

Travel to Magical Mont Blanc

By Peggy Newland

From the deck of our bedroom at Hotel du Bois in Les Houches, France, Mont Blanc Range looks like an apparition of snaggle-toothed grins full of whitecaps. The sky surrounding is brilliant blue and below, in our valley, spruce gather in layers of green, between runnels of avalanche ravine. We are front and center to a landscape that stops us, and our mouths hang in awe.

"This is," I start.

"Unbelievable," my husband, Brian, finishes.

We are at the start of a week full of hiking the various trails, alpine meadows, ravines, and jagged peaks of Mont Blanc with Explore Worldwide, but this afternoon, we sit and stare upward. Until it makes sense to take a stroll "downtown" to the center of Les Houches.

Explore Worldwide is a small-group adventuring company that eases the logistics of long-form hiking getaways but ramps up the spontaneity of untrammeled trails and behind-the-scenes experiences. With over 350 tours in around 100 countries, there's an adventure for everybody, but we are in the zone of all things Alps and Alpine. Throw in dining each night with French flair and local wines, and this is a true bucket list bonanza.

Les Houches is the start and finish line of "the circuit," an arduous tramp through three countries, elevation gains in the thousands per day. We are not on this circuit; instead, we chose the "highlights" guided tour of specialized trails that take in the beauty and some of the elevation but allow for relaxation at the end of the day, in the hotel's pool and sauna, and of course, on that deck with a view, wine in hand.

The village is fully loaded with hikers geared up in layered backpacks, some starting the circuit and some finishing. It's a celebratory place and smiles abound as we stroll past the "hiker's arch" to a quaint café called the Kitchenette for amazing Buddha Bowls of tofu, rice, fresh vegetables. The sunset shadows the massif purple as we walk back to the hotel.

We meet our small, friendly hiking group, and most come from are the U.K. and have traveled with Explore Worldwide multiple times. Our guides, a recently married couple, promise nooks and crannies unknown to the masses.

"I've been on 12 trips with Explore, all over the world," one hiker tells me.



The next morning, we pack lunches after a full French breakfast of croissants, eggs, fresh yogurts and juices, fruit, and plenty of strong coffee and off we go, for a "walk" along the Petit Balcon Sud to Paradise due Praz "to get our legs on." Views are expansive, of glaciers and creased ridges of the Chamonix Valley. The River Arve babbles as we climb through thick woods, and after a rolling ascent, we stop at a mountain café for pastries and coffee before exploring the active throngs of hikers and tourists in Chamonix. A train and bus pass are included in the tour so there are options for "bagging out" as needed. None of us do.

That night, we dine together at "our table" at the hotel's Le Caprice, a secret dining gem, which offers traditional Savoyard cuisine in three courses. Brian and I start with local cheeses and then branch off into salmon in wine sauce and Chicken "lick the plate" Francese. Desserts are ice cream sundaes called "Mont Blanc's." After dinner, we stop for a nightcap at the wood-paneled and cozy, Barry's Bar. Garden tables are lit up by candlelight as we toast our first day.

Day Two, we are in the clouds as we ascend via cable car to Bellevue at 5906 feet. The sun breaks through the high peaks of Mont Blanc couloirs and jagged peaks at 15,781 feet, setting us all up for a trek to heavenly perches along Grand Balcon Nord. Views of Col du Voza and the Contamines Valley overwhelm us all as we hike, so we stop often to stare. We picnic at 6400 feet on a wildflower-studded crest as hawks career overhead.

At dinner that night, we share photos and stories and laughter, as we dine on grilled salmon, tartiflette, and a glorious raclette over potatoes.

The next morning is rainy, but we journey out in rain gear for the Col du Montets through Montroc and past Cascades de Berard Falls. We explore the Grotte a Farinet, a cave that is known as Robin Hood's den. After a picnic in a grove of spruce, we hike through mossy, secluded trails, empty of anyone but our group. At one point, we stand silently together in the shadows of forest, enshrouded in mist, and the hush is about as magical a moment as can be found. Then we discover the hidden hamlet of Les Granges with its historic wood-hewn chalets and finally descend to

the outdoor garden café of Hotel du Buet for well-deserved pilsners.

The last two days, we hike high in the mountains. After, of course, long dinners at Le Caprice of duck confit, polenta with fresh tomato, beef filet, linguini with clam sauce, and with desserts layered in front of us for added sustenance. One of the days, we start in Le Tour, a village near Chamonix, and take a gondola up to over 6,000 feet and hike to Col de Balme. We are in both France and Switzerland, and marmots whistle all around us in celebration of stepping into two countries at the same time. It's a panorama of peaks with a view over to Trient Glacier as we hoof up ledges to Aiguillettes des Possettes for a mountain-top picnic. The last day, we explore the Lac Blanc region, which is part of the "circuit." We note many "fully loaded" hikers on their arduous eleven-day alpine trek. We picnic around the azure lake and watch rock climbers clamber on the edges. The descent is quiet, filled with meadows, waterfalls, and scuttling marmots in wildflowers. A group of us enjoy glasses of wine at the Chalet de la Flegere and are rewarded with undulating views of snow-covered Mont Blanc range from our cushioned seats on the expansive deck.

That night, after dinner and shared bottles of wine in the garden bar with the group, Brian and I watch the sun set from our own deck. An older couple waves to us and then throws their hands up to the purple and pink sky as if celebrating the beauty of the day's end. We smile together, with our hands raised, like we've discovered a secret. The secret of sharing a moment at the end of a journey well spent.

if you go

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