

The Montnvers train climbed slowly up the side of the fir-tree dotted mountain. The jagged, sugar-dusted peaks of Les Drus zoomed into focus while the highly populated valley floor got wider and longer. Twenty minutes later, the two red carriages reached France's longest glacier, the Mer de Glace.

Rewind to 1741 and two young Englishmen, William Windham and Richard Pocock, arrive in the little village of Chamonix where they encounter the same stunning glacier, which at that time extended to the valley floor. Back in the UK, they regale their aristocratic friends with tales of this new destination and it becomes a firm fixture on the European Grand Tour.

These days, Chamonix is the world's third most visited natural beauty spot and welcomes 2.5 million visitors each year from 40 countries. How does a small town cope with this influx? What can tourists do to ensure the survival of one of their favourite Alpine destinations? Noting The Ski Club of Great Britain's seven commandments of green skiing (see inset), I decided to go and find out.

OPERATION ECO-AWARE

My first task was to find an eco-aware tour operator. London-based Action Outdoors has teamed up with French activity holiday specialists, Union nationale des Centres sportifs de Plein Air (UCPA) to offer low-cost, all-inclusive skiing holidays to the British public.

According to UCPA spokeswoman Sandra Artore, respecting the natural environments in which they operate is at the heart of their practice. She says: "We have a wide diversity of centres and activities and always try and do what is best. In all of our centres we use natural cleaning products and low-energy equipment and we source food from local producers as much as possible."

"In Chamonix specifically, the centre has thermal insulation, we use local gas for heating and the lights are sensor-controlled in public areas. Our employees and guests must take out their own rubbish and put it in recycling bins in front of the building."

Instead of flying, Action Outdoors uses Eurolines' overnight coach service from London, Victoria direct to Chamonix. According to the carbon calculator on Eurolines' website, taking a flight over to Geneva would emit about 93 kg of CO₂, whereas going by coach would emit a far more acceptable 23 kg. The saving of 70 kg is equivalent to powering a house for 99.9 hours.

The last time that I took the coach to France, Eurostar was a mere twinkle in the engineer's eye, and was a considerably more cramped and unpleasant experience than this one. Along with 40 other Puffa-clad travellers – whose ages ranged from about 18 to 70 – the journey went smoothly and quickly thanks to a 20-minute

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crossing on Euroshuttle, the latest films on DVD and reclining seats with ample leg-room.

We arrived in Chamonix at 10.30am on Saturday morning to be greeted by the first big snowfall of the season. The trees, rooftops and ground looked like they had been coated in thick, uneven icing; shop windows glowed in the dim light and each street corner was a scene straight off a Christmas card.

MOUNTAIN ADDICTS

I spent the first night in Les Pelerins, one of two recognised eco-friendly chalets in town. Stylishly furnished and offering delicious food, the chalet has an uninterrupted view of Mont Blanc.

Owner, David Robertson explained: "We wanted to make the chalet as energy efficient as possible when we renovated it last year. Temperatures are rising and glaciers are shrinking and we wanted to do our bit to safeguard the valley – as business people and as mountain-addicts."

"Thanks to a grant from the local council, we were the first chalet in Chamonix to fit solar panels. These provide us with about 40 per cent of our hot water in the winter, and 90 per cent in summer.

"We added high-tech insulation to the roof and walls and installed a gas-condensing boiler, which has about 80 per cent less carbon emissions than the old oil one. During the renovation we also made a big effort to recycle waste and reuse materials."

After checking into the UCPA centre, housed in a former grand hotel and run along the lines of a youth hostel, I stopped by the tourist office. Here, I discovered that it's only the second tourist office in the French Alps to be awarded ISO14001 status – The International Standard of Environmental Management, which helps many organisations minimise the effect of their operations on the environment.

EASY RIDING

The holiday included four full days of skiing or boarding lessons in groups suited to different abilities, accompanied by English-speaking instructors. Getting to the lifts was no problem as the town has a free bus (with a particle filter) and train service. The Compagnie de Mont Blanc, which manages the chairlifts, >>

Facing page:
Chamonix is a magical place, and at the forefront of the eco-aware ski break movement



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cable cars and trains in the valley, is also working towards ISO14001 certification, which it aims to achieve before the 2008 season.

Instead of having a rest on my day off, I decided to try a different winter sport. In a blizzard of thick flakes, I caught the train to Le Buet, an attractive village near the Swiss border. Here, I met Julia Tregaskis-Allen, an International Mountain Leader who lives locally, and whose company, Tracks and Trails, offers snowshoe outings.

As we made our way past idyllic wooden chalets in a Narnia-like winter wonderland, yellow plastic paddles strapped to our feet, Julia explained the activity's attraction.

SNOWSHOEING SURPRISE

“Snowshoeing has minimal impact on the environment. The low speed of the walker means that exposed trees, which are brittle in winter, are not harmed and the layer of snow on the ground protects the flora underneath.

“Downhill skiing, on the other hand, has a large impact. As well as being an eye-sore, lifts allow large numbers of people onto the mountain and not everyone knows how to respect the place. The speed of skiers can snap branches and erode the hillside, especially if there's not much snow.

Julia emphasised: “It's very important to educate people about 'good practice'. For example, you should never leave any litter lying about, as it can take years to break down.”

Julia wasn't the only one concerned about the future of the valley. All around town there were leaflets by two local action groups: Club des Amis Respectueux des Vallées Alpines (ARVA) – who plant trees to hide the nearby motorway – and the Association pour le Respect du Site du Mont Blanc (ARSMB), which campaigns to reduce the number of heavy-goods vehicles passing through the Mont Blanc tunnel into Italy.

To minimise pollution, the association wants to see the transportation of goods by rail and river. They encourage the use of public transport, walking, cycling or car-sharing, and believe that people should buy local products.

With that in mind, I went in search of some goodies to take back home with me. Every Saturday morning, producers from the surrounding area hold a market in the car park on Place du Mont-Blanc. Tourists rub shoulders with locals around stalls selling mottled sausages, alpine-flower honey, vibrant vegetables and mounds of cheese such as Tomme and Reblochon.


Later that day, after admiring the Mer de Glace, I got back on the little red train (pictured above), which this year celebrated its centenary. A party of children dashed past me into the carriages, chattering excitedly about their visit to the ice grotto and its exhibition of crystals and animals. I wondered with some trepidation, as to what scene I would be looking at if we fast-forwarded 100 years into the future. [fm](#)

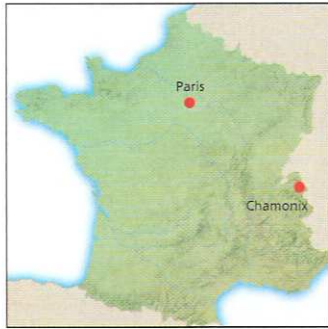
CHAMONIX

GETTING THERE

 Eurolines (08717 81 81 81, www.eurolines.co.uk) runs a weekly overnight coach service from London, Victoria direct to Chamonix. A standard return fare is £106. You can get a connection to London Victoria from anywhere in the UK with National Express (08717 818181; www.national-express.com) for £15 return.

WHERE TO STAY

 Action Outdoors (0845 890 0362; www.action-outdoors.co.uk) offers all-inclusive skiing and snowboarding holidays in Chamonix, and at other UCPA hostels in the French Alps, from £578. The trip includes Eurolines coach travel, shared accommodation, lift pass, ski hire, 23-hours tuition and all meals. I stayed in UCPA's lively



Chamonix Cosmique centre, which is in the middle of town.

A week in stylish Chalet Les Pelerins (00 33 6 70 60 56 00; www.chalet-in-chamonix.co.uk) starts at £375. The price includes transfers from the bus stop/airport/train station, a welcome glass of Champagne, 7 breakfasts, 6 dinners, resort guiding on the first day, assistance with booking ski hire


and/or lessons plus transfers to the slopes. Owner David might even be persuaded to take you for a visit to the fabulous hot springs, which are situated just over the border in Italy.

WHAT TO DO

 The highly qualified team at Tracks and Trails (0208 144 6442; www.tracks-and-trails.com) offer tailor-made snowshoeing, walking and cross-country skiing days out in the Mont Blanc valley for £140 for groups of up to eight people. The price includes equipment hire and tuition.

CONTACT

 Chamonix Tourist Office: 85 place du Triangle de l'Amitié, Chamonix (00 33 4 50 53 00 24; www.chamonix.com; www.chamonixgoesgreen.org).

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VALLORCINE

L'Ours Bleu is a four-star residence comprising 80 apartments (starting at €240,000) complete with bar; links to Chamonix Mont Blanc.

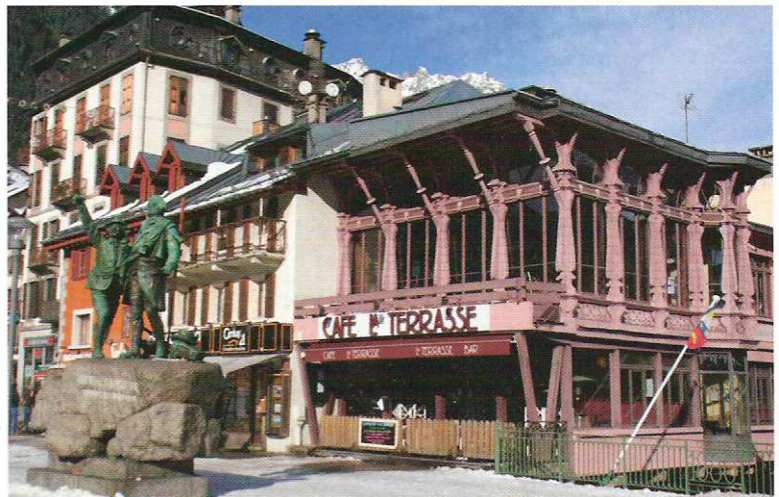
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THE SEVEN COMMANDMENTS OF GREEN SKIING

- ❁ Choose an environmentally-friendly resort
- ❁ Reduce CO² emissions
- ❁ Encourage tour operators to adopt green policies
- ❁ Reduce global warming on holiday and at home
- ❁ Be aware of your environmental impact as skiers and boarders
- ❁ Respect the natural habitat of mountain animals and plants
- ❁ Do not leave litter on the slopes

For further information about The Ski Club of Great Britain's 'Respect the Mountain' campaign see: www.skiclub.co.uk



Facing page: The iconic, little red train that takes passengers to and from Chamonix and Mer de Glace Above: The centre of Chamonix is home to two recognised eco-friendly chalets, including Chalet Les Pelerins which boasts stunning, uninterrupted views of Mont Blanc