

TURBO TREKKING

Can you hike the 108-mile Tour du Mont Blanc in a single week? PHOTOS: ANDREW MCCLUGGAGE

Inspired by the running world, **Andrew McCluggage** set out to try – and got more of a challenge than he bargained for.



I LOVE ALPINE TREKKING. It's such a relaxing activity and in my (admittedly biased) opinion makes for the perfect holiday: whiling away the days, walking between mountain huts, with little more to carry than a spare change of clothes. For me, it offers an unrivalled sense of freedom and journey. And the feeling of achievement on completion, after a week or two in the mountains, is something to be savoured.

Because a trekking trip is a holiday, many trekkers proceed at comfortable pace. They push themselves just enough to feel challenged and no further. Walking days finish at lunchtime or shortly afterwards, allowing for plenty of afternoon relaxation. Such an approach is a divine experience, so it is no surprise that guidebooks for Alpine treks were traditionally written with a relaxed itinerary in mind.

However, on a recent trek in the Alps, I dined in a remote

mountain hut with a group of trail runners. They were doing the same trek as me, but they were not proceeding at a relaxed pace. They were running it – and would complete the trek in a quarter of the time I would. Throughout the following days, I paid a bit more attention to the runners I saw. It got me thinking. Would I like to run the treks? I didn't think so. But perhaps there was merit in trying to step up my relaxed pace to see what was possible?

A few days later, I decided that on my next trek I would see how fast I could walk it. Not running but not slouching either: a kind of middle ground. I would aim to replace afternoons of horizontal pleasure with all-day walking. And, as this was something new for me, I decided that this next trek would be the most famous Alpine trek of all: the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB) which is traditionally walked in eleven days. My goal would be to complete the trek in less than seven days: certainly not fast by running standards but a lot





TOUR DU MONT BLANC

[Opening spread] Refuge de la Croix du Bonhomme [above] On the TMB you see Mont Blanc from every possible angle

faster than traditional trekking itineraries.

I travelled to the French Alps on a sunny morning in June to start my self-imposed challenge. Aficionados will know that the traditional staging point of the TMB is in the town of les Houches. However, I chose the hamlet of les Chapieux because I was arriving from the Southern Alps and it made for a shorter journey.

I chose the month of June after careful thought. I wasn't sure how far I would be able to get each day and wasn't able to book accommodation more than a day in advance. Late June is one of the least busy periods for walking the TMB, so I would be able to secure late bookings. Also, the weather in June is normally favourable.

As I hoped, there was plenty of sun as I embarked on the first stage of my journey; perhaps too much sun, given that I had to make a late kick-off because of my travel arrangements. I missed the cool of the early morning and my first climb of the day was a chunky 1000 metres. And so the next two hours made for a tough introduction to the TMB as I battled under the blazing sun towards the magnificent Aiguille des Glaciers, its white glacier glistening brightly. Fortunately, Mother Nature soon gave me a helping hand in the form of some white clouds which blocked the sun and took the edge of the heat.

Three hours from the start, I approached Col de la Seigne where the TMB passes from France into Italy. Just before the col, I got my first sighting of Mont Blanc itself, looking especially beautiful adorned with the heavy snowfall of the previous winter. Next I noticed the tall steeples and spires of its neighbours: they too were

bright with snow as were their lower slopes. Finally, at the col, I forgot all about savouring the views because there, on the far side of the col, was more snow. Lots of it.

It had been a heavy snow year, and I had expected spring snow (perhaps for a few hundred metres) at the high cols, so I had come equipped with light crampons and an ice axe. But it was a shock to see snow stretching downwards for many kilometres. It was immediately clear that this would have an impact on the difficulty of my challenge. If there was snow here, then there would likely be snow on the TMB's other high points. At the very least it was going to slow me down, adding time to each day's hike. The 'devil' in my head tempted me to revert to type: "Take it easy," he said. "You can't walk the TMB in seven days". However, common sense prevailed: I would take each day at a time. Today, I would just see how far I could get. This evening, I would have a better idea of what was possible.

I strapped on my crampons and set off down the steep slope into Italy. The snow was soft but I was still glad of the extra security provided by my equipment. The scenery was sublime and I started to enjoy myself again. However, twenty minutes later, I heard a scream. Turning round, I saw four fluorescent figures tumbling down the slope behind me. They got lucky, landed in a heap in a natural depression in the slope, then got up, unhurt, and continued. My curiosity got the better of me and I waited for them to approach. Four young women from Brazil soon arrived, dressed in bright cycling shorts and trainers, and continued briskly past my crampon-clad form, seemingly nonplussed by their recent fall. They were going



faster than me, but I wasn't convinced that barreling down snow slopes was a time-saving tactic I wanted to employ.

Ninety minutes later, I passed the beautifully situated Rifugio Elisabetta: the lovely stone building sits beneath a host of peaks and glaciers and has a commanding position overlooking Val Veni. With pangs of regret I continued onwards but fortunately, the snow ended there. I removed my crampons and continued downwards, now at a brisk pace. The second climb of the day soon started but by now I was in my stride and making better time. It was not the first time that I had undertaken the TMB so I knew that I had an incredible balcony path ahead of me which would provide amazing views of Mont Blanc. Furthermore, the clouds had dissipated, and I had perfect conditions. Just as I topped a rise in the path, Mont Blanc suddenly appeared again, so close it took my breath away. If you walked this section of path a hundred times, you would still feel sheer exhilaration as the great mountain materialises before your eyes.

I was slowed down slightly by a series of traverses across snow-covered slopes but these were well-tracked and I had an axe so I moved quickly, arriving at Rifugio Maison Vieille nine hours from the start. I had just enough time for a beer before dinner. As I lay in my bed that night, a sense of satisfaction accompanied me: even with snowy impediments, I remained on track. My challenge remained alive and I believed that I could succeed.

After breakfast the following morning, I set off for Courmayeur at 7:30. Ninety minutes later, I was strolling through the cobbled streets of this wonderful mountain town. After spending a king's ➔



Map: Allyson Shields

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Overview The Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB) is the most famous trek in the Alps. Its peerless reputation owes everything to the mighty Mont Blanc which, at 4810m, is the highest peak in Western Europe. The TMB makes a complete circumnavigation of the Mont Blanc Massif, passing through France, Italy and Switzerland. On the way, the trekker views the mountain, and the myriad of neighbouring peaks and glaciers, from every possible angle.

VITAL STATISTICS

Distance: 174 km / 108 miles

Ascent: 9700m / 31,800ft

Duration: 7 to 12 days

Transport: The closest international airport is Geneva in Switzerland: the airlines flying from the UK include British Airways and Easyjet. From the airport there are shuttle buses to les Houches in the Chamonix Valley, where the TMB begins.

Accommodation: There is a wide variety of accommodation on the TMB: mountain huts, hotels and gîtes can be booked individually but www.montourdumontblanc.com features much of the accommodation on the TMB. It allows you to book much of your trip in one go.

Best time to go: Normally the TMB can be tackled from the middle of June to the end of September. July and August is the peak season when visitor numbers are highest and advance booking is essential. June and September are quieter.

Guidebooks The author of this feature has written a new book on the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB) published by Knife Edge Outdoor Guidebooks. The book includes six suggested itineraries from 7 to 12 days. It is the only English language guidebook to include the real IGN 1:25,000 maps. The book is out now, priced at £14.99. For 20% off your copy plus free UK post and packaging, quote TGO20 when purchasing from www.knifedgeoutdoor.com. Other guidebooks to the TMB include Cicerone's 'The Tour of Mont Blanc: Complete Two-Way Trekking Guide' by Kev Reynolds and Trailblazer's 'Tour du Mont Blanc'.



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ransom on some exceptionally delicious cheese and salami, I was on my way again. I climbed steeply past Rifugio Bertone, one of my favorite places on this incredible trek. Shortly afterwards, I reached a junction - to the left the TMB continued but to the right I knew that there was a divine TMB variant. The variant is longer and harder but it is perhaps the finest section of a trek of superlatives; as you climb along Mont de la Saxe you get incredibly close to Mont Blanc. It was only noon so I had the time to compete the variant, and the weather was still great so I opted for it.

As predicted, the views were amazing as I walked the grassy whale back ridge flanked by Mont Blanc in all its glory. However, as I got higher, the snow increased. My ice axe came out and, without much difficulty, I reached Tête de la Tronche which is surely one of the finest Mont Blanc viewpoints of all. However, gazing NE from the summit, my spirits dropped. I knew that I was going no further on the variant: an ocean of snow stretched out ahead. It would mean a long, hard afternoon navigating through remote terrain which would take too much time and effort and could derail my challenge. I made that most difficult of decisions for any trekker and turned back.

Ninety minutes later, I was back on the main path. I had lost four hours and was weary but I knew that I could make Rifugio Walter-Bonatti in a few hours. That evening, I had just enough time to shower and get settled before a wonderful dinner in the company of some lovely people from Ohio. I slept well and awoke to another

fine day. After the exertions of yesterday's error, I would need all the help the weather could give me: I would have to walk 36 kilometres to Champex in Switzerland to remain on track.

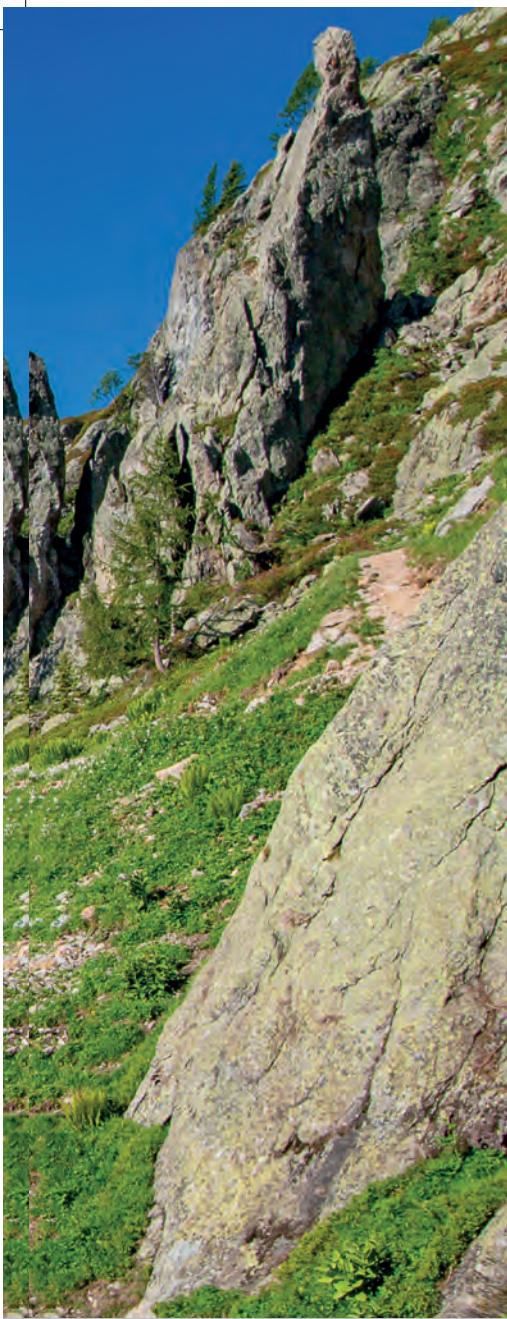
I rushed breakfast and started early, passing Rifugio Elena with its terrace facing Glacier Triolet. On the big climb of the day, I was relieved that there was little snow. Making good time, I crossed Grand Col Ferret passing into Switzerland: I had now visited three countries in about 48 hours. There was plenty of snow on the northeast side of the col but it was not very steep so I did not need crampons. After twenty minutes, the snow gave way to the grassy pastures that one immediately associates with the word 'Switzerland': true 'Sound of Music' territory, replete with wildflowers and cow bells. I was making excellent time and it was bliss. I descended into the lovely Val Ferret and quickly reached the village of la Fouly. I allowed myself a break as I had broken the back of the day's hike: in four hours I should reach Champex.

Traditionally the stage from la Fouly to Champex is one of the TMB's shortest and easiest. However, I was undertaking it immediately after completing one of the hardest stages. The bucolic views, neat Swiss chalets and cow bells all helped to take my mind off the exertions but I was relieved to arrive at my hotel. When I tried to check in, the manager handed me a bunch of keys: the Swiss football team was playing an important match so he didn't care which room I chose! I picked one with magnificent views of the lake. In three days I had managed to get about half way around the TMB.

Day four went well. The weather remained fabulous and I



[left] The epic balcony path on the Mont de la Saxe variant [above] Refuge du Col de Balme



made excellent time past the stunning restaurant at Bovine and the wonderful hamlet at Le Peuty. Immediately afterwards, I entered the big climb of the day but the gradient was never too steep and there was no snow. A few hours later, I crossed Col de Balme to be greeted by Mont Blanc which had not been visible since Refugio Bonatti.

After crossing back into France, a short climb led to the summit of l'Aiguillette des Posettes with its spectacular views of the Aiguilles Rouges. The knee-jerking descent to Tré le Champ followed: a hard section at the end of a long day. The sighting of a Chamois, a species of dainty mountain goats, slowed me down but I was hardly going to complain: seeing its dainty form skip from rock to rock with the jagged, snowy peaks of the Mont Blanc Massif as a backdrop is something I will remember for a long time. I arrived late at the lovely auberge just in time for dinner. And I was still on track.

For day five, I planned a big one, aiming to travel all the way to les Houches via the sublime Lac Blanc variant: 29 kilometres with a mammoth 1700 metres of altitude gain. The first climb to la Tête aux Vents is thrilling, using the famous metal ladders which scale the vertical cliffs: a head for heights is definitely recommended! Soon I put my crampons on and scaled the steep snow-covered slope to Lac Blanc. This early in the season, the lake was still covered in ice, giving it a wonderfully Arctic feel.

As I travelled the incredible balcony path towards Planpraz in the finest of conditions, with Mont Blanc looking its best under the deep blue skies, I realised this was one of the best walks of my life. Even

the deep snow after Col du Brévent could not dampen my spirits. As I arrived at the summit of le Brévent, the renowned Mont Blanc viewpoint, I felt that rare mixture of exhilaration and exhaustion which is awarded to the weary walker as they soak in one of the world's best views at the end of a strenuous climb. I was now fairly sure that I was going to complete the TMB in less than seven days.

On the sublime ridge heading towards Refuge de Bellachat, I relaxed and reminded myself to savour one of the finest sections of one of the finest walks in the world. I hardly took my eyes off Mont Blanc, trying to imprint the views permanently in my brain: the conditions were perfect and I wanted to remember everything. There was so much to take in that I hardly noticed the knee-jerking descent to Les Houches where I rested up for the night.

The next morning my body felt good. After five days I was 'walked in' and I was sure that I could make it all the way back to les Chapieux that day, enabling me to finish the challenge in six days. Indeed that is what the devil in my head wanted me to do. But I pushed him aside for the final time and decided that I was not going to rush the final two days. I would slow down and savour each moment. So, on day six, after an easy climb, I arrived in the village of les Contamines where I had a leisurely lunch. In the afternoon, I took it slowly and stayed at Refuge de la Balme.

I had my crampons on again the next morning as I crossed Col du Bonhomme. By now I was completely accustomed to the snowy conditions, so they hardly slowed my stride. I happily soaked up the last great views of my trek as I traversed the slopes to the magnificent Refuge de la Croix du Bonhomme. Afterwards, I skipped down through pastures filled with wildflowers of all colours and arrived back in les Chapieux. I had done it. I had walked the Tour du Mont Blanc in under a week and I had done it with half a day to spare. What's more, I'd loved almost every minute of it, and the way I trekked had changed forever. ▲