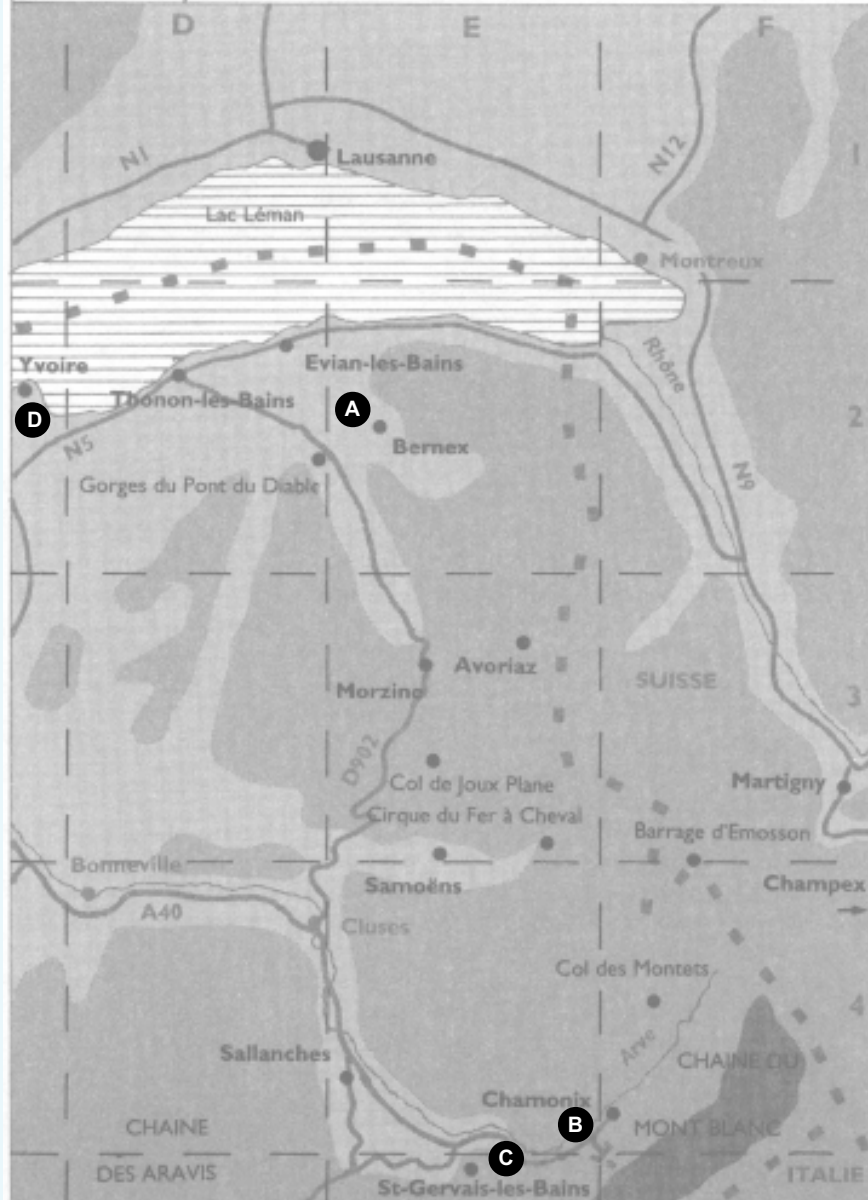
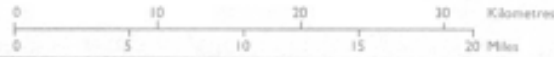


23

Haute-Savoie: dozy Mt Blanc, vistas galore and a car wash. Mer de Glace and *aiguilles*. A skyscraper dam. *Maquisards* and *miliciens*. Lac Léman, a choc-box, spas and *village fleuri*.



I'm halfway through *Mapaholics' France* and, at last, I have arrived in the terrain which I rate as one of my favourite parts of France – or, to be more specific, the area around the **Chaîne du Mont Blanc** (F4 and south of E4). Readers of my earlier books will know that I spent the first ten years of my life in the high Himalayas. As a result I have an insatiable love for lofty heights. No other mountain area in Europe excites me more than the varied peaks in the Mont Blanc *massif*.

If you approach Mont Blanc from the north you have two alternative routes to choose from. The less likely route is from **Martigny** (F3) in Switzerland. However impatient you may be to reach **Chamonix** (F4) make an absolutely essential detour, shortly before you reach the French border, to the **Barrage d'Emosson** (F3). The skyscraper-high dam is not far short of 7000 ft above sea-level; your reward is a spellbinding panorama of the entire Mont Blanc *chaîne*.

The second alternative approach is from Genève (west of D3) on either the **A40** (D4) or N205. At **Sallanches** (E4) turn right and climb on the D113, past numerous colourful chalets, to Cordon (D4): once again, the panorama of the western end of the *chaîne* is breathtaking.

However impressive these two long-distance panoramas are nothing compares with the views of the mountain wall towering above you in the Chamonix Valley; these are at their best from the lanes which climb the hillside on the north-west side of the 3400 ft-high resort. Across the valley, to your right, is the mystical snow-covered dome of the 15771 ft-high Mont Blanc (119:E3), glaciers tumbling down its northern face. In front of you, and to your left, are numerous razor-sharp rock needles (*aiguilles*), set in a jagged line across the eastern horizon.

There's always enough to keep you busy in **Chamonix** (F4) however long you stay. The various 'transport' attractions cost money. First, the cable-car climb to Aiguille du Midi, a spiky finger of rock, 12605 ft-high (done in two sections; and, if you have the time, the five-km gondola ride across the Vallée Blanche (south of F4) to Italy). Second, the less exciting cable-car climb ascent of Le Brévent (F4), one of the summits in the Aiguilles Rouges range; the panorama across the valley includes seven peaks in excess of 4000 m. Third, the gentle and relaxing rack (cog-rail) railway to the Mer de Glace at Montenvers (make the further ascent to the ice cave in the glacier, carved out anew each year). Fourth, the sedate Tramway du Mont Blanc, another rack system, which starts from Le Fayet (E4), climbs through the spa of **St-Gervais-les-Bains** (south of E4), to the 7782 ft-high terminus at Le Nid d'Aigle (leaving E1). Finally, the rail line which links Chamonix to Martigny shows off many facets of the Alpine world: isolated villages, roaring streams, deep gorges, dense forests, high peaks and emerald pastures. I've done them all – and others, too.

Sporting enthusiasts have a range of options. Golf, on one of the most exhilarating courses in the Alps; tennis, swimming and ice-skating (both the latter are covered, open-all-year facilities) in a fabulous sports complex; rafting and canoeing from

the Base Hydroglisse, alongside the Arve and the Centre Sportif; hang-gliding from the peaks reached by cable-car; a summer *luge* on the slopes behind the Mer de Glace terminus in Chamonix; and walks and climbs galore – exercise which costs nowt. There's an excellent guide for walkers and climbers: *Mont Blanc Trails* (in English) provides details, plus a first-class map, on 162 summer walks and hikes – each one categorised according to difficulty. A favourite walk of mine starts after the *téléferique* and *télécabine* ride from Les Praz (F4) to L'Index; walk north-east to Lac Blanc and then descend to the intermediate station at La Flégère. Flora and fauna fans should seek out two sites: the Parc de Merlet, a 57-acre reserve of mountain animals west of Les Bossons (E4); and the easy path which features many varieties of Alpine flowers and plants at the **Col des Montets** (F4), part of La Reserve des Aiguilles Rouges.

Let's head north. Make your first port of call the Giffre Valley and the **Cirque du Fer à Cheval** (E3/E4). As you approach **Samöens** (E3) you'll see a handful of pyramid-shaped peaks to the north of the three-star *village fleuri*. One treat at the village is the seven-acre hillside Jardin Alpin de La Jaysinia – an extrovert mix of cascades and paths among thousands of Alpine plants from five continents (a.m. and p.m. every day). The Cirque du Fer à Cheval, in two distinct amphitheatre halves, is a rewarding dead-end road: glaciers, both snow-topped and rocky peaks (one a rhino horn shape), and a dozen waterfalls appeal. An essential detour south from Sixt is the Cascade du Rouget (E4). The waterfall, in two parts, is more a river falling over a cliff edge. The D29 runs immediately below the fall, so close you could wash your car in the spray. Walk up the natural stone staircase to hear the roar, feel the spray and to admire the rainbow.

The **Col de Joux Plane** (E3) has long been a renowned Tour de France cycle race climb. From the south you climb through broadleaved trees and pines to pastures of wild flowers and a small pool at the summit. The views are stupendous: the whole Mont Blanc range, including the Grandes Jorasses (south of F4), fills the southern horizon.

**Morzine** (E3) has many sporting facilities: a large swimming pool, covered all-seasons ice rink, new golf course, tennis, and walks and climbs by the score. The best of the resort is the older part to the south. Drive up the D338 hairpins: as you climb hang-gliders swoop past you going the other way. The ski-station of **Avoriaz** (E3) is a spectacular sight at the top of the Ardoisières Valley: from a distance some of the buildings appear almost as extensions of the dark rock faces. As you descend on the D338 towards Les Lindarets keep a sharp look out for the Dents du Midi to the south-east (F3).

Les Lindarets is a tiny hamlet with old chalets; count yourself lucky if you encounter a herd of goats sunning themselves on the road – as I did. The Lac de Montriond (E3), in the wooded valley below, is as green a lake as you'll ever see. Further north the **Gorges du Pont du Diable** (D2) is a big tourist attraction (May

to Sept). After you pay your money there's a steep descent to a suspended walkway past falls of rock and alongside the Dranse, part of which is subterranean. (The dam upstream has taken the sting out of the river's fast flow.)

Typical of many mountain drives in Le Chablais (D2/E2) is the D122 which winds up through La Forclaz to the Col du Grand Taillet (D2): you get terrific views south of both the Dranse Gorge and the man-made lake. Over the top the vistas change: gentler hills, cultivated fields and many more houses. **Bernex** (E2), beneath several rock peaks to the east, is another unspoilt plus. The small lake at La Beunaz (you pay for the *plage*) is so well hidden by trees you can easily pass the spot by. But you'll not miss **Lac Léman**: your first views of the gigantic arc of water are from the lanes near St-Paul-en-Chablais (D2).

As hard as I have tried over several decades I have never taken to the resorts on the French side of Lac Léman. **Evian-les-Bains** (D2) has a large slice of style: flowers are everywhere; there's a shady tree-lined lakeside promenade; and, at the heart of the spa, you'll relish a chocolate-box selection of mouthwatering buildings. The Jardin Japonais is an eye-pleasing pleasure and steamer trips on the lake (including a service to **Lausanne**: D1) are a big bonus. **Thonon-les-Bains** (D2) has two parts: the lakeside port area has a Med feel; and a funicular takes you up to the ridge above Lac Léman where delightful gardens and views are the scenic highlights. Don't miss the picture postcard multi-towered Château de Ripaille, to the north, famed for its vineyards (a classic Savoie Chasselas grape white wine) and 47-acre arboretum. Excenevex (west of D2) has a great sandy beach.

On no account miss the stunning small medieval lakeside village of **Yvoire** (west of D2) – the epitome of a *village fleuri*. Man and Nature have succeeded too well; the honeypot hive is overrun by tourist swarms. The shops, too, are full of Far Eastern junk. All is forgotten when you enter Le Jardin des Cinq Sens at Yves and Anne-Monique d'Yvoire's château and the couple's newly-created delectable *labyrinthe* of small gardens which, in turn, appeal to each of the five senses. The property is open every day from May to Oct; try to avoid weekends.

Two final suggestions. Number one. I've written about the **Chaîne des Aravis** (D4) in 27. Make the scenically super *déviation* from Thorens-Glières to the Col des Glières (west of D4) – the site of the battle on March 26, 1944 between Savoie *maquisards* and a force of 5,000 Germans and French Vichy *miliciens*. At the col there are maps and a monument which explain the battle. See map sheet chapter 27 for details of the cemetery and museum near Thônes (27:C1).

Number two. Lack of space prevents me from writing about the Swiss treats on 23. But there's one gem you must unearth – the prettiest of pretty lakes. From Martigny Bourg (F4) head south and take the narrow road which climbs the Gorges du Durnand to the tiny lake and village at **Champex** (east of F4) – a superb mix of *lac*, forests, peaks and isolation.