



Standing so powerful and beautiful, Mont Blanc is the grand monarch of the European Alps. Sitting at an altitude of 4,810m above sea level, this is the highest peak in Europe. And, what makes her so incredible is that she's accessible to all. You don't need to be an "alpinist" to reach her as there are cable cars that can help non-climbers get up close to experience her from up high.

Mont Blanc is situated on a 40km mountain range that enters 3 countries – France, Italy and Switzerland with her summit being on the French side. There are glaciers that cover around 100sq km of this mountain, which is why she is known as Mont Blanc, meaning white mountain.



*Heading up the Col du Bonhomme mountain pass.*

I first visited the town of Chamonix in France back in 2010 and saw the grandeur of Mont Blanc. This is when I fell in love with this area. My husband and I spent a few days exploring, playing as happy tourists taking the cable car up to the Aiguille du Midi, 3842m high, which is the highest I have ever been.

Up here you have the most stunning views overlooking Italy and Switzerland and on a good day, Mont Blanc shows herself proudly.



*Hikers hopping in a cable car up to Aiguille du Midi.*

## Our trip

Last year saw us back and ready to experience Mont Blanc in a very different way than we did before. We came back to walk the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB), which is known as one of the greatest long-distance hikes in Europe. The walk is around 170km with 10,000m of ascent and takes you through the three countries of France, Switzerland and Italy.

Our journey had us hiking through some of the most spectacular mountain scenery, forest walks, and deep into the valleys. We stayed in a different village every night and sometimes even in a different country!



*The Col de la Seigne pass crossing Italy to France.*

## Hiking the TMB

Many people start in Les Houches in France and travel anti-clockwise. The trail is marked in both directions, so we chose to start in Chamonix and go clockwise. When planning your flight, it's best to fly into Geneva. This is where there are shuttle buses that can take you through to Les Houches or many of the other villages in the valley. My recommendation is to first check in with the hotel you will be staying at on the first night, as a lot of the hotels provide this service.

The time one would take to hike the TMB is anywhere between 5-12 days, depending on what you choose to do. Some of the paths you will be following are of ancient ones that have been used for many centuries. There are old mule and Shepherd's pathways, old trade routes, roads of the Roman Soldiers and Celtic tribes. I found it really interesting to learn some of this history as we walked along.



There are several ways you can experience this hike. You can walk it independently or use one of the many companies that offer package deals. These include a self-guided option or a fully guided walk with all luggage transfers and accommodation sorted out for you.



*Looking out towards Trient, Switzerland.*

## **The independent way**

### **Maps**

Maps of this walk are easy enough to obtain if you choose to go this way and the waymarking is very clear as it is a very popular and well-used trail.

### **Accommodation**

You will want to book accommodation ahead of time, as there are so many tour groups going through and they have pre-booked a lot of it, so it can be difficult especially during peak season to find anything despite there being an abundance of choice.

### **Camping options**

You can camp and there are many campgrounds along the way. I do recommend checking out the camping laws for each country if you decide to free camp.



*Hikers trekking through the Col de la Seigne pass.*

### **Choosing how many km to walk per day**

Be realistic on the kilometres you choose to hike each day as some sections have quite a significant ascent and descent, this can make a 20km day in the mountains a lot harder than in the valleys.

### **Food and supplies**

Do be aware of where you can obtain food as some of the mountain huts don't stock food and other huts have a limited amount.

### **Using one of the many tour companies**

The benefit of using a tour company is that they have a lot of choice in how you can walk the TMB. You can go with a guide and in a small group while having your luggage transferred. You can hike the TMB self-guided and the company will arrange all baggage transfers and accommodation. They will also provide you with up-to-date information and help along the way.



*Higher up towards Col du Bonhomme.*

## Best time to walk the TMB

There is a limited season for walking the TMB which does create a bit of traffic along the way. This is a hiking route you cannot do in the winter months due to the harsh weather. It's only recommended in the warmer seasons from late June to early September. Be aware that Europe have their main holiday time during August/September so expect the trail to be at it's busiest then.

You must also be aware that the weather in the mountains can be very unpredictable. They can have extreme cold snaps at any time, this can result in snow or blizzards especially on the higher passes. We walked at the end of August, being the height of summer and had a mix of hot and snowy days.

Another important piece of information to be aware of is that the mountain huts on the passes don't open till mid-June and usually shut down in mid-September.



*Trekking high above Les Chapieux - a stopover on the trip.*

## The terrain

With some lovely valley walks through forests, climbing up high rocky mountain passes, and even scrambling up sections at different points along the way. Be prepared to do it all and expect to get up to heights of 2,665m.

This is not of altitude that can cause sickness for most people, but it does give you a tough physical challenge nonetheless. Be prepared physically before setting out on this hike.



*The view over Col du Bonhomme.*

## What to pack

To pack for a trip like this where you are heading up over mountain passes, you need to be prepared for all types of weather. Just because it's summer, there can still be some severe weather at any time. This means that the temperatures drop drastically and fast!

Typically, June to September, the temperature is between 7°C and 24°C. Always check the weather on a regular basis while on this trip and do adhere to any warnings that may be in place. Don't attempt a mountain pass if you know the weather will be severe. Also, remember the wind chill factor as your body temperature can drop at a fast rate.

If you are using a company to transport your baggage be sure to check the maximum weight allowance as often this is as little as 7kg.



*The border of Italy and France along the trek.*



## Where you can stash your excess luggage

If you are travelling in Europe for a while other than just the walk, speak to your hotel where you will start and end your walk. Often they are happy to hold luggage that you won't need on the walk.

## Preparing for all kinds of weather

Whether you are carrying a day bag (and having your baggage transported) or carrying all your gear, you must have gear for all types of weather. Be sure to have wet weather gear and extra warm clothes like thermals. You will need to carry water, (up to 2 litres), snacks and most days you will need lunch. Though do check the map and guidebook as you may head through a village where you can obtain some food.

Also, carry your map and guidebook in your day bag, don't leave it in your transferred luggage as it is no good to you in there.



*There was snow on the ground when we left the Refuge de la Balme.*

## Packing list for Mont Blanc

- A backpack in the size to suit your needs.
- Sturdy boots or shoes you plan to trek in. A spare pair of shoes to put on in the evenings.
- Hiking poles (you won't regret taking them)
- Water bottles or hydration pack
- Map and guidebooks
- First aid kit
- 2 sets of socks
- 3 pairs of underwear. I don't recommend you pack cotton as once it gets wet, it takes a long time to dry which may cause chafing. Also, once wet it loses all thermal properties. You want a fabric that wicks away sweat to keep you comfortable.
- 2 quick drying hiking shirts
- 2 zip-off hiking pants. Hiking pants are not only quicker at drying, having the zip-offs allows you the flexibility to wear shorts if it warms up or long pants when the temperature drops.
- A lightweight windproof jacket
- 1 thermal top, and pants (optional)
- Rain jacket, rain pants (optional but highly recommended)
- 2 hats. One to keep the sun off and the other, a beanie, to keep your head warm when the temperature drops.



- A buff. Tip: a buff also helps protect you from the wind and cold.
- Gloves for when the temperature drops, I recommend this as I found mine to be invaluable!
- Sarong or Shemagh. This I recommend for so many uses, for example – a scarf, a wrap for after the shower, a towel, a blanket to sit on, make into a bag for the evenings, make many different outfits like a jacket, top and skirt, just to name a few.
- Something to sleep in.

## If you are camping

- Tent (4 seasoned preferred)
- Cooker, fuel for cooker (do be aware fuel and matches are not allowed on planes but can be purchased when you arrive).
- Food utensils
- Head torch

## An example of route and towns that you can stay in

### Day 1 - Les Houches to La Flegere. Distance - 18km.

### Day 2 -La Flegere to Trient. Distance - 19km.

You will find some variants on this day, as well as a chance to ride a cable car and a chairlift. At 14km there is a refuge on the Col de Balme (border of France/Italy). Note that this is an unmanned refuge and there is no food available here.



*The sign pointing towards Trient.*

### Day 3 - Trient to Champex. Distance - 17km.

You will find some variants on this day. One is to take the high and more challenging route over the pass of Fenetre d'Arpette (2665m). Only take it if the weather is good, as in recent years there has been a rock slide. The other choice is to take the Bovine Trail, can be challenging with long ascents and descents but there is a place to stop, relax and have lunch half way. Both are very similar in distance.



*Stopping for a rest and some lunch along the Bovine Trail.*



## **Day 4 - Champex to Ferret. Distance - 18km.**

There is a choice to stop at 16km and stay in La Fouly.



*The view of the Val Ferret Valley in Switzerland.*

## **Day 5 - Ferret to Rifugio Bonatti. Distance - 17km.**

Another border crossing and high pass at 2537m. There are a few other options to stay at like we did at Rifugio Elena (approximately 10km) or Chalet Val Ferret (approximately 13km).



*We stayed at the Rifugio Elena in the Aosta Valley in Italy.*

## **Day 6 - Rifugio Bonatti to Courmayeur. Distance - 12km.**

I highly recommend a day here as it is a beautiful town worth exploring.

## **Day 7 - Courmayeur to Rifugio Elisabetta. Distance - 18km.**

This is dorm style accommodation. The next available accommodation is in Les Chapieux, (not a town) and is approximately another 16km. You do have a choice, however, to catch a bus from Courmayeur to Cantine de la Visaille, where camping is available. This is around 14km which makes it an easier day to continue to Les Chapieux.



*Trekking uphill from Les Chapieux.*

## **Day 8 - Rifugio Elisabetta to Refuge de la Croix du Bonhomme Distance - 20km.**

This is dorm style accommodation, as well. There is a route variant here, there is also a high pass of Col de la Croix du Bonhomme (2483m), or you can choose the shorter (4km), but higher route over the Col des Fours (2665m). Only take this route if the weather is good. This is also another border crossing from Italy to France.



*You can stay overnight at the Rifugio Elisabetta.*

## **Day 9 - Refuge de la Croix du Bonhomme to Les Contamines. Distance - 13km.**

This is virtually downhill but be aware it can be very steep in some sections.



## **Day 10 - Les Contamines to Les Houches. Distance - 16km.**

Again, there is another route variant and cable cars. Check the weather for the choice of which route to take, as the high route will take you close to the glacier de Bionnassay, as well as crossing a swing bridge. Not recommended if the weather is bad.

### **The final takeaway**

To experience the mountains and achieve a walk like this has been a real highlight for me. After completing the journey, I now know my love affair with the European mountains will only continue to grow.

**Is Mont Blanc on your bucket list? Let us know in the comments.**