

The Mont Blanc Massive

Chipps rides the classic Tour de Mont Blanc. Five days from Chamonix, around the Mont Blanc massif, through France, Switzerland and Italy, and back to Chamonix.

Photos: Dan Milner





Our hills have been slowly and gently eroded over a very long time. The Alps are new and spiky. Everywhere you look, the horizon is hampered by jaggy, gnarly, craggy, pointy bits of mental bedrock.

It was the transition from ‘Bonjour’ to ‘Bon Giorno’ from the passing walkers that really drove home how much of an epic undertaking the Tour de Mont Blanc really is. We weren’t just visiting Mont Blanc, or getting the cable car up the mountain. Or doing a ride in its shadow. We were riding round the whole, monster thing on mountain bikes, in five days.

Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Western Europe. At 4,810m (15,781ft) it commands respect and awe from everyone who sees it. It’s not a benign mountain either and it regularly kills people with rocks, crevasses and general falls from great heights. Even if you regularly ride in the Scottish mountains, the Lakes and the Peaks, it’s hard not to be a little impressed when faced with a view of a glacier out of your window.

The Tour of Mont Blanc, or the ‘Three Countries Tour’ is a complete loop of the 700km/sq Mont Blanc Massif. It’s usually a ten day hike, but the mountain bike version comfortably does it in five. I say ‘comfortably’ to mean that there’s still time for coffee after lunch and a beer in daylight at the end of a day, but the climbing involved (around a vertical mile every day) and the demanding descents certainly don’t make it comfortable in the normal sense. (However, before you get all amazed at how hardcore it is, there’s a yearly running race around the same loop that does it in under a weekend.)

That’ll be France, Switzerland and Italy then.

The Three Countries Tour has been Mont Blanc Mountain Biking’s take on the Tour for a dozen years or more. It’s a favourite trip of the Chamonix-based holiday company and one that’s been on my list of ‘Must ride’ epics for over a decade. One sign of its quality was the fact that MBMB’s boss, Phil Hennem, still elects to lead most of the tours, despite having ridden the same loop several times a year for the last dozen.

And it’s hard. There’s no way that a UK rider can get a measure of French mountains without visiting them. My first few trips to the Pyrenees and Alps were truly humbling experiences. The sheer enormity of the massive lumps of towering rock you’re expected to scale is mindblowing to someone more used to riding rolling, green hills in the UK. Our hills have been slowly and gently eroded over a very long time. The Alps are new and spiky. Everywhere you look, the horizon is hampered by jaggy, gnarly, craggy, pointy bits of mental bedrock. Even the Scottish Highlands, smoothed over the millennia by expanding and receding glaciers, start to look friendly. It’s not often you can start a morning by opening the curtains and seeing a glacier pointing at you through the window.

My companions for the Tour would be Mike, ‘Sprout’ and Roy – three lads from Surrey/Hampshire, Daz – an Aussie from London, Singletrack stunt girl Emily and guides, Phil and George

with occasional appearances from master photographer, and another Chamonix local, Dan Milner. The plan was to ride out of Chamonix on a Sunday lunchtime, uphill to a sneaky cable car shortcut for lunch – our only permitted gravity-cheating until we were within sight of Chamonix again on Thursday. The timetable, worked out through years of fine-tuning by Phil mainly seemed to revolve around the lunch and dinner serving times at the few restaurants and refuges we’d be riding past – which suited us fine. Our bags would be schlepped between overnight stops by Charlie the excellent MBMB chef, so all we needed to carry would be water, tools, tubes, sunblock and raincoats.

Get year machos out.

The first climb (and subsequent descent) of a multi-day trip is always a traditional macho-fest. It’s where fresh-legged riders force the pace a little to see how the natural order of the riders in the group will settle. Your guides, used to this behaviour (and usually able to whip anyone) generally let this play out and merely gauge the overall speeds and measure out how long it’ll therefore take until lunch. Emily upset this order right off by being the fastest of all, skipping up the hill with a girly ‘La, la, la’. Meanwhile, lower down the hill, Mike was learning that his summer’s supremacy of speed over his smaller, slighter mates, Roy and Sprout, hard-won through a spring of training, didn’t

translate in the big mountains. Back home he was a master of the short-sharp, southern hill-honk, but in the lofty mountains, where steady cadence is rewarded over brutish chugging, his now-smug mates steadily span away from him. Aussie Daz simply joined in the peloton, trying to steer straight while staring up at the monster peaks all around – there simply isn’t this kind of scenery in Epping Forest.

A packed lunch and a cable car to the top and we were ready for the adventure to begin. Until we rounded the final corner into St Gervais (down the road from Chamonix) in five days’ time, every metre climbed or dropped would be under our own power. As if to stop us getting complacent about the scale of our undertaking, a thunderstorm had rolled in and our first taste of Mont Blanc singletrack would be under leaden skies, flying raindrops and a bitter wind.

Suitably reminded, we hipswayed ourselves down the perfectly skinny singletrack, unknowingly passing the innocuous stripey poles that mark the Swiss border. A couple of hours in and we were already in another country.

Swiss singletrack is in no way as precise as it should be. Our loamy trail soon turned into jaggy jumbles of serpentine switchbacks, bare rock exposed through the ultragreen turf, dotted with Alpine flowers. I passed Daz, cut and scraped from a fall – limping but cheerful. He’d walk for a moment and then be on his way. Having ridden a couple



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of sections for rainy photos (“Bangers!” and “Epic!” shots according to Dan) I caught up the group and looked back up the trail to see the other riders – catching the view of our trail, which had hugged a bare and sheer rock drop, unseen to us from the trail. Epic indeed.

The others caught us. Daz had taken another two tumbles since I’d seen him and was now nursing a bloodier shin and banged elbow. He was game to continue, so we pressed on, keen to stay ahead of the oncoming squall.

The occasional showers turned to steady rain as we descended into Switzerland. Fortunately, the rocks on this popular route were scrubbed clean of dirt and our progress through the rocky, rooty switchbacks were slip-free. I was volunteered to go first, being the only rider with a bell, through the clouds of caped Swiss walkers, sticks in hands and hoods firmly up. A cheery ‘Bonjour!’ and a very careful bit of riding to ensure I didn’t fall off in front of them usually got us through. Once out of the trees, where rooty switchbacks seemed to be very much in vogue, the heavy shower turned into a comedic, stair rod drenching. Just in time for the climb.

Our refuge for the night was at the top of the Col de Forclaz. And we were now at the bottom of it. A long, grassy, curvy climb took us to the final road section as humour drained and core-temperatures and blood sugars alike clanked off the bottom. Emily and I were the first to reach the hotel, soaked to the bone. We received a puzzled

look from the waiter as we ordered five ‘chocolate chaudes’ for us and our imaginary friends. Fortunately, they soon appeared to drink them.

Not content with finishing our first day of hard riding, we topped it off with an evening of welcome third-helpings and ill-advised late night drinking. Daz appeared to be more than scuffed and would sit out the next day in order to get checked out back in Chamonix. Wisely, as it proved, as he’d broken a finger – and an elbow. He would now become our, surprisingly cheerful and optimistic, evening drinking buddy, while travelling with Charlie in the schlepping bus with the luggage.

Steamy pavements

The morning dawned with a promise of sun and by the time we started our descent (the only good way to ride after breakfast) the pavement was starting to steam. As were our disc brakes after we ducked off the road and started taking farmers’ shortcuts: fieldside singletrack that cut through the middle of the switchbacks, popping us out every other corner into the road like the minis from the Italian Job. We’d cut the corner and then nip off down the next alleyway of singletrack until we’d lost all of our height.

As Alpine passes go, the Saint Bernard is one I’ve heard of – and a road we shared briefly with the trucks before nipping off on our own summiting mission. We had 12km of switchbacked climb to do



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FundRaising Standards Board

before lunch in Champex. Phil suggested a village halfway up to stop and regroup, only he got the name of the village wrong, so there was no rest for us keenies at the front. I say keenies, but George and I were just trying to catch up with the skipping Emily. We failed, but by the time that became obvious, we'd settled into a 'bottom of the middle ring' sweaty haul, determined to beat the climb – and with an increasingly obvious gentlemen's agreement that neither of us would be doing any sprinting for the line; if, indeed one ever appeared.

A lunch of grated potato, bread and cheese, baked and topped with, er, cheese, helped get me back on track at lunch, but the longevity of Cheese Power® is short and as we skirted an enormous, but dormant glacial riverbed, the cheese ran out and it took two non-export, double espresso Cliff Shot gels to get any sense out of me.

To get there, though, we'd all earned our Alpine Switchback badges – both up and downhill. Perfect trails, scattered with rocks and crossed by 'lunge and hope' roots – all sunken into loamy forest dirt, now perfectly tacky after the rain.

Back at the other end of the trail, on a brief caffeine high, I cleared the final, mech-scraping, glacial rock-garden and rejoined the others on the road that led to the hotel – via a €0 junk food trolley dash at the village supermarché.

Dinner that night was large and filling, but the table wine remained reasonably unmolested as one by one, we excused ourselves, and our heavy legs, for an earlyish night.

Reset the Max-Speed indicator
"I can't believe I'm doing 2.1mph and I'm still actually upright!" I whinged, not 20 minutes into the first climb – the day started steep and mean: a short tarmac climb and then a merciless fireroad haul. We were on our way to bag our first 2,500m pass, the Grand Col de Ferret – where we'd also leave Switzerland behind and ease into Italy. The first half was fire road which ended at a farm, a temporary stop for lots of cheery hikers, school-outing rambblers and, more importantly, a mid-climb coffee.

After the farm, a well-worn singletrack led the way towards the pass. It was only stubbornness that kept us riding and pushing fast enough to stay ahead of the school-trip youngsters in their bright cagoules.

After a lot of riding, pushing, stopping 'to look at the view', more resting 'I'm just taking a photo, you go ahead' we neared the pass. We also reeled in the only other mountain biker we'd see all week – a 60-something Swiss boy who was riding the Tour de Mont Blanc too. Unsupported. Twice in a row! He did a very good job of tortoisising our hares and we would keep bumping into him until he finished his epic the following afternoon.

After a comedy, but welcome, wait at the top of the pass in a bright orange, balloon-like, group shelter we set off on the descent. The valley faced us end-on, and our job was to ride the skinny singletrack to the very end, and out of sight. The trail was well worn, with rocky patches easing out of the hardpacked dirt. Every 50 yards would bring some evil waterbars, seemingly made of roofing tiles, 6in proud of the trail and designed to pinchflat the enthusiastic (Emily) or daydreaming (me).

Having stopped to take pictures, I got to see Phil and George ride towards, and then past me. Two mountain guides, at ease in the terrain, riding with the fluidity and confidence that only living in the mountains seems to bring. Just great to watch...

We hustled down the descent, the trail splitting into a six-way, parallel track, like some of the grassy trails in the Peaks do. Pick the right track and you were rewarded with singletrack heaven. Choose poorly and find yourself skidding to a dusty halt as your chosen channel simply stopped without warning.

Our first meal in Italy (of huge bowls of spaghetti, naturally) brought on a unanimous snooze break as we all littered the grass outside the restaurant. Suitably revived, we fire roaded and Italian-jobbed our way further down the mountain – and, unfortunately to the base of the final challenge for the day: another 40 minute climb in the hot afternoon sun... This time on the road, to our rifugio for the night. To our right, and filling my whole field of vision was the massive bulk of Mont Blanc again. The less pretty, more rugged, rocky and lethal looking Italian side. Every ten minutes a loud 'crack' and rumble would echo out as bits of the overhanging glacier would let go and chuck debris down the mountainside across the valley.

The welcome Rifugio Monte Bianco (we were in Italy now...) near Courmayeur made itself more welcome by serving big beers to thirsty riders – and continued to do so late into the night as we celebrated Sprout's birthday and another hard day done.

Not enough coffee... again!
Our penultimate morning started in promising style with a narrow singletrack descent that started from the end of the hotel's garden and clung to a narrow shelf on the wooded hillside. My fatigued and slightly hungover brain couldn't quite process all the trail information that

was coming at me and I rode it like a Muppet. In my random tome of trail classification, I'd reckon it was a two-coffee descent and I'd only had the one.

The singletrack joy didn't last for long though – we were scaling our second 2,500m pass that day and it all had to be earned. First with a road, then a concrete track and, finally, a gravel trail that levelled out into a beautiful, open valley, carved long ago by glaciers. Our goal lay at the head of the valley and there was no choice to be had apart from digging in and trying not to explode in the middle of a party of cheering French walkers.

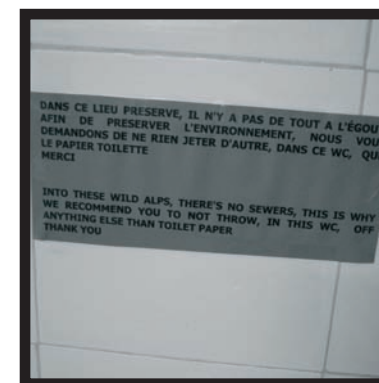
Sitting at the top of the valley, I could see glacial moraine (terminal, medial and lateral...) and probably drumlins and nunataks too – if my geography teacher had brought me here to show me the results and power of ice, I wouldn't have dropped it in the third year...

We could see graffiti on the rocks at the head of the pass, but before anyone got all indignant, we saw that it was all painstakingly laid out in little white stones on the black rock. Nice.

The descent promised fast, slow, fast, slow singletrack. One minute flat out on a perfectly smooth white ribbon, the next, hauling on the anchors as the trail dropped sharply over rocks into a crease in



Needless to say, photographer Dan was stopping every two minutes to frame up this "Banger!" or that "Cracker!"



the earth. Needless to say, photographer Dan was stopping every two minutes to frame up this "Banger!" or that "Cracker!" The other lads had long since headed down the hill towards lunch, leaving Emily, George and myself to mug for Dan's digital Leica. 'Just one more' shot turned inevitably to many and Emily headed down the hill.

Another 20 minutes of shots later and we headed down the hill too, with me trying to keep Dan and George in view as the two locals ripped down the trail. Unfortunately we were all too busy on keeping on to the trail that we missed seeing Emily waiting for us at a rifugio, so as we picked up more and more speed down the trail and then the road to lunch, we left her further behind.

It was only at the bottom of the hill that we met up with the other guys, already ordering food, that the '...but I thought she was with you' became apparent. Minutes later an incandescent Emily reminded us that we were playing on very big mountains, where it was soberingly easy to lose touch with someone. There are fewer places to stop, patchy phone coverage and a freewheel down the wrong road could leave you with a couple of hours' climbing to get back on track. Fortunately, a large lunch, with pudding, calmed

Emily's nerves and she started speaking to everyone again. Well, maybe everyone but Dan and his 'just one more picture'.

Lunch came with another price of a farm track ride and then another half hour of tarmac which turned out to be the 1967m Cormet de Roselend, a reasonably legendary Tour de France climb. With heavy legs, I slowly winched my way up, nearly reeling in Mike by the top. My legs weren't used to this much back-to-back beating and my thighs hurt to touch. I was relieved to hear that we'd descend to dinner – by way of a lighthearted 'no pedalling' race... I'm rubbish at excess speeds, so pootled down while watching some of the others easily freewheel their ways past speeding cars on the switchbacks below.

Our evening settled into the familiar routine of beers (this time with a bit of TV as we watched the Tour de France demolish the climb to Alp D'Huez in a different part of the same mountain range), dinner and amusing anecdotes told by our guides.

Somebody usually gets it today...

One more day left – and one that started with our most punishing



climb yet. It began simply enough, skirting a reservoir on a gravel track, then slowly switchbacking our way up to the higher pastures as cowbell-clanking cows looked on, unimpressed. We climbed until the trail ran out. Then we shouldered our bikes and carried and pushed up a never ending clover-topped hill until we finally regained our view of the other side. The view also gave us back the pretty, French side of Mont Blanc.

The sense of remoteness was impressive. We knew that, that evening, we'd be back in Chamonix, yet at that point it felt 100km away. Between us and Cham, though lay great singletrack, lurch, more singletrack, terrifyingly technical, woody switchbacks, Roman roads and more singletrack.

The descent to lunch was handled with suitable respect, but the brakes were sorely tested afterwards as we all started pushing our last-day limits with our hard-won Alpine trail skills. It's the kind of situation where someone always comes a cropper. Well, that would have to wait for next time because nobody did. The boys from the flat-lands of Surrey and Hampshire had toughened up, skilled up and beaten themselves into fitness, generally becoming better mountain bikers, day on day. Our descent took us down to the town of St Gervais, just one spur round the corner from Chamonix, where we took our second and final cheat of the loop in the form of the steep cog-railway. This dropped us off in sight of Cham', but many, many metres above it. All that lay between us and our celebratory beers was another hour of singletrack descending.

I counted them all out... I counted them all back in.

By the time we emerged from the woods, we were all dog-tired, elated and, importantly, intact. We would grin, and jabber, and drink beer like this long into the night. We had ridden more than 150km, climbed four mountain passes above 2000m, with a grand total climbing over 7000m and had earned (nearly) every descent.

It's a hard week of riding, by any standard, and nothing can prepare you for the size and scale of the Alps. Riding here will either beat you down, hurt you and steal your lunch money, or it'll scrape, cajole, scare and sculpt you screaming towards becoming a better rider. With no easy ways up, or down the mountains, riders have no choice but to step up to the challenge. Guys like Mike, Roy and Sprout, the self-professed 'Sunday afternoons and Thursday nights' married, middle aged, regular guys on the trip went from red-faced, wheezing climbers and tentative descenders to middle ring mashers and 'try anything once' switchback kings in just a week. Once back home, it's inevitable that they would go show their pictures and tell their uncomprehending mates about the size of the climbs and the difficulty of the descents. And then, on the local loop they thought they knew well, they'd pull their legs off...

The physical rewards are short-lived though – after a few months back at home, their skills will dull and their speed will ebb a little – but the memories and sights from a trip like this will burn themselves into your brain so permanently that you know, when called upon again, your inner mountain biker will be ready, once again, to rise to the challenge of the mountains... 🏔️

Go Ride

Mont Blanc Mountain Biking is based in Chamonix in the French Alps (and has been for something like 16 years now). What they don't know about the Chamonix Valley probably isn't worth knowing.

The Three Countries Tour costs around £500 each (including accommodation, half-board, luggage transfer and a chalet day either side) and takes place around six times every summer, from June to September. If you'd

rather an less committing introduction to the riding there, they run a selection of classic singletrack or freeride weeks, as well as 'quick fix' long weekends.

www.mbmb.co.uk

Thanks to Phil, George, Stu and Charlie for guiding, company and awesome food, to Dan for the photos and to Daz, Emily, Mike, Roy and Sprout for company, comedy, beer and inspiration.

