On Location: Chamonix, France

In this new series we intend to offer a snapshot of the clothing, footwear and equipment that is proving popular in specific sports locations around the world. In the first article, we visit the iconic Alpine resort of Chamonix.



The cradle of winter sports

Chamonix, in the shadow of Mont Blanc, western Europe's highest peak, claims to be the cradle of winter sports.

It was here, in this Alpine town of 10,000 inhabitants, that the Winter Olympics first took place in 1924. Since then, Chamonix has developed steadily as a tourist resort and now receives around five million visitors every year. As well as coming all year round to contemplate the mountain scenery, people come with the specific sporting intention of walking, climbing and mountain-biking in summer, and to ski and snow-board in winter. As we shall see, they also come to shop.

This winter season—at the time of writing, at least—is delighting the authorities in Chamonix. Snow has fallen more abundantly than during last year's "very difficult" winter, and there have also been plenty of sunny days. As a result, the 2007–2008 season shows promise of matching the high snow-levels of 1996, and the positive tourist earnings of 2005.

In the early part of January, Paris-based daily *Le Figaro* reported that traffic on the chairlift



The town of Chamonix attracts visitors all year round. Heavy snow-falls and sunny days have meant a positive start to this winter sports season.

network in this part of the Alps was up by 25% compared to the year before. And during the two-week Christmas holiday period, tourist accommodation in the area was 90% full. "We couldn't have dreamt of a better start to the season," Laurent Anceney, director of the tourist office at nearby Colomboux, told the newspaper.

Everyone connected to the industry is optimistic and looking forward to a fabulous February. This one month, the year's shortest, usually accounts for 40% of the whole winter season trade in this part of Europe.

In general, French visitors restrict their ski-breaks to the official school holidays, which include a now traditional winter sports week, or "Semaine Blanche", in February. Outside of those dates, low-cost airlines from other parts of Europe are helping resorts such as Chamonix to keep the stream of visitors flowing throughout the winter months.

All of this is good news for the outdoor apparel, footwear and equipment retailers that hold down all the best locations in the town, especially along the street named after the Italian doctor who first reached the summit of Mont Blanc in 1786, Michel-Gabriel Paccard, and for the brands whose goods they sell.

The Rue Docteur Paccard hosts many big names, including that of Swedish retailer and manufacturer Peak Performance, which has had one of its 'general stores' on Chamonix's main shopping street for ten years now. Popular products there at the moment include the company's Banff polyester ski jacket at €330 (the loud, red tartan design is turning lots of heads on the pistes) and its Frontier jumpsuit, inspired partly by the film Top Gun and partly by the suits NASA provides for its astronauts. The suit is made of Peak's own HiPE 2L performance fabric and retails at around €550.

Further along the street is the Quiksilver store. This California-based company is better known for surfing than for skiing, but its outlet in Chamonix carries a range of parkas (€200), jackets (from €110 to €350) and fleece tops (€99) that are proving popular with winter sports enthusiasts.

Another Rue Docteur Paccard resident is Helly Hansen, whose colourful range of LIFA—the brand's proprietary blend of Lycra, nylon and polypropylene—insulating base-layer garments (€79), ski and après-ski footwear (such as the men's Sasquatch boot in EVA and waterproof leather with added membrane protection against wetness, for wearing around town after a spell on the slopes, €149), and children's padded jackets in the company's proprietary waterproof, breathable Helly-Tech material (€89) make up just a tiny sample of the choice on offer in the boutique.

The Chamonix Lafuma boutique is in the same street, with the current stock including Spitfire stretch ski pants, which incorporate Gore-Tex protection (€250) and soft but strong base-layer garments for men and women in fabrics from Polartec and in the company's proprietary Dryway polyamide material (from €40).



The Banff ski jacket from Peak Performance is turning lots of heads on the pistes.

Peak Performance

Finally on our whistle-stop tour of the specialist sports and activewear shops in the centre of Chamonix, we visit Patagonia's store at the end of the same street, Rue Docteur Paccard. Winning many admirers there at the moment are the new Primo Down jackets for skiers and snowboarders. The product doesn't come cheap—it's €595—but the manufacturer insists the ultrawarm, waterproof jacket can cope with even the harshest Alpine conditions.

It has 700-fill down insulation and a three-layer shell with two-way stretch for flexibility. Patagonia uses welded seam technology throughout, which, it argues, reduces the overall weight of the finished garment and improves its wet-weather performance. It also has ventilating mesh panels to suspend the down and keep air flowing between the insulation and the shell. It also boasts a three-way-adjustable helmet-compatible hood, an interior drop-in pocket, a bicep pocket, an insulated pocket for iPods and water-resistant zippers.

The choice of garments, shoes, boots and accessories grows wider ever year as the outdoor and sports spaces continue to attract the attention of top design talent across the world. As far as winter sports are concerned, we can only give a small taste of the variety on offer in a hot-spot such as Chamonix.