

# Tour du Mont Blanc

*August 1978*



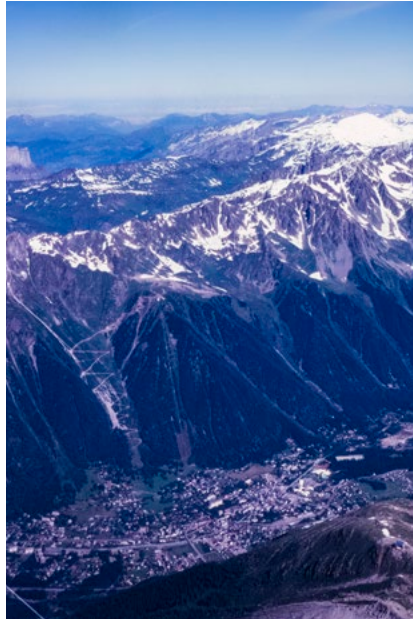
Backpacking the Tour du Mont Blanc  
with Pete Nightingale and Stephen Woulds



We took an anti-clockwise route from Chamonix taking us from France, across the border into Italy, then through Switzerland and back to France.

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*Chamonix – the starting point for the  
Tour du Mont Blanc.*

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After waiting just over an hour in Heathrow airport, our flight to Geneva was announced, and we made our way with great enthusiasm to the departure lounge. Within minutes of boarding the plane we found ourselves gazing into distant horizons of fair weather skies, and shortly after crossing the English Channel, we were touching down in the charming Swiss capital of Geneva.

As usual, we were ravenous, and allowed ourselves a brief opportunity to sample the local cuisines and a bottle of the local wine. *'Par excellence'*.

From Switzerland, we travelled by coach into the French town of Chamonix, which was to be the starting point of our two week walk on the *Tour du Mont Blanc*; one of the continental equivalents to the Pennine Way. The *Tour du Mont Blanc* forms a complete circle around the highest mountain in the European Alps, Mont Blanc (15,800 feet) – taking the fellwalker through France, Italy and Switzerland!

From the coach windows, the Mont Blanc massif loomed nearer and we gazed in astonishment at its size and splendour until the coach dropped us off in the foothills of this snow covered giant.

To most people, Chamonix is a reputable all year round ski centre – but it was also the location of Sir Abercrombies *"Ice Axe Murders"*; a tale of several murder suspects stormbound in a mountain hostel, each stealthily being murdered by the sharpened edge of a madmans ice axe!

Our rucksacks were crammed with sleeping bags, tent, first aid kit, spare clothing, cooking utensils and plenty of food. Having weighed our rucksacks previously we knew that the three of us were carrying approximately 31lbs each. As we unloaded our gear and pitched the tent, the sun disappeared behind the Brevant mountains which towered above our heads. We quickly noticed a sudden chill in the air and were grateful to snuggle into our duck down sleeping bags where we could discuss the days which lay ahead.

Next morning we were awakened by a chorus of tinkling bells; looking out of the tent door revealed a hundred or so goats milling their way past the tent as they made their daily journey into the valley below.

Impatient to climb the peaks of the Brevant we packed up and made our way to the cable car where we arrived at 8.30 a.m. We were disappointed to see that a couple of coach trips had arrived there some minutes before so delaying our departure. However, a local 'boulangerie' provided us with hot crispy rolls which we covered in marmalade and ate whilst in the queue.

In our best French we asked the guard for 'one way' tickets explaining that we were just starting the *Tour du Mont Blanc*. The cable car, carrying about fifty people, was soon climbing towards the snow capped peaks of the Brevant, and as we climbed higher the whole range of mountains opened up to view, giving splendid views of Mont Blanc and the tiny town of Chamonix.



*The cable car from Chamonix to the Aiguille du Midi (12,604 feet).*

At 7,500 feet we left behind the top cable car station and the ordinary tourist, as we made our way onto the hardened snows where our boots began to crunch underfoot. In front of us, we could see the footpath winding its way across the *Gorges de la Diosaz*, crossing long stretches of snow which fingered their way into alpine pasture on the lower levels.



*A good pitch at 6,161 feet on the mountain just north of Chamonix. The tent is an Ultimate Equipment, High Country III.*

We were soon surrounded by the more peaceful atmosphere of tumbling streams, glaciers and the drifting fragrances of wild honeysuckle. The landscape was undisturbed except for the small habitation of a farmstead on the opposite side of the valley.

By late afternoon we had reached this farm where we pitched the tent. Hot and sweaty from our possibly over enthusiastic pace we 'cooled off' in the meltwaters of a nearby glacier; two of us pitched the tent whilst our other companion collected firewood and lit a fire.

Whilst eating our meal we became aware of a heavy mass of cloud moving up the valley. It was a strange sensation standing in very bright sunshine above this turbulent black cloud, but within a few more minutes the cloud had swallowed us up.

Next day, the weather had not changed and we packed up carefully, making sure each item went in its special place. The maps and compass for example always go in an outside top pocket, so that they are readily accessible. The sleeping bag always goes in the top of the pack so that it forms a soft layer against the shoulder.

After climbing through a painful hailstorm we reached *Lac de Pormenaz* at 6,400 feet, a lake which was semi covered in floating ice. To our astonishment on the far bank of the lake was a well camouflaged gentleman in a crouched position fishing outside his one man tent!

### A Slip

It was on a steeper section of our descent that one of my friends was lucky not to bring the holiday to an abrupt end. He made the grave mistake of underestimating the amount of care needed on steep ice slopes. He lost his balance, slipped and went rolling past me like a sack of potatoes. His legs and arms were frantically waving around in the air until he just managed to roll onto his stomach where he buried his ice axe into the snow jerking himself to a halt. As an onlooker, it was like watching a slow motion movie. The snow was now dotted with blood but fortunately my friend escaped with minor cuts and bruises and a bloody nose, We patched him up with bandages and pain killing lotions, and were on our way again.



*Pete and Steve after a hard days walking.*





*Pete Nightingale reaching the top of the col.*

### 'Tres difficile'

The *Tour du Mont Blanc* splits into two sections, one marked, 'Tres difficile' and the other 'sentier a pied'. Being the ambitious young chaps that we are, we took the hard route down some tricky limestone gulleys, the heavy packs making our efforts more difficult, but our careful footing won the day. Rabbits mocked our slow progress as they scampered up and down with apparent ease.

By midday we had reached the French village of Servoc where we stocked up our rations from a local supermarket; from there we followed the riverside footpath of the raging L'Arve which led us to Les Houches where we pitched tent. We could hear singing from one of the nearby taverns, and not wanting to miss out on the good fun we mutually obliged by singing a few traditional Yorkshire songs, until our voices were so hoarse that we could sing no more. We staggered back to the tent.

Next morning on day 5 of our holiday we caught a cable car which whisked us up from the valley to 5,900 feet where we breakfasted on 'Alpen' covered in hot goats milk. The summit of Mont Blanc looked magical in the early morning light.

After approximately six miles walking through mixed forest our journey was interrupted by the sight of about a dozen wild cherry trees. Here we spent the next two hours sunbathing in the treetops, calmly plucking and eating cherries whenever the fancy took us. Our efforts turned to sleepiness and we dozed for most of the afternoon telling ourselves that we were on holiday, not on a 'do or die' army pursuit.

Following our restful day, we sensed that we were falling behind on our estimated time schedule and made up by walking 24 miles in the day. This turned out to be one of the best days of the holiday because we covered a good distance and were blessed with fair weather and superb scenery. We met an



*Two mighty rucksacks, weighing 31lb, carried our tents and provisions.*

interesting middle aged gentleman who had left England some 15 years ago and built himself a small mountain chalet where he served drinks and light refreshments to the occasional passer-by. With long beard, pipe and shabby boots he reminded me of 'Old Father Time'. His children (too many to count) were busy tormenting the goats outside. He showed us his impressive cheese larder before sending us on our journey.

Climbing out of the woodland the footpath levelled out before rising steeply for some 200' over a treacherous mass of compact ice. A series of sculptured footholes left by walkers before us made the going a little easier. Time after time we thought we had reached the col only to be deceived by the ever rising mountain.



*Ken on the Aig du Midi at 12,600 feet on the French Alps.*







Steve tests out his crampons on the Glacier du Trient.

### Like 'The Sound of Music'

In the heat of the day we reached the *Col du Bonholme* at 8,000 feet where we were greeted by about fifteen youthful looking characters who had made the climb from the South side, and armed with guitars and flutes they made merry music on the mountain tops. It was like a scene from 'The Sound of Music'!

A ski-like movement with the legs sent us gently gliding over the snows carrying us down to the valley floor again. One of my friends was lucky to see a wild cat, but it scampered away before I could catch a glimpse. We then made heavy going of a 2,500' climb before pitching the tent.

Our slumbers were suddenly interrupted by an almighty crack of thunder and the simultaneous flash of forked lightning lit the tent. At 8,000 feet and miles from anywhere there was little we could do except 'sit it out'. Whilst the thunder rumbled



A well earned lunch time stop.

around the surrounding valleys we took it in turns to read aloud a single page from 'Wuthering Heights'; an apt title indeed. To our surprise there wasn't a single spot of rain fell during the storm, but tremendous gusts of wind flapped the tent as if it were a flimsy paper bag.

Tired from our sleepless night we still managed to climb the remaining 600' to the French Station border of *Col de la Signe*, from which we viewed the rounded summit of Mont Blanc once more.

By late afternoon on day 8 of the holiday we had reached Courmayeur where we made a meal of some glorious fresh peaches; we later found out the consequences of eating so many.

We all agreed that having to change currencies every time we crossed a border was a bit of a nuisance, but the scenery and the pleasure of being in the open air far outweighed this trivial point.

We spent the following couple of days walking parallel with the South face of Mont Blanc; passing through one village we noticed a group of about fifty people gathered around a circular pool. Inquisitive to find out what was going on, we got a little closer. We found the pool to be about nine inches deep and forty feet across. Fishermen, at intervals around the edge, were tossing hooks baited with worms to hundreds of live trout which crammed the pool. No sooner had the bait hit the water than the fishermen had hooked themselves a sizeable trout! When the fish were brought to the side they were slugged on the back of the head with a heavy piece of wood and then sold to the catcher. I say catcher as opposed to angler because I feel most fishermen would be appalled at this slaughter.





*Three climbers return safely from the summit of Mont Blanc (in the background).*

### **Avalanche Power**

Reaching Champex on the eleventh day of our holiday we began heading northwards to Forelaz, the path climbing steadily through thick woodland and levelling out at 5,500 feet. It was here that we encountered the most terrible evidence of avalanche power; we had to climb over smashed tree trunks for hundreds of yards, temporarily losing our way amongst enormous boulders whilst a thick misty atmosphere weighed down heavily on our shoulders. We hiked in a zig-zag pattern over long scree slopes until we reached the 'Fenetre d'Arpette' where it began to snow. In the dreamworld which surrounded us we did not bother to rest and continued downwards to Forelaz. Miraculously the cloud lifted, and the sun burst through onto the *Glacier du Trient*. Without doubt we voted this the most attractive glacier on the holiday. Roped together, we spent a couple of hours exploring its surface looking into the blue green crevasses and listening to the animal like noises caused by the boulders moving and falling deep inside the glacier.

From Trient we headed west for the final part of our journey climbing the grassy slopes to La Flegere where we were given a fine view of the Mont Blanc summit and perhaps a more dramatic view of the 'Bossons Glacier' and the citadel like pinnacles of 'Les Drus'. Here we sat for about half an hour trying to take it all in; it was far better than the brochures had even hinted.

We had walked a total distance of approximately 142 miles. It was worth all the effort and planning we had put into it, and a pleasant trip home ended the holiday very happily indeed.



Tour du Mont Blanc



Pete lights up the camp stove for a well earned meal.



Steve, ready for some photography.



Pete.



Pete checking over his wounds at our midday break.



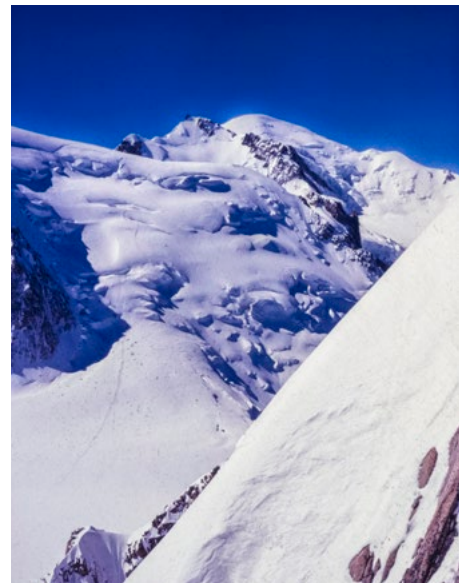
Ken, carefully crossing one of the many mountain streams.



One of the many mountain huts for sheep and goats to weather the storms.



View across the Mont Blanc massif.



Mont Blanc, 15,800 feet. Three borders meet at its summit (France, Italy and Switzerland).





*In the Col du Bonhomme – a meeting point of so many footpaths.*



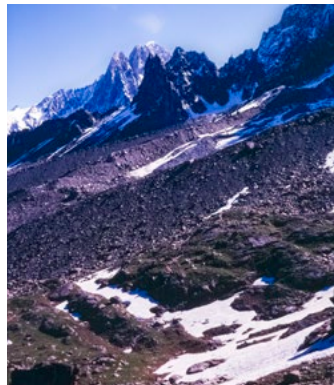
*Looking across to the Bossons Glacier and the pinnacles of Les Drus.*



*Steve – gurning after a great days hike.*



*At the French/Italian border on the Tour du Mont Blanc.*



*Snow, rockfalls and ice.*



*High up in the French Alps.*



*The only photograph we have with the three of us. (l to r) Pete, Ken and Steve.*



*A climber takes his final steps to the top of the Aig du Midi.*



*Walking in a football shirt. Ah those were the days.*

#### *Footnote*

The Tour du Mont Blanc was my final big walk before I started work. It fell between leaving Newcastle Poly and my first job at the Yorkshire Copperworks – in the summer of 1978.

The Tour is one of Europe's big walks and generally takes a couple of weeks. Each country we hiked through had a different currency – French Francs, Italian Lire and Swiss Francs. Sometimes it was difficult to work out which country we were arriving in! And which border we had just crossed. On one occasion we had the wrong currency, in the wrong valley. We didn't pre-book any campsites and regularly just pitched where we felt comfortable. Sometimes in valleys, sometimes high up on the mountain side.

At the time, I was taking photographs on a manual Olympus OM2 and used professional 35mm colour transparency (which has since been stored in a slide box for 40 years). Steve and I also used both colour and black and white film – these pictures, its fair to say, have not stored so well. On the walk I lost my Dad's sunglasses which were from the Second World War. They were issued by the RAF. I wish I had been more careful. I am also wearing my Dad's watch on the large picture, this was given to him, as thanks for 25 years service.

Money wise it was travellers cheques, which were cashed using your passport. Three different currencies in coins and note format. I also misplaced my chequebook somewhere on the Tour – it turned up a couple of years later in the middle of our cooking pots.

I now have all my Mont Blanc pictures stored in digital format.