



# Mont Blanc Challenge Climbing Information\*

## Mont-Blanc General Information

Note: Route information is for general knowledge, the Mountain Guides will assess you, weather and conditions before deciding which route to take.

Climbers in Europe have developed an extensive system of huts enabling them to travel fast, light and unencumbered through the Alpine wilderness. While some of these huts are very small bivouac shelters accommodating six to eight people, other are more like hotels with over a hundred beds and a well stocked kitchen.

This in combination with easy access has made the Alps into an alpine playground where generally short approaches, light packs, and big routes are the norm. Even though the mountains and huts are usually close at hand climbers cannot forget that the storms, the wind and the cold of an early dawn are every bit as serious here as in other comparable ranges. The Alps are high with many peaks rising to over 13,000 feet; Mont Blanc itself is over 15,700 feet high. The moist maritime climate and the northerly latitude can combine to produce severe storms. Climbers must not underestimate the seriousness of the weather in the Alps.

Typically, temperatures on Mont Blanc drop well below freezing at night (when we begin our ascent) but warm up in the bright sunshine of the day. The summit is often cold even during a fine day and there is almost always a strong breeze. When the weather is unstable you can expect snow or rain and a cold, cold wind.

A discussion of what it takes to climb the summit of the Alps and a brief description of the easy routes.

### Where is Mont-Blanc ?

According to the French, the actual summit is solely in France. See the [French map](#). The Italians have the "Mont Blanc de Courmayeur" which is slightly below the principal summit, but they have all the great routes, so for me Mont-Blanc is pretty much a Franco Italian mountain. However, Marco Benvenuti says: *"the Italian map gives a rather different path for the FRA-ITA border on the ridge. Few know of this (peaceful) dispute. The story goes back to Napoleon I, to the annexing of Savoie to France in 1860, then to WW II and today. Basically, the Italians take the watershed as the border, while the French take the line where the first rocks appear on the Italian side. Voila. No one with a healthy mind cares about it."*

*People in Chamonix and Courmayeur know the fact quite well and usually don't give it any importance, if not for cracking jokes. The feeling is that the mountain is a free space belonging to everyone. A real argument will be raised the day someone will try to open a fast-food restaurant on the disputed area at 4,700 meters, which is rather unlikely to happen."*

The closest towns are Chamonix and Saint-Gervais in France, Courmayeur in Italy.

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## **What makes this mountain so special?**

The Vallot guide writes "Mont Blanc is one of the most beautiful mountains in the world. The exploration of other ranges in the Americas and in Asia has confirmed this impression". The mountain, at 4807m is significantly higher than any other one in the Alps, and particularly in this range, which has the quintessential "alpine" character, with heavily glaciated and steep terrain. Starting from Saint-Gervais, the elevation difference from bottom to top is more than 4000m, in an area where glaciers can be found as low as 1200m. It is also a big mountain, with many ridges and faces, of which each one has its own character. The routes span the whole range of alpine climbing and have something to offer to anyone: walkups, classic ridges and faces, difficult rock climbing and frozen waterfalls. None of the other big mountains in the world are as easily accessible as Mont Blanc. A full-size town, Chamonix, lies at its foot, and there is an extensive network of trams, cable cars, huts around the mountain. The mountain carries a tremendous amount of history for more than two hundred years. It was first climbed in 1786 by Jacques Balmat and Michel-Gabriel Paccard by the gentle slopes of its north face, and since then has seen numerous feats, eccentricities, and tragedies. Mont-Blanc has the distinction of being, by a large margin, the mountain who has claimed the most lives so far, more than a thousand.

## **Am I ready for Mont-Blanc?**

Out of two persons who spend the night at the Gouter hut, only one makes it to the summit. There are more fatalities each year in the Mont-Blanc range than in any decade of Alaska mountaineering. Don't be the next victim!

In spite of the summer crowds, you should not underestimate Mont-Blanc. The combination of high altitude, relatively unstable weather, steep and/or exposed terrain, glacial features, orienting difficulty can be quite serious. You need at least to be in excellent shape, and to have previous mountaineering experience including a few long outings, use of the rope to prevent crevasse falls and climbing falls, use of an ice-ax and crampons, cold weather/storm skills. In doubt, it is better to use a guide service. The seriousness of Mont-Blanc in my opinion is at least comparable to that of Rainier.

It is best to arrive in good shape. If the weather seems stable, do another climb before to acclimatize, otherwise go for the first good window. Some very pretty high altitude climbs which are easy to access using the cable car are the Midi-Plan ridge and the Rochefort ridge. Whatever you do, go to the OHM (if you don't know what this means, [see here](#)) and ask for advice and conditions there. Another way to acclimatize is to go by feet without any mechanical transportation, however with my previous suggestion you get more exposure to high altitude.

It is difficult to say what level of acclimatisation is necessary since this tolerance to altitude depends a lot on individuals. Some take the train from Paris (sea-level), and sleep the next day fine at Gouter or Cosmiques, other would get very sick. However

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those who have spent at least an entire day at 4000m, and slept above 2500m seem to fare ok and that's the minimum that we would recommend. The greater duration spent at height the better your chances of having a safe, enjoyable and successful summit attempt.

### **Is it feasible for non-climbers?**

The regular route is more like "high-altitude hiking" than climbing, in the sense that general mountaineering skills are more important, the climbing itself being technically quite easy. The time it takes for you to be ready starting from scratch all depends whether you will learn by yourself, with experienced friends, or guides. It varies between just a few days and a year depending on your abilities and motivation. To start preparing, stay in good shape by aerobic training in the plains (running, biking, etc...), and try to climb smaller snowy peaks.

### **Is it feasible for novices?**

If you are a novice you have basically two options:

- take a week-long course where you will have some instruction, climb a smaller peak to acclimatise, and then try Mont-Blanc. Organizations which run such a course include the Club Alpin Francais (CAF, check with the Centre Alpin du Tour), Union des Centres de Plein Air (UCPA), Chalets Internationaux de Haute Montagne (CIHM). They most likely run such a course weekly. that's the option i would recommend: cheapest and most educational. you need however to understand French.
- try to share a guide that you and another person would hire for the length of the climb. According to Andrea Janda (ajay@hem.passagen.se), the summer of 1998 a guided Mont Blanc climb cost 3500F/guide, no matter if you took the Gouter route or the Trois Mont Blanc. (Both routes normally include one night in a hut.) You also have to pay the guide's train/cabin/whatever transportation, you need a reservation at the hut and you pay for him too. In 1998 a stay in Hut Cosmiques cost 250F per person and 150F per guide. Usually the guides bring their own food. The price (3500F) is per guide, and a guide will take max 2 people for Mont Blanc (you split the cost if you're 2).

### **What is the best time of year to climb Mont Blanc?**

Most of the traffic is in July and August. It is indeed during this period that the most consistent conditions are found, but the regular routes will be very crowded. Depending on the snow conditions, the routes can be good on foot in June or not.

Starting from September, the range can have either long periods of very stable weather without the summer thunderstorms (like in Oct 95) or either continuously lousy weather (like in Sept 95). The traffic is lower in September than it is during July

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and August, but still significant. Usually by mid-October to end-October, there is too much snow, the days get quite short and cold, and most people consider that the winter season has begun. Fall and early winter are however the times when the crevasse situation is the worse. The Grands Mulets route might not be usable at all if the fixed ladders are not in place below the hut.

The conditions in winter are very variable. I know that although you usually need to use skis, there are times when the snow is hard enough that you don't need them. The steeper it gets, the more this is true. For this reason, for instance the routes on the Brenva face are usually quite climbable even during the winter. You might want to watch for avalanches, and weak snow bridges. Both are a very serious problem in winter, and tend to improve as the season goes, since the snow stabilizes, and the bridges fill up. You have to decide whether you want to do an ascent on foot or on skis. In the first case, you should attempt the Gouter Route, since because of the wind, it is the most likely to have packed snow. In the latter case, the Grands Mulets route, done generally in spring, should have conditions good enough, but don't try in on foot since it will probably have lots of snow. The Trois-Mont-Blanc route has generally a high avalanche hazard during the winter. Expect very cold temperatures, and make sure that you get recent information from OHM.

By the spring, it is usually prime time for a ski ascent of Mont-Blanc. The most popular period for this is from April to beginning of June, although I believe that a ski ascent might be possible also during the summer. During spring, there is usually too much snow for an ascent without skis.

### **What gear to bring? (See below for a complete list)**

Crampons, ice-ax (not too short), very warm clothing and boots (plastic is best), high-altitude grade sunglasses, sunscreen and lipstick, compass, altimeter, and maps. We would recommend a 20m/9mm rope for most of the regular routes. It is not necessary to take a tent up. However, if you don't take it with you on the summit day (ie come back to Gouter or Col du Midi) it won't hurt, since you'll have more options. Sleeping bags can be left behind if you plan on sleeping in a hut \*and\* have reservations.

### **I have heard it is too crowded / touristy!**

Mont-Blanc is a marvelous mountain, therefore it is no wonder many attempt to climb it.

The Gouter route is indeed very crowded. The Grand Mulets and Trois-Mont-Blanc routes are a bit crowded. If you tackle Mt Blanc this way, well, you should be warned beforehand about this fact. It is well known, so this is only your choice to go on a crowded route. However, there are plenty of routes on the same mountain which do not suffer this affliction.

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## What are the Regular routes to Mont-Blanc ?

There are basically four classical easy routes to the summit of Mont-Blanc:

- The Gouter route, PD
- The Three-Mont-Blanc route, PD+
- The Grand Mulets route, F/PD
- The Aiguilles Grises route, PD

The most practical descent is through the Grand Mulets route. We recommend to do, if possible, a traverse of the summit descending the Three-Mont-Blanc route, which is the most beautiful descend, and is also quite practical (you finish at the Aiguille du Midi cable-car), but has the drawback of being quite long and forcing you to go up more than you'd like. Another good and practical combination is to go up Three-Mont-Blanc and down Grand Mulets. One of the most beautiful routes are the Three-Mont-Blanc, the Bosses ridge, and the Aiguilles Grises route.

A note on the Vallot hut: this is an emergency shelter which is meant to be used by climbers coming late from the long and difficult routes of the Italian side, and by climbers caught in a storm. It has saved many lives. Please don't plan to use this hut to climb one of the regular routes. If you use this hut because you feel sick, please don't add more garbage.

If a white-out occurs on your summit day, above the Vallot Hut, no real problem: follow the Bosses ridge, and use the altimeter to locate the Vallot Hut. The trouble begins under the Vallot hut. In bad weather, the best is to lose altitude fast by descending the Grands Mulets route. Due to its lower elevation, the trail remains longer too. However, there are a couple of flat sections (esp. Grand Plateau) where orienting is difficult. If you loose your way here, you can end up in quite dangerous terrain (seracs). The traverse of the Gouter Dome is safer, but orienting is also quite difficult, you will not loose altitude that fast, and the trail might be wiped out faster. Be prepared to make extensive use of the compass.

## MONT BLANC ASCENTS PROGRAM EQUIPMENT LIST

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The equipment you bring must function well in a wide variety of conditions. Your clothing should be warm, lightweight, dry quickly, and allow you good freedom of movement. The layering principle, which uses several thin layers of insulation (rather than one thick one) covered with an outer weather-proof shell, meets these needs well.

Typically, alpinists will wear a layer of long underwear made from polypropylene or similar synthetic, another insulating layer of pile or fleece, and a Gore-Tex shell,

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in addition to gloves/mittens and a hat.

We will stay in the huts and hotels for the entire program. Please take the time to prepare your equipment carefully, and to the extent possible, become familiar with it by using it in the field. If you have any questions don't hesitate to call the Mountain Leap office.

## CLOTHING

**Boots** - Leather Mountaineering boots (plastic boots will work but are not recommended). Mont Blanc is a cold, long, snow and ice climb. Though the technical demands of the route are not great, the cold and high altitude mean that boots need to be warm and waterproof. A warm and relatively stiff leather mountaineering boot is the best choice. A great example would be the La Sportiva Nepal Top Extreme, well water proofed and preferably broken in.

If you have not climbed fifth class rock in big boots before, we highly recommend you practice on a local crag before your trip.

**Rock Climbing Shoes** - Before we climb Mont Blanc we usually make two or three warm-up and acclimatization climbs near Chamonix. Depending on conditions and your interests, we may want to make an ascent which would be best climbed in rock shoes. If you already own a pair of rock shoes we recommend you bring them. If you don't own a pair and had no plans to purchase any, they are not absolutely necessary for the Mont Blanc ascent.

**Gaiters** - Knee high. For programs occurring from August on gaiters need not be knee high.

**Socks** - Wool or synthetic. Bring two complete changes. Climbers frequently wear a thin liner sock, and one pair of thick socks depending on boot fit.

**Long Underwear Bottoms and Tops** - This will be your base layer and should be lightweight polyester, polypropylene or similar synthetic.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Layer (Top)** - Expedition weight long underwear top, 100 weight powerstretch, very light weight fleece, Schoeller, or a lightweight wind shirt (i.e. Marmot DriClima) are good examples of this multi-use layer.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Layer (Bottom)** - Schoeller, Pile or fleece preferred. Seek out quick-drying and wind/water resistant material. Black Diamond Alpine Pants and Arcteryx Gamma LT Pants are good examples of these types of materials.

**Warm Jacket** - Pile, fleece or Windstopper.

**Insulated Jacket** - Lightweight down or synthetic in addition to the warm jacket described above. Some good examples of insulating materials are Primaloft, Polarguard 3D or any down jacket/parka. This is different than your outer most waterproof shell jacket.

**Rain Pants or Bibs** - Gore-Tex or other waterproof breathable material recommended. Full side zips recommended for easy on and off over boots and crampons.

**Rain Parka with Hood** - Gore-Tex or other waterproof breathable material recommended.

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**Liner Gloves** - Lightweight polypropylene or similar synthetic.

**Modular Gloves or Mittens** - these include a matched pair of insulating gloves and a pair of waterproof shells offers excellent protection. Good models are made by Outdoor Research, Wild Country etc. (If you bring a pair of these you will still need to bring the polypro gloves.)

**Warm Hat** - Synthetic is less itchy than wool.

**Balaclava** - For a windy summit day on Mont Blanc.

**Sun Hat** - A baseball cap serves well.

## **CLIMBING GEAR**

**Ice Axe** - 55cm to 70cm length with standard pick and webbing leash. Shorter tools are somewhat easier to manage when climbing. The lighter the ice axe is the better. Try to avoid long heavy axes. (Axes can be purchased or rented in Chamonix.)

Crampons with step-in bindings are usually the easiest to put on however, only certain leather boots are step-in crampon compatible. Please seek advice when purchasing crampons and make sure they can be put on your boots. (Many types of crampons can be purchased or rented in Chamonix.)

**Climbing Harness** - Should fit over bulky clothing. Adjustable leg loops are nice in this regard.

**Carabiners** - Bring three, one of which should be locking.

## **Climbing Helmet**

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

**Food** – Mountain Leap does not provide food between climbs or while in the mountains. Food for the climbs can be purchased in Chamonix. Whenever we stay in huts, dinner and breakfast can be purchased there. Plan to purchase food at local stores as the trip progresses.

**Summit Pack** - A summit pack is required. 30 to 40 liters (about 1900 to 2500 cubic inches) is about the right size. Ideally you want this pack to be light and designed for climbing (narrow with compression straps and ice axe loops)

**Ski Poles** - this is an optional but **highly** recommended item that is useful in two ways:

- 1) They take the burden off your knees when coming downhill with a big pack and
- 2) They give you good balance points when making tricky stream crossings. Telescoping (adjustable) poles are ideal, but non-adjustable ski poles at a length used in alpine (downhill) skiing will work too. Our guides have found them very helpful.

**Water Bottles** - Two quart size wide mouth nalgens or similar leak proof bottle.

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**Headlamp** - Bring an extra bulb and batteries. Headlamps which use only two AA batteries are not acceptable.

**Pocket Knife or Multi-tool**

**Repair Kit** - Crampon adjustment tools.

**Personal Medical Kit** - For blisters, cuts, scrapes, etc.

**Glacier Glasses** - With side shields.

**Sunscreen** - With a protection factor of at least 16. For the fair an SPF of 20 is better.

**Lip Protection** - With a protection factor of at least 16. For the fair of an SPF of 20 is better.

**Personal Toiletries**

**Ear Plugs** - Nice to have in noisy huts.

**Camera** - With lots of film and an extra battery. SLR cameras are not recommended. Small auto focus cameras which can be carried in an outside camera case are best. If you bring a camera you must be able to quickly access it without taking off your pack.

**Sleeping Bag** - A lightweight summer bag is adequate. Down or synthetic, rated to about 15°F.

**Sleeping Pad** - 3/4 or full length closed cell or Thermarest.

**Utensils** - Large cup and spoon minimum.