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Into the Void

Chamonix may be the adrenalin capital of the Alps, but extreme sports are just the start in this fascinating high-altitude resort...

So you think you know Chamonix? Breathtaking skiing, head-rush snowboarding, paragliding, heliski, ice climbing and the incredible off-piste powder of the Vallée Blanche – the thrills are endless. But what if you prefer your feet on the ground? Here are four surprising tales from Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, including mysterious crystals and a James Bond drama...

by Katy Dartford

Frankenstein inspired

Two hundred years ago a trio of England's leading literary figures made a trip to Chamonix... a trip which became notorious.

Poet Percy Shelley and future wife, Mary went to visit Lord Byron at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva. One night in June 1816, in the middle of a dramatic storm, Byron challenged them to write a ghost story - and the seeds of Mary Shelley's novel 'Frankenstein' were sown.

A month later they visited Chamonix and set eyes on the *Mer de Glace*.

"This," Mary Shelley wrote in her diary, "is the most desolate place in the world," and she chose the glacier as the setting for the terrible scene where Victor Frankenstein learns of the horrifying murder of his loved ones by the monster he created.

Holding back the tide

Staying with the *Mer de Glace*, did you know that this 7km long glacier is the largest in France and moves forward about 90m annually? This is linked to ice flow, but it also believed to be retracting by about 7.5m a year. Take the Montenvers funicular railway from Chamonix for an incredible ascent to 1,900m. Step out at the station and be prepared for amazing Alpine vistas, an freezing wind and perilous views into the icy heart of the glacier. Although access to the ***Mer de Glace*** ice cave (chiseled out afresh each summer) can be limited in winter, the hair-raising Step in the Void viewing platform remains open at the nearby ***Aiguille du Midi***. Also known as the Skywalk, for reasons that will become obvious, this is basically a glass cage hanging precipitously out over the freezing snowscape at 3,800m. *www. chamonix.com* for tickets and times.

Crystal maze

More than 200 years ago, Jacques Balmat, claimed the historic first ascent of Mont Blanc (August 1786), with Dr Michel-Gabriel Paccard, establishing Chamonix as the birthplace of modern mountaineering.

But these were not pleasure-seekers. They were crystal hunters. Since the middle ages, local farmers had searched the mountain rocks for quartz to sell to watch manufacturers and chandelier-makers in Geneva and Milan.

As mountaineering developed in the 19th century, these crystal hunters – who knew the terrain like the back of their hands - diversified to become mountain guides.

In 2006 the Musée des cristaux was inaugurated - which currently houses more than 500 specimens from the Mont Blanc ***massif*** and around the world.
www.mineralogie-chamonix.org

Shaken not stirred

In the famous Bond novels by Ian Fleming, James' parents (Scotsman Andrew Bond and Monique Delacroix-Bond from Vaud in Switzerland) were killed in a climbing accident in the ***Aiguilles Rouges*** near Chamonix. Eleven year old orphan James, who already had a first-class command of French and German, was dispatched to live with an aunt in Canterbury, England. Fast forward a few years and James was back - as a student at the University of Geneva.


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*Prize for two people – conditions may apply.