

TRAVEL
FEATURE

FOLLOWING IN THE INTREPID FOOTSTEPS OF THE VICTORIANS WHO FIRST CONQUERED MONT BLANC, THOMAS HAWKINS DONS HIS CRAMPONS ... AND CLIMBS

Don't look down

IN 1851, an English man called Albert Smith arrived in the Chamonix valley. The son of a surgeon, Smith had studied medicine and had himself started a career as a doctor but was moving away from that line of work to satisfy his desire for adventure.

Smith had travelled widely and came to the Alps to realise a long-held dream of reaching the summit of Mont Blanc, at 4810 metres, western Europe's highest mountain.

Smith was by no means the first to conquer the peak. That honour fell to two local Savoyard men, Chamonix doctor Michel-Gabriel Paccard and his guide Jacques Balmat in 1786. The 40 or so men and women who had reached the summit in the years between that first successful ascent and Smith arriving to Chamonix had done so variously for scientific or monetary reasons. What made Smith stand out, then, was not his climbing prowess, but his showmanship, his flamboyance. A shameless self-promoter and an entertainer, Smith had decided to risk life and limb on the high passes above Chamonix for the thrill and, no doubt, the fame.

He was also fat. Too fat to undertake such a dangerous challenge, according to Jean Tairraz, the chief mountain guide Smith had employed for the task. Undeterred, Smith paid a small army of guides and porters to shepherd him to the top. He needed them, too. The extravagant inventory of what he insisted upon taking included 91 bottles of wine, three bottles of cognac, 20 loaves, four legs and four shoulders of mutton, six cuts of veal, one of beef and 46 fowl. Despite all this, Smith made it to the summit and arrived back

in Chamonix to a triumphant welcome, complete with a band, cheering crowds and artillery fire.

What he did next, however, would help shape the course of Alpine history. Returning to London, Smith opened a show called The Ascent Of Mont Blanc at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, in which he recounted his perilous adventure. Complete with magic and painted backdrops, the show was seen by an estimated 800,000 people and created a mountaineering mania among Victorian Britons.

Smith had effectively kick-started what is now known as the golden age of Alpinism, when mountaineers, mainly from Britain and Ireland but also Italian, Swiss and Austrian, pushed the boundaries of what was possible in the thin Alpine air.

By 1860, the race to reach the highest peaks in the Alps had accelerated. The summits of 23 of the mountains were conquered in the period between 1860 and 1865. Men like English mountaineer and engraver Edward Whymper, legendary Chamonix guide Michel Croz and Christian Almer from Grindewald in Switzerland etched their names in history as they opened up increasingly arduous routes and tamed the most dangerous peaks.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – it is easily the most over-used of French clichés, but nothing could be more appropriate for describing Chamonix today, 150 years after the golden age of Alpinism reached its height.

Technology and convenience have transformed the valley – now a cable car ferries tourists to a restaurant at the top of Aiguille du Midi, a 3,842-metre peak in the Mont Blanc massif – but even here among the café au lait and croques monsieur, there are signs of people living on the edge. Climbers test themselves on the unforgiving granite, paragliders leap into the abyss just feet from the cable car station, and the truly daring slip into wingsuits and hurtle down the cliff.

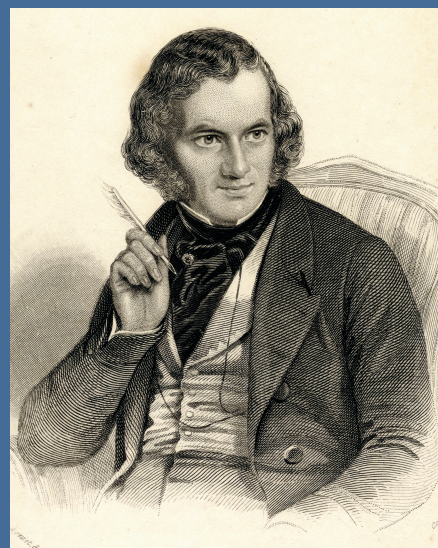
The spirit and showmanship of those golden age Alpinists is in evidence too. Jacques Mottin, our guide from the Chamonix Guides' Association, has spent his professional life clinging to the side of a mountain, but he is no wallflower.

He gives my skinny green golf trousers and bobble hat a once-over and laughs. “You look like the perfect British tourist, dressed like that,” he says before squeezing his wiry frame past the turnstile as we step onto the cable car. As we make the vertigo-inducing journey to the first station, Jacques rolls his eyes and lets out a mischievous chuckle when a Japanese couple seem more interested in the height of one lanky journalist (me) than the gargantuan mountain range towering above us. “How tall?” asks the husband, no more than 5ft himself. “4,800-something,” I say, clearly misunderstanding the question.

“Touristes, huh,” laughs Jacques, his glacier-blue eyes winking good-naturedly.

JACQUES takes us for a short hike up the mountain. We pick our way through the granite and compacted earth of the lower slopes to a small pool of icy water. “Are you getting in?” he jokes.

Just then, Jacques points to the wall of granite high above us. “You see that red dot?” he asks, picking out a speck halfway up the enormous vertical mass. It takes me a few seconds to locate it. “Yes, I see it,” I say, trying to figure out what it is, some sort of marker or a flag perhaps. “What is it?” I ask him. Jacques laughs, deep and loud. “Of course, it is a climber.” My mind goes out of focus, comes back in. It is only then I start to understand the epic scale in front of me. This speck is a person, clinging to the rock face, thousands of feet in the air. “Look up and to the left,” says Jacques. “You can see his friend.” I stare at the two climbers for some time. They don't move the



Above: Alpine pioneer Albert Smith
Below: The Aiguille du Midi with Mont Blanc in the background. Left: The author on the Vallée Blanche ridge
Photograph: Joelle Bozon & Michael Cranmer

CHAMONIX FACTBOX

3-star *Hotel Bar Bistro Pointe Isabelle*.

Prices from €139 per night (double room) B&B. <http://pointeisabelle.com>

Return ticket to the Aiguille du Midi is €57 for adult. www.compagniedumontblanc.fr

Mountain guides cost around

€400 per day for two people.

www.chamonix-guides.com

Chamonix guided tour, €10per person

Dinner at La Maison Carrier starts

at €31 for three-course menu.

www.hameaualbert.fr

For information and exhibits on the

history of alpinism visit the Musée de

Chamonix [www.chamonix.com/musee-](http://www.chamonix.com/musee-alpin,49-187321,en.html)

[alpin,49-187321,en.html](http://www.chamonix.com/musee-alpin,49-187321,en.html)

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www.chamonix.com;

www.evian-tourisme.com

whole time, as far as I can tell. “What happens if you decide that you cannot continue?” I ask. Jacques just laughs again. I shudder at the thought.

We return to the cable car and continue up to the top of Aiguille du Midi, which translates literally to “needle of the south”. From here, the summit of Mont Blanc stands majestically just a short distance away. Pretty soon, however, the weather shifts. Clouds, snow and wind drive in and our plans to take the cable car across to the Italian side of the Mont Blanc range are swept away.

“I will give you a taste of the ridge instead,” says Jacques nonchalantly.

The ridge is in fact a snow and ice arête that dives steeply out of an ice cave from the top of Aiguille du Midi. With no rope rail and very little snow build-up to broaden the path, the ridge is at most four feet across, dropping off into a 1200-metre void to the Vallée Blanche below.

We clip crampons onto our walking boots and step out into howling wind, snow and freezing temperatures. I quickly inspect my gloves and realise that thumbless handwear was definitely not a wise option.

After about 50 feet of sharp descent, a party of climbers emerges from the blizzard, coming the other way. “Step to the right,” Jacques, who is connected to me by rope, calls from behind. “There is no right,” I think to myself but I shuffle over a few inches. “That’s enough,” he says, to my relief. We carry on. Every 10 steps or so, I shout, “aller?”, praying that Jacques will understand my unease and start back for the cave. “Allez,” comes the response.

Mercifully, Jacques eventually shouts that it is time to return to the shelter of the ice cave. The whole experience lasts minutes but gives me a newfound respect for those pioneers of mountaineering, who had to endure a

minimum of two days on the mountain to reach the summit of Mont Blanc. Those treks included an overnight stay out in the freezing cold before a hut was built at the Grands Mulet rocks in 1853, the result of an influx of interest and money in the area created by Smith’s show. Incidentally, today the record for the fastest ascent and descent of Mont Blanc is held by a prodigious young Catalanian called Kilian Jornet. His time is a mind-bending four hours and 57 minutes.

Back down in the warm late-afternoon sun of Chamonix, we are invited for dinner at the two-Michelin-star Le Hameau Albert 1er by Perrine Maillet, nee Carrier, of the locally renowned Carrier family. The director at the chocolate-box restaurant and hotel resort is no stranger to climbing herself.

“This photograph,” she says pointing to a coffee table book of recipes produced by her father, Pierre Carrier, and her husband and current head chef, Pierre Maillet. The cover is of a table set for dinner perched right on the summit of Mont Blanc. “We carried everything to the top.” She leafs through the book until she finds the page. “Here, you can see me with the table,” she says, her finger resting on a picture of herself with the broad tabletop strapped to her back. “It was only a lightweight one,” she adds, clearly registering my shock.

The stated aim at Albert 1er, and La Maison Carrier where we retire to have dinner, is to combine haute cuisine with haute mountains and as we sit back in our chairs for a private performance by virtuoso pianist Samir Hodzic, the contented faces around the table indicate that they have hit their mark.

I think Albert Smith and those Alpine pioneers of the golden age would have approved.