Herzog, who was mayor of Chamonix in 1968. His family sold the house to the Chamonix council in 2000 and it fell into disrepair. After an extensive renovation, the building now has a jazz bar and also functions as a cultural meeting point. André



## HOW TO GET THERE

Geneva Cointrin is the nearest airport to Chamonix; you can get there flying via Emirates or Etihad Airways.

Manoukian is the man behind this renovation — and also the brains behind the annual jazz festival held here.

I visit the Hotel Point Isabelle, which has been opened recently after renovation and redesign by a Swedish hospitality design company. The hotel is named after Isabella Straton, a British woman who, in 1875, made the first winter ascent of Mont Blanc. I love the wallpaper with motifs of skis, crampons and the mountains, and the décor that mixes modern pieces with retro elements like tables fashioned from stacked vintage leather suitcases. I also discover history and art in the most improbable places. Cécile, from the local tourism board, takes me to a sports store, where during renovation they discovered exquisite wall frescoes of people climbing the mountains and chamois on slopes. I am struck by the stark contrast between that old art and the smart sports jackets that line the racks. Another exquisite ceiling is now part of a beauty salon and I peek into its interiors with wonder; they were palace hotels in the yesteryears.

Two distinctive statues form the centrepiece of the town. One is a dramatic one: two men, one of them pointing to





**SIGHTS & SOUNDS:** ① The magnificent Aiguille du Midi ② The statue of Horace-Bénédict de Saussure ③ Two floors of entertainment at Cafe La Terrasse ④ La Maison des Artistes, for all jazz lovers ⑤ & ⑥ Breathtaking art works on buildings' facades ⑦ Enjoy a leisurely horse-drawn ride across town

eers who developed artistic skills to illustrate their expeditions, at a time when photography was cumbersome.

Even the restaurants that I dined in have reference to the mountains and climbing. I dined at the swish Italian restaurant *L'Impossible* named after the "skier of the impossible", Swiss-born Sylvain Saudan – considered one of the fathers of extreme skiing. He has 18 of the world's most difficult ski descents to his name, including Alaska's Mount McKinley, Mont Blanc in the French Alps and Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest peak in Africa. I have dinner at another new restaurant called *Le Télécabine*, where the whole theme is skiing and cable cars; a couple can even book a refurbished cable car parked inside the restaurant, for an intimate candlelit dinner. By the end of my trip to Chamonix, I can't help but think that the mountains have cast their spell on me. **W**

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Mont Blanc with an outstretched arm. The single figure statue is of Dr Paccard. Horace-Bénédict de Saussure was an 18th-century scientist who offered a monetary prize in 1760 to the first person to get to the top of Mont Blanc. On August 8, 1786, the reward was claimed by two local men – Jacques Balmat, a hunter and crystal collector, and Dr Michel Gabriel Paccard, a doctor. A bronze statue was erected in the town's main square in 1887 to commemorate the centenary of the first ascent. Why was Dr Paccard left alone in another statue... Bernadette reads my thoughts and explains: "The original ascent of Mont Blanc was misreported after it occurred because Marc-Theodore Bourrit, another Alpine traveller who had failed to find a route to the summit, was jealous and downgraded the role Paccard played in the historic feat." It was only later that people made amends by erecting his statue.

But the real discovery I make is the Alpine Museum, lodged in a palatial building. This is the place to head to in Chamonix if you want to discover it through the eyes of the first pioneers. I discover how difficult it was to actually survey the mountains those days and how topographers did that with their own photographs. I love the exhibition of mountaineering heritage, and discover fine Alpine-art landscapes not only from the Alps, but also the Himalayas, the Caucasus and other places, painted by talented 19th-century artists ranging from oils and watercolours to lithographs. I am fascinated by the gargantuan works of artist Gabriel Loppé – high-mountain scenery in a very large format. I also find it amazing that though some artists were professionals, such as Edward T. Compton and Loppé, others were just passionate mountain-



**LOCAL FAVOURITES:** ⑧ Pasta – of all shapes, sizes and fillings – to fill you up ⑨ Sweets to cap off a good meal