

## Travel

# How Chamonix became the world's favourite ski resort

One hundred years since it hosted the first Winter Olympics, this French resort remains prince of the pistes, says *Alf Alderson*

With its spectacular peaks and challenging terrain, Chamonix was already attracting eager mountaineers – the English aristocracy and members of the Alpine Club chief amongst them – throughout the early 1800s, its reputation as the world centre of alpinism well-cemented by the turn of the century.

So it's little surprise that in 1924, when the International Olympic Committee was persuaded to create a winter version of the Olympics – a response to the growing popularity of snow and ice sports – and searching for an inaugural venue, it was to



Chamonix, with its stellar pedigree, that they looked.

The 11-day event featured cross-country skiing, figure and speed skating, ice hockey, bobsleigh, curling and military patrol, a forerunner to the modern biathlon. There were, somewhat surprisingly, no downhill-skiing competitions (these weren't introduced until 1936), though there were ski jumping and Nordic combined (ski jumping and cross-country skiing) events, which necessitated the not-inconsiderable expense of building the Mont aux Bossons ski jump (which is still used occasionally today), as well as a 36,000-square-metre ice rink and a bobsleigh track (both now long gone).

When the events were over and medals tallied, Britain sat in sixth place; the Scandinavian countries then, as now, had dominated; and France came in ninth.

The first Winter Olympics had been a roaring success – and had provided Chamonix with a perfect opportunity to market itself as a year-round destination. Up until then, most tourists had visited only in summer, but over the coming decades, the town and surrounding mountains were to become one of the world's major winter-sports destinations.

In 1928, construction began on the Brévent cable car, followed by a succession of ski lifts and, in 1955, the spectacular Aiguille du Midi Téléphérique, then the highest cable car in the world, rising to a breathtaking 3,842 metres.

It provided mountaineers with quicker and easier access to the Mont Blanc massif, allowed skiers to descend the Vallée Blanche – a thrilling and spectacular 20km backcountry ski run down the Mer de Glace glacier – and gave day-trippers an opportunity to see Mont Blanc's magnificent glaciated Alpine landscape up close.

Fast-forward to today, and winter-sports enthusiasts still flock from all over the world to challenge themselves on the area's slopes, joining a multitude of locals, as well as residents from the UK, Scandinavia, the US and Australia. To cater to this diverse international crowd, the resort has gradually added everything from Michelin-starred restaurants to curry houses and burger bars; five-star hotels to bunkhouses; and hipster bars and brewpubs to nightclubs and even a casino.

However, the once "endless snows" of Mont Blanc are changing as rapidly as the town beneath them. Over the past 140 years, the Mer de Glace glacier has retreated 2km in length and 220 metres in depth: Edwardian visitors once took a rack-and-pinion railway up to the 1,913-metre high Refuge du Montenvers; tourists going there today have to climb down 550 steps to reach it.

A new gondola will replace the steps later this month – yet another small evolution for ever-adaptable Chamonix. But it does make you wonder. This prince of the pistes may have kept its crown for the past 100 years, but what will its next century bring? One hundred years from now, will it be hosting another Winter Olympics, or will the crowds have departed for snowier pastures? For now, though, its appeal remains as great as ever.

**The construction of the world's highest cable car in 1955 allowed skiers to access the magnificent Vallée Blanche**

## Essentials

The Ski Club of Great Britain (020 8410 2015; [skiclub.co.uk](http://skiclub.co.uk)) offers a Chamonix Off Piste Adventure trip from £1,595 per person, for intermediate skiers upwards, on dates throughout February and March. The price includes seven nights' chalet accommodation, with six nights' chalet board, and five days with mountain guides. Excludes travel.

Various airlines (including easyJet, Jet2 and British Airways) fly from UK airports to Geneva, from £41 return. The journey from Geneva to Chamonix takes about three hours by train.

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