

Tour du Mont Blanc Trip: August 2015

It seems we have become a bit addicted to hiking trips with outfitter *Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS)* as we embarked on our 5th such trip with them, the *Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB)*. The TMB is one of the most popular long-distance walks in Europe. The TMB route circles the Mont Blanc Massif (mountain range) which straddles the borders of three countries: Switzerland, Italy and France.

On most of our prior trips MTS trips we did not know anyone else in the group prior to the trip. For this trip however, we would be joined by two other couples from here in Colorado that we already knew ...

- Linda & Brian who live in the Denver area and whom we had met on a MTS trip to Iceland in 2013; and
- Jo Marie & George who live north of Denver and whom we have known for over 25 years (Jo Marie was our mistress of ceremonies at our wedding!)

Iceland Stopover

We had decided with Linda & Brian to do a stopover in Iceland for a few days before continuing on to Geneva to meet up with the rest of the group at the start of the actual MTS trip. The direct Iceland Air flight from Denver to Iceland's capital of Reykjavik makes it an easy 7 1/4 hour hop over the Atlantic though the 6:30am arrival and 6 hr time change mean a very draggy/tired first day! We had two key reasons for the stopover:

1. We had all enjoyed our previous time in Iceland and wanted to see a bit more of the country; and
2. It was a great way to better adjust to the eventual 8 hr time difference we'd experience -- we'd get 3/4th of the jet lag conquered before our arrival on the European continent

Daughter Victoria was kind enough to drive us to the airport for our late Friday, August 7th afternoon flight even though she had herself just returned to the states following 8 weeks in Xian, China and hadn't a clue what time zone she was in. We met up with Linda & Brian and our adventure was underway!

The flight into Reykjavik was uneventful and while Linda & I watched the luggage, Steve & Brian headed off to get our transportation for the next few days: a 1998 Toyota Land Cruiser with over 395,000 kilometers on the odometer (245,000 miles) from a company called "Sad Cars." Rental cars during the summer in Iceland are expensive and we needed one large enough for the 4 of us plus our gear and one that could be driven off pavement – thus, our "Sad Car." Unlike a normal rental car, Sad Cars do not need to be returned with a full tank of gas and they are rented out with whatever gas they are returned with: apparently ours was on fumes when Steve & Brian picked it up so their first stop was a nearby gas station and nearly \$100 later it had a full tank (yes,



Steve, Linda & Brian looking "sad" with our Sad Car

gas is also expensive in Iceland at over \$7 per gallon). Once we and our luggage were loaded into the car, we headed off to downtown Reykjavik for a much needed breakfast.



"Hundreds wait outside Dunkin' Donuts" -- Picture and Headline from August 5, 2015 *Iceland Monitor*

We made a food run at the local grocery store to stock up on some lunch foods, beverages, and our favorite Icelandic candy, the Sambo "3" mini candy bar, a delicious combination of chocolate, caramel, and licorice which sounds really weird but is quite tasty.



The town was getting ready for a gay pride parade but despite the allure of a shocking pink metallic Viking boat float we headed north out of Reykjavik about noon towards the town of *Borgarnes*, our destination for the night. The route includes *Hvalfjörður Tunnel* (*Hvalfjarðargöng* in Icelandic) which is 5,700 m long (3.6 miles) and reaches a depth of 165m (541 feet) below sea level under the Hvalfjörður fjord – the farthest we've ever been below sea level I believe. Once in Borgarnes we spotted an old car museum in a warehouse building and stopped in for a look – very eclectic mix of vehicles from Russian made Vaz's to Volvo's to Jeep's to Chevy's to Mercedes. By mid-afternoon we were all rather fuzzy around the edges so checked into our B&B and had a nap before walking "downtown" for an early and very delicious dinner at The Settlement Center restaurant located in one of the oldest houses in Borgarnes. The Settlement Center tells the Saga of The Settlement of Iceland and Iceland's most famous Viking and first poet Egill Skallagrimsson. To aid digestion, we then walked around town, population around 2,000, and visited the local school, sports/aquatic center, and church.



Lori and Jon with his Ad for Skyr Yogurt: July 2013



Settlement Center Restaurant is built right into rock outcropping




Settlement Center, Borgarnes

Sunday morning, after a hearty breakfast at the B&B (we enjoyed some “skyr”!), we headed out for our planned destination of Snæfellsjökull National Park. Along the way we stopped for a quick look at a road side marker expecting to read about some historical event ... the marker informed us about Iceland’s best known serial killer ... it became a bit of a running joke when subsequent markers/plaques always seemed to involve violent events.

Located in western Iceland, the park is home to Iceland’s most famous volcano (it is still active). Snæfellsjökull became world famous after Jules Verne described it in his book "A Journey to the Center of the Earth" as the starting point of the journey.



 Axlur-Björn (born ca. 1555) is the best known serial killer in Icelandic history. His nickname comes from the farm Öxl in Breiðavík, where he lived during the latter part of the sixteenth century. Travelers often stayed with him and enjoyed his hospitality, and one could say that he was the region’s earliest known farm holiday provider. But many of these travelers got no further, as Björn stretched his income by killing those whose path led to his farm with an axe and stealing their clothes, money, and horses. Björn is believed to have murdered 18 people, although he only confessed to having killed nine. He was found out after one of two siblings who he tried to kill escaped from his clutches and informed the authorities. He had buried his first victim in the manure pit of the cowshed at the farm Knörr, where he grew up, and thrown most of the rest into Iglutjörn, a leech-filled pond beneath the Axlurhólar hills. Axlur-Björn was sentenced to death and was executed at Laugarbrekka, near Hellnar, in 1596.

After a brief stop at the Visitor’s Center (where Steve & I shared a piece of *happy marriage*

cake made from rhubarb and oats), we planned to do to hike along the coastline. While Steve ferried a motorist with a dead battery back to the nearest town, the rest of us took a leisurely stroll out to the very odiferous seaside cliffs, home to many seagulls. From there, it was a windy but pleasant walk among sculptured rock formations to a nearby light house. Steve caught up with us and we all marveled at the rugged coastline and strength of the crashing waves.

An “in car” picnic* revived our energy and we spent most of the rest of the afternoon doing other hikes in the park, including a short hike up to a small volcanic cone/crater and a walk farther inland alongside a beautiful moss-lined stream tumbling through carved black volcanic rock.

*It was too cold and windy to consider an outside picnic. We saw many road side *rest areas* with picnic tables (designated as “Rest Area with Facilities”) but we never encountered a single rest area with actual restroom facilities (according to our map there are less than 5 such rest areas in the entire country). We never saw anyone sitting at any of the rest area picnic tables!





Our drive through the park exited in the small hamlet of *Helissandur* where we had booked rooms at the Helissandur Hotel for the night. Before checking in however, we took a couple of short side trips: to the nearby fishing village of “Rif” and to the “Lonely Church,” the first concrete church in the world, built in 1903.

With the temperature hovering at about 42 degrees (plus the wind chill from a brisk wind), we were happy to have a pleasant room and a hot shower. That evening we enjoyed a delicious dinner (I had fabulous lamb) in the hotel’s dining room -- our other option was to “dine” at the nearby gas station’s mini mart! We watched nearby campers fight the wind to set-up their tents and we felt sorry for a heavily burdened bicyclist we saw battling a head wind while also worrying about vehicular traffic along the not-so-wide road.



Lonely Church and Sad Car

After a solid buffet breakfast at the hotel, we were on the road by 8:30am Monday with a plan to drive at least partway up the *Snæfellsjökull Glacier Road* – a dirt road that connects the southern and northern parts of the peninsula on which the national park sits and skirts the glacier atop the *Snæfellsjökull Volcano*. Given the increasingly foggy conditions, we didn’t make it too far up the road before we decided to turn around. A pleasant drive back along the coast had us stopping at a beautiful waterfall for a chilly, but lovely vantage point.



Notice our “summer” attire!

Our next destination was the lava tubes of *Surtshellier* located significantly inland so we traversed through barren lava fields to lush farmlands to a small forest area before once again encountering bleak lava fields. We also traversed a variety of road types to reach the lava tubes – from national highway to smaller side roads to gravel/dirt. We climbed down jumbled and sharp-edged volcanic rocks into the first of 3 lava tube openings in the Surtshellier area and quickly donned headlamps/ flashlights as we didn’t need to venture in very far to lose the benefit of the outside light. After a short visit we decided not to venture farther into the tube due to the “path” being a very chaotic rock strewn floor filled with large wet and/or icy pieces of lava rock. Instead, we strolled from lava tube opening to lava tube opening *above* ground – a much more pleasant and far safer choice.



A rock pile/cairn is used to access the 2nd lava tube opening at Surtshellir – we chose NOT to give it a try



Water cascades from an ancient lava field downstream from the Barnafoss waterfall

A rain shower ended our visit to the lava tube area. After negotiating the drive back on some gravel/dirt roads we returned to pavement and had a short drive to the “Children’s Waterfall,” *Barnafoss*. Here the river *Hvati* roars through a canyon before it meets up with cascades of water seeping through an ancient lava flow. Two children were tragically swept to their deaths here, hence the name.



At Barnafoss, the Children's Waterfall

Late Monday afternoon we drove back to the airport area where we checked into the airport hotel before heading out for a farewell Icelandic dinner at a seaside restaurant in the nearby town of Keflavik. We dropped off our “Sad Car” and got a ride back to the hotel (we left the gas tank considerably fuller than when we had received it!).

While we had all certainly enjoyed our time in Iceland it was time to turn our attention to the next leg of our trip ... but first a last stop at airport duty free to load up on Sambo“3” candy bars ...

Tour du Mont Blanc

Day 1 – Geneva to Chamonix: A quick 3 ½ hour flight early Tuesday morning took us from Iceland to Geneva, Switzerland where Steve counted seven watch advertisements just in the baggage claim area! We found most of our fellow MTS travelers awaiting us and once joined by our lead guide, Laurent, we were quickly shepherded out to a bus for the 45 min drive across the border to the town of Chamonix, France and our hotel home for the next 2 nights. As we had a very early breakfast and no lunch, we quickly dumped our gear and headed out in search of food and for a short check out of the area. The consumption of a couple of tasty individual-sized quiches held us for the couple of hours we had before our group dinner.



Officially known as Chamonix-Mont Blanc, this town or “commune” in south-eastern France is actually made up of 16 separate villages and hamlets, including the village of *Chamonix*. These villages sit in a mountain-rimmed valley – the altitude of Chamonix is 3,264’. The area first became a summer tourist destination and with the later development of several skiing areas it has become a very popular year-round resort area. The 1924 Winter Olympics were hosted here.

We enjoyed a stroll through the main area of the village of Chamonix along with thousands of fellow tourists – from families with kids in strollers to obviously serious mountaineers carrying backpacks festooned with climbing paraphernalia (helmets, rope, carabiners, etc.). We saw a virtual United Nations of visitors from around the globe. We also felt right at home in Chamonix -- Colorado’s own mountain village of Vail is said to be built to mimic Chamonix’s look and feel.

Towering above Chamonix stands *Mt. Blanc* (White Mountain), the highest mountain in the *Alps* and Europe’s highest mountain west of Russia with a summit topping out at 15,778’. Twenty-three years ago, Steve and his climbing friend John attempted to climb the peak but ended up having to turn back due to time and weather constraints. This time around, the plan wasn’t to climb Mt. Blanc, but instead to hike around it and its fellow peaks which make up the Mt. Blanc Massif.



Chamonix, France



Mt. Blanc as seen from our hotel room in Chamonix

Back at the hotel we met up with our entire MTS group for an initial orientation and group dinner. Our illustrious group for the next several days consisted of:

- *Laurent*, our Lead Guide, a French native who has lived in the Chamonix area for over 20 years and is a member of the famed *Compagnie des Guides* (it is the world’s oldest association of mountain guides, founded in 1821). Laurent is in his late 40’s.
- *Laetitia*, our assistant guide, also a member of *Compagnie des Guides* (in her mid-30’s).
- *Pascale*, our intrepid driver, lunch-making supplies acquirer, and gear handler (in her early 40’s).

Our fellow MTS travelers ... a total of 13 including us:

- *Lindsay*, 38, a writer for Major League Baseball and granddaughter of famed catcher Yogi Berra (who passed away just a few weeks after the trip)
- *Sophie*, 41, a London-based editor for Bloomberg News and long-time friend of Lindsay's
- *Jim*, early 60's, a 20 year Air Force retiree from Charlotte NC
- *Blair and Molly*, mid-60's, retired ophthalmologist and his wife from Mercer Island, WA
- *Dave*, early 50's, retired business man from a small town in Connecticut
- *Ann*, mid 50's, currently on leave from working with Americares, from Greenwich, CT
- *Jo Marie and George*, our friends and fellow Coloradoans
- *Linda and Brian*, our fellow Icelandic adventurers, friends and fellow Coloradoans

We had joined forces to do the *Tour du Mont Blanc*, a hike of many miles and many steep climbs and steep descents. However, we planned to do it "in comfort" by staying at inns & hotels each night to ensure a hot shower and a real bed! The alternative being staying in mountain huts with shared dormitories, unheated facilities, no hot showers, etc.

Day 2 - Chamonix: Following a 7:30am buffet breakfast at the hotel and an 8am lunch/snack-making session, we reconvened at 8:30am Wednesday morning for a "warm-up" hike. So into a beautiful blue sky and warm morning we gaily stepped for a hike of 6 to 8 miles and 1900' elevation ascent and 2000' descent according to the trip write-up. In actuality, we hiked 8 miles and had 4000' of elevation ascent ... the start of several days of differences between the trip write-up's elevation ascents and our group's reality! Regardless, back to the trip ...

That first morning's hike was indicative of what we experienced most days ... from the valley floor where we had overnighted we would quickly encounter a steep trail. The glacier carved u-shaped valleys of the Mt. Blanc Massif mean steep valley walls and thus steep climbs up the mountain sides. That first morning the trail climbed through a forest up to the meadows of the *Blaitiere Farm* where a couple of young 20-somethings were grazing cows and making cheese from their milk. We heard the cow bells long before we saw the actual cows ... a phenomenon that would be repeated throughout the trip.



Trail signs in the area show estimated "time" to hike to a destination, not the actual mileage



Cow at Blaitiere Farm above Chamonix

We enjoyed lunch while looking across the valley to watch numerous parasailers ride the warm air currents (they ride the tram up the mountain and then hike to a good jumping off spot) – it is amazing to see just how far they can travel and for how long they can stay aloft.



Group hiking above Blaitiere Farm with Mt. Blanc in background



George, Jo Marie, and Laurent

We hike with only day packs carrying water, snacks, lunch, and foul weather gear (certainly didn't need it this day but would soon enough). Most of us, me included, use trekking poles to help lessen the impact on our legs/knees, especially going down, and to provide us better balance when crossing rough terrain. Steve, who is part mountain goat, hikes beautifully without them.

After lunch we continue to climb above tree line to the *Grand Balcon* (Grand Balcony) where we encounter a steady stream of folks who are crossing this trail which is anchored at one end by a gondola and the other end by a cog railway (i.e., most folks are transported up the steep slope and do a rolling terrain hike before being transported down again -- we later learn that the wait time for the gondola can easily run 2-3 hours during the high season (i.e., August). We join the crowds on the Grand Balcon and hike towards the cog railway which we too will use to descend back down to Chamonix via a 20 minute ride. The Cog Railroad mountainside terminus sits overlooking the *Mer de Glace* (Sea of Ice), the longest glacier in France (over 4.3 miles in length). By 4:30pm we're back at the hotel, *Hotel Les Aigons*, and enjoying a cold beverage and a hot shower.



Along the granite-screed Grand Balcon trail



Cog Railroad Train

We're on our own for dinner that evening so we joined Linda & Brian for a casual dinner of excellent salad and omelets at *Le Tablee*. We enjoyed a tasty gelato cone for dessert (Chamonix is filled with places to get gelato) and then stopped by the *Cote Macaron* shop to pick up a sampling of their rainbow colored goodies for future consumption (I chose their fig, passion fruit, and caramel sea salt varieties – yum!).



So many gelato flavors - how to decide?



The macaroons were delicious!

Day 3 – Chamonix to Les Houches: Today, another very warm day, we hike from Chamonix to the quaint village of Les Houches (pronounced “Le Schouch”). It was a leisurely hike of about 10 miles with a 2,000’ ascent/descent. We walked through the outskirts of Chamonix before entering a forest and climbing upwards via the rolling up & down trail.

Mid-morning the group split into 2 groups – those who wanted to do a longer hike with more vertical gain/loss and those who wanted not too -- Steve went with the first group and I the second one. My group passed a fenced nature park and we spotted a couple of grazing deer. A lovely pond served as our leisurely lunch spot and we enjoyed watching huge beautiful dragon flies flit about. By mid-afternoon we had descended to the small ski resort village of *Les Houches*, elevation 3,200’, amid cooling temperatures.

Before a group dinner at our lodging, the *Hotel du Bois*, we performed our daily post hike rituals: drink cold beverage, take hot shower, and do daily laundry in bathroom sink using now damp towels to “burrito” the clothes (wrap them in towel and step on them to squeeze out excess water and facilitate the drying process).



Lunch spot on the way to village of Les Houches



Laurent and Linda at lunch spot

Day 4 – Les Houches to Les Contamines-Montjoie: We start the day with the usual breakfast buffet at the hotel and lunch/snack making. The spread Pascale laid out for us every morning was a cornucopia of goodness: sandwich makings of all sorts including locally made breads, sausages and cheeses, fresh veggies and fruits, nuts and dried fruits, a variety of cookies and chocolates, and so much more. We gleefully and with abandon packed our daily lunches and snacks knowing we would earn every bite!

As would be the norm for most days, the group split into what Laurent ended up calling the “faster group” and the “slower group” with Laurent and Laetitia taking turns guiding each. The faster group would usually end up doing a bit more mileage and vertical gain than the slower group. I was always in the latter group while Steve tended to bounce between them. Laurent was quick to point out that the slower group was not really “slow” as we easily beat the anticipated hiking times each day.

From our hotel we climbed, under cloudy skies, up through the slopes of the local ski resort, encountering lots of animals along the way: horses, cows, goats, sheep, and dogs. At a railroad crossing atop the ski resort, our 2 groups met up and continued together through farmland and alpine villages where homes were adorned with colorful hanging flowers and flower boxes. The skies didn't open up until just as we were finishing up our lunch, but open up they did for a while -- we quickly donned our rain gear and kept on hiking.



Me checking out a chairlift above Les Houches



The goats wear bells too!

Before long, the constant rain stopped and we made our way into the village of *Les Contamines-Montjoie*, elevation 3,829', under gray and sputtering skies. We grabbed a cold drink at a local grocery store before meeting up with Pascale for a short van ride to our hotel for the night, *Hotel La Chamenez*.



Colorful French alpine chalet under cloudy skies

Our dinner that evening included a regional dish made of potatoes, cheese, and ham baked in individual cassoulets – perfect for the wet, chilly evening and to help fuel us after hiking 10 miles and doing 4,200’ vertical. For dessert, we had a curd-like dish to which we added sugar and jam to taste. Heated towel racks in our bathroom made the drying of our daily laundry much easier given the damp conditions!



Stacked fire wood, ready to heat the chalets come winter



Cheeses available at a grocery in Les Contamines

Day 5 – Les Contamines to Les Chapieux: Today, under rather wet conditions we had a long ascent up along an old Roman road. A mid-morning stop at a trailside refuge for some delicious hot chocolate helped lift our spirits. So did the many colorful wildflowers we encountered (and some not so wild ones as well). After reaching the *Col du Bonhomme*, a saddle at 7,641’, we continued onto the *Croix du Bonhomme*, a second pass at 8,100’. From there it was a quick descent to the *Refugio du Col de la Croix du Bonhomme* (a large mountain hut), where we ate a late lunch out of the wet weather and warm our hands via a pot-bellied wood stove. We had to leave our wet boots in the mud room and don plastic slippers (aka generic Crocs) before entering the hut.



Steve & I at the Col du Bonhomme, elevation 7,641'



Wildflowers along the Roman Road



Wet Steve, Jo Marie & George heading to Les Chapieux

A descent through often muddy and slippery grassy slopes to the rustic hamlet of *Les Chapieux* completed the day's 12.5 miles, 4,400' ascent, and 3000' descent! At the *Auberge de la Nova* hostel, we hung our wet boots and outerwear in the communal drying room. We were fortunate to have an in-room shower though shared a hallway toilet. Viewing the close by water-logged camping and RV area, we were happy to have a warm bed and watertight roof over our heads for the night!

Day 6 – Les Chapieux, France to Courmayeur, Italy: A short van ride to the end of the *Vallee des Glaciers* is our starting point for today's hike. It was only lightly misting as we hiked up verdant slopes where we watched a Sheppard and his sheepherding dog at work. At the *Col de la Seigne*, at 8,245', we cross from France into Italy.



Vallee des Glaciers



Sheep below the Col de la Seigne

It was chilly and windy atop the pass so we don't spend much time there but did marvel at the hearty mountain bikers who rode/pushed their bikes up the same trail we had just hiked. From the pass we hike down to the Refugio Elisabetta (built and run by the Italian Alpine Club) where we eat lunch overlooking several glaciers and enjoy a warming and rich cup of hot chocolate.



Laetitia, me & Steve at the Col de la Seigne, the border of France and Italy at 8,245'



Lunch at Refugio Elisabetta, Italy



Glacier above Refugio Elisabetta



Green slopes below Refugio Elisabetta

After lunch, with the sun beginning to peak out, we have a very pleasant hike down to our meeting spot with Pascale and the van for our shuttle into Courmayeur, elevation 4,016'. We are treated to views of towering peaks, glaciers all around, and lush vegetation. We ended up hiking a bit over 10 miles with about 2,400' ascent and 2,700' descent.



Steve & I enjoying the sunshine -- note the brave souls behind us taking a dip in glacier-fed waters!

The charming Italian village of Courmayeur is our home for the night and we have some time before dinner to explore it. Almost all of the roofs in the village are made of granite pieces in a fish-scale pattern – a very appealing attribute. Not so appealing were the many smokers walking the crowded streets -- Courmayeur is a very popular tourist destination and easily accessed via the *Mt. Blanc Tunnel*, an over 7.2 mile long tunnel that goes beneath Mt. Blanc and connects Chamonix with Courmayeur. After all the wide open spaces of the hiking trails, we felt a bit trapped in the mass of humanity that was downtown Courmayeur. A very tasty and filling Italian meal helped restore us as did a good night's sleep.



Our charming family run hotel in Courmayeur



Granite fish-scale pattern roofs in Courmayeur

Day 7 – Courmayeur to La Vachey: After an excellent buffet breakfast at the *Hotel Berthod* with an overwhelming smorgsbord of options (the entire group later declared it the “best” breakfast of the trip), we walked from our hotel through the still mostly unoccupied streets of Courmayeur. We climbed through town to a trail along the side of a mountain with glorious views of peaks and glaciers on the Italian side of the Mt. Blanc Massif opposite of us.



Looking back towards Courmayeur



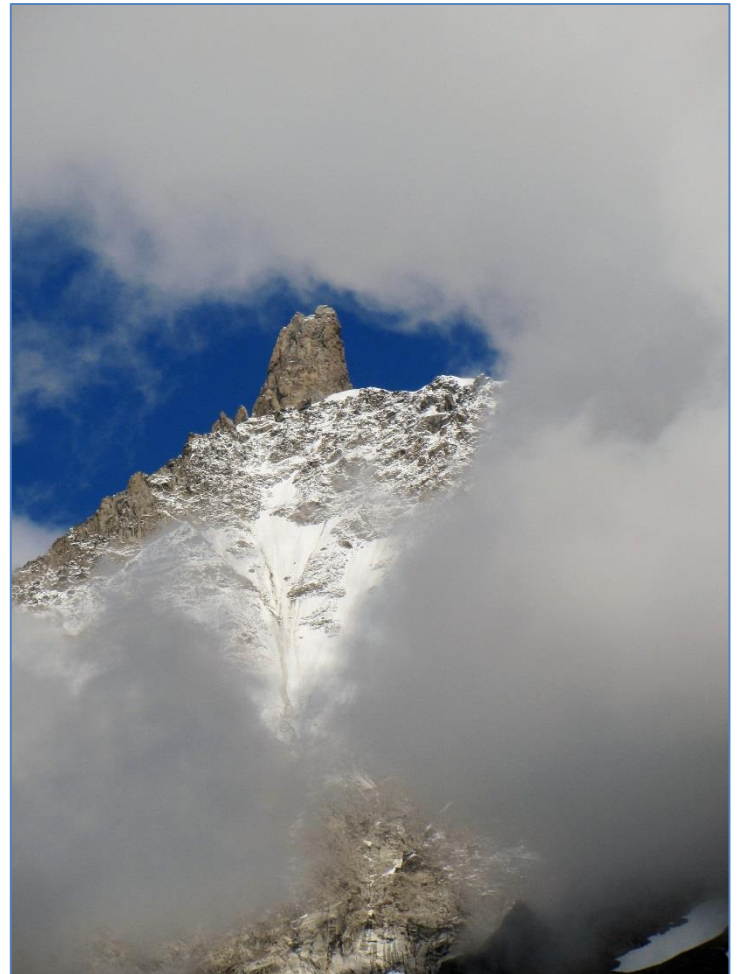
Italian side of Mt. Blanc peeking through the clouds

We stopped at a local refuge (hut) for a morning snack break before continuing along the rolling trail. At one point, we heard a tremendous sound of either avalanche or large rock fall letting loose but we couldn't see exactly where it was occurring.



Friendly cat at Refuge Giorgio Bertone

We ended our 8 mile, 3,500' ascent day with a very steep trail descent to the valley floor. Our overnight accommodations were at the rustic *Hotel Lavachey* in the *Val Ferret* (Ferret Valley). What we didn't know until we arrived, is that the hotel is next to a VERY popular day destination for hiking, picnicing, etc.



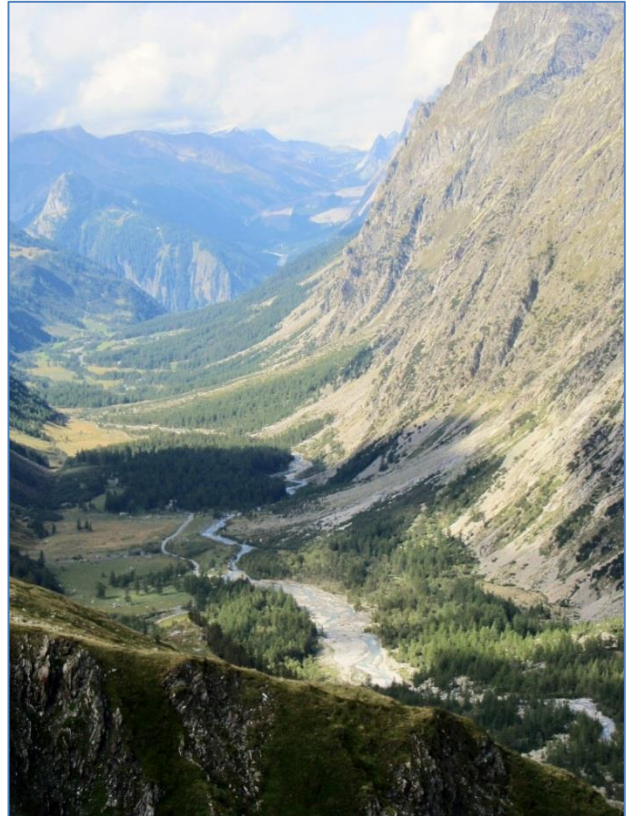
Dramatic Mt. Blanc Massif scenery

When we arrived the place was positively overrun with parked cars and people. Luckily, as the sun descended all the visiting day folks and their cars left and we enjoyed a quiet evening. A peak at the brilliantly starred night sky in the middle of the night was a great treat!

Day 8 – La Vachey, Italy to Champex, Switzerland: A short shuttle from Pascale had us to our trailhead. A steady climb put us at the beautiful Refuge Elena with its gorgeous views in time for a mid morning break. Across the valley is the *Glacier de Pre-de-Bar* with *Mont Dolent* above – the meeting point of the borders of France, Italy, and Switzerland.



Steve, me, Linda & Brian looking up at the *Glacier de Pre-de-Bar* from the deck of Refuge Elena



Looking down *Val Ferret*, Valley Ferret, from Refuge Elena



Crossing from Italy into Switzerland via the *Grand Col Ferret*, elevation 8,300'

Further climbing took us to the *Grand Col Ferret* (Grand Ferret Pass), elevation 8,300', where we cross from Italy into Switzerland. This is our highest elevation of the trip. Unfortunately, our climb took us into the clouds so we don't have much of a view and the temperature has dropped. We cross granite scree fields to the *Petite Col Ferret* (Small Ferret Pass), elevation 8,169.

We descend via more granite scree trail, and eventually break for a somewhat chilly lunch beside a beautiful mountain stream. From here it was all downhill. Steve & I were hiking with Linda & Brian and the 4 of us ended up doing a bit extra mileage – we missed an unmarked turn-off from the main trail to another which would take us to the Village of La Fouly. We figured things out before too long so we just doubled back. Our total mileage was 8.5 miles with 2,700' ascent and 3,100' descent.

We enjoyed a cold beverage in La Fouly before climbing to the van for a ½ hour drive to *Champex*, a small lake resort. Little did we know what we were in for ... apparently Pascale has the heart of a Formula 1 race car driver (something we hadn't noticed before on our previous short shuttles). The narrow road between La Fouly and Champex involved a number of steep hairpin turns taken by Pascale without regard to oncoming traffic, lack of guardrails, and often while gesturing with one or both hands off the steering wheel ... an "E-Ticket" ride for sure! (Note: I had to explain the meaning of that phrase to some of my fellow riders.) A hot shower and very good dinner at the *Hotel Glacier* help us regain a more normal pulse rate.

Day 9 – Champex to Col de la Forclaz: From the *Hotel Glacier's* front door, we walk up through the local ski resort and through a lovely forest. We spot a sleeping and very large St. Bernard dog at our mid-morning stop at a local farm house/café. Shortly thereafter Laurent leads us up the "old" route, a very steep trail with several stream crossings. Once we gain the ridge, we encounter several cows, appropriate given this part of the TMB is known as *Bovine* route! We stop for lunch at the *de Bovine Alpage* (high mountain cow pasture) mountain hut which serves a variety of home-made goodies (cakes and pies) – all baked via an old wood-fueled stove.



The village of La Fouly is part of the Champex-Lac area known as "St. Bernard Country"



Woodstove at *de Bovine Alpage* mountain hut



Swiss chalet in forest near Champex

From our high vantage point, we can look down into the Rhone Valley and the Swiss town of Martigny – with a population of about 15,000 it looks huge compared to the small hamlet and villages we've become accustomed to. We learn that Martigny has a microclimate that is just right for growing grapes and we can spot vineyards on several of the hillsides around the town.

Down through high pastures and forest we descend and see several “Queen” cows – champions of the Swiss tradition of cow fighting. Unlike bull fighting, no blood is drawn. The cows’ horns are blunted before competition, so the fights are mainly a contest of pushing and shoving, with losers determined by the first cow to back down.

After over 10 miles, 2,800’ ascent and 2,300’ descent we reach our home of the night, the *Hotel du Col de La Forclaz*. The hotel sits right on the apex of a popular and curvy mountain road – we could hear sports cars and motorcycles enthusiastically taking the hairpin turns long before we actually arrived!

Day 10 – Col de la Forclaz, Switzerland to the Vallorcine Valley, France: Under mostly sunny skies, we take a steep trail through the forest, an old smuggler’s path we are told, to the “frontier” (aka, the border between Switzerland and France). There we are treated to terrific views of the entire Mt. Blanc Massif! Down below to our left are the mostly gentle ski slopes of *Domaine de Balme (Le Tour)*. Off to our right across the valley is a large dam, the *Lac d’Emosson*, which is used by both France and Switzerland for hydroelectric purposes. We roll along admiring the 360 degree views and have a lazy lunch lounging in the grass and soaking up the warmth of the sun and the splendor of our environment.



Look at the size of those cow bells!



Steve at the “frontier,” the border between Switzerland and France



Admiring the Mont Blanc Massif

After a bit more up and down trail we start the long downhill to the Vallorcine Valley and our hotel, *Hotel de la Couronne*, in the village of Argentiere. Some interesting local wooden totem poles greet us as we exit the forest -- they have been carved by a local resident. After nearly 11 miles and 4,375' ascent and significant descent as well, we need and enjoy a hot and leisurely shower* before joining the group for our next to last dinner together. *Jo Marie & George reported later that they had a mostly cold shower as the hot water had run out by the time they showered.

Day 11 – Argentiere to Chamonix: Pascale shuttles us to the nearby *Le Col De Montets*, a pass at elevation 4,800', where we begin our last day of hiking the TMB. We had spotted today's trail from high above the day before – it was easy to spot – a seemingly endless series of switchbacks! A group of us made a game of guessing the total number of switchbacks we'd encounter ... after several "resets" of guesstimates, a total of 85 switchbacks was declared as the final count. The trail then continued upwards in a more straightened out manner and we were able to take in the encompassing views.



Carved wooden totems near Argentiere



We hike onwards and upwards to the area of the five *Lacs des Cheserys* (Chesery Lakes). We lunch beside one of the lakes as a few brave souls take a dip (neither Steve or I are one of them). Because we are now so close of Chamonix, we are joined on the trail by many others out enjoying a beautiful day.



Sophie going to great lengths to set up a group shot



Our fellow TMB hikers: Sophie, Steve, me, George, David, Lindsay (kneeling), Jo Marie, Linda, Jim, Brian (kneeling), Molly, Blair, Ann, Laetitia, and Laurent

After lunch we continue to the final and largest of the Chesery Lakes which has a spectacular view of the Mont Blanc Massif as its backdrop. We then head downwards and join up with the Grand Balcon route on this side of the Chamonix Valley and a steady stream of fellow hikers (we had hiked part of the Grand Balcon route on the other side of the valley on our Day 2). Our destination is the station at the top of the *Flegere* gondola/cable car, our transportation down to Chamonix. We hiked nearly 7 miles and with an over 3,000' ascent, and 1,500' descent before piling into the cable car for a swift and exhilarating ride down the mountain. Pascale picked us up for a short transfer to our hotel – we had her drop us up in the middle of town so we could grab a much deserved gelato first!



Lac de Chesery

I managed to fit in a much needed massage prior to our final group dinner, held at a very nice Chamonix restaurant called *Atmosphere*. We ate and drank heartily as we reminisced about our adventures over the prior 11 days. We said a final thank yous and farewell to our wonderful guides before taking a final stroll through the charming village of Chamonix.

The map illustrates a 11-day walking itinerary in the Chamonix region, spanning the borders of France, Switzerland (Schweiz/Suisse), and Italy. The route is marked with a purple line and numbered days 1 through 11. Key locations and peaks are labeled with their elevations in meters (m).

Key Locations and Peaks:

- France:** Tignes, Taninges, Salvagny, Sixt-Fer-à-Cheval (765 m), Nambride (846 m), Le Grenie de Commune (2,775 m), Le Buet (3,096 m), Tête à l'Âne (2,804 m), Tête du Colonney (2,804 m), Servoz (814 m), Le Fayet (580 m), St.-Gervais-les-Bains (807 m), Les Houches (980 m), Aig. du Midi (3,842 m), Aiguille de Bionnassay (4,052 m), Les Contamines-Montjoie (1,167 m), Notre Dame de la Gorge, Mont Tondou (3,198 m), La Ville des Glaciers (1,789 m), Col du Bonhomme (2,329 m), Pass Col de la Croix du Bonhomme (2,483 m), Ref. du Col de la Croix du Bonhomme (2,443 m).
- Switzerland (Schweiz/Suisse):** Martigny, Trient (1,297 m), Col de la Forclaz (1,526 m), Fenêtre d'Arpette (2,665 m), Tête du Chanavier (1,927 m), Aiguille du Tour (3,540 m), Aiguille d'Argentière (3,900 m), Mont Dolent (3,280 m), Tête de Ferret (2,714 m), Grand Col Ferret (2,537 m), La Fouly (1,594 m), Ferret, Gand Golliat (3,238 m), Rif. Elena (2,062 m), Rif. Bonatti (1,056 m), Rif. Bertone (1,989 m), Villair (1,226 m), Courmayeur (1,021 m), Morgex (923 m), La Thuile (1,465 m), Col du Petit St-Bernard.
- Italy:** Aosta, Pointe Fetita (2,623 m), Grande Rochère (3,326 m), Col entre deux Sauts (2,524 m), Col du Sapin (2,436 m), Entrèves (1,308 m), Mt. Chétif (2,343 m), Rif. Maison Vieille (1,956 m), Alpe Vieille inf., Mont Béro Blanc (3,252 m), Mont Ouille (3,099 m).

Key Features and Landmarks:

- Mountains:** Mont Blanc (4,810 m), Dent du Géant (4,013 m), Grandes Jorasses (4,208 m), Aiguille Verte (4,122 m), Aiguille de Trel la Tête (3,930 m), Aiguille de la Seigne (2,950 m), Aiguille du Belvedere (2,965 m), Tré-la-Chaux (1,400 m), Argentière (1,252 m), Aiguille de la Flégère (1,877 m), Aiguille de la Balme (1,706 m).
- Lakes and Glaciers:** Lac d'Emosson, Lac du Miage, Mer de Glace, Gl. d'Argentière, Gl. de la Brenva, Gl. de Tré-la-Tête, Lac du Têt (1,120 m), Lac du Bonhomme (2,329 m), Lac du Miage, Lac du Chécrouit (1,956 m), Lac du Chécrouit (1,956 m), Lac du Chécrouit (1,956 m).
- Refuges and Huts:** Ref. de la Flégère (1,877 m), Ref. de Bellachat (2,151 m), Ref. de Miage (1,559 m), Ref. de Nant (1,459 m), Ch. de la Balme (1,706 m), Ref. des Mottets (1,850 m), Rif. Elisabetta Soldini (2,197 m), Rif. Maison Vieille (1,956 m), Rif. Bertone (1,989 m), Rif. Bonatti (1,056 m), Rif. Elena (2,062 m), Cabane d'Orny (2,826 m), Rel. d'Arpette (1,630 m).

Day 11 Itinerary:

- Start: Chamonix (1,037 m)
- Ref. de la Flégère (1,877 m)
- Chal. du Lac Blanc (2,352 m)
- Argentière (1,252 m)
- Aiguille Verte (4,122 m)
- Mont Dolent (3,280 m)
- Tête de Ferret (2,714 m)
- Grand Col Ferret (2,537 m)
- La Fouly (1,594 m)
- Ferret
- Gand Golliat (3,238 m)
- Rif. Elena (2,062 m)
- Rif. Bonatti (1,056 m)
- Rif. Bertone (1,989 m)
- Villair (1,226 m)
- Courmayeur (1,021 m)
- Morgex (923 m)
- La Thuile (1,465 m)
- Col du Petit St-Bernard

Day 12 – Chamonix to Denver: As a group we are transported across the border to the airport in Geneva, Switzerland where we scatter – most to catch flights and a few to spend a night or two in Geneva before heading home. We did some shopping in duty free (mostly window shopping) before boarding our IcelandAir flight to Reykjavik (Linda & Brian are on the small flight). By this time, my right knee has begun to swell a bit (later diagnosed as tendinitis with underlying osteoarthritis – nothing a shot of cortisone won't take care of). We have a short layover in Iceland where Brian buys 17 bags of our favorite Icelandic candy bar in duty free ... and ends up having to check part of his now overflowing day pack on our final flight of the trip back to Denver. Victoria is there to pick us up and speed us homeward for some much needed sleep.



Laetitia, Laurent, and Pascale -- our Mountain Travel Sobek guide and support team

The trip can be summed up in many ways but I'll do it this way ...

- Over 10,400 air miles over 4 segments
- Four countries outside the US: Iceland, Switzerland, France, and Italy (Switzerland and Italy were “new” countries for Steve)
- Approximately 95 miles of hiking in those 4 countries and 34,000 vertical feet of ascent
- From desolate but beautiful volcanic Icelandic peaks to the towering granite peaks of the Mont Blanc Massif – both glacier covered and all awe inspiring
- Colorful summer wildflowers thriving in their challenging terrains, be it windy, chilly Iceland to the high alpine meadows of the Alps
- Weather of all types, except snow, which made us happy that Gore-Tex had been invented
- A guilt-free culinary romp through the delicious offerings of the 4 countries with the cuisine of Italy getting our top ranking
- An instant community of like-minded folks who walked, talked, ate, and laughed their way through a wonderful trip!

Of course, the “next” hiking trip became an object of discussion even before this trip was finished ... where will it be?