

Vallee Blanche – Chamonix, France

The World's Biggest Lift-Served Vertical

Coming to the Grand Rapids Ski Club February 27, 2019

(Optional One-Day Ski Bus Trip to the Morzine Ski Trip)



From Chamonix's top lift, it's an ear-popping, vertigo-inducing climb to the top of the Aiguille du Midi before skiing the Vallee Blanche

“Vertical” is one of those key statistics we’re all drawn to when comparing ski areas – how big is the lift-served vertical drop?

If you like your drops huge – which should mean perhaps 10 miles of gentle cruising or half an hour of shorter steeper stuff in the 6,500 foot descent category – then the Alps wins hands down. Indeed 49 of the 50 biggest lift-served vertical descents in the world are in the Alps.

But not all big, lift-served verticals are created equally, and there are more than 50 ski areas claiming at least a 5,500 foot lift-served vertical. Before being dazzled by the numbers you need to check the small print, or at least the piste map.

Firstly, can you ski the full vertical in one go? Do you need to take a lift halfway down to get to the bottom or is there a big cliff in the way.

Secondly, how likely is it that the lower section of the lift-served vertical will have snow? At some mountains, the lower sections are unofficial off-piste terrain.

Third, check that the descent is feasible for your ability level. Many of the longest descents are wholly or partially off-piste routes of varying levels of difficulty which may be increased by weather and snow conditions on the day.

Finally, does the descent arrive back at the base of the lifts so you can head straight back up? A few of the long descents are wonderfully long runs but end up in neighboring hamlets – so you need to get a ski bus, train or taxi back.



Walking down the ridge of the Aiguille du Midi at the start of the Vallee Blanche, Chamonix

The World’s Biggest Drop: The Vallee Blanche, [Chamonix](#), France

The Vallee Blanche is an iconic descent of 9,036 feet, creating runs of up to 14 miles down from 12,431 feet to 3,395 feet – the longest descent in the world over the biggest lift-served vertical.

The image portrayed is of floating down through light powder and spectacular scenery but weather conditions can change the view. Let’s be clear on what skiing the Vallée Blanche requires.

Firstly, at the very least you should be a good intermediate skier. Most of the usual route (and there are many others) would rate as a blue for gradient and challenge, but you do need stamina to keep going all the way down and then, at the bottom, tackle the long flight of 350 stairs back up to Montenevers rail station for the ride back to Chamonix.



Carving through powder on Chamonix's Vallée Blanche

Secondly, you need a guide – this is high-altitude, glacier terrain and sadly most winters one or two people still fall into crevasses or are lost in some other accident; it's very foolish to tackle the Vallée Blanche alone.

Unless you know it like a local, ski the Vallée Blanche with a guide. Even someone confident on reds can ski it with the right guide who knows your ability, but remember it's a glacier with many deadly crevasses, often hidden by snow bridges of unknown strength. Chamonix has been called the death-sport capital of the world, but it doesn't need to be dangerous there to enjoy the majesty of the highest peaks in the Alps.

Thirdly you need a head for heights. Your day begins with a vertigo-inducing, ear-popping 9,184 foot vertical ascent of the Aiguille du Midi. But for many people the most challenging part of the Vallée Blanche experience is shuffling along the icy 'arête' that links the lift station to the start of the ski run (although for experienced mountaineers, it's no doubt a walk in the park). You have a rope to cling on to but you are carrying your skis and wearing your ski boots of course – crampons and roping your party together are often options offered. Snowboarders have the advantage of more secure footwear but the disadvantage that the board is more likely to catch the wind.

Other than that you just need good gear, a helmet, standard off-piste avalanche kit, your

camera, a sandwich and some drinks for the way down, and you're sorted.

But is it all it's cracked up to be? Well the answer is likely to depend on the conditions when you tackle it. If you ski on a day when it hadn't snowed for weeks and find several hours of skiing over icy ridges and hard old crust; you will be exhausted. But, if you ski it on a good-snow day, you will mark it down as one of the best, most thrilling experiences of your life and something they want to repeat as often as possible.



Vallee Blanche in Chamonix, France

Take a look at the world's biggest statistics for Vallee Blanche in Chamonix, France

Lift-served vertical	9,082 feet
Altitude at start	12,477 feet
Altitude at bottom	3,395 feet
Run length	10.6 – 13.7 miles
Run ability type	Intermediate to Expert
Run surface type	Off-Piste
Glacier?	Yes
Below Tree Line?	Last 25%
Snowmaking?	No – Glacier
Roped together at top?	Yes
Guide essential?	Yes
Lifts to the top	Two cable cars
View	Stunning
Adrenalin Factor	Medium to High
Cost	\$135.00 (guide + lift ticket)
Duration	All day
Web	www.chamonix.com

