

Chamonix/Vallée Blanche, France

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Having negotiated the harrowing descent from the Aiguille du Midi, groups arrive at the head of the glacier ready to begin their ski tour. (Claire Walter photo)

One Big Day, One Big White Valley
Skiing glaciers in the shadow of France's Mont-Blanc

By Claire Walter

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What Everest or McKinley is for mountaineers, Maui or Maverick's for surfers, the Great Barrier Reef or Cozumel for scuba divers, the Vallée Blanche is for skiers. Arguably the world's most iconic ski run, it had topped my to-ski list for years. This epic glacier route plunges some 9,200 vertical feet and 13 miles from the Aiguille du Midi at 12,604 feet to Chamonix. Receding glaciers and iffy snow years now usually shorten it to about nine

miles, still the world's longest lift-served ski route. The best part still is skiable – awesomely, magnificently, scenically, beautifully skiable – from January to May.

The Vallée Blanche (French for “white valley”) is not trivial. Even strong, experienced skiers hire a guide for the unmarked, ungroomed, unpatrolled snow-covered route. Unless you have a death wish, you will too. The only map is in the guides' heads. There are crevasses, of course, and you hear avalanches and rockfalls echoing off cliffs and pinnacles soaring thousands of feet. Anything and everything above looks as if it could release. Guides know where it tends to do so. Also, guide fees include helicopter evacuation in case of an injury, and trust me: if something bad happens, you don't want to pay to be choppered out.

My friends and I skied with Vincent Lameyre, who by then had descended the Vallée Blanche more than 500 times. He auditioned us on two lesser ski areas to evaluate our skills and stamina – routine for guides with anyone except returning clients. First, we went to the moderately pitched, ungroomed slopes of La Tour, the smallest of the town's five ski domains that nevertheless dwarfs most in America. The next day, we skied run after thigh-burning run on Les Grandes Montets, 6,000 vertical feet, including steep, hard-packed snowfields and a glacier.

Of the 15 of us who hoped to ski the Vallée Blanche, Vincent was taking eight. My skier's heart would have broken if he hadn't selected me. On each of my three previous Chamonix trips, I was thwarted by weather. Once winds were too fierce for the cable car. Twice heavy clouds packed into the enormous valley creating a whiteout, not just dangerous, but venturing in is also pointless since the jaw-dropping scenery is part of the experience. I was elated to be chosen and euphoric when the big day dawned with a promise of sunshine.

Reaching the Vallée Blanche is an adventure itself. The two-stage cable car has only three towers between the base and a plateau called the Plan de l'Aiguille. The second stage is the longest unsupported span of any lift on the planet – more a mile-and-a-half and a vertical rise of almost 5,000 feet between the mid-station and the top. The cabin travels so close to the Aiguille du Midi's imposing north wall that you feel as if you could reach out and touch the rock.

At the top, Mont Blanc, western Europe's highest peak, is in your face. Sightseers gaze at the panorama stretching into Switzerland and Italy. Skiers glance quickly before looking down at groups slowly negotiating a narrow, slanting ridge that, from the viewing platform, resembles the Chilkoot Trail during the Klondike Gold Rush.

We clumped down several flights of metal stairs, where we roped up to each other and to Vincent, who would be both our caboose and our anchor. He stashed our poles in a rucksack and strapped on crampons, his rope at the ready as we clients sideslid, in our ski boots, the perilously icy ridge that slopes as much as 30 degrees. Two slender ropes attached to metal stakes mark the way. With skis in one hand and such a guide rope in the other, we moved slowly. If one person fell, everyone could go down.

We unroped after crossing this scary ridge, clamored over the broken ice at the head of the glacier, hit the snow and started skiing in Vincent's tracks. We deviated from the standard route to a less traveled, wilder one on the skiers' left side of the Vallée Blanche. Vincent described the wide, white swath under sheer cliffs as “skiing inside the mountain.” We skied around seracs, rock fins and enormous sections of fractured ice, skirting crevasses and crossing snow bridges. Vincent told us about the time he lowered

his rope into a small crevasse to retrieve a client who had slipped in. He pulled someone up, but it wasn't his client. It was a stranger who had slid into the cleft. Such are the perils of skiing alone on Europe's second-largest glacier.

Groups with cross-border ambitions, touring skis and skins do the first part of Vallée Blanche until they are in line with a peak called the Pyramide du Tacul and then angle to the south to skin up the Col de Toule, a small pass right on the French-Italian border. At this elevation, the ascent gets people breathing very hard, very fast. The reward, after a sweet descent down the Glacier de Toule, is lunch stop at Pavillon, an intermediary station for the Vallée Blanche cable car which provides return transport to France. This Italian lift with the French name unloads at the Pointe Hellbronner at 11,254 feet, from which skiers ski Glacier du Géant and merge into the lower section of the Vallée Blanche. This option adds some 800 feet of climb and nearly 7,000 feet of descent to a Vallée Blanche day, but we had neither the legs nor the lungs nor the gear for this detour.

In so vast and dazzling a valley, usually with no one but each other in sight, perspective vanished, and distance and time both lost their meaning. We skied on and on, mesmerized by the scenery. We stopped for photographs but didn't look at our watches. Snow conditions varied. Powder welled over our boot tops. Windpack rippled like lightly crusted white wavelets. Silky packed snow gave way to snow swales that skied like washboards or occasional ice patches where the snow had blown off the glacier's surface. Moguls erupted at the steep foot of each glacier and in narrow areas where ice breaks as it squeezes between rock walls.

Eventually, Vincent directed us to a traverse toward the Refuge de Requin for lunch on a sun terrace packed into the snow beside the stone hut. We contemplated our choices: vegetable soup, quiche, omelet and *tartiflette*, a rich Savoyard concoction of potatoes, onions, bacon and Reblochon cheese. It was France, so there was wine, even at the glacier's edge.

Afterwards, we dropped back into the Vallée Blanche, joining the main route where we finally saw a few other skiers. Soon we reached a mile-wide section where the Glacier de Leschaux merges in from the right. After this confluence, we came to the fabled Mer de Glace ("sea of ice"), a gentle white ballroom where skis run and skiers' egos soar.

We ran out of snow with 3½ miles and 2,400 vertical feet to go before Chamonix, so we shouldered our skis, walked over glacial debris, climbed 200 more stairs and boarded a gondola to Montenvers, a plateau with a hotel and a small railroad station. There we scrambled onto a cheerful red train for the 20-minute return to Chamonix's outskirts and civilization after the raw, white wilderness.

IF YOU GO

Travel and lodging: Most package trips from the U.S. include roundtrip air to Geneva, airport-resort transportation, accommodations, generally daily breakfast and often nightly dinner. Tour operators include Adventures on Skis (www.advonskis.com, 800-269-6686), All Mountain Vacations (www.all-mountain.com, 800-833-8142), Ski-Europe (www.ski-europe.com, 800-333-5533) and World on Skis (www.worldonskis.com, 866-678-5858). The CHAM'Ski lift pass (€65) excludes Aiguille du Midi/Montenvers transport, which is €44 per day.

Guides: The Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix (www.chamonix-guide.com) is the oldest (1821) and most famous of several guide services. Private guide, €250 for one to four people; €16 per additional person. Joining a group they assembled is €65. Fees include insurance and helicopter evacuation in case of a serious accident (chickening out is not considered an accident). Lameyre's website is www.vincent-laymeyre.com.

More information: For general Chamonix information, go to www.chamonix.com. Topo maps are available at Chamonix's many sporting goods stores. Recommended are the *Carte topographique, Serie Bleue, 3531 est, St. Gervais-les-Bains - Mont Blanc*, and *Institut Géographique National 1:25000 no. 3630 OT (Chamonix)*, or go to www.bluebookski.com/bluebook9/France_Chamonix_Map.htm for a general on-line map. See www.chamonix.com for more local information.

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