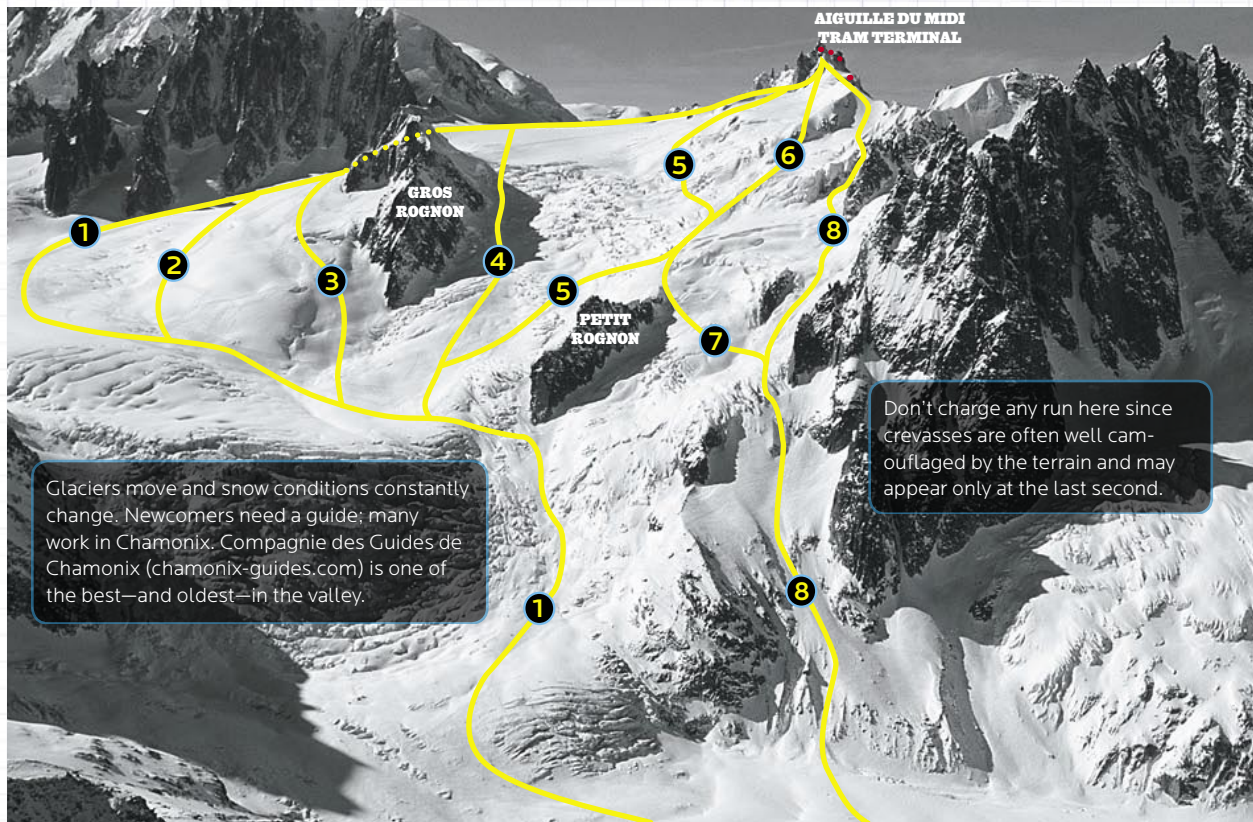


FRANCE

Chamonix's Aiguille du Midi

The Aiguille du Midi tram whisks you up almost two miles from the valley floor and spits you out at 12,605 feet atop Chamonix's most precarious windswept ridge. The 13-mile backcountry route through La Vallée Blanche is one of the most famous runs in the world. —JANCSI HADIK



Glaciers move and snow conditions constantly change. Newcomers need a guide; many work in Chamonix. Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix (chamonix-guides.com) is one of the best—and oldest—in the valley.

Don't charge any run here since crevasses are often well camouflaged by the terrain and may appear only at the last second.

1 LA VALLÉE BLANCHE

The most technical aspect of La Vallée Blanche is getting from the tram to the run. Be prepared for a short, sketchy boot-pack down an exposed, certain death knife-edge ridge—two ropes serve as handrails. Once you've got your skis on, stay skier's right until you reach Séracs du Géant, a massive, mile-wide sea of ice. You'll see it. Traverse above it.

2 GROS ROGNON ALTERNATIVE

Instead of heading skier's right with the masses, seek out 30-degree pitches down the rocky west face of Gros Rognon, located just under the cables of the Helbronner lift, which comes from the Italian side of Mont Blanc (not shown). Ski the fall line.

3 GROS ROGNON ALTERNATIVE B

This wide-open, east-facing run gets less sunlight and holds powder longer than the two more-trafficked routes farther skier's right. Keep well left of the huge crevasse that bisects the run. Once you pass it, you're looking at 2,000 feet of 30-degree turns before you have to traverse left at the bottom.

4 LA VRAI VALLÉE BLANCHE

Often unskiable in low-snow years due to the exposed crevasses, this run whisks you underneath towering 100-foot-high blue seracs. Stop and listen to the glacier moaning and groaning; then follow your guide through the exit traverse and around a snow bridge.

5 LE PETIT ENVERS

This gradual slope holds more snow than other runs in the valley, but you must ski through a maze of crevasses and seracs—get a guide. At the col above the Petit Rognon, you have two options: Head right of the Rognon and left to Vallée Blanche or right onto l'Envers du Plan Glacier.

6 L'ENVERS DU PLAN

Instead of taking Le Petit Envers, continue skier's left to this 200-foot, 45-degree slope, which often has an open bergschrund (a crevasse that forms when the top of a glacier peels away from a mountain) at the bottom. Don't fall here, especially on the top section, unless you want to end up at the bottom of the crevasse. This is glacier skiing at its most challenging.

7 L'ENVERS DU PLAN GLACIER

Shorter in distance but steeper in pitch, this 45-degree run is a must for expert skiers looking to challenge themselves on one of the planet's most famous descents. After skiing this short pitch, emerge onto the Mer de Glace, a famous ice field.

8 LE GRAND ENVERS

Want more of a challenge? Mix in up to 20 feet of air in this cliff-lined run. Follow the ridgeline to the Envers Glacier, and hike toward the Arête du Midi-Plan summit. Reaching the top is a serious mountaineering feat: Don't try it without a guide and equipment. Instead, drop into a 45- to 50-degree bowl. Cut hard skier's left to avoid both the rocks—and to access the more open section of the bowl.