



STEEP PRICE TO PAY

INCREASING BC TRAFFIC IN CHAMONIX CAUSES SAFETY CONCERN

One of the most polarizing topics in the backcountry is the rise of lift-served access and the resulting increase in skier traffic on lines that once were seldom ridden. Nowhere has this trend been more magnified than in Chamonix, France, where safety-controlled terrain does not exist and elite skiers and riders the world over come to test their mettle on serious big-mountain lines. But from the north face of the Aiguille du Midi to the Argentière Basin, locals are starting to wonder how much more traffic their massive steeps can take before the increased load leads to tragedy.

"It's glaringly obvious how crowded it's gotten," says Dave Rosenbarger, a leading steep skier in Chamonix for the past decade. "It used to be that it'd snow, you'd let it sit for a couple of days, then there'd be a small crew—maybe one or two parties—who would go out and ski the bigger lines. Now, pretty much every snowfall, up to 40 people are literally racing to ski those lines the next day."

All of the descents in question are at least partially lift accessed, whether via the Grand Montets ski area or the téléphérique to the top of the Aiguille. Yet while the Argentière Basin requires you to boot up your route—a problem in its own right when 12 skiers start following you up a 50-degree tube, Rosenbarger says—no such exertion is needed to ski the north face of the Aiguille. You simply ski off the top, and 4,000 feet later you reach the bottom.

Trey Cook, editor of ChamonixInsider.com and a full-time resident for 15 years, believes equipment advances are at the core of the issue, allowing more people to access the backcountry more easily. But the "herd mentality" doesn't help, he says, pointing to a day last May when 50 centimeters of windblown snow greeted a number of teams competing for first tracks on the Aiguille's infamous Mallory route—a couloir so steep it's usually an ice climb. "The first crew released a big slab on the initial slope in full view of everyone," he explains. "But did that stop anyone? Not hardly."

Rosenbarger recalls a day three seasons ago when he was skiing the same line with a group of elite pros. Halfway down, they heard a rumble. Another party had dropped in above them and sent an eight-foot-tall "sluff" cascading down the throat. "You almost need traffic police up there, like, 'OK, it's good, you can go now,'" Rosenbarger says. "I'm certain there's going to be major accidents if things stay the way they are." —*Devon O'Neil*

Alex Devouassoux playing in heavy traffic. Chamonix, France. // Photo: Luca Pandolfi