

**Trek**  
in  
**The Alps**

**I. Tour du Mont Blanc**

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# Tour du Mont Blanc



Alpenrose, *Rhododendron ferrugineum*, grows above the treeline across the Alps flowering all summer



The Chamois, *Rupicapra rupicapra*, is an iconic goat like antelope which is found throughout the Alps. It is smaller than the Ibex and relatively common in some National parks



The Ox-eye daisy, *Leucanthemum vulgare*, flourishes in the Alps, even into late summer

The Tour Du Mont Blanc (TMB) is one of the classic treks of the Alps and it circumnavigates the entire Massif Du Mont Blanc, from whose glaciers and snowfields emerge some of Europe's most famous and dramatic mountains. The route round the massif has a few variants but by and large it takes 11 days at a leisurely pace and goes from the deciduous forests and villages of the valley floors at 1000m to rocky passes over 2500m and just above the last grasses. Most of the geology of the massif is granite or granitoid and it is this which is shattered by the frost to create the distinctive spires of the region.

If the path is hiked early, in mid June, then some of the passes will still be covered in snow. However, the passes are not steep and an ice axe is unnecessary except on the Fenetre d'Arpette variant. Late September can see the onset of winter. During the high summer months the trek can be busy, especially in the last 2 weeks of July and all of August. Perhaps the best time to walk

is the first half of September when the weather is settled, but most of the alpine flowers will be spent. Afternoon and evening thunderstorms are possible and you should avoid the passes and the ladders on Day 10 then. Otherwise all the sections can really be walked in wet misty weather but route finding might be difficult if snow starts to lie on the paths.

Accommodation is very varied from hotels to hostels or *gîtes d'etape* in the towns or villages to mountain refuges which only have dormitories or *dortoirs*, divided into sections, but may also have smaller rooms. There are camp spots near most of the mountain refuges and plenty of campsites in the forested valleys. Camping is not allowed in the various French National Parks or the Swiss valleys passed by the route, but with discretion would be overlooked.

Food is available at all the towns and villages either at the hotel or at a nearby restaurant but

at the mountain refuges dinner and breakfast are provided by the establishment, usually around 0700 and 1900. If you do not pass a refuge for lunch then most refuges can also make up pack lunches, or you can stop to eat a shop bought picnic. The only problem with this comfortable and gourmet option is the expense which can be significant in France and Italy, and absolutely eye-watering in Switzerland - which offers very poor value for money. From mid June to mid September accomodation and food is widely available in the villages and mountain refuges but after mid September many places close and the choice becomes very limited

There is a small guidebook called "Tour of Mont Blanc" by Kev Reynolds which is very useful and informative. There is a 1:50,000 map published by the French ING called "Pays du Mont-Blanc" which covers the entire walk on one sheet and is adequate because all of the routes and variants are so well marked.

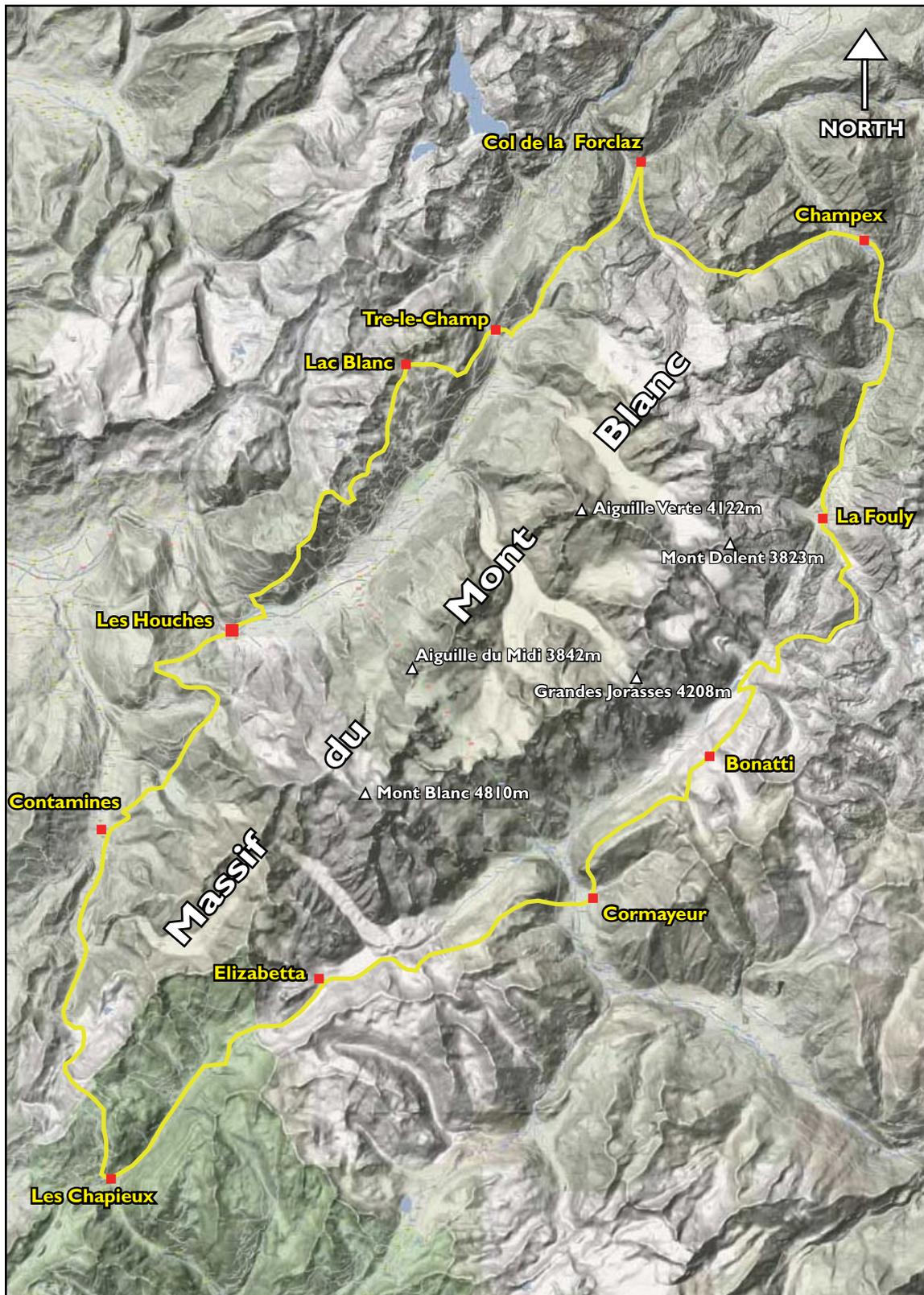
Perhaps the easiest way to get to the start of the

trail is to take one of the numerous minibuses which shuttle between Geneva Airport and the Chamonix Valley. The start of the trail is at the charming village of Les Houches, which is the first stop for these minibuses about an hour after leaving Geneva Airport and just 10 minutes before Chamonix itself.

While there is some traditional culture on the TMB, the alpine farmers who practiced transhumance with their cattle have long realized that it is now tourism which is the milk cow. Indeed many of the mountains refuges started off as shepards houses and cowsheds 100 years ago, but now, after a few incarnations, are the large establishments of today catering for 100 trekkers a day. There are still herds of cows, and less commonly sheep, in the the mountains and as you walk you will not be far from the sound of bells. The cows and sheep are milked at the alpine pastures and the milk is made into artisanal cheeses. The main highlight of the Tour du Mont Blanc is not the remnants of this alpine culture but the outstanding mountain scenery.



Day 11. The mountain scenery on the TMB is outstanding. Here is the view from near Lac Blanc looking across the mist-filled Chamonix valley to the Grandes Jorasses on the left and the various Aiguilles above Chamonix in the centre and right. Under the mist, between the two, is the huge Mer de Glace glacier.



Map of the anti-clockwise circular route from Les Hourches, in the Chamonix Valley in France, round to Cormayeur in Italy and on to Champex in Switzerland, before returning to Les Hourches in France again to circumnavigate the Massif Du Mont Blanc on the classic 11 day trek.



Day 1. The TMB starts with a solid ascent of 650metres from Les Houches to Col de Voza. Much of the ascent follows the ski piste used for the Kandahar Ski Race. About halfway up is the charming Chalet La Tuile, which is sometimes a restaurant



Day 1. From Col de Voza the better variant route goes up to Bellevue and then contours through the forest towards the snout of the Bionnassay Glacier in the photo ahead. After crossing the torrent emerging from the base of the glacier the path climbs up to the Col de Tricot, 2120m.



Day 1. From the grassy Col de Voza, 1653m, there is a great view back down the ski slope into the valley with the town of Chamonix spread out across the valley floor surrounded by mountains and glaciers.



Day 1. Crossing the suspension bridge over the glacial torrent which emerges from the Bionnassay Glacier before the climb up to Col de Tricot



Day 1. The quaint and popular refuge at Truc lies on a idyllic alpine plateau bordered by forested valleys on each side. The village of Contamines lies in the valley to the west of this plateau



Day 2. The church at Contamines is the centre piece of this traditional village and boasts a huge, decorated eave which overhangs and protects the facade



Day 2. The Rollaz Alp lies a couple of hours after Contamines and before the sustained climb up to Col du Bonhomme to the left of the photo. At the far end of this alp is the Refuge Balme



Day 2. From Col du Bonhomme pictured above the path continues to climb to the higher Col de la Croix du Bonhomme where there is a delightful refuge and the start of the Col du Fours variant



Day 3. From the small hamlet at La Ville des Glaciers there is a great view past the small chapel into the pastoral valley and the lofty Aiguille des Glacier, 3816m, beyond. The interesting variant route via Col des Fours comes over the mountainside from Refuge du Col de la Croix du Bonhomme to here and misses out the long descent to the utilitarian village of Chapieux



Day 3. The busy Elisabetta refuge lies in Italy beside the Glacier de la Lex Blanche and under the towering Aiguille de Tre La Tete mountain, 3930m. From here it is a good days walk to Cormayeur with little other accommodation so it is worth booking this refuge especially in the high summer.



Day 4. Below Elisabetta Refuge is a alluvial plain where the lateral moraine of the massive Miage Glacier has blocked the valley. This alluvial plain is fertile and grassy and affords good grazing for cows who are brought up here for the summer



Day 4. Between Elisabetta Refuge and Cormayer the path climbs high above the Val Veny to avoid the Miage Glacier and its debris. It affords one of the most spectacular views of the soaring and jagged south side of the Massif du Mont Blanc



Day 4. The town of Cormayer lies in the middle of the south side of the Massif du Mont Blanc where the main valleys of Val Veny and Val Ferret meet. It's a spectacular and convenient location



Day 5. Looking over the stone slab rooftops of Cormayer to the south of the Massif du Mont Blanc. Cormayer is connected to Chamonix by a tunnel in case one has to return or break the trek



Day 5. The TMB has been re-routed to contour round the north face of Mont de la Saxe, rather than go over it. This new treeline path is a delight to follow all the way to Bonatti Refuge



Day 5. The path continues its delightful treeline contour to Bonatti Refuge above Val Ferret with stunning views across the traditional pastoral valley to the south side of the Grandes Jorasses



Day 4. Kestrels, *Falco tinnunculus*, are common on the south side of the massif where there small prey and large insects.



Day 11. The Alpine Marmot, *Marmota marmota*, is the largest member of the squirrel family. It eats grasses and small insects to accrue fat deposits to see them through 6-7 months of hibernation.



Day 11. The Alpine Chough, *Pyrrhocorax graculus*, often gathers where it is likely to get food from humans.



Day 6. On the way up to Grand Col Ferret with the upper Val Ferret down to the left. In the far distance on the left is the Col de la Seigne at the head of the Val Veny which is crossed a few days previously. The shorter mountains on the right are the Petites Jorasses and the central higher ones the Grandes Jorasses



Day 6. Looking to Mont Dolent, 3823m, from the top of the Grand Col Ferret, 2537m, between Bonatti and La Fouly. The mountain is relatively modest compared to most in the massif but is where the French, Swiss and Italian borders meet.



Day 7. One of the older timber log houses on the edge of La Fouly is typical. The walls are made of interlocking logs and the roof is made of massive timbers and then either covered with larch shingles or large stone slabs.



Day 7. The easy walk from La Fouly down the Val Ferret to Issert is through a two hour delight of small fields and pastoral villages with many of the old wooden houses a few centuries old



Day 8. After crossing the Fenetre d'Arpette the route descends down past the heavily crevassed Glacier du Trient before it enters the forest and follows the easy path to Col de la Forclaz



Day 9. Snow can fall on the high passes at anytime, especially in September. Here are colder conditions at just 2200m by the Col de Balme Refuge which has just closed a few days previously



Day 10. Climbing the main ladder section by the Aiguillette d'Argentiere en route from Tre-le-Champ to Lac Blanc Refuge in the snow. The ladders are easy but the rungs might be cold



Day 11. The walk from Lac Blanc refuge to Bel Lachat Refuge mostly goes down the east side of the Massif des Aiguilles Rouges on a wide mountain shelf called Grand Balcon Sud from which there are excellent views over the Chamonix Valley to the Massif du Mont Blanc on the other side.



Day 11. Mont Blanc looms in the distance across the Chamoix Valley from the easy path which contours across the mountainside along the Grand Balcon Sud, here between the ski complexes of La Flegere and Plenpraz 5 km further south.



Day 11. From Plenpraz the route crosses the Massif des Aiguilles Rouges for a while to the rocky west side and then climbs up Le Brevent, 2525m. On the ascent up this mountain there is a short section with a ladder



Day 11. On the descent from Le Brevent to Bel Lachat the route goes along the crest on the massif where there are more superb views to the Massif du Mont Blanc. From Bel Lachat there is a long descent into the valley to complete the TMB.



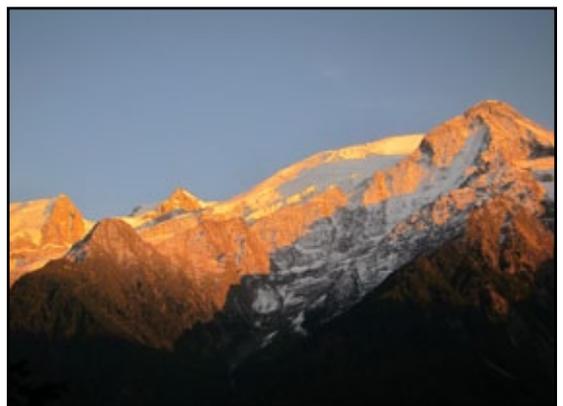
Day 11. Chamois are very agile and can jump five metres across steep rocky ground with their elasticated hooves giving them excellent grip. They graze meadows never far from the safety of cliffs



Day 11. Marmots hibernate for up to 8 months and have to build up fat reserves in the summer. They live in underground colonies with a lookout posted who chirps loudly if a threat is spotted



Day 11. From Bel Lachat refuge the path returns to the east side of Massif des Aiguilles Rouges and starts to descend steeply down conifer then deciduous forest into the Chamonix Valley again.



Day 11. The summit of Mont Blanc cannot be seen from the Chamonix Valley itself but the upper slopes are visible and light up with an alpenglow in the evening sun

# The Alps: Tour du Mont Blanc

| Day | Start        | Finish       | Km | Up   | Down | Time | General   |
|-----|--------------|--------------|----|------|------|------|---|
| 1   | les Houches  | Contamines   | 18 | 1400 | 1220 | 9.5  | Leave Les Houches and climb up the zig-zags between chalets and up the Kandahar ski run for 3 hours to Col de Voza. Here in alpine pastures is a hotel and mountain train stop. Head east up the ridge for a half hour and then descend in forest to the swing bridge over the tumbling torrent emerging from the Bionnassay glacier. After the bridge climb an hour past rhododendron bushes to the Col de Tricot. In a day of great views some of the best are here. Descend steeply for a good hour to the alp at Chalet Miage. Now climb steeply for a hour to the lovely Chalet de Truc in its superb idyllic setting. From here it is a long descent for a good hour through forest to the Alpine village of Contamines for hotels and food.  |
| 2   | Contamines   | Les Chapieux | 18 | 1330 | 990  | 10   | Head south up the quiet verdant valley for an hour to the Gorge Church. Here start to climb up a wooded track for an hour to a Roman bridge over a gorge and Refuge Nant Bourrant just beyond. From here there is a short climb through forest to a delightful alp with the Refuge Balme at the southern end and the imposing Pennaz Aiguilles rising beyond. From Balme the route now climbs steeply for a hour to the chalets and alp at Jovet and the after some respite for another hour to Col Bonhomme. There is a further hours rising traverse to Col de la Croix du Bonhomme where there is a delightful refuge. If the forecast is good stay here for the preferable variant over Col des Fours tomorrow. If not head down the relentless grassy slopes to the utilitarian hamlet of Les Chapieux and the welcoming Auberge de la Nova.   |
| 3   | Les Chapieux | Elisabetta   | 15 | 1150 | 420  | 7    | From Les Chapieux walk up the deep valley on the road to La Ville des Glaciers where the valley opens out. It is here the Col des Fours variant rejoins the main Tour Mont Blanc track. Continue up the alp for an easy half hour to Refuge des Mottets at the foot of the long climb. Start up the zig zags passing sheep grazing and marmot colonies until two hours later you approach the Col de la Seigne. The impressive view of Aiguille des Glacier is soon surpassed at the Col with a tremendous view of Mont Blanc and its serated southern ridges. From the pass descend for a good hour into the gentle grassy valley now in Italy to reach the lovely Refugio Elisabetta beside the glacier .   |
| 4   | Elisabetta   | Cormayeur    | 14 | 530  | 1510 | 7.5  | From Elisabetta walk down to the alluvial plain on the valley floor then along the gravel road until the lateral moraine wall of Glacier du Miage cuts across the valley. Here start to climb, sometimes steeply, up the stream to Vielle Alp which is riddled with marmot. Now there follows a delightful traverse NE across the meadows with absolutely stunning views across the moraine filled Val Veny to the entire south east side of the Mont Blanc massif. Enjoy this view for a good hour as you make the lofty traverse to the lovely Col Checrouit and its refuge. Now start a knee jarring descent down through steep forest for an hour and half to reach the valley. Pass through the lovely old village of Dolonne cross the glacial torrent and reach Cormayeur with its abundance of facilities.  |
| 5   | Cormayeur    | Bonatti      | 14 | 1050 | 270  | 6    | Leave Cormayeur by the towns church and walk up the road through the hamlet of Villiar in Val Sapin. Cross a bridge and the start a two hour climb through the forest to the gastronomic Refugio Bentone at the treeline. From here the route divides with a harder variant going up along the crest of Mont de la Saxe. The main route traverses along the north flank on Mont de la Saxe on a delightful path at the treeline. This three hour traverse offers the best scenery of the trip so far with the south side of Mont Blanc and the Grand Jorasses soaring above the idyllic Val Ferret below. The easy undulating forest walk passes a couple of cow alps before reaching the superb Refugio Bonatti.   |
| 6   | Bonatti      | La Fouly     | 20 | 960  | 1360 | 9    | From Bonatti head east along the shelf for a pleasant hour through larch, rhododendron and blueberry with stunning views to the Grand Jorasses across Val Ferret. On reaching the Arnuva alp the path zig-zags down to the valley then, climbs 300m up to the treeless and pastoral Refugio Elena. From here there is a sustained further 500m climb up the grassy hillside to Col Ferret where there is a great vista back down Val Ferret and Val Veny to Elisabetta from three days ago and also west into the milder Switzerland. Descend the Col on an easy track for a good hour to the best avoided Refugio Peule. Here leave the main track for a preferable variant traversing the steep hillside for a short hour to a small alp. Then descend beautiful larch forests to the Refuge Lecherie on the valley floor. Just a half hour further is the charming village of La Fouly with many facilities lying under the soaring Mont Dolent. |

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| Day | Start             | Finish            | Km  | Up    | Down  | Time | General   |
|-----|-------------------|-------------------|-----|-------|-------|------|---|
| 7   | La Fouly          | Champex           | 17  | 510   | 640   | 6    | At the bottom of La Fouly opposite the Hotel Grand Ferret turn left off the road and across the river. For the next two hours follow the tracks and paths down the quiet forested west side of the glacial river. This easy route ends in a descent down the lateral moraine of the long retreated Saleina glacier and spills you out of the forest into the quaint fields around Praz de Fort village. Enter this very authentic old village and descend its old streets between sun blackened timber houses and colourful flowers. Cross to the east side of the valley and descend for just half hour passing a rural mountain hamlet to the equally Swiss village of Issert crossing the river again to the west. Here the route climbs over 400m up through easy, seldom steep, spruce forest for two hours. Emerge from the spruce trees into the large village of Champex idyllically sited beside a small lake. There are all facilities here.  |
| 8   | Champex           | Col de la Forclaz | 14  | 1210  | 1110  | 8.5  | There are two routes to Col Forclaz either 6 hours via Alp Bovine or 8.5 hours via Fenetre Arpette. The latter being a more demanding, but interesting, variant and described here. Leave Campex and walk to the top of the village then leave the road and head up the hill beside an irrigation channel and through forest to Refuge Relais D'Arpette after an hour. The route now heads up larch filled valley before leaving the trees and climbing more steeply for 3 hours across moraine and then into a rock bowl which leads up to the steep high pass of Fenetre D'Arpette. There is a fantastic view looking down to the Trient Glacier and the valley beyond. Start down the steep slopes slowly drawing level with the glaciers snout. Continue down for 2 hours to reach the Chalet du Glacier and the forest again. Here there is a bridge over the torrent and up to Refuge Col de Balme 3 hours away, but we continue for a further hour down a very easy path beside an irrigation channel. It leads to the old large hotel at Col de la Forclaz high above the upper Trient valley.  |
| 9   | Col de la Forclaz | Tre-Le-Champ      | 12  | 960   | 1100  | 5.5  | Leave the ageing Col De La Forclaz Hotel and return along the irrigation channel for 10 min then take the turning down to Le Peuty 300m below. Once in the valley head up through the village, across meadows and start up the forested path to Col de Balme. It is a near 900 metre climb through the spruce, then larch forest and finally open grass to reach the Col after 3 hours and cross into France again. In good weather the route now goes down to the Col de Posettes and over the Aiguilles des Posettes with great views before descending to the charming Auberge at Tres Le Champ. In poor weather this route is best avoided by taking the path down the pistes from Col de Balme to the villages of Le Tour and Montroc and then skirting the hillside on a good forest path for 15 min to Auberge La Boerne in Tre Le Champ.  |
| 10  | Tre-Le-Champ      | Lac Blanc         | 5   | 1040  | 60    | 3.5  | Leave Tre Le Champ cross the main road and start up the track in the spruce forest. After a good hour reach the Aiguillette d'Argentiere a well known climbers pinnacle. From here at 1900 the first and main ladder section starts with a series of linked ladders climbing 60m up a steep crag with lofty views to the valley 800m below. Continue up across the hillside with sensational views across the Chamonix valley to Mont Blanc massif. Pass various junctions as you climb steadily west passing a few tarns. The Chalet du Lac Blanc is a short climb up again with a couple of easy ladder sections through ibex country to the lovely refuge.   |
| 11  | Lac Blanc         | Les Houches       | 23  | 900   | 2270  | 10.5 | From Lac Blanc head down past a few small tarns with fantastic views across the valley up the Mer du Glace glacier slicing through the Mont Blanc massif. After a half hour reach a track zig zagging down to the concrete intrusion of the La Flegere ski complex. Now contour round the hillside on a forest path passing across two steep valleys before reaching a third and climbing to yet another ski complex, Plenpraz, on the far south side. Here the path climbs steeply for 300m up to Col Brevent. The path now undulates across bouldery ground for a good km before meeting a track and climbing a further 200m to Le Brevent mountain. After enjoying great views descend chamois and marmot terrain for a short hour to the small Bel Lachat refuge. From here there is an unrelenting 1200m descent across bushes then into larch, spruce and finally deciduous forest into the Chamonix Valley passing the huge Le Christ Roi statue towards the bottom. Cross the main road to reach the east end of Les Houches and walk west a km to reach Hotel Le Slalom at the bottom of the Bellevue cable car to complete the TMB circuit. |
|     |                   |                   | 170 | 11040 | 10950 | 83   |   |