

Between Stars and Mountains:
A month across Europe



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Prepping for TMB in Mind, Body and Spirit

When one says he is going to hike across Europe, very rarely do we actually picture someone hiking through four different countries (or more), but that is exactly what we did. Of course, the Alps are intimidating enough that you do not just want to go cold turkey hiking. So to prepare ourselves mentally, physically and emotionally, we gave ourselves a chance to ease into challenge by taking on the “hills” of northern England.

Our biggest day was hiking Mt. Helvellyn, England’s third tallest mountain. Surprisingly, we took this on in our second day of hiking, though it did serve as a good eye opener as to what the rest of our trip was going to look like. The hike itself is divided into two parts: the first is the hike up to the base, which with its consistent slightly steep uphill is enough to wipe out the unconditioned day-hiker. The second of the two parts is climbing Helvellyn itself. The mountain is essentially one long ridge line along the top, and quite steep on either side. We chose to go up Swirral Edge (the right side looking up at the mountain) cross the summit, and then come down on Striding Edge.



We were very cautious coming down Striding Edge, because of friends with ankle injuries. This climb is unfortunate but doable with a healing ankle. The problem is large parts of the steep part of the climb is just scrambling over rock, so if you are wearing a large hiking backpack, be prepared to crawl on all fours with it on your back. Upon reaching the top you feel

accomplished as you can see the lake and lots of England below you, and allegedly even France on clear days, but you feel even more accomplished upon reaching the base again and looking back up.

This was our big hike while in Europe, to prepare us for similar elevation gains and losses that we would experience when we head over to the Alps and Mont Blanc. This was not the only hike however.

The cool thing about the Lakes District to keep in mind is that it is a lake nestled in mountains and so there are hills all over the place and mountains that you can hike up. Just find a trail and start walking it. Do note that you will have to share the trail and fields with sheep at some point. When it's not a field of blaa-ing sheep you have to walk through, it's a field of sheep poop or lambs darting to and fro. While some of us in our trip were excited to just keep running after lamb in the hopes that they might choose to run towards them instead of away, the rest of us started groaning pretty much every time we left our Hostel.



While England may not offer the majestic views of the Alps, it does have to offer beautiful rolling green hills, lakes nestled in between mountains and a practical place to warm yourself up in mind, body and spirit before you try to take on the Tour de Mont Blanc, if that is your ultimate goal.

Leading the Way: Touring the Mont Blanc

I kicked off our time on the Tour de Mont Blanc (TMB) as Leader of the Day (LoD), which was an interesting point in time to be LoD. Memories came back from my two week trip in the Rocky Mountains and our group dynamics from that trip. I remember distinctly that our group had trouble with pacing and breaking: the two things that gave our group trouble in Europe.

As a leader, it was frustrating walking five minutes between each break: one time we filled up water, one time trying to find directions, one time not even a clear reason we had stopped. Once we fixed our breaking problem, pacing became an issue. As I started to periodically call up to the front to slow down, I was sent back to Philmont and all the times we had heard, “slow down” or “hold up a sec.”

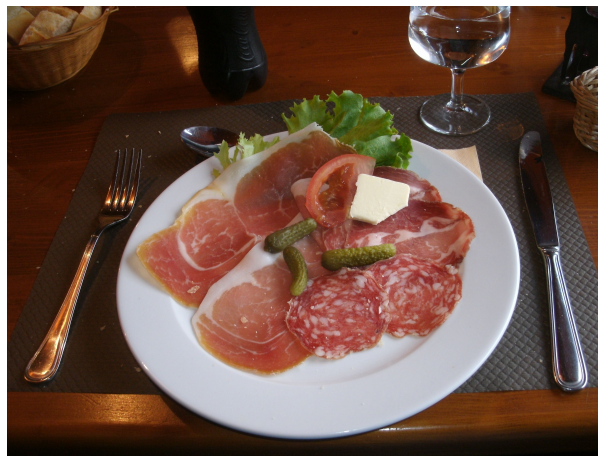


But the exciting thing was we were in Switzerland. We had just finished a three day excursion in Interlochen, which was exciting for me and Matt because we got to practice our German-speaking skills, and had now moved to Champex in preparation for our section of the TMB.

This is where we began to see more significant cultural differences. Perhaps the biggest one that would continue to affect our days was shops closing in the afternoon. In America, we

get used to having things open just about every day from morning until it closes for the night. Not so in Europe. You have to plan your day around places being closed for the afternoon.

Another thing to be conscious of is thinking about what kind of meal you're going to get. Traditionally, portion sizes are smaller, if you go into a sit down restaurant to have a nice dinner. However, if you have dinner at the Chalet/Gitet/Hostel you're staying at, especially in the Mont Blanc region, then be prepared for people who are used to feeding hikers and mountaineers. In other words, be prepared for a lot of food.



Another cultural difference I had to be especially aware of (as LoD) was cars on the road. We had gotten used to England where the cars do not drive on the right side of the road – sorry, the left side of the road – and then had to get used to cars being on the right side of the road again. The thing you want to keep in mind is if you're going to lead a group hiking on the side of the road, you want to make sure you're aware which side of the road that traffic will be coming from.

All this, cultural and group oriented differences from the past few days, had to be kept in mind as we made our way from Champex. And we did it all underneath the austere silhouettes of the Alps (The Eiger, the Mönch, the Jungfrau, and for the second half, Mont Blanc).

Hiking in France: the King of Food

I'm always one to shy away from stereotypes even though I usually say there is a reason that stereotypes do exist, but I'll make an exception in this case. The French certainly do know how to work with food: all the way from crepes to macaroons to even pasta. Now I know why people obsess over 4 star and 5 star restaurants in France. We only ever ate at 3 star restaurants and some of those were mind blowing. Forget the restaurants for a moment, and let's just talk about the small cafés.

America has some of these, but it is a much bigger cultural experience for Europeans to have a whole series of cafés on the side that you can sit down at, have a dessert and hot drink, and just sit and watch the world move by. They aren't five star or four star restaurant. They aren't even really ranked, but this one café we visited just had the most mind blowing macaroon. One bite, as I like to say, was crunchy, foamy and chewy all in the same bite.

So now we know I could go on and on about the food. Oh, and we can't forget about Boogie too, our personal chef the nights we stayed in the Gîte in Les Houches. But there's more to France than just food. There are mountains and valleys, which is what we spent most of the time in. This part of our trip was a five day excursion (out and back) where we went over a ridge between two peaks and into a valley.



This was the emotionally challenging part for many of us. The day we pushed from Les Houches to Les Contamines was a 10 ½ hour hike, and a number of us (myself included) finally shed a couple tears, because the intensity of the hike affected an emotional part of us, each in a different way.

I think another reason it was difficult was because we got separated. Matt had lost his camera, which freaked him out and he and Hollis went back to find it while the rest of us moved on. As much as some might protest the statement that Matt leaving us affected our emotions, it did leave an impact that we felt: not only had we lost a humorous person from our group, there was more uncertainty with how we were going to meet up and get to the Gitet in a timely fashion.

These five days are perhaps where the most serious bonding of our group took place. It's where the harshest things were said, it's where the greatest forgiveness took place and where the deepest secrets were shared.

Bonjour! Buongiorno!

The last section of our trip was in Italy, and so we went from greeting with “Bonjour!” to greeting with “Buongiorno” and all because we took a bus that went through a mountain.

Our plans changed on this part of the trip, because the winter had been especially bad, and so our planned Refugio, Refugio Bonatti (I believe) was still surrounded by snow that was avalanching, and so we couldn’t make it up to there. So instead, we stayed in this really cool, homely hotel that had a lot of luxuries we particularly enjoyed.

The consequence of hiking the TMB in this early pre-season is that we had to deal with cooler temperatures and more snow. On our biggest hike in Italy, we encountered a snowcapped part of the trail, where we were hiking in about 4 inches of snow.



Usually, according to the guide book we were following, most hikers choose to take on the tour starting the first week of July, for that’s when the last of the snow usually melts that gets in the way of the trail. We of course, were not able to go for the ideal season, given this was a *May Term* course.

It doesn’t make it a bad thing to go in early season, but it does mean you should be prepared to not do the full route. We were not planning on the doing the full route regardless, but

the one section in Italy that we were planning on doing was out of reach because the snow hadn't had enough time to melt quite yet.



On the plus side, the mountains we were surrounded with were much more snow capped than the mountains we had seen to date. It was just spectacular seeing mountains that you could see both snow and ice glinting in the sun light. It was also cool to see mountains where the rocks were completely buried at points and all you could see was snow. We never got to actually see the peak of Mont Blanc, but I'm told that it is the same way, all year round, and that's what its name translates to White Mountain.

By traveling to Courmayeur, we got a real sense for the timelessness of adventurers passing through. The citizens speak just enough English to communicate meals and accommodations with people passing by, but otherwise it's the same old town that it has been for centuries, all the way down to many hotels being family owned.

But the most fascinating thing with where Courmayeur is situated is how quickly the language changes. It's just so strange. You don't see that in the US where you can get on a bus speaking one language and get off it a little bit later, and have to speak a different language. It certainly threw me for a loop trying to adjust to the small sayings such as "hello", "thank you",

“bye.” And to all my friends who joined me on this trip, “Bonjour, Buongiorno, Grazie, Merci,
Ciao and Adieu!”