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Vallée Blanche: Superb off-piste adventures

The Chamonix ski resort offers off-piste adventures for the intermediate skier. Just make sure you get a guide...

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The Vallée Blanche at Chamonix is one of the world's great ski-runs, arguably the best in the Alps that is accessible by ski lift. But it is something more than that: it is the most challenging off-piste run in the Alps that a decent intermediate skier can safely and sensibly tackle. As such, it makes a brilliant climax to a week in Chamonix; indeed, it's one of the prime reasons to go there in the first place. Even without the Vallée Blanche, Chamonix would be one of the top dozen resorts in the Alps; with it, it's in a league of its own.

So what is so special? For the normal on-piste skier, as most of us are, doing something tricky usually consists of finding a more difficult way of going down the same mountain. Nothing wrong with that. You make the choice between the red or the black run depending on the conditions, how you are skiing that day, the number of people on the slope, your general level of competence and so on. You have a nice time and maybe you do a different run down next time.

Going off-piste is different. You have to know what you are doing and if things go wrong, they can go very wrong. If you are really competent, you can have a wonderful time. A friend still waxes lyrical about heli-skiing at Whistler, and I don't doubt it's splendid. But for those of us on a family holiday, most off-piste is not realistic: it is either too difficult to organise, too dangerous or (if you are into helicopters) too expensive. The risk/reward ratio does not stack up.

The Vallée Blanche is special in that it is both accessible and thrilling. There are risks, but the rewards are huge. It is one of Europe's longest ski runs. The skiing is not that difficult: a mixture of red and blue runs on the classic route, or blacks of varying intensity if you cut across the side. But you get a run of 22km (more in a good year), with a vertical descent of more than 2,000 metres, in a grand valley with Mont Blanc towering over you. Even on a busy day you find yourself making your own tracks through the powder. Bliss.

This is what to do. First, get a guide (the hotel or ski school can fix it up). You don't have to get a guide but there are two powerful reasons for doing so. One is interest, the other safety. It is vastly more interesting to have someone who knows the nuances of the routes, can assess the quality of your skiing and then judge how many of the awkward bits you should have a crack at.

People die on the Vallée Blanche every year. On both occasions that we skied it, the helicopters were out. On the first, we were told that a middle-aged Belgian woman had fallen off on the climb down at the start, and I am afraid that was that. On the second occasion, there was an emergency further down the mountain; the news there was not good either.

There are two dangerous aspects. The first is this initial climb down to get to the start of the run. You take the Aiguille du Midi cable car – which is pretty spectacular in itself – to above 3,800 metres. Then you rope up.

You emerge from the Aiguille du Midi station through a tunnel and suddenly you see why you are roped. You have to climb down a ridge, skis and poles in one hand, hanging on to a guide rope with the other, for about 100 metres, with sheer drops on either side. Fall off to the left and you head down 1,500 metres to the valley floor. Fall to the right (as the Belgian lady did) and it is only 200 metres – still enough to kill you.

Further down you have to cross a number of crevasses, and there are points where you are vulnerable to an avalanche. It is fairly obvious where that might be, yet we saw people stopping to take photos exactly where an avalanche would sweep them away. We were told: the next five minutes are dangerous; we cannot out-run an avalanche, so we have to keep moving. We kept moving.

There is a short, bumpy traverse at the top, awkward if conditions are poor. Once through that, you head off across a great, open snowfield. The classic route, "La Vraie", is the longest and easiest. You head south, then swing round to the east and finally north. Head right and you come under some spectacular rock climbs round the base of Mont Blanc; swing to the left and you have descents of varying steepness ahead.

After making fresh tracks across the snowfield you reach the top of the Glacier du Géant. Coming down that is a long and bumpy ride, with the guide picking the safest way to avoid the crevasses. Then it's likely to be lunchtime. You have two options; to stop off at the Refuge du Requin, or to picnic in the snow, as we did.

By then the skiing should be straightforward. You cross the Mer de Glace, one of Europe's longest glaciers, which is a gentle slope with just enough drop to keep you moving. There is a scruffy part at the end where you descend to the glacier's base, but it's not difficult. Finally, conditions permitting, it may be possible to ski down to Chamonix, but more probably you'll need to take a cable-car and then the train from Montenvers back to the town.

The only physically tough thing here is that you have to climb the equivalent of several storeys to reach the bottom of the cable car, which is a long pull at the end of a strenuous ski-run. Why did they not build it so that it went from the glacier itself? Well, they did. Old prints show it ran past the railway station, higher still. But global warming has receded the glacier by several hundred metres. So a wonderful day ends with an uncomfortable reminder of the changes taking place on our planet. I find that curiously fitting. We can marvel at the glory of the Alps and know that we are privileged to share and enjoy them. But if the Vallée Blanche also reminds us of the fragility of nature, then that is no bad thing too.

Traveller's guide**GETTING THERE**

Geneva airport, about an hour's drive from Chamonix, is served by several airlines, including easyJet (0905 821 0905; www.easyJet.com), Swiss (0845 601 0956; www.swiss.com), British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com), Bmibaby (0871 224 0224; www.bmibaby.com), Jet2 (0871 226 1737; www.jet2.com) and Flyglobespan (0870 556 1522; www.flyglobespan.com).

To reduce the impact on the environment, you can buy an "offset" from Equiclimat (0845 456 0170; www.ebico.co.uk) or Pure (020-7382 7815; www.puretrust.org.uk).

You can take the Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris and connect for St-Gervais-Les-Bains, where you change to the Mont Blanc Express to Chamonix (Rail Europe: 0870 830 4932; www.raileurope.co.uk/snowtrains).

STAYING THERE

Packages to Chamonix can be arranged via tour operators such as Crystal Ski (0870 405 5047; www.crystalski.co.uk) and Erna Low (0845 863 0525; www.ernalow.co.uk).

SKIING THERE

Guided group descents of the Vallée Blanche can be arranged through companies such as The Chamonix Experience (00 33 4 50 54 09 36; www.chamex.com) for €70 (£50) per person based on a group of eight; or Alpine Adventures (00 33 4 50 547 344; www.alpineadventures.co.uk) for £255 per group of five to eight people. Smaller group descents can also be arranged.

MORE INFORMATION

Chamonix Tourism: 00 33 4 50 53 00 24; www.chamonix.net

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