

TRAVERSEE DU MONT BLANC

With Yves Astier, high mountain guide

A successful ascent of Mt. Blanc is every mountaineer's dream. The first four days of our course are the same as for our 'introduction to mountaineering' course, during which three nights are spent at altitude, in order to acclimatise gradually. Then, after a night's rest and recuperation in the valley, we go up to the Cosmiques hut (3613m) on the Aiguille du Midi cable car. After a short night, we set off from here for Europe's highest summit, by the three peaks route. Our last six years' experience with these courses has led us to prefer this to the 'Gouter' route, as it offers a better chance of success.

The ascent of Mt Blanc takes place on the sixth or seventh day of the course, depending on weather conditions, (the seventh day is a spare day in case of bad weather at altitude).

Success rate : more than 85% of the mountaineers that we guide reach the summit of Mt Blanc. This remarkable success rate (statistics show an average 55% success rate for mountaineers leaving from the Gouter hut and 65% for those leaving from the Cosmiques) is a result of improvements made to the programme over the years to overcome the five main causes of failure on Mt Blanc:

- 1) Equipment which does not keep out the cold, especially gloves, (it is essential to have the outer and inner gloves that we ask you to bring); badly adjusted or ill-fitting crampons, which lead to fatigue whilst walking; boots which are not warm enough; no Thermos flask.
- 2) Lack of snow and ice experience : no matter what routes we climb during the course, additional training in snow and ice, crampon and rope techniques is essential, in order to be able to move safely on the route up Mt Blanc.
- 3) Insufficient training : before the course, get fit, either by running for 30 minutes three times a week, or by going on walks with a height gain of at least 1500m, at the weekends, during the two months preceding the course.
- 4) Lack of a 'spare' day, which, in case of bad weather, allows the ascent to be postponed until conditions improve.
- 5) The main reason for failure is lack of acclimatisation. Climbing 3400m or even 4000m summits in a single day, from the valley, does not help much. The same applies if you do not sleep high enough, in a mountain hut. In both cases, not enough time is spent at altitude, (above 3000m), for acclimatisation to take place. In order to acclimatise correctly, it is essential to spend two nights above 3000m, then spend a night in the valley to recuperate before attempting the ascent.

Duration : 7 days, one guide to 4 participants for the first 4 days (except whilst learning snow and ice techniques, when there will be 4 – 8 participants), one guide to 2 participants for the ascent of Mt Blanc. This programme is limited to 2 groups of 4 persons each week during the summer.

Dates : see brochures

Price : 1060 euros for the 6 days

Don't forget to bring :

Your 'hill food'.

Your CAF or FFME membership card.

For the 1st morning (snow and ice techniques), you can leave spare clothes and food in the guide's vehicle. Take just 3 cereal bars, so as to have a light rucksack for snow and ice climbing.

Itinerary

Arrival and departure:

Meet at 0730 the first day, in Chamonix, in front of the Montanvers railway station (the 'Mer de Glace' train, not to be confused with the main railway station, (SNCF) which is 200m away). We will leave very shortly afterwards on the Montanvers rack-and-pinion railway : buy everything you need (food, films etc.) before the rendezvous.

Separate in Chamonix : late afternoon on the 6th day, if the ascent of Mt Blanc takes place on the 6th day, or late afternoon on the 7th if the ascent takes place on the 7th.

Day 1 : Rendezvous in Chamonix, in front of the Montanvers station, at 0730. The rack-and- pinion train takes us up to 1909m, to a balcony overlooking the famous Mer de Glace. Descent onto the glacier via the ladders. Here we put on crampons and cross the glacier, easily, towards its right bank, where we will learn about snow and ice: climbing, descending and traversing easy slopes using different ice axe techniques. Then, roped up, you will discover the different belaying and safety techniques used whilst moving on a glacier. Return to Chamonix early afternoon on the Montanvers railway. In the afternoon, a short transfer to the village of Le Tour, from where we will take the cable car to the col de Balme, 2180m. From here, a pleasant footpath crosses the alpine pastures towards the lake at Charamillon. The view opens up onto the magnificent seracs (ice towers) of the le Tour glacier; our footpath winds its way up the lateral moraine to the Albert 1er hut at 2702m. Night spent in the mountain hut.

2 hours' walk + snow and ice climbing. Height gain = +522m. Height loss = 0.

Day 2 : Early in the morning, we will return quickly to the wide, open glacier, via a stony track. The snow is good in the morning and you will be able to try out the techniques learnt yesterday. 3 hours after leaving the hut, we reach the beautiful summit of Tête Blanche, 3429m, on the border. You won't see any customs officers here, just a splendid panorama - the Trient glacier, framed by the Aiguille du Tour and the Aiguilles Dorées, a climber's paradise. We descend by the same route, then fork right towards the Col du Tour, 3282m. From here, a descending track leads us to the Trient mountain hut, at 3170m. This superb granite building stands like a lighthouse above the glacial plateau of the Trient glacier: you will be warmly welcomed, and will be able to watch the magical sunset from the terrace.

5 hours. Height gain : 831m. Height loss: 363m

Day 3 : As we will be returning to the Trient hut this evening, the rucksacks will be light today. A gently rising traverse of the vast glacial plateau brings us to our objective, the bergschrund of the Aiguille du Tour, 3542m. Crossing this bergschrund will take us a few minutes (the bergschrund is the crevasse separating the snow slopes at the base of a summit from the glacier and its snow slopes; owing to snowfall and avalanches coming down from the summit, the bergschrund will be more or less filled in). The ingenious route up the east face leads easily, via ledges and chimneys, to the summit of the Aiguille. As the return to the hut is relatively short we will be able to take our time and enjoy the view of the Oberland and the Valais. Return to the hut late morning.

In the afternoon, we will study and practice mountaineering knots and belay techniques at the hut. Night spent in the hut.

4h 30m Height gain +516m. Height loss -516m.

Day 4 : at dawn, we will leave everyone sleeping in the hut and cross the extensive flat ground of the cirque de Trient, towards the foot of the Aiguilles dorées. Near these sharp pointed granite peaks is the col des Plines or col Droit, 3294m. We descend the short, steep slope easily, facing the Saleina glacier – this is a paradise for ski tourists and the novice mountaineers - and reach the Dorées bivouac/hut, 3010m, by an easy track. After pausing to enjoy the view over the glacial cirque, closed off by the impressive north face of the Aiguille d'Argentière, we will climb back up towards the fenêtre (col) de Saleina, 3267m, which leads us to the Trient glacier. The south gully of the 'fenêtre' is a 60m, 45° slope where it may be necessary to put up a fixed rope and cut steps to make things easier. From the 'fenêtre', we will return to the col supérieur du Tour, 3289m, then follow the descent track to the Albert 1^{er} hut, and the path back to the col de Balme cable car. By cable car to le Tour. Transfer to Chamonix early afternoon.

6 h30. Height gain +598m. Height loss –1588m.

Day 5 : After a night spent recuperating in the valley, the morning will be free, for sightseeing in Chamonix, and rest. In the middle of the afternoon, we will meet at the foot of the Aiguille du Midi cable car, to organise the groups for the ascent of Mt Blanc, and to check equipment. We will take the cable car to the Aiguille du Midi, 3842m; from here it is only 30 mins. walk, roped up, to the Cosmiques mountain hut, 3613m, the most spacious high mountain hut in the French alps. After the evening meal, we will go to bed early, as the night will be short. Night spent in the hut.

30mn. Height gain +40m. Height loss –200m

Day 6 : 1 o'clock in the morning; the hut is full of the hustle and bustle of thirty parties preparing to set out for Mt Blanc. After a hurried breakfast we set off on the track crossing the flat ground of the col du Midi, 3532m, by the light of our head torches. The night is cold, body and mind are still asleep, but you quickly fall into the rhythm set by the guide, and our little group zigzags up the slopes of the normal route on Mt Blanc du Tacul. The pace is moderate, as this will be a long day. At daybreak we climb the final slopes of the north side of Mt Maudit, which we avoid by taking the short, steep col du Mt Maudit, 4345m. We climb the summit dome of Mt Blanc in the sunshine, which, however, is never very warm at these altitudes. All the alpine peaks stand out on the horizon : Jura, Chablais, Oberland, Valais, Grand Paradis, Vanoise, Oisans and in the distance, the south pyramid of l'Argentera, only 70km from the Mediterranean. The slope seems endless, the cold intense and the walking is difficult, but suddenly there is nothing more to climb, we are on the 'roof of Europe', and fatigue gives way to emotion. After the euphoria of the summit, we descend to the Plan de l'Aiguille by the Grand Mulets route : the 'arete des Bosses', elegant and airy, the Vallot hut (the highest hut in France), the magnificent glacial cirque of the Grand Plateau, the seracs of the 'Dôme' and the 'Jonction', and the 'sentier des Pélerins' are all features of this long descent. We return to the cable car at the Plan de l'Aiguille, 2310m. Descent to Chamonix.

A long day, 6 to 7 heures climbing Height gain +1388m. Height loss –2641m.

Day 7 : spare day for summit attempt or rest day.

Separate in Chamonix late afternoon on the 6th or 7th day.

This itinerary is for information only : your guide will do everything possible to complete the whole programme, but conditions, as always in the mountains, remain unpredictable, – bad weather, icing, – and the programme may have to be modified. It is not your guide's fault if (s)he has to change the programme : safety remains the n°1 priority.

In case bad weather or dangerous icing conditions in the last three days prevent any attempt on Mt Blanc in safety, we have an alternative programme : the ascent and traverse of the Domes de Miage, 3670m, on the 5th or 6th and 7th days. No reimbursement, either partial or total will be given, and the ascent of Mt Blanc will not be postponed to a later date. The decision to attempt Mt Blanc will rest solely with the guide(s).

Technical competence and physical fitness

As a novice mountaineer or with some experience, you would like to improve your chance of success on Mt Blanc.

You are a regular walker and used to steep terrain.

Your physical fitness is excellent, you practise an endurance sport twice a week (running, swimming, cycling). If this is not the case, you should run for 30mn, three times a week, and go for long walks at altitude as often as possible, (also sleeping at altitude, above 3000m), during the 2 months preceding your departure.

Price of your course : 895 euros per person

The price includes : from arrival to departure, for a standard programme :

- Supervision by a high mountain guide and his/her expenses (food, accommodation, transport)
- Specific group equipment : radio for liaison with mountain rescue organisations, group first aid kit, safety and navigation equipment (survival blankets, ropes, maps, altimeter, compass, GPS)
- Loan of a mountaineering harness
- All car, rack-and-pinion railway, and cable car journeys connected with the normal running of the programme, excepting the return journey from your accommodation to les Contamines (33km from Chamonix) in the case of an ascent of the Dômes de Miage on the 5th, 6th and 7th days of the course.
- Reservations in mountain huts
- Accommodation and half board in high mountain huts for the 4 nights spent in the mountains. Copious, well balanced, hot supper and breakfast, prepared by the hut's warden)

The price does not include :

- « cancellation/rescue » insurance
- 'hill food'
- drinks in mountain huts
- accommodation and half board for nights spent in the valley.
- personal expenses
- the return journey from your accommodation to les Contamines, (33km from Chamonix) in the case of an ascent of the Dômes de Miage on the 5th, 6th and 7th days.
- Supplementary journeys as a result of a modification of the programme through bad weather or icing conditions.
- Transport from your home to the meeting point, and transport from the separation point to your home.
- In general, everything that is not mentioned in '**The price includes**'.