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# Lockdown in the Alps

*All quiet in Chamonix*

**Doug Mayer**

ANYONE WHO HAS TOUCHED A CLIMBING ROPE UTTERS WITH reverence the name of the French town at the base of Mont Blanc: Chamonix. Its glaciated peaks and its 15-mile-long V-shaped valley just below the 4,809-meter peak, have been at the forefront of alpinism since Jacques Balmat and Michel Paccard first gained the summit of “Le Mont Blanc” on August 8, 1786. This journal first mentioned “Chamouny” in its December 1884 issue.



Even some of the mayors of Chamonix (current population 8,906) have alpine stories to tell. Maurice Herzog, whose team made the first ascent of 8,091-meter-high Annapurna, held the office from 1968 to 1977. Current Mayor Eric Fournier runs high-elevation ultramarathons. “I trained for 45 minutes,” he quipped when asked how he prepared for a 100-kilometer race around half of the Mont Blanc massif.

Nick Yardley, a guide and mountain rescuer from the White Mountains of New Hampshire, has climbed for three decades in Chamonix and calls it “the place to come to test oneself against the milestone climbing routes of such heroes as Walter Bonatti and Riccardo Cassin,” two of the Alps’s famous climbers.\*

In Chamonix, through World War I, the 2018 flu pandemic, and World War II, ice axes were always swinging.

Until, at noon on March 17, 2020, in the world’s birthplace of alpinism, everything stopped.

### **Le Confinement**

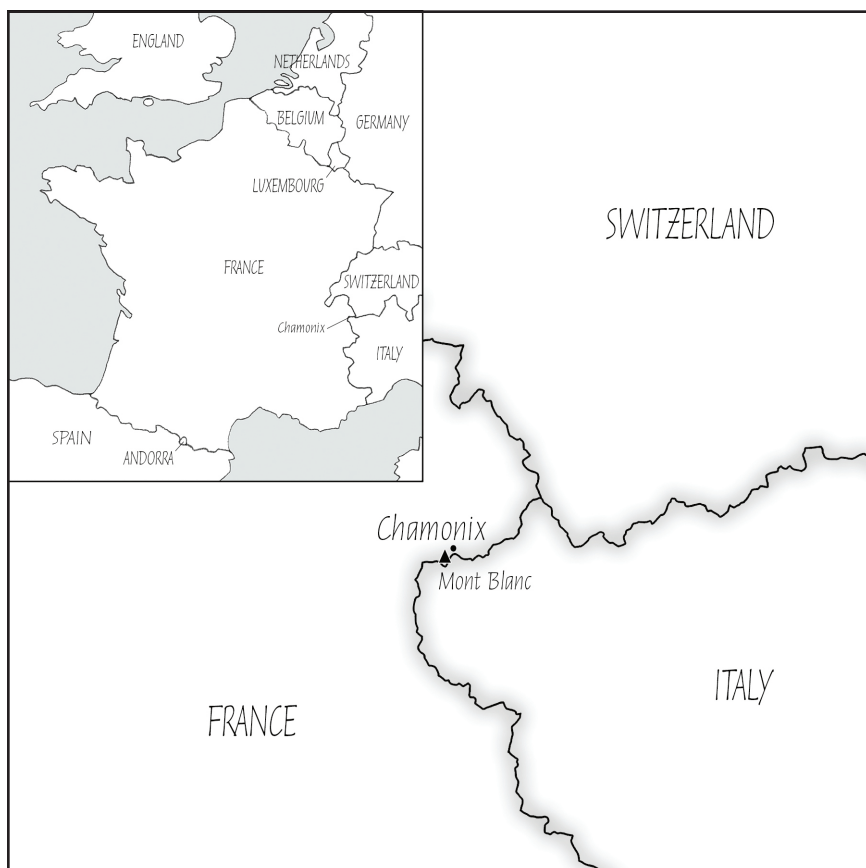
The coronavirus caused a seven-week lockdown. Facing surging infection rates and the prospects of overflowing hospital emergency rooms, the French government took a series of decisive actions, starting on March 12, when it announced that all schools and universities would close, indefinitely. Next, large gatherings were prohibited, and cafés and restaurants closed.

Finally, on March 16, French President Emmanuel Macron went on national TV to announce the start of a mandatory home lockdown, which became known as *Le Confinement*. In Chamonix, locals took to the mountains for a final fix, uncertain what the future held. Emily Geldard, a hiking guide and longtime resident, grabbed her skis and climbing skins and headed for Le Tour, a small valley village not far from the Swiss border. “Although the ski lifts had closed the day before, we turned up to a packed parking lot,” she

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\* The Italian climber Bonatti pioneered technically demanding routes on the world’s highest peaks, including the first winter ascent of the North Face of the Matterhorn. He died in Rome in 2011. His Italian contemporary, Cassin, made over 2,500 ascents, including more than 100 first ascents, such as a technical ridge named in his honor on Alaska’s Denali. He was a decorated World War II resistance fighter, who died at age 100 in 2009.

*A seven-week lockdown left the normally bustling streets of Chamonix, France, completely empty.* KATIE MOORE



ABIGAIL COYLE/APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

said. “Looking down the run, you could have mistaken it for a busy ski day, but with most people moving up rather than down!” Geldard was glad she went. “It felt like our freedom was about to end.”

For my part, I had planned to attend the popular Pierra Menta ski mountaineering race in Arêches, 90 minutes from Chamonix. Considered one of the world’s great mountain races, the event draws competitors from around the world and thousands of spectators, who ski deep into the Beaufortain mountain range to cheer the skiing athletes as they climb and descend challenging alpine terrain on lightweight skis. Pierra Menta, of course, was off for this year. Suspecting a lockdown was coming, a friend and I nonetheless kept our hotel reservations, taking what we thought were reasonable sanitary precautions. We enjoyed two days of quiet ski mountaineering—and on the

third and last day, I fell and broke my arm. At the hospital the next morning, I chose to wait outside, the small, poorly ventilated *salle d'attente* already filled with sick-looking, coughing patients. An MRI revealed that surgery would not be necessary, and a friend gave me a ride home. It was, I decided, an act of genius. If I had to break a bone and miss a season of spring skiing, at least this time around there would be no FOMO, or Fear of Missing Out.

The vibe of town had already started to shift. Normally, Chamonix has a lively nightlife, with many bars, pubs, and restaurants open into the early hours of the morning. Geldard's husband owns the popular Big Mountain Brewery. "It was already different, with people avoiding hugs or kisses when meeting. There was lots of chat about COVID and speculation about the upcoming confinement."

When it came, the confinement was strict. Anyone venturing out, Macron announced, would need to complete a form called an *Attestation de Déplacement Dérogatoire*. Fines were levied for improperly completed paperwork, with repeat offenders facing a penalty of up to 3,750 euros, or about \$4,300, and six months in prison. Time outside was capped at one hour, and approved reasons for leaving home were few. The government allowed just one hour of exercise and only within one kilometer of your residence. Within a few days, leaders added a cap of 100 meters of climbing above home. The goal was clear: reduce hospital admissions and free up medical staff for the impending tsunami of COVID-19 cases.

During the confinement, I was living in an apartment just at the one-kilometer radius from downtown Chamonix. On the second full day of lockdown, I filled out my attestation, signed and dated it, adding the time, and struck out for a walk. Chamonix, famous for its busy pedestrian-only downtown and bustling outdoor cafés and restaurants, was a dystopic ghost town. Gendarmes, the local police, were very nearly the only people out, checking papers and IDs. Of the half-dozen residents I saw, one was half-slumped on a bench outside the mayor's office in Place de l'Église. She caught my attention and today lives in my memory for one notable quality. She was coughing violently.

### **Confined, *Les Sportifs* Cope**

In short order, a wave of illness swept across the country. On March 31 alone, 7,578 new cases were reported across the country. On April 4, the country recorded 2,004 new deaths that day; on April 15, 1,438 were dead from the

virus. The daily new cases and death rates dropped dramatically by mid-May, but cumulative deaths would reach more than 30,000 by mid-July.

In Chamonix, several of my friends were sick with a range of symptoms. One of the valley's strongest ski mountaineering guides, Fred Bernard, battled a severe COVID-19 infection at his home in Le Tour. At one point, he drained an oxygen bottle saved for clients. Geldard, with whom I had recently shared a long car ride, fell ill. At home a few days into confinement, I began to experience light flu-like symptoms that lasted ten days. I wondered if I had been lucky enough to gain immunity without much personal sacrifice.

Down valley, in the village of Servoz, an American high mountain guide from Saint George, Vermont, had started his confinement a few days before the rest of the country. Brad Carlson, age 31, had been climbing with a friend who contracted the virus from a client. Carlson, only the third American to go through Chamonix's École Nationale de Ski et d'Alpinisme's high mountain guide program, also holds a PhD in alpine plant ecology and works part-time as a researcher at Chamonix's alpine environmental research nonprofit, CREA Mont-Blanc. Carlson's wife, Hillary Gerardi, is a sponsored mountain runner for Black Diamond and worked at six of the Appalachian Mountain Club's White Mountain huts between 2005 and 2009. Carlson and Gerardi have lived in France for nine years, the last three in Chamonix.

In many ways, Carlson and Gerardi are representative of the Chamonix community—overachievements included. High-level *sportifs*, their living depends on time in the mountains, sometimes with tourists tagging along, other times pushing their limits, hard. "If it's a beautiful Saturday and you're not working, you sure as hell better be out sending hard or doing something rad," says Carlson, who likens the vibe to a treadmill—cease your relentless forward motion, and in the blink of an eye you'll be jettisoned off the back.

Carlson, who has a low-key presence and a gentle demeanor, is both wise and thoughtful. He found a silver lining in confinement. "It was a really positive experience for me. I needed to slow down." The couple took time to enjoy their backyard, having lunch outside and exploring local trails in their village, even as the pandemic raged at their doorstep—an irony not lost on either of them.

The more typical Chamoniard reaction, however, was a bit more angst-ridden. Climbers, trail runners, and backcountry skiers slowly began to chafe against the lockdown. After a full moon, residents spotted ski tracks high on the Mont Blanc massif. A few trail runners admitted privately to completing duplicate forms, noting the time on the second form an hour later, so

they could double their time outside. Other residents gently tested boundaries. Colorado native Rob Coppolillo, who lives in Chamonix with his wife, Rebecca, and two children Dominic and Luca, delicately explored the fringes of the 100-meter cap and was promptly admonished by a local gendarme. “He was very polite, with a big smile,” said Coppolillo, who thanked the officer. “I was going a bit stir crazy and sure enough, it bit me in the ass,” he confessed.

### **PGHM Responds**

The local mountain police, *Le Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne*, or PGHM, were at the ready for the cat-and-mouse game. With their helicopter, Dragon 74, they patrolled the peaks, occasionally landing to fine the few climbers and skiers brazenly violating confinement. They watched the GPS app Strava, looking for *les sportifs* who neglected to keep their phones off. They flew drones, hid in the trees near bouldering areas, and stopped trail runners, asking to see their sports watches—some of which were ticking well past the one-hour mark.

Chamonix’s airborne athletes weren’t immune to the itch, either. In a moment of poor judgment that is already becoming legendary in the valley, one paraglider couldn’t quite restrain himself. The problem? He lived in a building with a number of PGHM employees. His climbing rope provided the solution, however, and in the middle of the night he rappelled out his window, climbed above Chamonix, and happily sailed over the sleeping town. When he returned, PGHM members were lying in wait with a few questions about the dangling rappel cord.

Midnight rappelling aside, most Chamonix residents took the confinement in stride. Danny Uhlmann, a mountain guide from the United States, started an online training program for his fellow guides. Guide and paraglider Dylan Taylor organized his peers via the messaging service WhatsApp. When American guides Mark Houston and Kathy Cosley fell ill, the group brought the longtime Chamonix guides their groceries. (Cosley later got tested and was negative for coronavirus antibodies. Houston decided not to get tested after Cosley’s negative result.) Chamonix’s trail runners went virtual, supporting each other on a popular local Facebook group, Wild Trail Chamonix. For their part, Gerardi and Carlson set up a cycling trainer, pull-up bars, and rings in their yard that Gerardi had scored right before the looming lockdown. “We made ourselves a *Deep Confinement* Spotify playlist and generally embraced training hard in a 500-square-foot space,” said Carlson.



### **Le Déconfinement Arrives**

For Chamonix and the rest of France, the first phase of *le déconfinement* came on May 11. France's Minister of Sports issued painfully conflicted guidance: climbing was allowed, but climbers needed to maintain 1.5 meters of spacing—impossible on a narrow belay ledge. One could set foot atop the summits . . . but please don't stay long. Mountain sports were approved for training, but clients were not yet allowed. In the Haute-Savoie, the mountainous region of France that is home to Chamonix and more than a dozen other mountain towns, the regional government chimed in, noting that hospitals would be near capacity, and the usual rates of mountaineering accidents would not be acceptable. "The chance of overstroke was very high," Carlson said,

In general, though, alpinists took the intent of the decree to heart. In Chamonix, there were a few accidents. One skier fell 600 meters in the Cosmiques Gully, off the Aiguille du Midi, and was seriously injured. Two weeks after the deconfinement, Hugo Hoff, a past winner of the Freeride Junior World Tour, fell 700 meters and died while skiing the Gervasutti Couloir, on the east face of Mont-Blanc du Tacul. A professional, sponsored athlete, he was just 20 years old.

In town, Chamonix remained eerily empty, the result of a new 100-kilometer travel limit. A few cafés and restaurants opened for take-out only, and small groups of friends awkwardly rejoiced in seeing each other, tapping elbows in lieu of the famous French *bise* on the cheek. They did their best to remember the new 1.5-meter *distanciation sociale*. Nearly all wore masks, and posters went up reinforcing the new norms.

Three weeks later, on June 2, France entered phase two of *deconfinement*. A much smaller than usual clutch of climbers and skiers gathered outside Boulangerie Le Fournil on Avenue de l'Aiguille du Midi, downing a café au lait while they waited for the early morning tram up to glaciers below the Aiguille du Midi, where they would have instant access to the alpine world they so missed.

### **An Uncertain Future**

In recent years, Chamonix has metamorphosed. The largest events are now trail races like the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc and the Marathon du Mont-Blanc, each of which bring tens of thousands of mountain runners and onlookers to the region. Climate change, meanwhile, has been melting the permafrost that acts as glue, holding together classic alpine climbs. In



September of last year, an estimated 100,000 cubic meters of rock collapsed on a portion of the Mont Blanc massif, falling on to the Glacier des Pèlerins, below. The dusty plume was visible for miles. And now, guides, shopkeepers and others who bank on alpinists and trail runners showing up, are wondering what the summer holds. “The forecast is for close to zero international clientele,” Carlson said. He and his colleagues at the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix expect business to be about 15 to 30 percent of normal, their few clients being regional tourists looking for adventures close to home.

Cosley, who has been guiding in Chamonix for two decades, wonders if it’s the end of an era. “I go back and forth between thinking we’ll have a weird year or two,” she said, “and wondering if maybe the business model of American guides getting American clients in the Alps is gone for my generation.”

Coppolillo, for his part, is trying to reposition and find more regional clients. He’s part of a social media group of American guides, and few expect much business from the US for some time. With European Union borders less likely to close than more distant international ones, looking for clients a little closer to home is clearly a safer bet.

If stress and uncertainty was the order of the day during the seven-week confinement in the world’s home of alpinism, there was another population that, one imagines, was decidedly OK with the change. Chamonix’s alpine fauna experienced a newfound peace. Mathieu Dechavanne, CEO of the Compagnie du Mont-Blanc, which owns the valley’s 69 mountain lifts, captured unusual footage during one of the handful of times the town’s Aiguille du Midi cable car—the world’s second longest—was in operation during the confinement. In the video he posted online, one of the Alps’ few wolves is casually roaming over the spring snowpack, mere meters from the shuttered Refuge Plan de l’Aiguille mountain hut—and, no doubt, blissfully unaware of the human drama unfolding a thousand meters below.

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DOUG MAYER lived for years at the base of Mount Madison, in Randolph, New Hampshire, where he was trails chair for the Randolph Mountain Club. He now lives in Chamonix, France, and runs the trail-running tour company Run the Alps.