

CHAMONIX TO ZERMATT

About the Author

Kev Reynolds first visited the Alps in the 1960s, and returned there on numerous occasions to walk, trek or climb, to lead mountain holidays, devise multi-day routes or to research a series of guidebooks covering the whole range. A freelance travel writer and lecturer, he has a long association with Cicerone Press which began with his first guidebook to *Walks and Climbs in the Pyrenees*. Published in 1978 it has grown through many editions and is still in print. He has also written more than a dozen books on Europe's premier mountain range, a series of trekking guides to Nepal, a memoir covering some of his Himalayan journeys (*Abode of the Gods*) and a collection of short stories and anecdotes harvested from his 50 years of mountain activity (*A Walk in the Clouds*).

Kev is a member of the Alpine Club and Austrian Alpine Club. He was made an honorary life member of the Outdoor Writers and Photographers Guild; SELVA (the Société d'Etudes de la Littérature de Voyage Anglophone), and the British Association of International Mountain Leaders (BAIML). After a lifetime's activity, his enthusiasm for the countryside in general, and mountains in particular, remains undiminished, and during the winter months he regularly travels throughout Britain and abroad to share that enthusiasm through his lectures. Check him out on www.kevreynolds.co.uk

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Rätikon Alps
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CHAMONIX TO ZERMATT

THE CLASSIC WALKER'S HAUTE ROUTE

by Kev Reynolds

CICERONE

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*For my wife – without whose love and practical support
this guidebook would not have been written.*

Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1048/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: Trekkers on the last part of the Europaweg beginning the gradual descent into Zermatt (Stage 14)

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Acknowledgements for 2019 edition

Research for this latest edition was undertaken by Jonathan, Lesley and Madeline Williams who not only acted as my legs and lungs but took over a thousand photos (a small selection of which grace this book) and supplied all the information to bring the guide up to date. I am profoundly grateful to each one of them. The Cicerone team at Juniper House transformed the words, photographs, maps and profiles into the attractive book you hold in your hands which, I trust, will enable you to enjoy the trek of a lifetime. I offer my thanks to them all, as ever, for enabling me to benefit from their talents and their friendship.

Mountain safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

International distress signal *(emergency only)*

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

Helicopter rescue

The following signals are used to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:
raise both arms
above head to
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:
raise one arm
above head, extend
other arm downward



Emergency telephone numbers

If telephoning from the UK the dialling codes are:

France: 0033; Switzerland: 0041

France: PGHM (Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne):

tel 04 50 53 16 89; Emergency services: tel 112 (mobile phones)

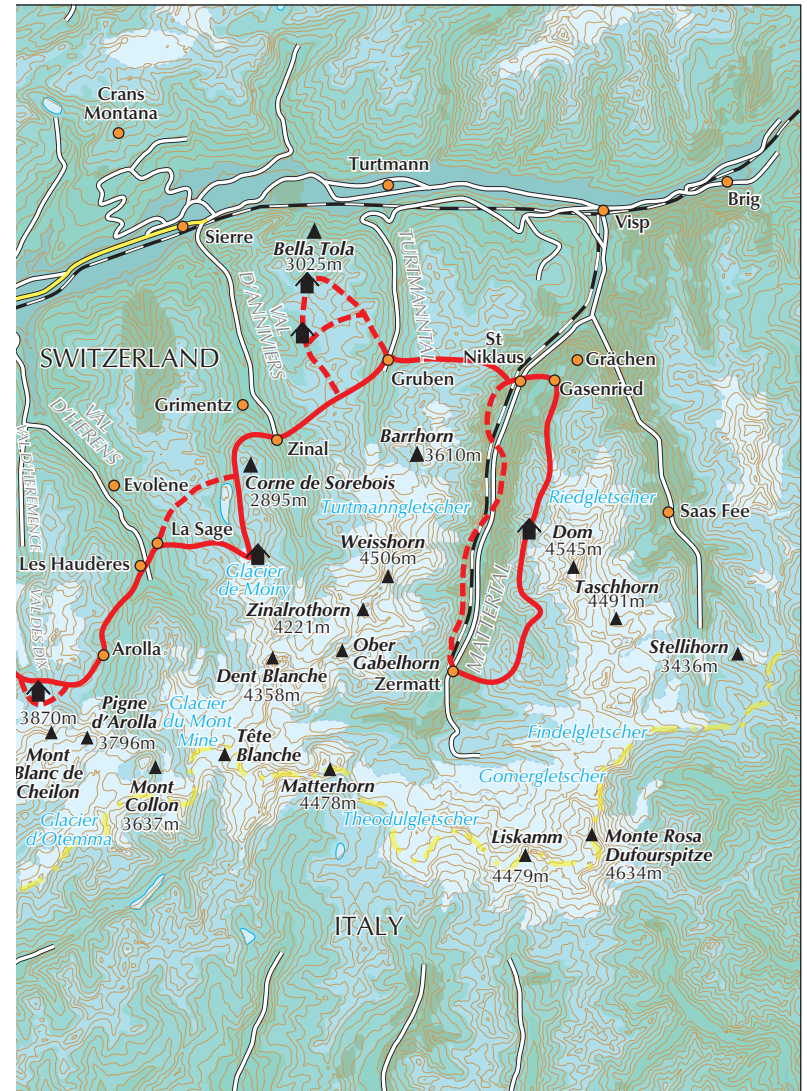
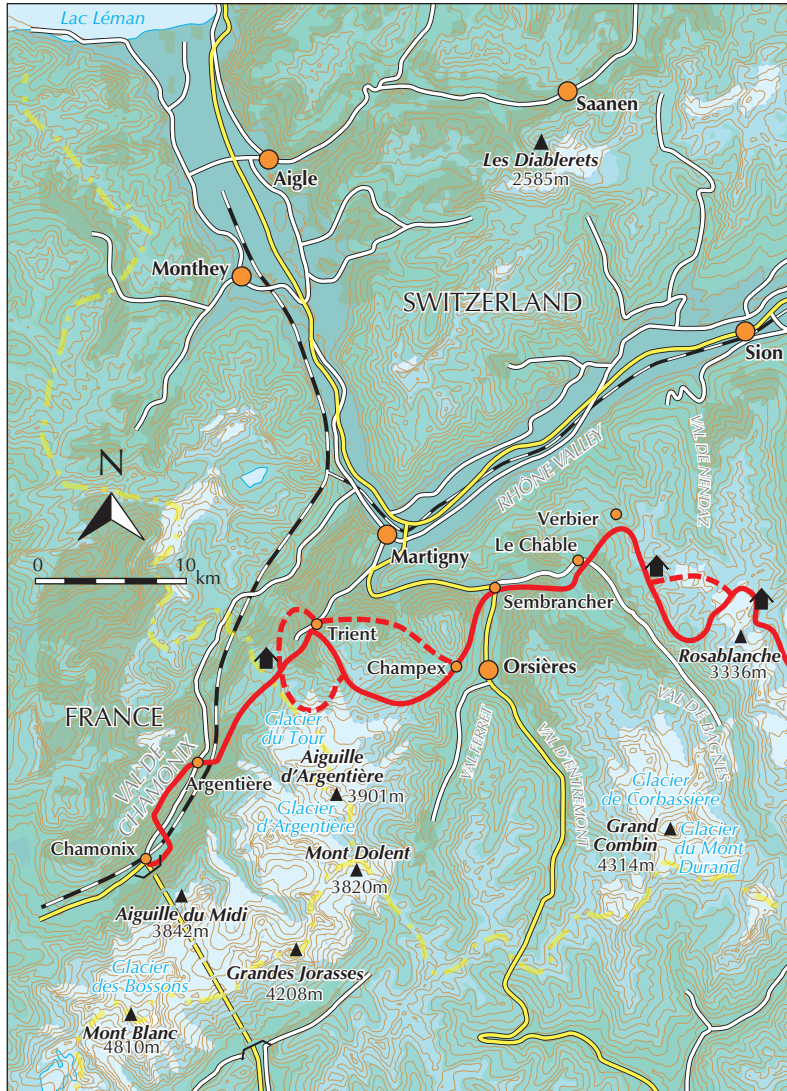
Switzerland: OCVS (Organisation Cantonale Valaisanne de Secours): tel 144

Weather reports

France: Chamonix: tel 08 92 68 02 74, www.meteo.fr or tel 3250

Switzerland: tel 162 (in French, German or Italian), www.meteoschweiz.ch/en

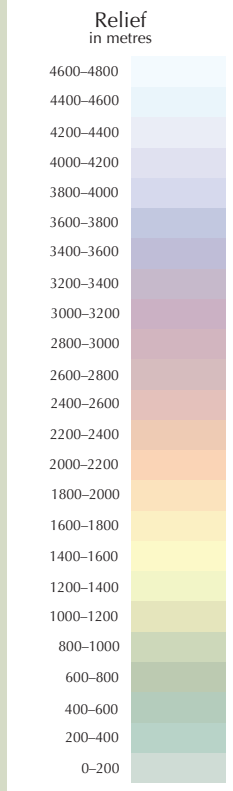
Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.



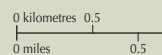


Symbols used on route maps

-  route
-  alternative route
-  start point
-  finish point
-  alternative start point
-  alternative finish point
-  glacier
-  woodland
-  urban areas
-  regional border
-  international border
-  station/railway
-  peak
-  manned/refuge
-  unmanned/refuge
-  building
-  church/monastery/cross
-  church/monastery/cross
-  church/monastery/cross
-  pass
-  water feature
-  other feature



SCALE: 1:50,000



Contour lines are drawn at 25m intervals and highlighted at 100m intervals.

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded free at www.cicerone.co.uk/1048/GPX.

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage no.	Start/Finish	Distance (km)	Time (hr:min)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	Page
1	Chamonix – Argentière	9	2:15	300	85	48
2	Argentière – Trient	15	5:30	1000	975	56
3	Trient – Champex	16	7:00	1390	1200	69
4	Champex – Le Châble	14.5	4:15	200	840	83
5	Le Châble – Cabane du Mont Fort	13	5:30	1660	20	92
6	Cabane du Mont Fort – Cabane de Prafleuri	17	7:30	1110	940	104
7	Cabane de Prafleuri – Arolla	18	6:00	740	1360	116
8	Arolla – La Sage	11.5	4:00	520	860	130
9	La Sage – Cabane de Moiry	15	6:00	1680	520	139
10	Cabane de Moiry – Zinal	19.5	7:00	650	1800	155
11	Zinal – Gruben	17	6:00	1250	1100	166
12	Gruben – St Niklaus	18	7:00	1150	1850	189
12A	St Niklaus – Gasenried	4	2:00	600	70	203
13	Gasenried – Europa Hut	15	6:30	1180	570	208
14	Europa Hut – Zermatt	23	7:00	850	1510	216
Total		225.5	83.30	14,280	13,700	

Stage no.	Start/Finish	Distance (km)	Time (hr:min)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	Page
Alternative stages						
3A	Trient – Champex	16	5:45	1040	850	77
5A	Le Châble (Les Ruinettes) – Cabane de Louvie	10	4:00	640	600	101
9A	La Sage – Barrage de Moiry	13	5:00	1250	670	147
10A	Barrage de Moiry – Zinal	9	4:00	600	1170	161
11A	Zinal – Hôtel Weissshorn	11	3:30	810	150	174
11B	Hôtel Weissshorn – Gruben	11	4:00	600	1120	181
13A/ 14A	St Niklaus – Zermatt	23	5:30	720	240	226

Facilities symbols

	information centre		train station
	hotel/B&B/accommodation		bus service
	café/restaurant/food		cable car
	shop/groceries		manned hut
	ATM/bank		unmanned hut



PREFACE TO THE SIXTH EDITION

Since the first edition of this guide was published in 1991, the Walker's Haute Route between Chamonix and Zermatt has become accepted as one of the finest of all Alpine treks, growing in popularity among both individual and group trekkers from around the world. It's not difficult to see why. The scenery is second to none, trails are clearly defined almost everywhere, the passes offer both challenge and reward in equal measure, and accommodation is plentiful and varied. It is little wonder that some trekkers return more than once to enjoy this classic route and introduce others to its delights.

But the Alpine landscape changes year by year – often in dramatic fashion through rockfall, avalanche or flood. Snowfields shrink, moraines crumble, glaciers withdraw and even disappear completely. Nowhere is immune to change, and that is certainly true of the region through which this trek makes its way. This latest edition of the guide reflects changes that have occurred since the previous updated edition was

published. In some cases the way has been rerouted, improved, safeguarded or provided with better waymarking. On some stages new signage indicates the adoption of the route by the Swiss National Walking Route 6, and on the final stage of the trek, the world's longest pedestrian suspension bridge has been created on the exciting Europaweg above the Mattertal.

All these changes were noted on my behalf by Jonathan, Lesley and Madeline Williams during their research trek in the summer of 2018, and I am deeply indebted to them for their attention to detail. They also recorded the distances covered on each stage, as well as height gained and lost, with a greater degree of accuracy than I had for previous editions. All of which should both aid in the planning of your trek and when you set out with this guidebook in hand on what is an epic and exquisitely scenic journey from Mont Blanc to the Matterhorn.

May you find your trek along this route to be as enriching and rewarding as each one of mine has been.

Kev Reynolds

The Grand Combin, seen from the path between the Col Termin and the Col de Louvie (Stage 6)



INTRODUCTION



Chamonix to Zermatt, Mont Blanc to the Matterhorn. What pictures these names conjure in the minds of those of us who love mountains! The two greatest mountaineering centres in the world – one overshadowed by the highest massif in Western Europe and the other by the most famous, if not the most elegant and most instantly recognised, of all mountains.

Chamonix to Zermatt, Mont Blanc to the Matterhorn – a recipe for a visual feast!

To walk from one to the other is to sample that feast in full measure; a gourmet extravaganza of scenic wonders from first day till last, and each one (to carry the metaphor to its limit) a course that both satisfies and teases

the palate for more. The Walker's Haute Route does just that.

In two weeks of mountain travel you will be witness to the greatest collection of 4000m peaks in all the Alps and visit some of the most spectacular valleys. There you'll find delightful villages and remote alp hamlets, wander flower meadows and deep fragrant forests, skirt exquisite tarns that toss mountains on their heads, cross icy streams and clamber beside glaciers that hang suspended from huge buttresses of rock. You'll traverse lonely passes and descend into wild, stone-filled corries. There will be marmots among the boulders and ibex on the heights. And your days will be filled with wonder.

It's more demanding than the well-known Tour of Mont Blanc, for the route is over 225km long; it crosses 11 passes, gains and loses close to 14,000m in height. But each pass gained is a window onto a world of stunning beauty.

There's the Mont Blanc range and the chain of the Pennine Alps, one massif after another of snow-bound glory: Mont Blanc itself, with its organ-pipe aiguilles; the overpowering mass of the Grand Combin; Mont Blanc de Cheilon and Pigne d'Arolla, Mont Collon and Tête Blanche and the huge tooth of Dent Blanche. There's the Grand Cornier, Ober Gabelhorn and Weisshorn and stiletto-pointed Zinalrothorn; then there's the Dom and Täschhorn, Breithorn and Matterhorn and all their crowding neighbours sheathed in ice and snow to act as a backcloth

to dreams; a background landscape to the Walker's Haute Route, contender for the title of Most Beautiful Walk in Europe.

THE WALKER'S HAUTE ROUTE

The original High Level Route (*Haute Route*), from Chamonix to Zermatt and beyond, was developed more than a hundred years ago. But this was very much a mountaineer's expedition, for it traced a meandering line among the great peaks of the Pennine Alps by linking a number of glacier passes. James David Forbes, scientist and active mountaineer, pioneered an important section of this in 1842 when he crossed Col d'Hérens, Col de Fenêtre and Col du Mont Collon. Alfred Wills also made early explorations, but it was mainly a joint effort by other members of the Alpine Club,

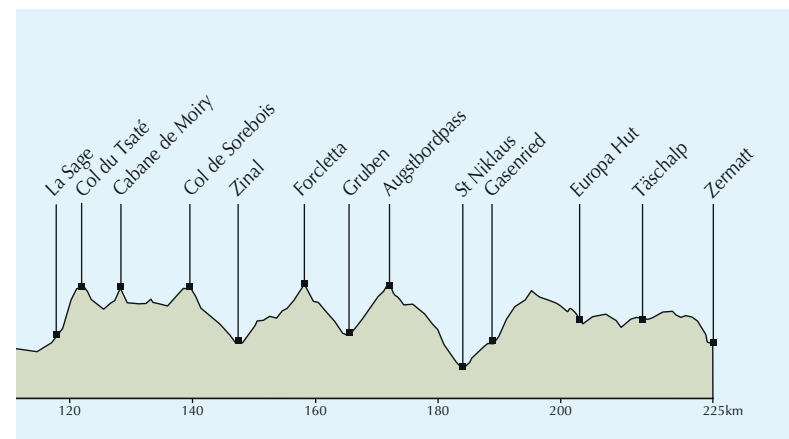
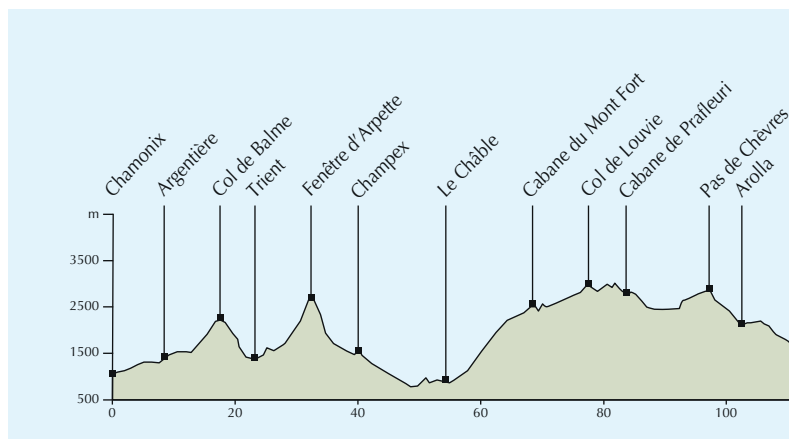
notably JF Hardy, William Mathews, Francis Fox Tuckett, FW Jacomb and Stephen Winkworth and their guides, that saw a complete High Level Route established in 1861. This route went from Chamonix to Col d'Argentière, then via Val Ferret, Orsières, Bourg St Pierre, Col de Sonadon, Col d'Oren, Praraye, Col de Valpelline and on to Zermatt.

The following year (1862) Col des Planards was discovered, which led to Orsières being bypassed, thereby allowing a better line to be made in the link between the northern edge of the Mont Blanc range and that of the Pennine Alps.

This High Level Route was, of course, primarily a summer mountaineering expedition that was no small undertaking, especially when one considers the fact that at the time there were no mountain huts

as we know them now and all supplies had to be carried a very long way. But with the introduction of skis to the Alps in the late 19th century a new concept in winter travel became apparent, and with the first important ski tour being made in the Bernese Alps in 1897, and the subsequent winter ascent of major mountains aided by ski (Monte Rosa in 1898, Breithorn 1899, Strahlhorn 1901, etc), it was clearly only a matter of time before the challenge of the High Level Route would be subjected to winter assault.

In 1903 the first attempt was made to create a ski traverse of the Pennine Alps, and although this and other attempts failed, in January 1911 Roget, Kurz, Murisier, the brothers Crettex and Louis Theytaz succeeded in establishing a winter route from Bourg St Pierre to Zermatt.



STAGE 1

Chamonix – Argentière

Start	Chamonix (1037m)
Distance	9km
Total ascent	300m
Total descent	85m
Time	2hr 15min
High point	Argentière (1251m)
Accommodation	Chamonix: hotels, youth hostel, camping; Les Praz de Chamonix (35min): hotels, camping; Argentière: hotels, gîte
Transport options	Train and bus (Chamonix–Argentière)

This initial, very short stage is suggested as a prelude for walkers who arrive in Chamonix late in the day and wish to get a few kilometres under their boots before seeking overnight accommodation. Those who arrive early and fresh enough from their travels can, of course, combine this with Stage 2 and continue over Col de Balme to Trient for a 7–8hr day.

It's a valley walk without any passes to tackle. But it's a pleasant walk all the same, with a few short ascents to contend with. It begins by threading a way among the crowds that throng the streets of Chamonix and heads upvalley on the road leading out of town, but then takes a path through woods and across open glades with a wonderful introductory view of the Drus standing guard over the Mer de Glace. Crossing the Arveyron the walk enters Les Praz de Chamonix, then over the river Arve onto another woodland path that is followed most of the way to Argentière.

Chamonix's valley is dominated by the Mont Blanc massif whose jagged aiguilles form fenceposts of granite and whose glaciers hang in sheets of arctic splendour above the town and its neighbouring forests. On the walk to Argentière there are several opportunities to gaze upon such scenes, while the bare northern wall with the russet-coloured Aiguilles Rouges is largely hidden from view.

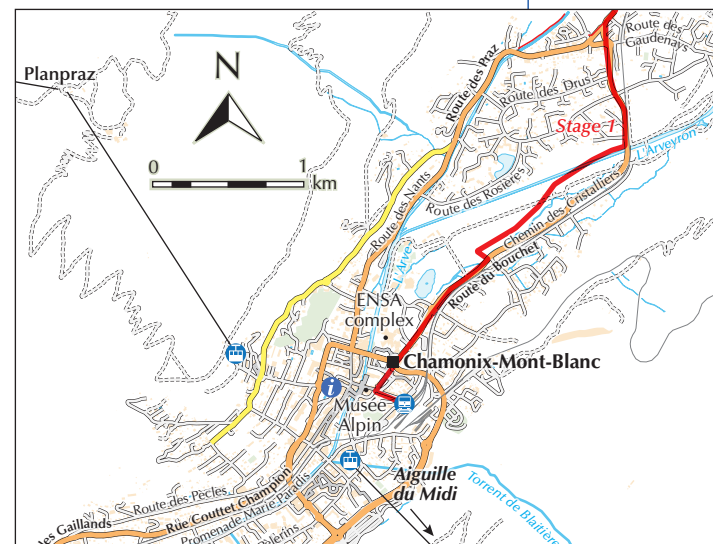
As early as 1741 Chamonix – then a small village – was 'discovered' by Richard Pococke and William Windham, whose *Account of the Glaciers or Ice Alps in Savoy* sowed the seeds of popularity for the valley; a popularity

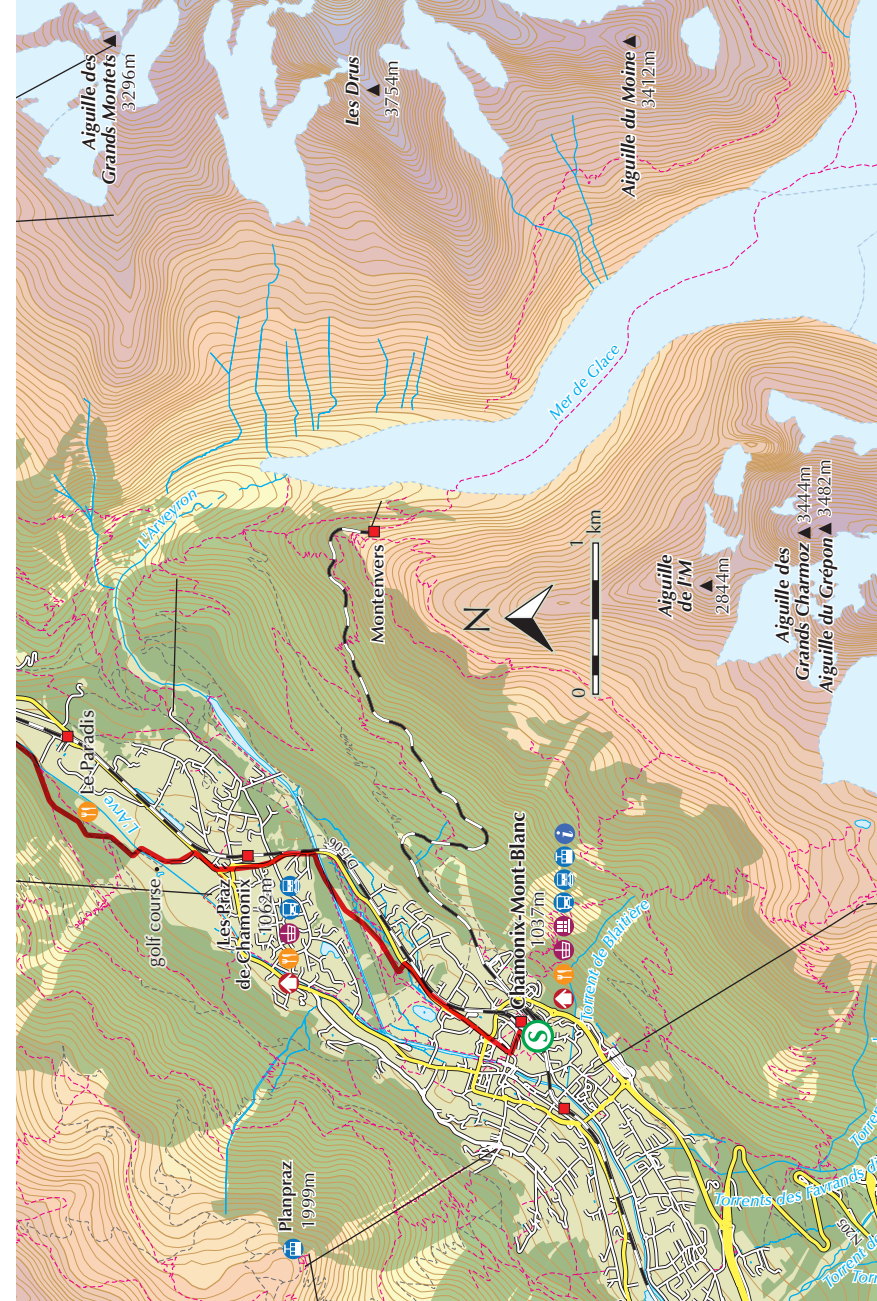
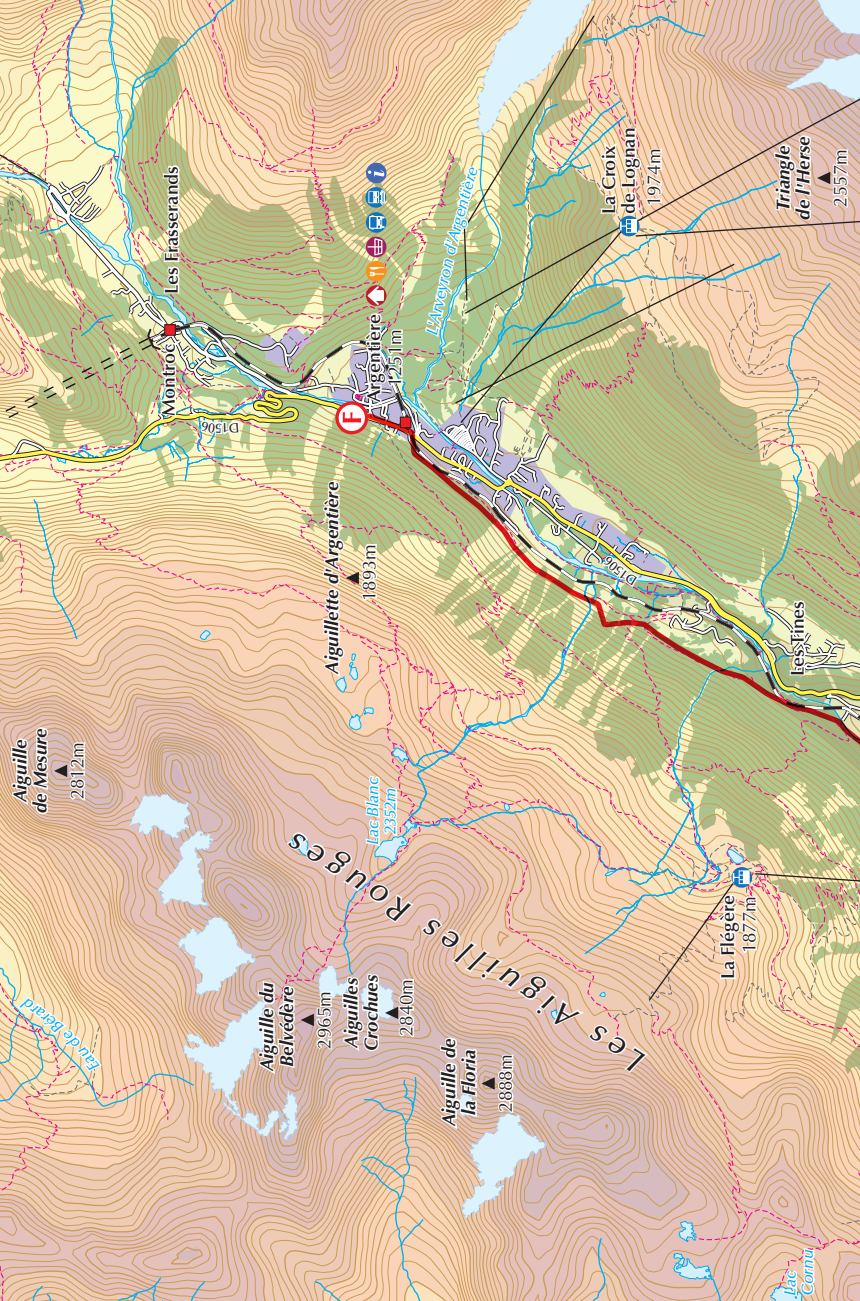
that has steadily increased from a lowly trickle to the present-day deluge of tourists who threaten an overkill, with around a million visitors per year in Chamonix alone.

Footpaths along the valley are busy during the summer and will remain so for the first three stages; that is, until the route of the Tour of Mont Blanc (TMB) has been left behind after Champex. During the high season there's likely to be a heavy demand for accommodation. Booking in advance is recommended.

From Chamonix **railway station** walk down the main street, Avenue Michel Croz, alongside shops and restaurants, and take the first road breaking to the right. This is Rue Whymper, which leads to a roundabout opposite the Ecole Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme. Continue straight ahead along the road signed to Les Praz and Argentière, soon leaving the town behind.

Shortly after passing the Chamonix–Mont Blanc road sign (15min from the station) note a bus stop on the left,





CHAMONIX (1037M)

The busy centre of Chamonix, which will soon be left behind for much quieter walking



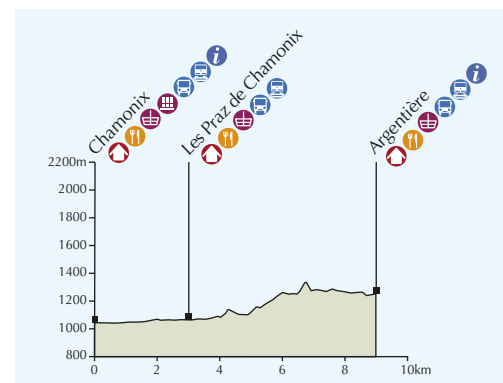
With the close proximity of Mont Blanc, Chamonix has always been at the forefront of alpine mountaineering, and during the development of alpinism in the 19th century it became a serious rival to Zermatt. Today it is unquestionably the leading mountaineering centre of Europe, if not the world. But the town's importance extends beyond the limits of mountaineering, for in winter it is a major ski resort, while in summer it attracts a deluge of general tourists. Chamonix has plenty to occupy them, including the cablecar to the summit of the Aiguille du Midi, and from there the possibility of traversing the whole range by cableway to Entrèves, near Courmayeur in Italy. The railway to Montenvers has long been one of the most popular excursions, with its climax being superb views along the Mer de Glace to the Grandes Jorasses.

The Chamonix valley, of course, offers excellent walking opportunities. In particular it is a base for the Tour of Mont Blanc trek. The summer season has been extended by the highly successful Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc (UTMB) race, which uses, in the main, the Tour of Mont Blanc trail and takes place just before the end of August. If your walking coincides with the UTMB the race is an inspiring sight. See *Mont Blanc Walks* by Hilary Sharp (Cicerone Press), *Chamonix Mountain Adventures*, also by Hilary Sharp, and *Chamonix Trail Running* by Kingsley Jones. Although the classic Tour of Mont Blanc does not actually visit Chamonix itself, it does traverse the valley. See *Tour of Mont Blanc* by Kev Reynolds (Cicerone Press).

Hotels, youth hostel, camping, restaurants, shops, banks, PTT, tourist information, railway, buses, cableways and funicular, www.chamonix.com.

and a sign on the right to La Frasse and Les Coverays. Immediately after the bus stop turn left over a bridge, then take the right-hand of two paths. This leads through the Bois du Bouchet. On coming to a crossing track turn right and soon gain a very fine view of the spear-like Drus ahead. At a crossing road continue ahead, and when the path veers right to enter a tunnel, leave it in favour of a minor path which takes you onto the main road where it crosses the **Arveyron** (30min). Turn left and walk into **Les Praz de Chamonix** (1062m, 40min, hotels, camping, restaurants).

When you reach a roundabout cross directly ahead beside a small church in the direction of Argentière and Martigny. Immediately after passing the Chalet Hôtel Le Castel the road curves to the right where you gain another splendid view of the Drus. Take the first turning left and wander past the Hôtel Le Labrador and its **golf course**. Through a golf club car park continue ahead on a gravel track which soon crosses the **river Arve**. Ignore the initial path on the right, but stay on the track which curves right just beyond. The track becomes a narrow metalled lane. When it forks continue ahead and shortly come to the café/bar **Le Paradis des Praz** (refreshments). Beyond this the way continues as a pleasant forest walk beside a stream.



Ignore all bridges across to the right-hand side of the Arve, and at path junctions follow signs for Argentière. About 1hr 5min from the start the way forks near the Pont de la Corva (1092m). Do not cross the bridge but stay on the left of the river and climb the wooded slope on the Petit Balcon Sud (the name of this low-level trail from Chamonix to Argentière). From here to Argentière there are several junctions, all well signed. Remain on the Petit Balcon Sud; in woods most of the way it's an undulating trail which climbs over 200m to its maximum altitude, then slopes downhill only to climb again. There are several bench seats, but few open views.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF MOUNTAINEERING

The Haute Route begins by wandering down Chamonix's main street, Avenue Michel Croz, named after one of the finest guides of the Golden Age of Mountaineering, a man whose talent and skills were discovered by Alfred Wills and then put to good use by Edward Whymper. Croz was a Chamonix guide (born in Le Tour in 1830) whose list of first ascents includes the Barre des Écrins, Mont Dolent, Aiguille d'Argentière, Dent Blanche, Grandes Jorasses and the crossing of the Moming Pass above Zinal. In 1865 Croz was in Whymper's party that made the first ascent of the Matterhorn, but tragically was killed on the descent. (See *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* by Edward Whymper.)

On leaving Avenue Michel Croz the route turns into Rue Whymper. Edward Whymper will forever be remembered as the man who first climbed the Matterhorn, and as such is known far beyond the somewhat limited circle of active mountaineers. Whymper was a London-born wood engraver who first visited the Alps in 1860 in order to make a series of sketches for the publisher William Longman. The following year he began a remarkable climbing career (often with Michel Croz) that included first ascents of the Barre des Écrins, the aiguilles of Trélatête and Argentière, Grand Cornier, Grandes Jorasses (west summit), Aiguille Verte and, of course, the Matterhorn.

He did little climbing in the Alps after the Matterhorn tragedy, but explored farther afield – making journeys to Greenland, the Andes of South America and three trips to the Canadian Rockies. His *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* is still considered to be one of the finest of all mountaineering books, and is frequently reprinted. Whymper died in Chamonix at the age of 71.



The path takes you down almost to the level of the railway, follows it for a short distance then climbs briefly before sloping downhill again, coming onto a track by some houses. Walk ahead along the track to arrive in the main street in **Argentière**.

The Aiguille du Dru, seen from Les Praz de Chamonix on the way to Argentière

ARGENTIÈRE (1251M)

Argentière is a compact village at the upper end of the Chamonix valley. The original village stands on the true left bank of the Arve below the terminal moraine of the Argentière Glacier, and is an attractive huddle of chalets and a small church. Argentière makes a low-key alternative to Chamonix for a mountaineering or skiing base. The 'new' village which has grown astride the main valley road has a range of accommodation, plenty of restaurants, food stores and a tourist information office.

Accommodation at Gîte d'étape Le Belvedere, 52 dortoir places, meals provided (tel 04 50 18 50 66, www.gitelebelvedere.com); lower-priced hotel: Hôtel Les Randonneurs (tel 04 50 54 02 80, www.lesrandonneurs.fr). Restaurants, shops, PTT, tourist information (tel 04 50 53 99 98, www.argentiere-mont-blanc.com), railway and bus links with Chamonix.

If you have difficulty finding accommodation in Argentière, try Gîte d'étape Le Moulin in Les Frasserands about 2km upvalley, 38 places, open all year (tel 04 50 54 05 37 and 06 82 33 34 54).