

CHAMONIX: A RUN FOR YOUR MONEY

Sarah Stirling lived in Chamonix for four years, and spent most of her free-time exploring the mountains in trainers. OE persuaded her to share some of her favourite routes.

I moved to Europe's 'Mountain Capital' by accident one summer. I got a lift there after going to an outdoor gear trade show in Germany, and ended up staying till November. When I finally returned to Pembrokeshire, it was just to pack up my life into my battered Polo and make the long drive out to a log cabin in the woods that I'd fallen in love with.

I love watching landscapes evolve on long journeys. I stayed overnight amidst the flat fields of the Champagne region, dipped croissants into my bowl of hot chocolate at breakfast and continued on. As I neared the pre-alps, the scenery began to push away from the earth. By the time I reached industrial Sallanches, the nearest (small) city to Chamonix, and realised excitedly that I was just 30 minutes from my new home, the hills had become mountains.



SALLANCHES TO PASSY AREA (JUST SOUTH OF CHAMONIX VALLEY)

To my left, whizzing past the car window, were some faces that I'd already got to know very well. There was the Chaîne de Fiz, rising like a castle from the forest below, with its bands of rock, tiered with steep grass, and the Aiguille (needle) de Varan rising like a pointed tower at one end.

There were mountains to the right of the road, too — including the Chain des Aravis. The valley around Sallanches is wider than the neighbouring Chamonix Valley, and the peaks down here are slightly smaller, greener, and less spiky. 'Chamonix-Mont-Blanc' is essentially a chain of towns and villages wedged into a long, narrow cleft between huge mountains.

Looking left again, I spotted a favourite run. If you drive up zig-zag roads to the foot of the Chaîne de Fiz, you can reach a mountain-side village called Bay. A steep uphill grunt accesses a balcony track that leads to the Refuge de Varan (1620m) and the high, teetering alpine pastures of Zeta, which sit on top of one of those castellated bands of rock.

Lots of beautiful trail races are organised in the Chamonix region; in July, there's a lovely series held down

here, from the 60k Tour des Fiz, a circuit which links eight mountain refuges, to the 15km 'Balcon des Fiz' race.

As with other mountain refuges it's possible to book to stay overnight independently, too, which makes for lovely running link-ups. At night all is peaceful as local animals like the ibex emerge into the pink of dusk. Life slows and quietens. You tune into natural sounds.

Just past Sallanches is the village of Passy. Above it lies Sixt-Passy, the biggest nature reserve in Haute-Savoie, with its lakes, waterfalls and the curious limestone Platé Desert. You are essentially running around on a beautiful platform overlooking the classic Mont Blanc range panorama spread out as you see it in photographs. A good place to park to explore this area is Passy Plaine Joux (1340m), a little ski resort in winter that is peppered with signposts for footpaths in summer. There are wonderful swimming lakes around here, too, including Lac de Passy, the largest, with its beach vibes and mountain views.

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LES HOUCHES TO CHAMONIX AREA (SOUTH CHAMONIX VALLEY)

As my car began to chug up the Égratz Viaduct, the mile-long bridge on stilts that connects Passy to Chamonix Valley, I began to get excited. Arriving in Les Houches, the first village that you come to, I looked up at one of the most runner-friendly summits in the valley: the rounded rather than spiky Aiguillette des Houches (2285m). If you've got a few hours to spare, park at Merlet (1563m) and run up to the Refuge de Bellachat (2152m), enjoy a drink on the terrace, then traverse to the Aiguillette des Houches. From there a flowy path descends a technical, fun arete and pops you out amidst the picturesque Chalets de Chailloux, a small collection of farmer's chalets in an alpine pasture.

Finally, I was driving through Chamonix (1035m) itself. There are some wonderful running options straight from town, of course. You can test yourself with the vertical K race route or take a warm-up run to the Floria Refuge (about a three-kilometre run). This wooden building is decorated in hundreds of flowers and has a cosy, colourful terrace on which to enjoy a drink or crepe while gazing around at the splendour.

A must-do run for Chamonix first-timers: take the world's highest vertical ascent cable car to the summit of the Aiguille du Midi, a needle clinging to the top of rocks (3842m). Then go back to the mid-station (2317m). A wonderful balcony path winds from here to the historic Montenvers Hotel (1913m), which is perched on the edge of the Mer de Glace and is served by an old-fashioned red rack-and-pinion train. There are beautiful alpine flowers along the path, and stunning views over the Aiguilles Rouges, which stand on the opposite side of the valley. You can descend to Chamonix from here on the train.

Once back in town, of course, there are numerous places to reward yourself with a drink as you stroll around the picturesque alpine town.



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LES PRAZ TO LE TOUR (NORTH CHAMONIX VALLEY)

If you continue through Chamonix, you get to the village of les Praz, where there is a particularly picturesque church and the Flegere lift system. Flegere is on the opposite side of the valley to the Aiguille du Midi. From the top of the lift you can run over to Lac Blanc and other delights in the Aiguilles Rouges. It's beautiful here at dusk when the aptly-named needles turn red with alpine glow.

After driving through Chamonix and Les Praz, I turned right to switchback up through a picturesque hamlet, all aged wood and shutters, called Le Lavancher. At the top of the hamlet, just underneath a band of woodland, I cut the engine outside the log cabin. Towering over the trees above me were a cluster of famous mountains including the Drus and the Grandes Jorasses. It was so quiet, apart from the engine ticking down.

Pushing the door open, all was cool inside. I opened the shutters. Next door's dog, Rufus, a huge hairy beast who would become my best friend, bounded in excitedly, breaking the silence. His owners had said I could run with him whenever I wanted. I would leave the unpacking for now, I decided, and run what had already become our favourite route.

From the door, we headed out to a

track that carves around the wooded hillside, offering glimpses through trees of Chamonix spread out below and Mont Blanc looming on the horizon. Finally we reached a huge waterfall, tumbling underneath a mountain buvette on a rock, called le Chapeau (the hat). After a drink on their terrace, which is pretty with flowers, we continued to a view point over what is left of the rapidly retreating Mer de Glace. We could see the Montanvers train chugging up its track on the opposite side of the glacier and the Aiguilles Rouges opposite us.

After resting on this hill shoulder, we began the steep climb up the Tete de Prapators (1844m). This is a lovely hilltop surrounded by the giant mountains of Chamonix. It's an ideal peak to bag in spring, when it's tricky to reach the higher summits due to lingering snow. Next, we descended through the Pendant Bowl, a tear-shaped alpine meadow, and returned through the woods to the cabin. This circuit takes a couple of hours and can be extended by continuing to the Montagne de Lognan, which sits above the next village, Argentiere.

As well as accessing this picturesque circuit, my log cabin was also situated right on the best, easy route in Chamonix. The Petit Balcon Nord and Petit Balcon Sud run around the Chamonix Valley at a relatively level altitude of 1200m (about 200m above the valley floor), offering cool

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shade in the woods, as well as alpine pastures, lovely views over the River Arve, which runs through Chamonix, and views over the mountains. You can do various length circuits using these balconies.

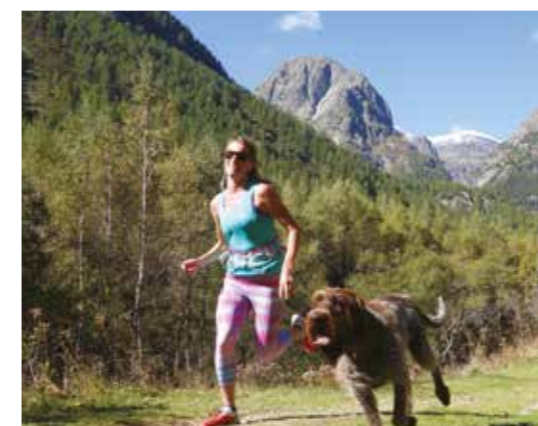
I'll let you in on my favourite run in the valley. Over the coming years, I'd often put Rufus in the car (he'd stick his head out, enjoying the breeze in his shaggy hair) and continue along the main Chamonix Valley road, through the village of Argentiere, to reach Le Tour, at the head of the valley. Le Tour's mountainside is unusual in Chamonix because it is tree-free, which means wonderful views all the way up. In summer, the meadow here tinkles with sheep bells.

We would often run up that meadow to reach the Col de Balme, where there is a refuge with red shutters, then continue up to the Croix de Fer (2300m), an iron cross at the end of a narrow but walkable ridge, which overlooks neighbouring Switzerland. From here we could retrace our steps for a shorter day, or descend to the next country!

COL DES MONTETS TO SWISS BORDER (NORTH OF CHAMONIX VALLEY)

If you continue driving past Le Tour, the road zig-zags up to Col des Montets, and you have left the Chamonix Valley. Col des Montets (1461m), I would learn, is a lovely high point from which to access the wonderful terrain of the Aiguilles Rouges to the left, and the Aiguillette de Possettes (2201m) to the right; the latter peak was surely designed with runners in mind with its technical trails amidst alpine flowers and huge views.

Often over the coming years, I would park here and Rufus and I would run downhill from Col des Montets to reach the neighbouring valley, which has more quiet and rural villages than Chamonix, like le Buet and Vallorcine. And, if we kept running on paths alongside the main road, we could cross the border to Switzerland. The Swiss border is 2.5 kilometres from Vallorcine.



TRAIL RUNNING TIPS

Look out for wildlife. Ibex and chamois can often be seen in areas like the Aiguille Rouges. A whistle might signal a marmot is about.

Don't worry too much if you can't navigate very well. 99% of the running in the Alps is on signposted paths! But do bring a map in case. I tend to cut these up into squares for running so I can pop them in my bag.

However, don't get carried away and forget the time. It can take a long time to descend — these are big mountains.

Don't go too early in the year - snow can hang around on the summits into June!

There are five lift systems in the Chamonix Valley, south to north these are Les Houches, Brevent (north side of Chamonix), Aiguille du Midi (south side of Chamonix), Flegere in Les Praz, Grands Montets in Argentiere and La Balme in Le Tour. These are useful for saving your lungs on ascents and your knees on descents!

The valley is well served by buses and a train, which is useful for linear runs.

THE MAGIC TUNNEL

Perhaps my favourite thing about Chamonix, though, is its magic tunnel to Italy. The weather is always better on the other side of the Mont Blanc Tunnel.

Drive to the Italian village of Morgex (15 minutes from the tunnel) and park at the Col San Carlo, then trot up through forest to reach the Lago d'Arpy. It's a 6km round trip to the lake, with incredible views on the way of mountains, waterfalls and forests. The lake is peaceful and beautiful with mountains reflected in it. From here you can hike further if you have time and energy left. I sometimes climbed to a col to explore ruins and look down over the Italian side of Mont Blanc.

Now it's time to enjoy what you really came for — pizza, wine, cappuccino and gelato are all ridiculously cheap and delicious here (Chamonix is expensive!) and the people are incredibly laid-back. Any of the villages here will make a wonderful place to spend an evening. And, finally, I'd recommend popping into the thermal spa in Pré St Didier — it's wonderfully relaxing!

I'm getting jealous thinking about all this, but I have a new home with a new companion in North Wales. Of course, I still make regular pilgrimages to Chamonix and visit Rufus, but by the time you read this, I'll be married, so new adventures beckon. Wish me luck! 