



## Taking the Iron Way

In Switzerland's Lake Geneva Region, landlubbers can taste the ultimate high with the latest craze in climbing. **Leslie Woit** samples the delights of via ferrata.

**+** Look down. WAY down. Beneath my boots, a slim band of cold iron. Below that, a whole lot of nothing. I take my hands off the rope, lean back into the abyss. ... And take one big step.

No, it isn't the end, it's only the beginning. Via ferrata is the latest trend for novice climbers seeking the same high-altitude rush as the pros – within the safe confines of a fixed-protection laddered route and under supervision of a guide.

How safe can a ladder be, you ask? The term via ferrata means "iron way" in Italian. The hundreds of iron

ladder steps that guide your ascent and descent are drilled, bolted and glued into solid rock with a space-age form of chewing gum that sustains thousands of pounds of pressure per square inch. In addition to the rungs, heavy-gauge steel wire ropes are fixed to the rock. Your two carabiners are repeatedly clipped and re-clipped as you advance.

First used during the wars to allow for the quick movement of mountain troops in the Dolomites, via ferrata routes are now popping up all over Switzerland, on vertical faces otherwise inaccessible to all but seriously experienced athletes. Just over an hour from Geneva, in the idyllic Swiss villages of Villars, Leysin, Château d'Oex and Rougement, are some of the most thrilling and scenic climbs anywhere.

The Diablerets Glacier 3000 is popular with both skiers and hikers for its year-round snow, and for the new Wild Glacier Ride – the world's highest alpine bobsleigh track. The lift up to it delivers big-bang accessible climbing adventure.

I'm on the route known as the Tête au Chamois – the Head of the Chamois – a hulking rock face that stands beneath the first stage of the Col du

Pillon cable-car at Les Diablerets. All 830 metres of the Tête au Chamois traverses dramatically across and then straight up the cliff, with two primary benefits. First, you ride the cable-car to reach

the start, then loop around, conveniently finishing at the cable-car. Second and best of all, those riding the lift think you're a superstar. Or crazy. Or both.

Classed as D+, the Tête au Chamois is full of gravity-loaded magic treats. Narrow passages that involve shape-shifting into a sausage-wearing helmet. Plank walking over thin air. And overhangs where your all-but-total bodyweight relies on two sweaty hands and whatever pinky strength you can muster.

Climbing on bits of metal is one thing, but the real wow factor derives not so much from you being latched onto an endless vertical wall – but on what looms behind.

In this case, a whole lot of nothing. ●

**Tête au Chamois** traverses dramatically across and then straight up the cliff



### What kind of equipment do I need?

A helmet, climbing harness, and a double, shock-absorbing rope specially designed for the via ferrata can be provided by your guide.

### How can I get started?

Introductory courses are run by certified guides in Villars. Check out Villars Experience ([www.villars-experience.ch](http://www.villars-experience.ch)) and the aptly-named and charming Guido Guidetti. Avenue Centrale, 1884 Villars, call +41 24 495 4138, or email [guido@villars-experience.ch](mailto:guido@villars-experience.ch). A private guide for an entire day costs SFr480 for up to seven guests. Add SFr25 for equipment. For more information visit [www.villars.ch](http://www.villars.ch)

### What else?

Mountain-biking, walking, paragliding, hot-air ballooning can all be done in the Lake Geneva Region, for more information visit [www.lake-geneva-region.ch](http://www.lake-geneva-region.ch). A whole host of activities offered under the Villars-Cryon Freedom Pass (don't miss our competition to win a holiday to Villars and a Freedom Pass on page 42).