

France

Would you ski down this slope — after midnight?

Skiing the Vallée Blanche is special, but doing it late at night under a starry sky is mindblowing, says **Nick Dalton**

I am skiing one of the great runs of the world, the 14-mile off-piste glacier delight of the Vallée Blanche, in Chamonix. And, if I say so myself, I'm making rather neat turns — I can see it from my shadow. It's an eerie feeling as my mirror image is cast by the full moon that also illuminates the snowy ridges to either side with an understated brilliance. Skiing the Vallée Blanche may be special, but doing it late at night under a clear, starry sky is mindblowing.

My group, led by the veteran mountain guide Jean-Marie Olianti, sweeps silently, like a commando unit in a war film, across the Mer de Glace, our head-mounted lamps dancing across the otherworldly scenery. Looking back I can see another cluster of lights in the distance as, despite the grandeur and silence, we are not alone.

It is a bit like skiing in a whiteout, when you have to keep your knees bent to avoid sudden shocks; but skiing in a blackout goes on for far longer. There's a lot that the moon can't illuminate and there's always the possibility of losing concentration and taking a fall while staring open-mouthed at the blue blocks of tumbledown ice that rear up when you least expect them.

We're in terrain that's not so much demanding as scarily unpredictable. So used are people here to serious skiing that no one even thinks to tell me that wearing goggles isn't a good thing at night. It's only after a short period of sheer terror as we set off from Refuge du Requin, sideslipping along a gnarly path, that it occurs to me to lift my goggles. It's a revelation.

The French can get worked up about many things — try wearing baggy trunks in one of their swimming pools — but they don't blink when it comes to letting unaccompanied skiers loose here after dark. For all its unassuming sweeps of flat terrain, these are in many places merely a "snow bridge" covering chasms in the age-old ice. This is a lethal place and Olianti still goes white when he tells the tale of a particularly cocky Russian who refused to stick to the chosen path and was later found dead at the bottom of a crevasse.

You do what you're told here — your life depends on it. It's easy to see the chunky river of ice beside you, glowing blue even in this light, but less so the black holes that dot the sides of what passes for a piste.

Our adventure starts when the sun's still high. To ski the Vallée Blanche at night we have to take the final, 4pm ride on the two-stage Aiguille du Midi cable car. Any suggestion that we're going to be lone explorers is squashed by the excited chatter of the crowd of rangy young skiers fighting with the clatter of ice axes and snow shovels.

At the top, in a tunnel through the 12,600ft peak, we're roped together, as even getting to the run is nerve-racking. We spend 30 minutes clambering down icy steps cut into a dizzying ridge with sheer drops on either side, clutching skis and the rope guide rail. I stumble and slip and am all but exhausted when I put my

skis on. Many choose to head for Refuge Cosmique, just below us, to while away the time until the evening, but we start our descent in the blinding horizontal shafts of the late afternoon sun, lengthening shadows sliding across the snow.

Over the next hour we cover almost half the run, evening rushing on as we descend to the stone fortress-like Refuge du Requin. Inside it's like a locals' bar, rough-hewn tables with skiers and mountain guides turning to look as we enter. We tuck into a hearty meal of vegetable soup with Savoyard cheese followed by salmon with gnocchi. It's like a jolly dinner party; one of the hardest parts of the whole descent is limiting yourself to a few sips of wine. At 9pm we check to see if the moon is up. It is, and so we drift outside and set off.

After a few hundred yards we come to snaking little paths, whooshing down across open spaces and rounding rocky bends to see new vistas, the flicker of headlamps bringing to mind a Christmas parade. Olianti rarely speaks, concentrating on finding his line and looking out for new dangers that can appear daily on the relentlessly moving glacier. At one point we have to make sharp, slippery turns on the edge of a seemingly bottomless drop in the ice; at another it's like a rollercoaster ride on narrow chutes as we head towards the bottom of the gorge. I recognise the spot where, by daylight several years before, I ended my run, climbing the 400 steps to a slow gondola that lifted me to the Montanvers train station for a ride to town.

We keep on skiing and eventually halt at the foot of a steep slope where we have to attach our skis to our backpacks and climb a narrow path for half an hour. By this time, almost 11pm, I'm tired, my foot misses its place and I trip into deep snow and barely escape bouncing back down.



Need to know

Nick Dalton was a guest of Collineige (01483 579242, collineige.com), which offers seven nights in Chalet Valhalla from about £850pp, based on 12 sharing, fully catered. A moonlit Vallée Blanche tour with Jean-Marie Olianti is from €165pp (£130) for a group of three, including dinner at Refuge du Requin and lift pass extension.

I recover, but it's not over yet and we have to trudge around the mountain to a point where I find myself surrounded by several dozen skiers chomping on energy bars.

Even now, at midnight, we're far from home and set out on what turns out to be an hour's skiing along a narrow, twisting path along the valley. My headlamp is burning as low as my energy levels and even the moon can't help as I slip through the trees until we arrive at the car park.

It's 1.30am by the time we fall out of Olianti's car at what is, thankfully, the perfect contrast to the rugged experience we've just had. His wife Colleen is the founder of the luxury ski operator Collineige and Chalet Valhalla is one of those chalets that is traditional on the outside but like a millionaire's den on the inside. We collapse in exhausted triumph with a glass of claret and a chunk of home-made cake.