

# Mountain MAN

*Which nationalities have the best equipment? What's the most adventurous thing to do with a family? How tough is the training? Jean-Marie Olianti, an experienced Chamonix mountain guide for over 30 years, explains the attraction of Europe's finest outdoor playground ▶▶▶▶*

**Safety first:** as a mountain guide, Jean-Marie Olianti must strike a balance between providing clients with a fun challenge and ensuring their safety



### How much training have you had to reach your professional level?

The training itself takes at least five years, but before this you have to pass certain criteria and tests—there is huge competition just to be accepted for the training—these days there are 50 places per year in France and about 200 try.

Before you can even be accepted on the training programme, you have to be an incredibly able and experienced climber and skier worldwide. At the end of the training, you are a “guide aspirant” for two to five years (during this time you may have to have a fully qualified guide to escort you on certain trips) and then you have the final exam to get the diploma and you can be part of a guiding body, a member of the Union Internationale d’Haute Montagne. As a guide you have to measure someone in the first 10 minutes—physically and psychologically. I was first accepted by the Compagnie des Guides in 1978. This body is the oldest (founded in 1821) and most prestigious guiding company in the world with about 200 current members.

### Is it a difficult process?

Very. Lots of skiers have no idea how much training and experience a guide has to have. They’re taking their clients’ lives in their hands. They have to understand the weather and people’s technical and mental ability with a fine balance between providing adventure plus the right level of security. As part of a guide’s training they spend a week in the



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**Peak performance:**  
Jean-Marie Olianti has honed his guiding skills in a variety of settings around the world



*« I’ve skied with prime ministers, doctors, plumbers and bankers—the mountains are great levellers »*

“École Nationale de Ski et d’Alpinisme”, where all the ski instructors, ski patrols and guides of France train. This is in Chamonix, the mecca of mountaineering.

### How does your role as guide change from the winter months into the spring ones?

The emphasis between skiing and climbing changes, although even in winter there is climbing on the ice-falls. There’s a great time right now, at the end of the winter, when there’s spring snow. It’s warmer, but with some wonderful fresh snowfalls. It’s the time for ski touring and amazing trips like Chamonix to Zermatt, where you disappear away from the ski resorts into the land of mountain refuges and huts in the middle of nowhere. Then in the summer there is climbing, rock and ice hiking. Also, guides take clients on trips outside France. I’ve guided trips to Kilimanjaro and Aconcagua. Others take clients to Everest and the Himalayas.

I’ve skied with prime ministers, politicians, doctors, captains of industry,

plumbers and bankers—the mountains are great levellers, they create an amazing camaraderie and passion between nationalities. I had a call from the Vatican once when the Pope wanted to climb Mont Blanc!

### Are you finding that visitors to Chamonix are getting more adventurous?

Yes, as their ability rises. This also means there are more people in the mountains and an increase in the number of mountain rescues. The PGHM (mountain police rescue) do an amazing job and often risk their lives in the course of their job. There are also more people now who call up the helicopter just if they have a sore finger! The mountains are becoming more accessible and equipment is so good now that more people are in the mountains and doing things they really should have a guide for, but they don’t realise this. There have been many times on the mountain when I have helped groups without a guide—it’s my job, even though they may not be my clients. ▶▶▶



▶▶▶ **If you could recommend just three things to do in the Chamonix area, what would they be?**

Ski the Vallée Blanche, a 24km off-piste run down the Mer de Glace, ski on the Grands Montets (maybe the Pas de Chèvre) and climb Mont Blanc.

**If a family with two young children wanted to do something adventurous, what would you recommend?**

Take a guide for a few days and do a bit of everything. In the summer, you can go hiking, climbing and canyoning.

In the winter, it really depends on your ski level, but with a guide you can set your own programme. You can also

« *The Nordics are good—they're used to being in the mountains, they have lots of experience* »

go snowshoeing on the Mer de Glace, sledging at night, or indoor climbing. There are some great little restaurants you can reach in the mountains, like the Ferme de Tornieux, which you can hike or skidoo up to and then sledge back down with a full tummy.

**Do the guides get together and gossip about the silliest questions asked of them?**

Oh yes. We talk about them like a doctor talks about clients—you might have had someone who wants to ski the Vallée Blanche and doesn't know how to ski—but they wait to tell you this at the bottom of the ridge. So you have to take them all the way back up the ridge. The guide has to find a solution, that's his job.

**Is there a marked difference between different nationalities of visitors and what they want from a guide?**

The British and Japanese listen. The Nordics are good—they're used to being in the mountains, they have lots of experience.

**Which nationality of visitors have the best equipment?**

Nordic and British have good equipment. The Japanese too—they're so well organised—doesn't mean they can ski, though!

Visit [www.chamonix.com](http://www.chamonix.com) for the area, [www.chamonix-guides.com](http://www.chamonix-guides.com) for guides and [www.collineige.com](http://www.collineige.com) for accommodation



The sky's the limit: clockwise from left, groups that hire a guide can set their own programme; winter activities include ice climbing; Jean-Marie Olianti is in his element in the mountains