

# LIFE & STYLE TRAVEL



## Summer in Chamonix: celebrating 150 years of climbing in the Alps



### NEED TO KNOW:

#### Where to stay

Eating out in Chamonix is pretty pricey and, with so many Michelin-starred options, restaurants can get booked up. One of the best options is to stay in a chalet rather than a hotel. **Collineige** offers both catered and non-catered summer chalets for groups of 2-18 people, and all are within easy reach of the town itself. Renting a four person chalet costs around £350 per person for a week. For more rates and reservations, visit [collineige.com](http://collineige.com).

#### How to get there

The easiest way used to be to fly direct to Geneva from London, followed by an hour's taxi journey across the border from Switzerland to south-east France. But for around the same price you can catch the new **Eurostar** route that takes you from Kings Cross St Pancras to Geneva train station, with a stop in Lille from £137 return. Visit [eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com) for more rates and bookings.

What happens in Chamonix when the snow disappears and the skiers go home? Sarah Spickernell finds out

**B**irthplace of the Winter Olympics and home to some of the Alps' most challenging pistes, the Chamonix Valley in France is a magnet for snow-sporting types throughout the winter months.

But as the warmer weather arrives and the snow disappears, so do most of the tourists, and the thousands of skiers are replaced by a trickle of mountaineering enthusiasts keen to reach the top of Mont Blanc – Europe's highest mountain west of Russia.

This was not always the case. Long before skiing was introduced, fashionable and wealthy Britons flocked to the valley to test their climbing and glacier-walking skills all year round. In fact, at least 34 of the first Mont Blanc massif ascents were made by people from the UK in the 1800s, clearly unafraid of the dragons locals claimed roamed the mountains at the time.

In celebration of the valley's mountaineering heritage, there will be a huge festival in Chamonix this summer, bringing life to the area from June to September. Summer visitors will be able to see one-off art and photography exhibitions, watch plays and films depicting tales of the first climbs, and try out the many Michelin-starred restaurants.

Two main events will be the Alpine Museum's display of artefacts from the first mountaineering days, including paintings by British artist Edward Compton, and a photography exhibition showing how the region's landscape has evolved since the first ascents.

The town itself is pleasant enough to



Above: Mont Blanc looming over the town of Chamonix in the summer

walk around, but you don't travel to Chamonix for the architecture. Tucked into the Rhone-Alps region of south-east France, it is right in the heart of one of Europe's most picturesque landscapes, with walks, fishing, mountain biking, and mountain climbing on its doorstep.

The stroll to Vallorcine, a nearby town also involved in the summer festivities, is perfect for those looking to enjoy spectacular views without having to haul yourself up a mountain. During a 20 minute train ride through Alpine woodland, you'll find yourself surrounded by huge waterfalls, forests, mountain goats and picture postcard villages. The most popular restaurant, Café Comptoir, serves modern European fare and does out portions fit for an Olympic skier.

The only time you may have to get your snow shoes out will be when venturing further afield on the Mont Blanc Express, which will take you to a more challenging walk halfway up Mont Blanc itself. After only 10 minutes of uphill struggle, Chamonix will look like a tiny speck down below, surrounded by dramatic mountain peaks and vertigo-

Alpine legend Mark Twight once described Chamonix as the "death sport capital of the world"



Not a climber? Take the tramway up Mont Blanc

inducing descents. Further on, you'll even pass the start of the first ever Winter Olympic ski run. Not bad, for stroll that's 20 minutes in total.

But if all the gentle walking and generous portions leave you feeling a bit sluggish, it's easy to take the activity up a notch. Chamonix is a playground for thrill seekers, after all, which was once described by Alpine legend Mark Twight as the "death sport capital of the world" because of its steep slopes and difficult climbs. Every mountain sport is on offer here, from climbing and canoeing to more unusual activities such as ice climbing and wingsuit flying.

For those who like their thrills relatively risk-free, there is also a new "step into the void" structure close to Chamonix – a 2.5m long glass cage suspended over a 1,000m drop into the abyss, which you can reach using the *Aiguille du Midi* cable car.

Whether it's great food, scenic walks or thrills at high altitude, Chamonix has it all, come snow or shine.