

CHAMONIX MOUNTAIN ADVENTURES

by Hilary Sharp

CICERONE

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Dedication

*To my bike, garden, cat and husband, all much
neglected in the frantic final stages.*

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Front cover: Wonderful reflections of Mont Blanc at the small lake above the Lac de Brévent (Family Walks, Route 5)

CHAMONIX MOUNTAIN ADVENTURES

Sharing the broad
summit of the
Belvédère with the
locals



block – a geological curiosity, being a limestone cap on the granite of the Aiguilles Rouges range. Luckily, a foot-path in the red earthy terrain leads around to the right towards the north ridge. Now easy scrambling up this (and sometimes just to its left) leads to the top, with the actual summit a little further on.

Descend by the same route to Lac Blanc then take the wide and frequented trail back to the Flégère cable car.



ROUTE 4

Mer de Glace Balcony Trail

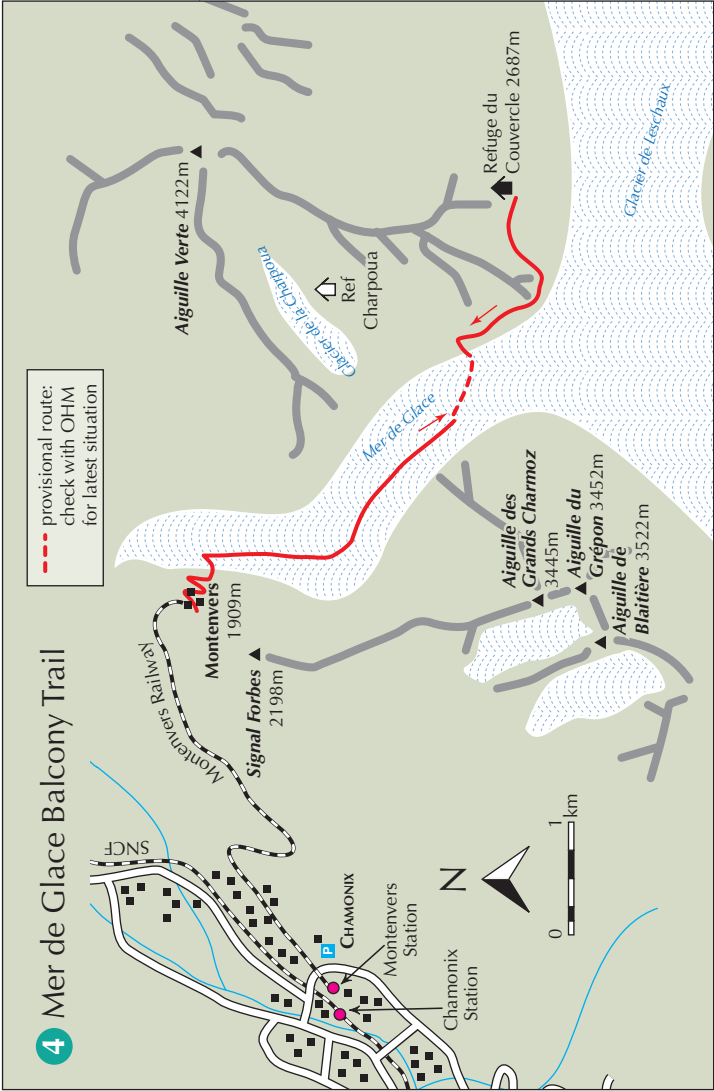
Start/Finish	Montenvers 1909m
Distance	15km – this varies slightly according to the line taken up the glacier
Time	Time 8h+ In summer (2022) the Montenvers train runs from 8h30 to 17h30, which barely gives time to complete this walk in the day. Best to book a night at the hut or be ready to turn around before you get there.
Terrain	Mountain trails, steps, glacier walking, moraine paths, boulders, ice, ladders; the terrain is often demanding, physical and tiring. A harness and via ferrata leash and/or rope are essential to safely ascend and descend the ladders. A helmet is also highly recommended. Crampons will aid progress on the icy sections of the glacier.
High point	2858m

Altitude gain	Around 1000m – the undulations on the trail are difficult to calculate
Map	Top 25 3630 OT Chamonix Mont Blanc
Parking	Montenvers railway station or Les Planards opposite
Note	Montenvers is at 1909m, at the terminus of its own rack, and pinion railway, which comes from its own station in Chamonix. This is not to be confused with the main Chamonix train station nearby.
Warning	This route crosses terrain that is constantly changing. The Mer de Glace glacier is shrinking at an alarming rate and this means that access to it is progressively more difficult. Years of warming temperatures mean that there is a risk of rockfall from the steep sides of the glaciated valley and the trail has been affected. The route described here is a shorter version of that previously known as the Mer de Glace Balcony Route, because longer versions risk being closed or altered. Before embarking on this adventurous expedition it is essential that you check on viability at the OHM office (La Chamoniarde) in Chamonix.

The full version of this unique trail provides a spectacular circuit of the refuges of the Mer de Glace, but the balcony section from the Mer de Glace to the Couvercle Refuge is in itself a great objective. The scenery is nothing short of magnificent. The ladders that lead up to the balcony path are impressive and long. After that the trail along the hillside is intermittently equipped with ladders, rungs and cables, leading to the Couvercle Refuge.

The route described here is an out and back along the balcony trail from Montenvers. The IGN map shows the 2015 ladders to the Charpoua and Couvercle huts correctly marked, but it also shows the old ladders opposite Montenvers, which are no longer maintained. Equally the ladders down from Montenvers via the Vire des Guides are no longer there, and the descent from the Couvercle via les Egralets has been repositioned.

It is easy to underestimate this hike. It is a serious and arduous expedition and the terrain is difficult. Crampons, harness, via ferrata leash and helmet are essential. The ladders are equipped with protection points for those who choose to rope up. If you miss the last train down you'll be faced with a long walk back to Chamonix.





From **Montenvers**, at the time of writing, the only way down to the **Mer de Glace** is to go down to the Grotte de Glace. This can be accessed by a cable car and then via several hundred steps. The cable car opens some time after the arrival of the first train, so if you arrive early take the footpath to the left of the cable car, looking out, to reach the steps. There are plans for a new cable car which should go all the way to the glacier, but this is in the early stages of construction.

Previously there was a long ladder descent from Montenvers arriving further up the glacier (La Vire des Guides), but as of 2022 this has been taken down.

Once you arrive at the **Grotte de Glace** you need to take the easiest way up the glacier. At this level the glacier is largely composed of rocks on ice, and can be quite tortuous. Especially early morning, the icy sections will be slippery and care should be taken. Crampons will most likely be useful and it is advisable to try to see where others have gone before...tracks in the dust, the odd cairn....otherwise you risk finding very loose ground. After leaving this rather chaotic section, the way gets

The impressive ladders leading up to the balcony trail

more obvious and there is a choice: either go left across a glacier stream onto ice and go along there, or stay on the moraine in the centre of the glacier. The latter is the safest option as you do not cross the river, which has quite steep sides and you stay well away from the steep rocky sides of the valley, which can be prone to rockfall.

However, walking up moraine is tricky and takes time. After about 2hr of walking you reach the area marked on the map as **Les Moulins**. The 'moulins' are the water channels formed in the ice by running water. Keep looking up left and you should spot the ladders, high up on the granite slabs. You might also spot cairns with red markers but these are few and far between and easy to miss. This is the access route for the Charpoua Refuge as well as the Couvercle. The ladder route is marked with a big yellow square, which is way up the cliff, and it begins at 2060m. To reach the base of the ladders make your way across the streams and onto the moraine scree. Again, look carefully for the most worn way up this, following waymarks if you're lucky.

The ladders are long and steep. Every few metres there is a fixed bolt and carabine, which is for use when you are roped up to someone. There are small ledges from time to time where you can rest, or allow others to pass coming the other way. It is not safe to climb these ladders unattached. If not using ropes then you need to use a via ferrata leash. There is a good chance of small rocks coming down from people ahead so a helmet is a very good idea.

After the ladders, the path continues into grassy terrain with chains and cables to help. Eventually you reach the junction where the Charpoua trail goes left and the onwards trail to the **Couvercle Hut** goes right. This well waymarked path (red flashes and yellow squares) is now easier, but there are numerous undulations and another series of ladders – take it steady and savour the stunning situation – glaciers and soaring rocky peaks as far as you can see. The path arrives just below the Couvercle Refuge at a big cairn – about 1hr30 from the top of the access climb. In hot conditions there can be water pouring down some of the gullies traversed so expect to get a soaking.

Return by the same route. Be sure to allow plenty of time for the return (at least as much as your outward journey) – the endless steps back up from the Grotte de Glace are fairly painful, although not as painful as the disappointment of missing the last train back down to Chamonix.



ROUTE 5

Tré-les-Eaux Circuit

Start	Le Couteray 1360m
Finish	Emosson 1965m
Distance	14km
Time	8hr
Terrain	Mountain paths, cabled rocky passage and pathless sections marked by cairns. Note that this cabled path is not on the current (2002) IGN map. A much shorter circuit is possible: from the top of the equipped section of trail, a path heads back right and eventually leads down to the start point. This path is on the map, marked in places with dots as a difficult path, but it is fairly straightforward.
High point	Col des Corbeaux 2602m
Altitude gain	1450m
Map	Top 25 3630 OT Chamonix Mont Blanc
Parking	Le Couteray

The Tré-les-Eaux valley is a secret gem – far less frequented than its popular neighbour, the Bérard valley. This might be because the trail alongside the river in the Tré-les-Eaux is blocked some way up by imposing rocky slabs. However, for those looking for a bit of zest, this provides the excitement of the route – those rocky slabs are overcome by means of metal cables and rungs, allowing access to the rest of the valley, a wild and spectacular delight. A long ascent leads over the Col des Corbeaux to the Vieux Emosson cirque and a foray over to the dinosaur tracks (Family Walks, Route 10), before descending the scenic Veudale gorge to Emosson Lake. (See page 27 for information about the construction works around the Emosson Lakes area.) A long and very special mountain day.

the **Glacier du Tour**. Here you'll need to put on harness and crampons and rope up. The route makes its way to the right under the ridges of the peak until you can ascend to and cross the **Col Supérieur du Tour** (3289m) and gain the Trient Glacier. Take care not to mistake the Col Sup. glacier basin with the one further left (north), which leads to a harder route, the Couloir de la Table, but which doesn't offer a way through to the Trient Glacier. From the col, turn left and follow the edge of the glacier up quite a steep slope, just next to the crags, until you come to a flatter area under the summit rocks.

There are various ways to the summit of **Aiguille du Tour**, the easiest, most popular and most reliable being to cross the (sometimes quite large) bergschrund and make your way to the left arête where you can leave your axe and crampons if the rocks are dry. Now follow an easy line of weakness in the rocks a little way right and parallel to the arête until you arrive on the little north ridge just below the summit. Climb up steeper rocks to the top.

Descent is the ascent route in reverse.



ROUTE 7

The Cosmiques Arête

Start/Finish	Top of the Aiguille du Midi 3842m
Grade	AD
Time	4hr
Terrain	Mixed climbing with a glacier approach
High point	Aiguille du Midi 3840m
Altitude gain	250m
Map	IGN Top 25 3630OT Chamonix Mont Blanc
Parking	Aiguille du Midi car park, Chamonix
Note	A rockfall in 2018 changed the itinerary where there is a section of abseil. This section remains potentially unstable, especially in dry conditions, and care must be taken. Some older descriptions of the route do not take this into account. If in doubt ask at the OHM office and refer to this topo www.chamoniarde.com/images/files/Variante-Cosmiques-2019.jpg .

ROUTE 7 – THE COSMIQUES ARÊTE



The crux pitch of the Cosmiques Arête – short and sweet

Climb easy cracks and chimneys and the occasional cracked slabs for a fair distance, then head slightly right before reaching a rocky pinnacle equipped with a bolted belay. From here an awkward diagonal abseil leads to a new abseil anchor at a col. Make an 8m abseil down the NW face. From here there are two options. It is possible to return to the SE face and to descend the chimney, to then climb up to reach a ledge on the right. But the preferred route, given the unstable rocks in that part of the SE face, is to go down and around the big block (rightwards facing out) and climb back up to regain the SE face. Go right again, then climb to easier ground on the ridge. Easy blocks lead right towards a large gendarme, which is turned on the right, followed by a short snow/ice slope to gain the ridge again, just before the crux wall. Surmount this either with a point of aid or by free climbing – using the chipped footholds.

Continue up easier rock on the right till a step left leads to a large flat ledge. Now go around left and down onto the shady side and climb a long, open chimney which leads up onto the ridge. A few more metres along the ridge and you'll see a ladder leading to the viewing platform and its dozens of admiring sightseers. Muster up as much dignity as you can and climb the ladder – don't trip over the balustrade ...