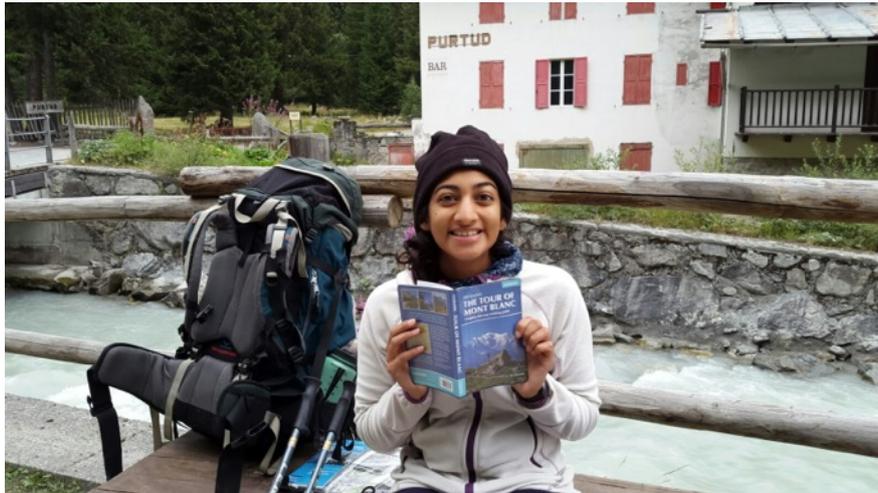


Mont Blanc Trip Report



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15th - 26th August 2016

With thanks to the UCL Expedition and Travel Committee for the generous travel grant



Introduction

Having completed the trek to Everest Base Camp in 2014 despite being underprepared and sorely affected by altitude sickness, I discovered a love of hiking that I would not have anticipated. I have never been very sporty, and in fact have always been fairly small and scrawny. However, the trek to Base Camp taught me that mental fortitude amounts to much more than pure physical strength; there were times when I nearly gave up, but the peer pressure of being in a group of 15 hikers and the encouragement of our guides spurred me on. I made it through, and the payoff for the effort required was worth it - stunning views, meditative silence and interesting encounters.

Since then, I have been searching for a greater challenge, and one that I could tackle more independently, in order to create for myself a truly irrefutable reference point for self-confidence, discipline and tenacity. When I then heard of the Tour du Mont Blanc it seemed perfect, as it is a longer trek in terms of distance (170km vs 66km), and a much more challenging trek in terms of ascent and descent (10,000m vs 8200m). Having set my mind on this trek as my next target, I added a further hurdle by deciding to camp and carry the associated weight instead of staying in refuges or using porters.



One bonus to this specific trek was the fact that it crosses through three countries. As a student of languages and cultures, this was fascinating to me. I was intrigued to meet the people living in these border communities, to see how they spoke and with what culture(s) they identified.

At this point, I must give my whole-hearted thanks to the UCL Expedition and Travel Committee for enabling me to go on this trek which was clearly exactly what I was searching for. It was a truly life-defining experience.

Overview

I completed the trek with a partner (for safety reasons) - my friend Sanjay - and it took 11 days including 1 rest/ contingency day as anticipated. We largely followed the route advice of the guidebook (Cicerone), and took two of the hardest variants at the Col de Fours and Fenetre d'Arpette. We found that our natural pace for walking was much slower than the norm, so our days ended up being quite long, and we had to take a cable car down from La Flegere to Chamonix on our final day in order to finish the trek (saving us about 5 hours). However, I am not disappointed by this, because I feel we really did make the most of enjoying the beautiful Alps, and spent a lot of time interacting with other people on the trek, which for me is an important aspect of hiking. I include some of my observations and conclusions at the end of the report.

Training

- 2 days circular hike via Eastbourne and Alfriston at 60% weight (June)
- 1.5 days hiking in the Chilterns at 60% weight (June)
- 2 days hiking via Leith Hill and Box Hill at 100% weight (July)
- A few day/ half-day hikes with 50% weight in London (July-August)
- Walked 1 hour with backpack at 60% weight OR did 1 hour at the gym, 5 days a week for the last 4 weeks before the trek (July-August)



Packing

We tried to split the weight fairly evenly between us, and to keep moving weight around throughout the trek when necessary. In fact, we discovered that I found going downhill easier while Sanjay found going uphill easier, so Sanjay would often carry more on the

uphill and then offload his weight to me on the downhill. My pack weighed in at 12-16kg depending on the day, while Sanjay's was 13-17kg.

Our packs roughly comprised of:

- Two-man tent and pegs (4 kg)
- Stove and cooking equipment (4 kg)
- Liquid fuel (petrol) (1kg)
- Minimal toiletries (0.5kg)
- Clothes (7-8 kg)
- Food for 3-4 days (6 kg)
- Water (2-4kg)
- Head torches (0.5kg)
- Maps and book (1kg)
- DSLR camera and charger (1.5kg)
- Misc including first aid kit (0.5)



In order to keep weight down, and for ease of cooking, we pre-prepared a few dehydrated meals that could be cooked just by adding hot water. We also only took enough food for 3-4 days and were able to stock up at various points on the trek.

Daily log

Monday 15th: Flight Heathrow - Geneva, then transfer to Les Houches

7.30pm Arrival at Camping Bellevue. When unpacking realised that I had accidentally packed two sleeping bags (WHY?!) and so had to ask the campsite to hang on to it for a few days while we did the hike. More fortunately, we met some of our fellow campers - an Italian couple who were already half way through the TMB, and two students from Oxford uni also on a grant but to do the GR20! Had dinner with them and got some tips, apparently rain was forecast for the Thursday so we decided we should call ahead and book Elisabetta

10.30pm Sleep

Tuesday 16th: Les Houches - Les Contamines

10am Started walking late due to missing our alarm and taking over 2 hours to eat and pack down.



This was a shock to start - 600m up for the whole first part of the day, extremely hot and sunny. The scenery was not so interesting at this point as for the most part we seemed to be walking through residential/ town streets or ski slopes. Met a family from the UK who didn't have maps, and helped them work out which way to go (always bring maps!). By the time we came to our lunch stop at Col de Voza I had already had to stop four or five times because I was struggling

so much. We decided not to take the high pass option here as we had originally planned - the following flatter section boosted my morale until the rain kicked in...

5pm - 6.30pm Walked in a rainstorm wondering why we were so slow... we were supposed to have reached Les Contamines by then! About 30 min from our camp spot we were starving and saw some people setting up to sleep in a wooden shelter in what looked



like a parking lot. We decided to stop and cook up under the shelter before continuing on to the campsite. Met a Dutch man and two Swedish people he had been walking with that day. Shared food and felt a lot better.

8.30pm Reached Camping Le Pontet. Though the rain had let up our things were soaked and it was only €10 extra to sleep inside so we got beds in a dorm. Completely randomly met a group of 5th year UCL medics - small world!

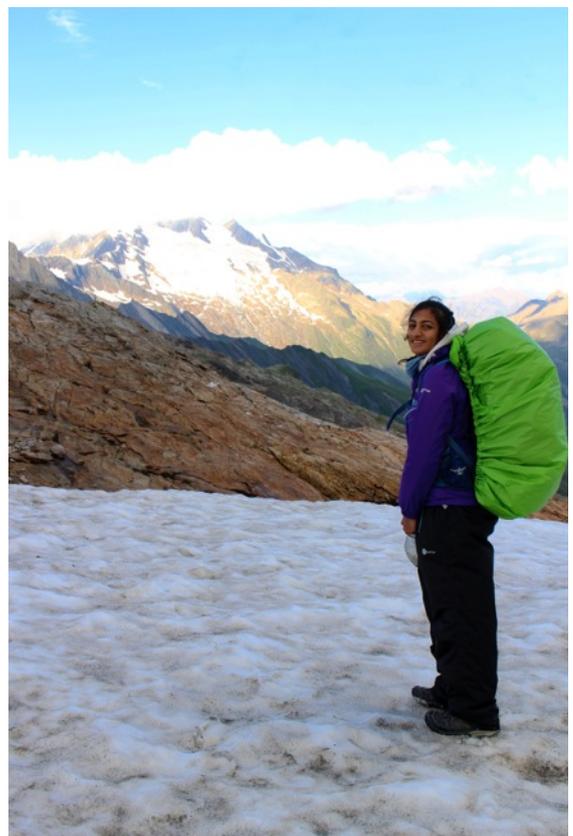
Wednesday 17th: Les Contamines - Somewhere over the Col de Fours

8am Got walking straight away in order to avoid doing the climb up to the first Col (Col du Bonhomme) in the midday sun, decided to try having breakfast on the trail. BAD IDEA because we spent a lot of time at breakfast talking to people passing through, and ended up getting to the first Col late anyway! Views on the steep climb up to the Col were stunning and weather was clear so we could see very far

3.30pm Reached Col du Bonhomme but got caught in a sudden terrible rain and hailstorm. Hail was so big that it was painful to have any exposed skin, and there was a fierce wind. I was very low on energy and shaking so we had to stop to eat something, but stopping meant that Sanjay got extremely cold and also starting shaking violently. We were concerned we wouldn't make it to Refuge Croix de la Bonhomme, and I was on the verge of crying.

5pm Finally reached the refuge, stopped inside for drinks and debated getting beds there but we couldn't afford it - then the weather cleared up so we decided to stick with our original plan and take the high pass to see the view from the Col de Fours.

7pm After trudging through snow made it over the Col to encounter a breathtaking view of the sun setting behind Mont Blanc. Found a wild camping spot in an isolated and peaceful



valley to sleep. A sub-zero night - was a little too cold for me but the location was wonderful.

Thursday 18th: Somewhere over the Col de Fours - Rifugio Elisabetta

8.30am Packed down and continued the steep descent on this variant path, trying to move quickly as we had been told a storm was forecast for the evening

1.30pm Stopped for lunch at Refuge de Mottets and bought some Beaufort cheese from a local farmer. As we continued up towards the Col de la Seigne I started to feel extremely short of breath - could have been altitude or exhaustion. We were aware of the legend of the 'third day hump' and knew that the third day of hiking was often the hardest, so we pushed through...

6.30pm Finally reached crossed over from France into Italy and reached Rifugio Elisabetta, after what seemed like a much longer day than forecast. Were grateful to have hot food, and spent some time chatting to the extremely friendly hotel staff. The refuge was fully booked so it was packed with people and our beds were hilarious - a third tier of bunk beds so close to the ceiling that you had to slot yourself in like a letter in a letterbox.



Friday 19th: Rifugio Elisabetta - Just outside of Courmayeur

7am Breakfast in the rifugio, then spent a little while enjoying the spectacular view into the valley from Elisabetta, brimming with the colours of sunrise. A very pleasant (and flat!) walk for a while on what was supposed to be a reasonably easy day....

3.30pm Stopped for a break at some small ponds/ lakes just before Rifugio Bertone - many Italian tourists about enjoying a long sunny weekend. We must have been walking slowly because we were still a while away from our campsite and had already been walking for more than the time forecast for the day. We were extremely tired and frustrated

and hot - the 'third day hump' was really a 'fourth day hump'?

4.30pm Reached Rifugio Monte Bianco and had a much needed ice-cream break. Felt rejuvenated.

6.30pm FINALLY reached Camping La Sorgente, just outside of Courmayeur, after a dreary two hours of road walking. It was not the most pleasant way to finish the day, but we discovered a FREE OUTDOOR HOT TUB at the campsite which we used much to our satisfaction. Met a girl who was going to run the Ultimate Tour du Mont Blanc race the following week and felt very humbled.

Saturday 20th: Just outside of Courmayeur - Rifugio Bonatti

7.30am Decided to take the bus into Courmayeur to avoid having to walk along the same horrible stretch of road from the previous day. Had breakfast in a cafe and met some very friendly locals who taught us 'how to be more Italian' and ran around town for some much needed supplies (food, fuel, soap)

11.30am Got walking from Courmayeur in very very heavy rain, but were feeling a lot livelier than the day before so it was a surprisingly fun walk uphill.



1pm Stopped for lunch inside Rifugio Bertone, met an Englishman called Andrew and a crazy German ex-monk called Peter who were taking a rest day at the refuge.

2.30pm Carried on towards Bonatti - got a little lost for half an hour as the paths were unclear but got rescued by French couple Julien and Lolita.

3.30pm Peter came bounding up behind us, announcing that he was bored of resting and really wanted to walk some way with us, so of course we welcomed him.

6pm Reached Bonatti - probably the nicest refuge on the TMB. Lovely hot showers and a yummy, sociable dinner. Slept like babies.



Sunday 21st: Rifugio Bonatti - La Fouly

8.30am Walked with Peter and two amazingly active pensioner ladies from the US, mostly downhill and at a good pace.

5pm Grateful for a slightly shorter/ quicker day we camped up with Peter at Camping des Glaciers, met the french couple again who had helped us to navigate from Bertone!

7pm Was a freezing cold night so we had dinner inside a little shelter that the camping place had. Ended up being a huge group dinner of all the campers - us, Peter, Julien and Lolita and two students from Mexico who were trekking the TMB in the opposite direction to us.

11pm Another freezing cold night.

Monday 22nd: La Fouly - Relais d'Arpette

8am Had breakfast in the shelter, and again all the campers were there. We put some music on and it ended up turning into a morning dance party to warm up for the day!

11am We knew we had a shorter day ahead so allowed ourselves to warm up a little in the sun before setting off with Peter, Julien and Lolita to walk through some really nice wooded areas (this is not known to be a highlight of the TMB but I thought it was a pretty

walk, and it added some variation from the more dramatic alpine scenery)

2pm Stopped for lunch on a bench near one of the quaint Swiss alpine towns with higgledy-piggledy houses

4pm Lolita had terrible blisters on her feet so we stopped for some emergency first aid procedures and then redistributed the weight she was carrying among the rest of the group so she could make it to



Champex

5pm Had ice-cream by the gorgeous lake at Champex and stocked up on food - got there later than planned due to the injury but it didn't matter so much in the end

7pm Walked on to the camping spot by the refuge at Relais d' Arpette, as we planned to do the high-route variant of the Fenetre d'Arpette the day after. Got to use the showers in the refuge and some kind French girls we met who were staying inside donated their blankets to us so we had a toasty night's sleep!

Tuesday 23rd: Relais d'Arpette - Le Peuty

8am A hasty start in the morning to what we knew would be another very challenging day - the way was to be steep and long! However, the first few hours of the morning were reasonably gentle uphill through meadows and we felt we were doing well...

11am The REAL hike set in - suddenly the terrain became very steep and very rocky, with no shelter from the 30 degree sun. The higher we went the more difficult the



terrain became, with us left to scramble over boulders and leap from rock to rock. With heavy backpacks this felt extremely dangerous and really slowed us down.

2pm Finally made it to the top of the pass to a brilliant view of the valley on the other side. We were in pain all over and thoroughly zonked, so we stopped for a long lunch, then had to go back down similar terrain. We all had very sore knees and feet due to the incline but I felt generally okay. However, we had only brought 1 litre of water each, being used to stocking up at rivers and public water taps. Here there were no water sources, so we ran out quickly and Sanjay started to feel very dizzy and dehydrated. We and Peter took our time, trying not to push too hard, while the French couple went ahead.

5.30pm Reached the bottom of the steepest part of the downhill, and found a stream to finally get some water. Took a break to rehydrate (as well as some rehydration tablets) and cheered on some of the race runners who were coming from the other direction.

6.30pm Found the French couple again! We were near to the campsite but not sure exactly where it was, so looked together.

7.30pm Finally found the campsite - a very basic spot on a patch of grass near to some public bathrooms, but a financial blessing at €4 per person. This had been definitely the toughest day physically, and we were all very drained. Did a group massage session in order to boost morale and ate dinner before going to bed early.

Wednesday 23rd: REST DAY

11am After the hardest day of the TMB we decided to use our contingency day on a day in the sun to recover, so we slept in till the sun warmed our tent. We expected to wake up to find everyone else gone, but Julien and Lolita had also decided they needed some rest,

and Peter had decided he liked our company too much to leave! We had breakfast together and looked up some refuges nearby in the guidebook, to see where might be a nice place to get showers and sleep for the rest of our recovery day. However, after totting up money spent so far and compared it with our budget we realised we couldn't afford another night in a refuge! The weather was beautiful, so actually staying in the campsite was a good idea and it turned out to be a very peaceful day.

12pm Julien and Lolita headed off as they had a tight schedule.

3pm We couldn't have hot showers in a refuge, but we COULD have cold showers in a nearby river! Washing in a river, in the middle of the Alps - what an adventure.

5pm Stretching and yoga session with Peter to soothe muscles.

9pm Another early night so we could be prepared to continue on the next day

Thursday 24th: Le Peuty - Argentiere/ Tre-Le-Champ

8.30am Got going in reasonable time on a gentle climb uphill towards the Col de la Balme. The rest must have done us a lot of good because we were able to walk pretty fast without taking any breaks until...

10.30am We reached Refuge de Balme well ahead of time! Rewarded ourselves with a nice stop with a view of Mont Blanc, which we hadn't seen since we'd been in France.

3.30pm Arrived in Tre-Le-Champ after a long and rambling downhill walk, our muscles strangely still sore from the steep downhill at Arpette. We had originally planned to go for lunch at a vegetarian cafe that had been recommended to us in Argentiere, but we were running late so had eaten on the trail. Instead walked around for an hour looking for somewhere to camp up, before being told that the refuge in the town would let us camp on their lawn for €6 each.



5.30pm Went down to

Argentiere to see if we could

go to the cafe for dinner. Alas, the kitchen was closed! Went to a different cafe for crepes instead, and stocked up on food for a feast the next day (our last day of hiking).

10pm Tried to heat some water but discovered that the petrol we had bought that day for cooking with was the wrong kind (too pure, too flammable) and so we could no longer cook. Disaster! Asked some friends on the campsite if they had any half empty gas canisters they could lend us for the next day, for our big feast, and luckily they were ending their trek so they gave us a little bit of gas. Went to bed relieved.

Friday 25th: Argentiere/ Tre-Le-Champ - Chamonix

8.30am Left early as we wanted to take the diversion to Lac Blanc before hitting midday sun

10.30am Began the famous ladder section of the TMB, which involved climbing and across a number of ladders fixed into the rocks to help people get over steep faces and huge boulders

12.30pm Peter, whose speed was much faster than ours, had rushed ahead to find a nice spot for lunch. He said that Lac Blanc didn't have any grassy areas, and also you weren't allowed to swim in it! So we stopped just before Lac Blanc at a similar, but smaller lake, also with a beautiful view of the mountains reflected in the water. Cooked up a HUGE feast of omelettes for us, Peter, and some other campers from Wales who were nearby. Went swimming in the icy water and cooled down from another hot day.



3pm We were having such a good time at the lake that we lost track of time and slightly over-extended our lunch break. Hurried on as we knew the route was long to Chamonix.

4.30pm Reached La Flegere and realised that it was going to take us another 5 hours to make it to Chamonix. We wanted to see the start of the UTMB (Ultimate Tour du Mont Blanc) at 6pm in town, so I made the executive decision to take a cable car down to Chamonix instead of walking on.

6pm Crazy crowds and atmosphere in Chamonix for the start of the UTMB - very exciting.

7.30pm Reached our hostel for showers and some nice wine and cheese to celebrate completing an amazing trek.

10.30pm Crashed out

Saturday 26th: Flight Geneva - Luton

10am Flight to London, then bus transfer home. Cleaned the tent and our clothes then I spent the whole day doing anything I could to avoid walking anywhere!

Observations and Conclusions

One thing that struck me as we made our way round the TMB is the fascinating way in which borders are in some ways irrelevant to our sense of identity, and in others completely inseparable from our sense of identity. On the one hand, although the TMB passes through Italy, all of the locals we met, perhaps with the exception of those in Courmayeur, spoke predominantly in French. When I asked why, they said that French is the unofficial language of the TMB. Thus it became clear that despite the division of borders, all of those living in the alpine territory of the TMB and other popular hiking routes belong to a subculture of their own that is a cohesive community. On the other, when asked where they are from, most of these locals responded proudly with allegiance to their country, and many refuges, cafes and vehicles had country flags on them. This seemed reminiscent to me of the way that those who live on the border between Wales and England seem to be closer to their Welsh culture, perhaps because its proximity to another makes it seem threatened in some way. Along the TMB, there are no obvious physical markers for border crossings, so one culture or society could easily blur into another, but everyone living there has a strong sense of what is *their* land. There is even a jocular sense of competition - every country we went through claimed to have the best bread, or the only 'real' cheese.

In terms of what I learnt about the trek from its physical challenges, there are a few things:

- I MUST invest in a better sleeping bag, and look after it properly. Although the days were hot, I struggled to sleep in temperatures under 5 degrees in my sleeping bag. It's a piece of kit that is worth investing in.
- We needn't have brought the maps. While they came in handy when hunting for wild camping spots, the route is surprisingly well signposted, and the guidebook gives very detailed instructions.
- Camping was a lot more expensive than we anticipated, and I think next time I would plan to wild camp more on a trek like this.
- The next challenge would be to do a longer route like the GR20, or one in a more isolated location like the Australian outback, to test my navigational skills.
- Though I managed this trek, I did find it extremely difficult and if I were to attempt anything harder I would definitely have to train even more for it - Everest Base Camp was more a mental challenge but I think the TMB was also physically demanding to say the least.