



MOUNTAIN BIKING THE MASSIF

THE TOUR DU MONT BLANC, ALSO KNOWN AS THE “TMB” AND “THREE COUNTRIES TOUR”, IS ONE OF THE WORLD’S ICONIC LONG-DISTANCE HIKING TRAILS. BUT IT IS ALSO OPEN TO MOUNTAIN BIKES.

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I went through the instructions one more time... Forget the brakes. Steering is useless. Keep your weight well back. Don’t fight the bike – let it go until you hit solid ground again. If you need to stop, fall off.

Ahead of me a great triangular blanket of white drops out of sight, then reappears, wedged between soaring peaks left and right. Eventually, it feathers into the green valley bottom. All that stands between me and thick Italian hot chocolate is a good wind-buffeting across an unseasonal low glacier. “Good luck,” a hiker shouts from behind me at the top of the pass. “Au revoir France,” I shout back.

I point my cross-country bike towards the valley below, shove back, and think of hot chocolate.

My bike takes off with a mind of its own, sliding and jerking through split-personality snow: icy one second and powdery the next. I find it’s not that easy handing over total control to a lump of metal that’s having a fit between my knees.

As the bike bolts faster and the scenery blurs, another thought strikes me. I have no idea how much this is going to hurt at bailout point.

Although I grew up in the snowy northern hemisphere, my winter sports skills amount to sliding down the local knoll on a dustbin lid back in the day when I was young and bouncy.

It all ends with a plunge headfirst into Italy to the cheers of weary hikers. It’s not my finest moment, but then on the brighter side I’m laughing harder than a kid who’s just got a whoopee cushion for Christmas. I chalk it up as my most memorable border crossing since I had my underwear bag searched with the muzzle of a Kalashnikov. A natural trail snakes into the distance. It looks delectably groomed and flowy. I should be grinning about what lies ahead. Instead, I look back with a sad puppy face. “Can we go back and do it again?” I ask Jamie while clearing the ice out of my helmet? “Oh don’t worry,” he shouts back, “there’s plenty more of that.”

Ride The Alps guide Jamie warned us about the unseasonal snow when we arrived at Geneva airport in late June. “Never in 16 years operating here have I seen the snow so low down and so deep at this time of the year. We’ll have to adjust the route,” he explained on the hour’s drive to Chamonix.





Five days of riding just about every type of trail was more than enough to pull my husband Paul and myself into riding the Tour du Mont Blanc – a circumnavigation of the entire Mont Blanc Massif traversing the frontiers of France, Italy and Switzerland.

Eleven independent peaks, each over 4,000 metres, including Mont Blanc itself - Europe’s highest – guarantees the unfaltering company of thrills, challenge and spectacular backdrops.

Yet as we discovered, riding in the Alps offers another star attraction – the philosophy. “These mountains are for everyone to enjoy - freedom of use for all,” said Jamie. No permits are necessary and rules for riding are simple; share the trail and be nice.

The late snow meant that the longest glaciers this side of Europe hadn’t melted back to more typical summer levels and would see us taking a slightly longer route than the 175-kilometre norm. “Some of the snow is unavoidable and we’re going to have to hike the bike over the highest cols,” Jamie explained while detailing our planned route in a small B&B just outside Chamonix.

Roughly we’d cover 200 kilometres. A couple of climbs each day, averaging 1500 metres in total, would be rewarded with whopping descents ferreting out as many singletrack as possible.

Terrain changes from double tracks to technical singletrack, passing through alpine pastures, glacial lakes, deep valleys and high altitude cols (passes). Meals, breaks and sleeps would

be taken in ‘Refuges’ atop cols, or in mountain village chalets and cafes that dot the route.

The TMB eased us in with a river valley ride to Les Houches where we took a once-and-only uplift option to the Prarion Plateau (1900m). At the top, I stumbled awkwardly out of the gondola to a smack in the face from a 360-degree alpine panorama.

Glistening centre stage of the Massif range, the 4,810m Mont Blanc summit struck its pose in show-stopping light. An entourage of peaks faded away to either side of this two-kilometre upward shift of planet earth. If you’ve seen the flagship photo for the Banff Film Festival World Tour, then you’ll know why I stood agog. “Get your shot here,” Jamie said, “The views are spectacular everyday but it doesn’t look like this again until you get back to Chamonix.”

After a picnic of baguettes we’d picked up from a boulangerie earlier, we rode through alpine pastures with blankets of yellow and purple wildflowers to meet our first long single trail descent. “Let’s see what’s down here,” said Jamie plunging down through head height grass.

Even after 16 years of guiding around the Alp’s most popular route, Jamie is still exploring new trails. The 46-year-old’s mountain biking career officially started almost 30 years ago when he made the news for being the youngest member picked for the first British mountain bike racing team at the tender age of 17. Four professional racing years and a stretch at global guiding followed, until he settled in the Aps with his family, pioneering commercial routes from Chamonix to Zermatt and the Eiger.



“ALLEZ, ALLEZ” ALL THE WAY TO SWITZERLAND

We spent the afternoon zigzagging down hairpins through rooty beech forest and woods carpeted with pine needles. Our warm up day’s riding came to an end with a climb into the village of Contamines with enough time left to fit in a skills session. The day was sealed with a sundowner beer at the alpine club refuge where we bunked down in dorms for the night.

A long climb around an impassable col - and with an imminent storm on the way - ensured we didn’t hang around after breakfast the following morning. Paul and I pushed as hard as we could while watching Jamie’s bike bobbing progressively further into the distance. Suddenly, a doomsday gloom collected overhead but luckily the puffing paid off. We were close to the top where a closed lift station gave us refuge and a magnificent open-window show of the lightning storm.

“Did you know that carbon is one of the best conductors of electricity,” shouted Jamie through



our last zinging espresso and thick hot chocolates to motivate us up to the Grand Col Ferret and highest point at 2540m. Another triumphant dollop of snow-biking was rudely interrupted by a steep glacier-covered river.

“I don’t like the look of that,” Jamie said pointing at the snow ‘bridge’ - an informal track trampled by hikers. He was concerned that the glacier had recently broken off and dropped into the raging river below. “The track is too close to the edge. We need to make a new one higher up.” Hikers sensed Jamie’s experience and followed behind.

Once over the precarious crossing, we rode to the sound of cow-bells-a-clanging down into Switzerland and our final rest point - the idyllic lakeside village of Champex.

Riding back into France the following day, our long descent was rocky, exposed and hairy in places. In one spot a fixed chain scalloped the mountainside. Riding it would’ve made a worthy YouTube moment, which I promised myself I would do as soon as I discover the secret to immortality.

The TMB’s parting gift is an exhilarating ride through the ski slopes of La Tour, then a gentle roll into Chamonix where the iconic image of the Banff Film Festival World Tour made its final appearance.

There are some iconic routes, which no amount of talking up can spoil. The Tour Du Mont Blanc is one of them. As popular as the trail is with hikers, avoiding the peak walking season meant there were only a few small bottlenecks over the entire journey. Mountain bikers were few and far between on day rides. And our snow adventures proved that even the most well-known routes can still throw up surprises.

Over a goodbye beer, Jamie told us the valleys next door to Mont Blanc are strewn with similar old walking paths. “Seldom ridden and all legal to ride,” he said. Noticing our eyes light up, he raised his beer to Europe’s mighty range like an old familiar friend, “Oh yeah.... there’s plenty more of that.”

* Tracey and Paul Croke rode the Tour Du Mont Blanc with ‘Ride the Alps’. More info at ridethealps.com

rumbles, cracks and the pummeling of hail. We jibed through the time until the blue calm and the squeaks of marmots returned - our cue to start the descent into the famous cheese town of Beaufort for lunch.

A 20km Tour de France road route climbing 1,200m to the Cormet de Roselend soon decimated our cheesy treats. Serial shouts of “Allez, Allez” (Go, Go) from car windows broke the boredom of the tarmac. It made a nice contrast from the ‘encouragement’ we’re accustomed to on road spins back in Sydney. A woman keen to show her support got out of her car and gave me a hands-on-bum shove of 50 metres.

Another quick fuel stop in a cafe with views over Lac de Roselend switched us on for the twisty and rocky single track down to Les Chapieux, where we spend the night at our favourite accommodation of the trip.

In the newly renovated Chambres du Soleil, we joined a walking group around a huge pine dining table. A tasty and nutritious nettle soup rejuvenated the cells with every slurp. Melty pork cheek stew followed and a sumptuous chocolate tart finished off any leftover appetite generated by

the 2100 metres of climbing that day. For 70 euros per person we got well-appointed ensuite rooms, breakfast and the gourmet dinner included. Company to match the outstanding food and a few whisky nips kept us up well past our bedtime.

Despite the “Allez, Allez” bum-shoving assistance and the friends we’d made, I still wasn’t convinced all would be cordial on the trails the following day when we met groups of hikers on a monster push to the Col de la Seigne (2,516m).

I prepared myself for some tut-tuts and disapproving looks. Instead, shouts of “bravo” and “well done” followed whether I was on the bike or the bike was on me.

At the top, hikers joined us to marvel at the views into Italy. They hung around for the extra entertainment of our impromptu snow-biking lesson. Once we hit solid ground, we followed a high ribbon of fast track high above Courmayeur then dropped down to Val Ferret where a comfy hotel awaited.

Switzerland beckoned the next day. But not before we pulled into Refuge Elena. We needed to get