

Alpine luxury

The discreet town of Chamonix, at the foot of Mont Blanc, is fast emerging as a luxury hub with its unique offerings for travellers

Words : Riaan Jacob George

The Mont-Blanc Express takes travellers on an unforgettable journey, passing through mysterious forests, wild gorges and towering peaks, even as they enjoy the grand spectacle of the Trient Valley

The experience is heart-stopping, monsieur, it will shake you out of your senses,” says François, the ticket attendant at Step Into The Void, as I enter a large glass box, suspended at an altitude of 3,842 m. He was right — standing on a glass floor, with a chilling drop below me, staring out at Mont Blanc and the nearby Bossons Glacier, a few hundred metres away — is quite an experience. It comes as no surprise that Step Into the Void has become the talk of the town in Chamonix, France. It is the latest tourist attraction at the Aiguille du Midi terrace, the highest point tourists can reach to see Mont Blanc. The lofty Aiguille du Midi complex is accessible by cable car from the heart of Chamonix and is a great place to spend an hour or two, marvelling at the 360 degree view of the snowcapped Alps and perhaps even sneaking in a selfie with Mont Blanc in the background.

MUST VISIT



ALPINE MUSEUM

Housed in the former Chamonix Palace dating back to the early 20th century, the Musée Alpin records the development of Chamonix – from when the first tourists came to admire the glaciers right up to when the cable cars were built.



GALERIE MB FACTORY

Contemporary art gallery that showcases different perspectives on mountains and nature, particularly ones with an offbeat and contemporary outlook.



CHALET DE LA RÉSERVE DES AIGUILLES ROUGES

Situated at the Col des Montets, the Aiguilles rouges chalet laboratory offers visitors a unique opportunity to delve into the passionate world of fauna and flora in the mountains.



The town is situated in the valley of Chamonix, with mountains towering over its humble proportions

MONT BLANC MOTIF

Once I am back to terra firma, I set out to explore Chamonix. Everywhere I look, Mont Blanc seems to be a leitmotif, recurring consistently across this town — in souvenir stores selling all sorts of Alpine bric-a-brac, sports shops selling gear for ski and mountain sports and even the signboards at shops, cafes and restaurants. My next stop is Chalet 4810, the trendiest patisserie and cafe. Built in a restored traditional chalet dating back to 1909, the cafe's name — Chalet 4810 — represents the altitude of Mont Blanc, 4,810 m. I get chatting with its charming owner, Madame Jacqueline Fattier, as she painstakingly puts the finishing touches to a mountain of macarons. She pulls out a box of chocolates, shaped like Mont Blanc. "Voilà," she says, "the peak is reflected even in my artisanal chocolates."

EMERGING DESTINATION

As I walk through the streets of Chamonix, with its quaint wooden shopfronts, chalets and cafes, I can't help but admire the setting. This town is situated in the valley of Chamonix, with mountains towering over its humble proportions. There is no sign of touristy kitsch, although the town is a major tourist draw. What I see around are tell-tale signs of Chamonix as a thriving and emerging luxury travel hub. New boutique hotels, fashionable stores including Chanel, Michelin-star restaurants, adventure sports centres, trendy cafes and buzzing bars surround the area.

Always been popular among French travellers, the town is now opening up to the international community. Cécile Gruffat from the Tourism Board of Chamonix, with whom I am strolling through the city

A Evening view of square in Chamonix-Mont Blanc



From its height of 3,777m, the Aiguille du Midi and its laid-out terraces offer a 360 degree view of all the French, Swiss and Italian Alps

centre, brings up an interesting point, “Only a decade ago, it was a tour operator who first discovered Chamonix as a great potential destination for Indian travellers. Now, it is the third most visited venue in France for Indians after Paris and Nice.”

It, therefore, comes as no surprise that Janina Taittinger, the Scandinavian model and daughter-in-law of the iconic Taittinger champagne family, along with her husband Tarik, chose to open up a chic luxury hotel in a restored 115-year-old chalet. Today, Hôtel Mont Blanc is the town’s hippest address, thanks to its unique blend of Alpine and Scandinavian design sensibilities, gorgeous rooms that overlook Mont Blanc and a Clarins-branded spa. The hotel recently welcomed Chef Michael Bourdillat, former chef at the Michelin-starred Le Bistrot, Chamonix, at its new gourmet restaurant, Le Matafan. The restaurant’s modern yet casual take on French haute gastronomy is impressive.

Down the street, at the Hameau Albert Premier, a heritage property of sorts, under the Relais & Chateaux umbrella, has been welcoming guests to its antique chalets since



MUST DO

A Ski Lesson

During ski season, Chamonix plays host to professional skiers from across the globe. The local tourist office suggests a variety of ski schools that offer a fun beginner’s ski session. If you are unfamiliar with the equipment required, fret not. The ski schools take you to the sports rental shop where you can rent everything from ski shoes and clothes to helmets and skis after which you are led to the beginner’s slopes for an adventurous session!

B Chamonix is one of the oldest ski resorts in France

C The mountain top station of the Aiguille du Midi



Getting Around

A great idea is to buy a Chamonix Pass from the tourist office — different options are available, depending on your preferences — which gives you free access to cable cars, ski lifts and discounts at different outlets across the town.

The tour of Grotte de glace takes visitors into the heart of the glacier. Re-sculpted every year, it describes the life of mountain people in the early 19th century

1903. Today, the Albert Premier offers to travellers the quintessential Alpine luxury experience, with its wooden villas, heated swimming pool, two Michelin-star restaurant, The Alber 1er, and the casual regional cuisine restaurant, La Maison Carrier. Another address that is a favourite among the town's gourmets is Le Bistrot which does a great prix fixe set menu for lunch and à la carte for dinner. Le Bistrot's decadent "cheese trolley" is an absolute treat. If you are in the mood for something more homely, try L'Impossible, claimed to be Chamonix's first organic restaurant, run by a jovial Italian family in a beautiful chalet with their massive watchdog lording over the entrance.

EXPLORE

Take some time out to walk around the town centre of Chamonix. Ask the tourist office to suggest a local guide who will explain the history of the town and its famous mountaineers.

I end my Chamonix sojourn with a visit to the Mer de Glace glacier, arguably the most breathtaking spot in Chamonix, accessible by a delightful toy train, Le Train du Montenvers. As you get off at Montenvers Station, enjoy the panoramic terraces before descending 400 steps where you actually get to walk on an active glacier. This is France, in its purest form, I thought to myself!

D Mer de Glace glacier