



“No 550 stairs for me... whoop!”

# WORLD'S LONGEST SKI RUN MORE ACCESSIBLE THAN EVER

**Patrick Thorne** was in Chamonix this month, where gondolas are the talk of the wash house

**T**he world's longest lift-served ski run, the Vallée Blanche, needs little introduction. Part of its infamous appeal is that it's not reserved for experts – anyone who can ski a red run with reasonable competence can do it. However, for the first two months of this season it was a tough ask for most recreational skiers to attempt.

The issue was that the new gondola, scheduled to begin operations early December – which most skiers tackling the famous run will use to exit the Mer de Glace glacier after their descent – suffered delays and couldn't open, while the old gondola lift it replaces had already been decommissioned.

So the only options at the end of the run were either climbing out on a challenging via ferrata (while wearing ski boots and carrying your skis), or negotiating the boulder field at the base of the glacier and skiing on down to Chamonix – if valley snow was adequate.

But as we went to press, Chamonix advised that the new gondola was due to finally open on 26 January. Now the main concern is that the much easier exit from the glacier may lead to guides trying to take two groups a day down the Vallée Blanche, rather than one, potentially leading to over-crowding and exasperating glacier erosion. Time will tell.

In recent years, due to the diminishing

glacier, skiers have had to tackle over 500 stairs from the end of the descent, before taking the old gondola up to the Montanvers train station for a journey back to Chamonix. Part of a €53m project, the huge new gondola is being installed 600m further up the glacier, creating direct access from the glacier to Montanvers.

The Compagnie du Mont Blanc lift company has made exceptional efforts to minimise the environmental impact of the new construction project, including using temporary lifts to bring in material and constructing cleaner, greener concrete on site. These efforts have made costs much higher than if they were using conventional practices and helicopters, and also led to the delay in the new gondola starting operations.

The Vallée Blanche is the most famous off-piste descent in the world and attracts tens of thousands of skiers each winter. It can be tackled by skiers of intermediate standard or higher, but skiing with a guide is essential as most winters see accidents, including deaths, due to skiers falling into crevasses.

The full descent from the Aiguille du Midi back down to Chamonix is around 23km (14.5 miles) long and descends approximately 2,800 vertical metres. But most skiers end their run below Montanvers after about 17km

(11 miles) and 2,300 vertical metres, as below here there is a glacial debris field at the end of the glacier, and then snow cover down to Chamonix can be incomplete.

The run is also one of the world's most visible illustrations of climate change, as the Mer de Glace glacier is melting fast and the level of the ice has dropped over a hundred vertical metres below Montanvers over the past 30 years.

When the original gondola linking Montanvers to the glacier opened in 1998 it reached directly down to the ice. However, as the years went by, a few steps needed to be added from the base of the gondola to the glacier. By the early 2000s 118 steps were needed. By last year the melting process had accelerated so much there were 550 steps required between the glacier and the old gondola base station.

The new gondola will mean no more steps initially, but project manager Benoit Borrel says this will be the last gondola, and that as the ice continues to retreat in the future, visitors will just have to adapt their habits.

The €53m project also includes an impressive Glaciorium, which will be located on a site where the old gondola operated and is due to open in late 2024 or early 2025.

For more info head to [chamonix.net](http://chamonix.net).