

Morzine Avoriaz

from pastures to ski slopes



Morzine at the turn of the 20th century.

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**Morzine's church of Mary Magdalene
and the Old Bridge.**



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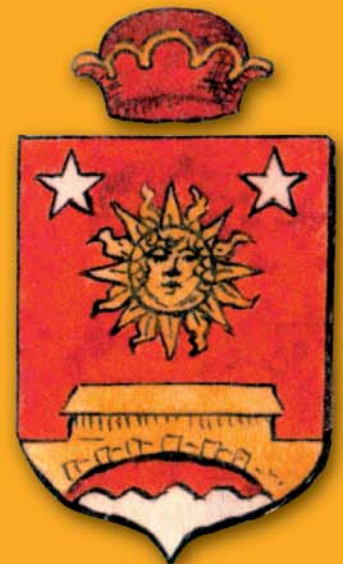
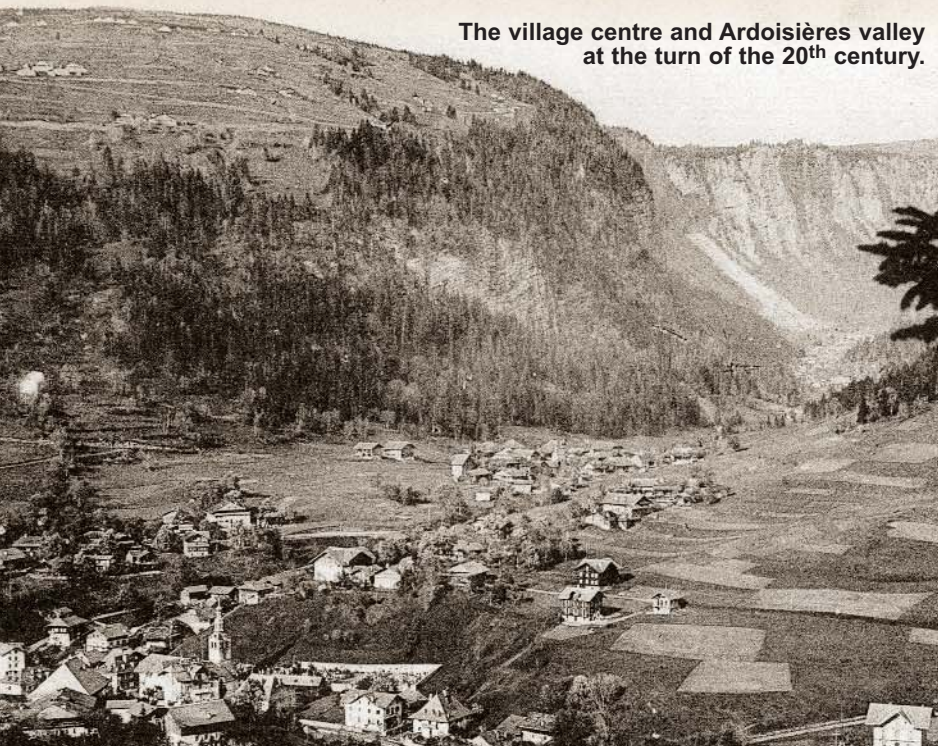
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Located in the Chablais in the north of the Haute-Savoie and at the southern most tip of the Aulps valley, Morzine-Avoriaz is in Le Biot canton and falls under the jurisdiction of Thonon-les-Bains. The Aulps valley, along with two other valleys flanking it - Brevon and Abondance - are known collectively as Haut-Chablais. The Aulps valley measures 220km from north to south and was governed for much of the Middle Ages by the Cistercian abbey of Saint Marie d'Aulps. The name "Aulps" derives from the Latin "alpius", or mountain pasture, indicating a long history of farming at altitude. The valley is intersected by Morzine's Dranse river and the D902 highway. This road, part of the "Route des Grandes Alpes" network, was constructed at the end of the 19th century. Its opening abruptly ended Morzine's isolation at the southern end of the Aulps valley on the border with Swiss Valais. Since then, Morzine has experienced enormous growth through tourism, further accelerated by the creation of Avoriaz in the 1960s. Today the village is known as Morzine-Avoriaz and recognised as one of the most famous ski resorts in the world.



The name Morzine ("Morzna" in the local patois) derives from the Celtic "Morge" meaning a frontier or a limit. Many rivers in France and Switzerland are called "La Morge". This indicates perhaps in the very distant past that the area called Morzine (the village centre) which is at the confluence of two rivers - from Manche and Ardoisières valleys - defined the boundary between two communities. Some believe that Morzine gets its name from the German "morgen", meaning acre or morning and sunrise, hence the sun's depiction.

The village centre and Ardoisières valley at the turn of the 20th century.



MORZINE'S COAT OF ARMS
 "A face on a golden sun flanked by two silver stars either side on high and a covered bridge with a silver river below." The arch represents the old bridge spanning the Dranse river and the now dismantled covered hallway. The coat of arms was stitched onto a red hat with gold embroidery which alluded to the Morzinois nickname: "The Red Hats."

Location

Three Haut (High) Chablais valleys -

While the Bas (Low) Chablais runs down gently to Lake Geneva, the Haut Chablais reaches for the mountains. The three valleys constituting the Haut Chablais (Abondance, Aulps and Brevon) each feature a Dranse, or river, which meet at Bioge to become the Savoie Dranse that is a tributary of Lake Geneva. Going from north to south the Aulps valley encompasses the villages of La Forclaz, La Vernaz, La Baume, Le Biot, Seytroux, Saint Jean-d'Aulps, Essert-Romand, Montriond, La Côte d'Arbroz, Les Gets and Morzine-Avoriaz. The valley's history is discussed in detail in another book in this series by the same editor.

A glaciated valley - Aulps valley, a 30km stretch from Morzine to Thonon-les-Bains, was formed by glaciers and the Dranse river in turn. The valley provides a link to the north via Thonon and the shores of Lake Geneva, and to the south with Swiss Valais via Coux mountain pass,

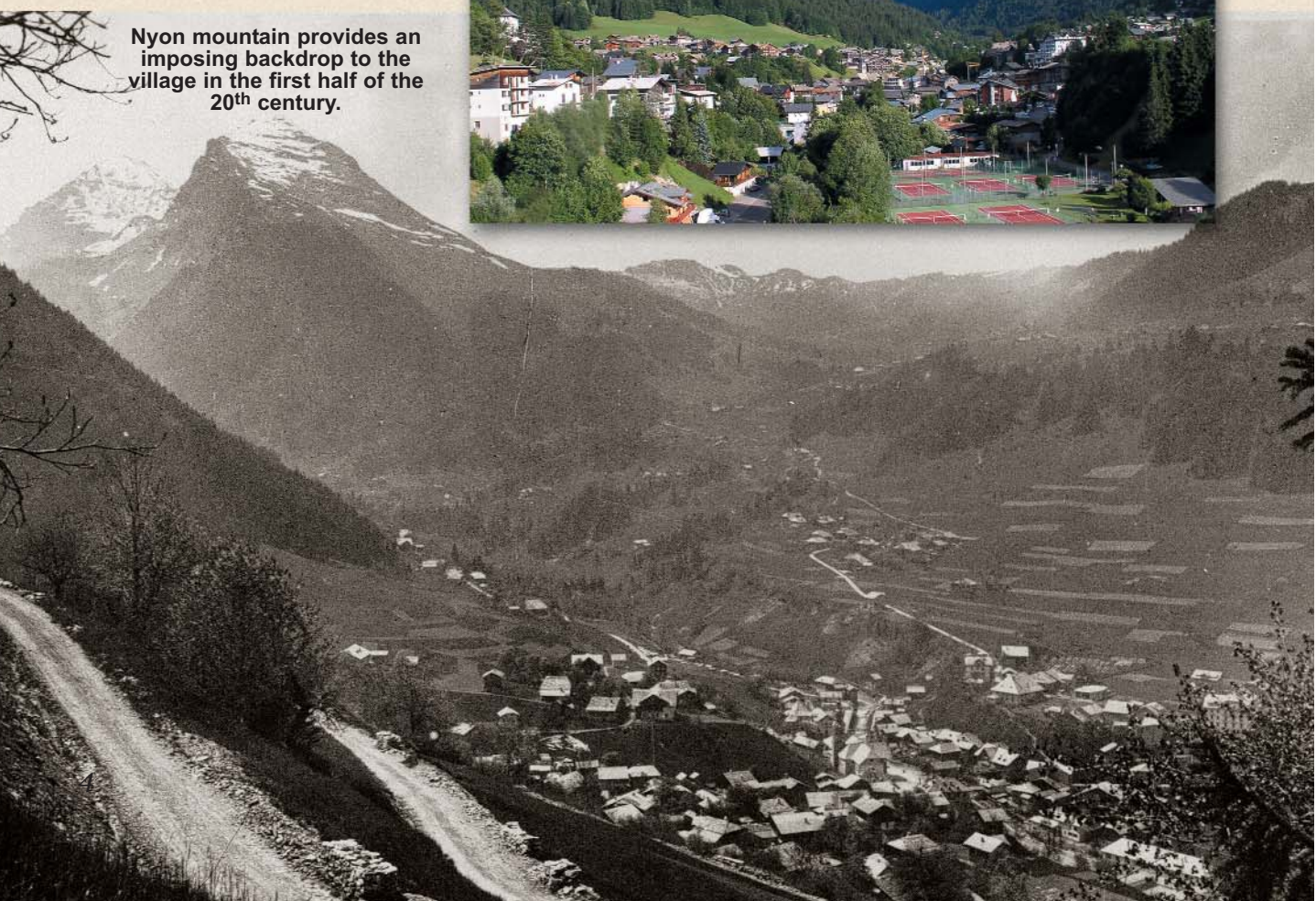
and with Taninges via Les Gets mountain pass.

The valley is divided into three geological basins by two rocky outcrops: Jotty and Tines - this last formation being so narrow that a tunnel had to be burrowed through it at the end of the 19th century to build the Morzine-Thonon road. This inaccessibility is the main reason why Morzine remained isolated for so long - and why its villagers had more contact with Swiss Valais than with Thonon-les-Bains. But if the number of villagers remained low because of the harsh mountain climate, all this changed following the D902's opening and the subsequent enthusiasm for winter sports. Today the majority of economic activity is focused on Morzine, which also has the biggest local population.

Nyon mountain provides an imposing backdrop to the village in the first half of the 20th century.



The village in 2008 with the sports complex in the foreground.

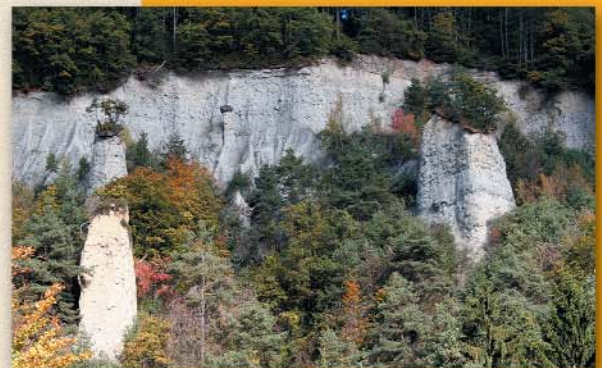




Devil's Bridge gorges at Jotty (near La Vernaz village). A spectacular example of natural erosion. The boulders wedged over the gorges - the celebrated Devil's Bridge - fell from cliffs above.

The Pre-Alps - The Chablais lies in a geological zone classified as Pre Alps. In Aulps valley the principal rock formations are limestone, shale and gypsum. Other schist formations include slate which is mined in Morzine. Initially the valley was hollowed out by the Rhone glacier which enveloped the Chablais, though narrower sections remain - at Jotty and Tines - indicating harder limestone capable of resisting the glacier's passage. The spectacular linked gorges at Devil's Bridge - which opened in 1893 - were created by the Dranse river as it ran up against the Jotty rock.

The glaciers retreated some 12 000 years ago leaving piles of soil and rock, known as moraine, and erratic rocks which still lie in the Dranse.



Erosion by another name: the fairies' chimneys at "pont de la Douceur" (bridge of Sweetness) on the outskirts of Thonon.

The village

The chef lieu, or village centre - It is located at the confluence of the Dranse rivers of Sous le Saix and Manche at the centre of the valley floor. The valley is relatively narrow here and access to both sides is given by three bridges. Before 1741 when work began to dig dykes to counter the Dranse's devastating floods, what we today call the old part of Morzine was by no means the most densely populated area. Hamlets such as Salle, Crusaz or Putheys were built on higher ground and housed more people. The land used to build the church and town hall flooded often and it was only in the second half of the 18th century that work finished to tame the Dranse and the Vieux Pont (Old Bridge) and Pont des Filles (Girls' Bridge) were built.

A Y-shaped settlement - Beyond the village centre the community separates into two closed valleys: Ardoisières and Manche. The first, as its name implies, was a slate mining area, and it comes to an abrupt halt at the cliffs beneath the Avoriaz plateau. The second valley is longer, stretching to the Mines d'Or, or gold mines, and linking to Switzerland via Coux mountain pass. Ardoisières and Manche valleys are separated by Hauts Forts mountains (2 466m) and Ressachaux peak (2 173m). Each valley has its own Dranse river - Sous le Saix and Manche - which meet in the centre of Morzine close to the church to form the Morzine Dranse river.



Deep in each valley, far from the tourist hustle and bustle of the village centre and Avoriaz, you can still see many traditional chalets, some of which are working farms.

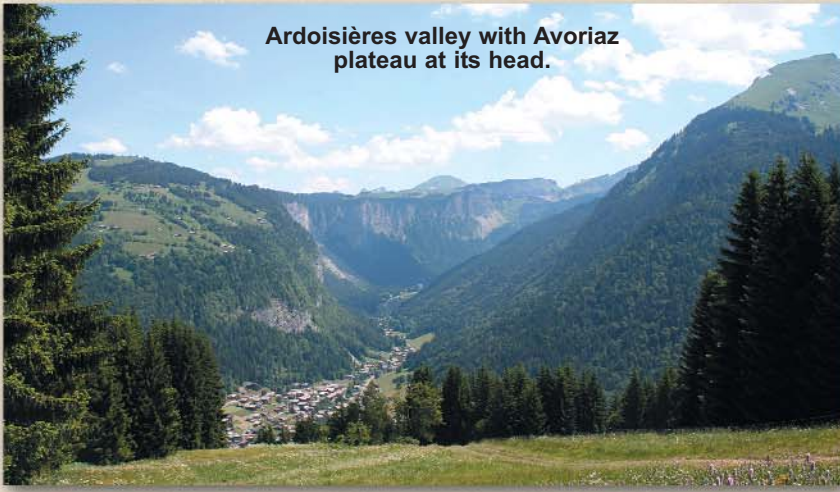
Ardoisières valley - Also known as Sous le Saix (saix derives from the Latin *saxum* meaning rock). This valley is also flanked by the Serrausaix mountains on the right and by Ressachaux on the left. The slate mines are scattered along the cliff's surface and follow the slate seam to Avoriaz. Huge blocks of stone stand alone in the middle of fields throughout the valley, remnants of previous landslides; the worst destroyed Char village in 1873. At the end of the valley Prodains cable car rises to Avoriaz.

Manche valley - The Mines d'Or (gold mines) lake lies in a secluded spot on the border with Samoëns village. Measuring 1.5 hectares and with a depth of 5m, anglers catch Fario and rainbow trout. The valley was given its name in the second half of the 19th century after Swiss people came looking - in vain - for precious minerals.

Avoriaz perches at 1 800 metres on a magnificent, sun-drenched plateau some 12km drive from the village centre. It is a skiers' paradise constructed on medieval pasture.



Ardoisières valley with Avoriaz plateau at its head.

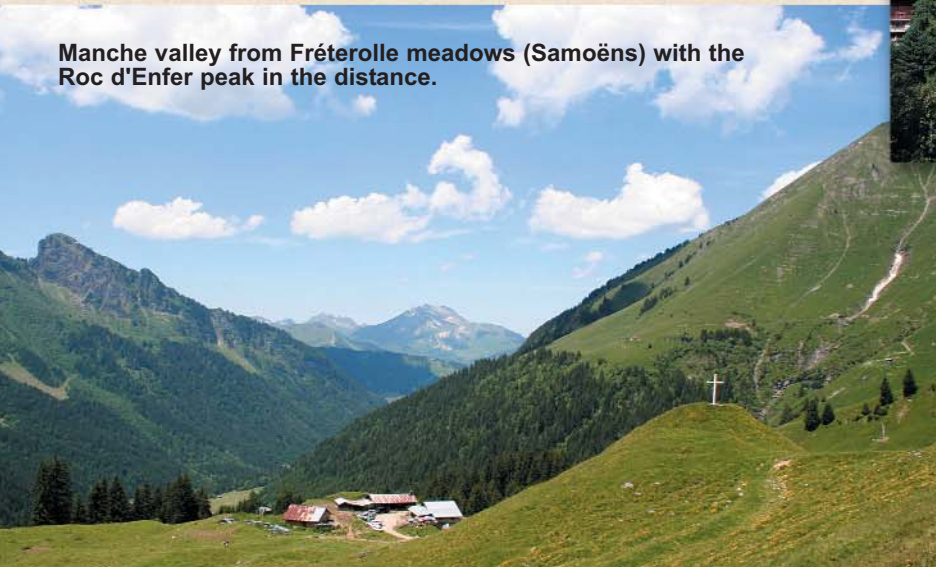


Above it the Golèse mountain pass leads to Samoëns village while Coux mountain pass leads to Switzerland. The Coux pass ("coux" means pass) was often used, and not only by smugglers, since the Morzine-Thonon road was far from easy, so trade was mainly done with Switzerland. Between August and October the Bretolet and Coux mountain passes are also used by millions of migrating birds on their way to the Mediterranean.

A branch of Manche valley, known as Lanche valley, begins in Morzine centre and ends at Joux Plane mountain pass.

Sport and history - Thanks to its farming roots the village retains many picturesque hamlets complete with original farms, wooden storehouses and oratories. For a very long time the villagers' only sources of revenue were log-felling, harvesting crops and rearing livestock. While Morzine has not forgotten its rich history, it now offers myriad tourist activities. The shift in focus to essentially winter sports was notable from 1930-1940 (with the opening of Pleney and Super-Morzine ski slopes) and accelerated after Avoriaz opened in 1963. In winter the vast alpine meadows become snow fields to form part of the immense Portes du Soleil playground.

Manche valley from Fréterolle meadows (Samoëns) with the Roc d'Enfer peak in the distance.



MORZINE - Fact file

- Altitude: 985m (chef-lieu, or village centre), 1 800m at Avoriaz and 2 466m at Hauts Forts summit.
- Size: 4 410 hectares
- Population: 2 933 residents (in 1999), known as Morzinois/es (or Morziniens).
- Population density: 67 residents per km² in 1999.
- Population growth: approximately 1 000 residents in 1605, 1 779 villagers in 1861, 1 524 in 1901, 1 354 in 1921, 1 815 in 1954, 2 450 villagers in 1968, 2 650 villagers in 1980 and 2 933 in 1999.



The 200m François Baud footbridge that sits 35m above the ground and links each side of the valley.