

Trail Running

Chamonix and the Mont Blanc region



40 routes
in the Chamonix Valley,
Italy and Switzerland
by Kingsley Jones

CICERONE

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lovelljohns.com

Route mapping
by Lovell Johns
www.lovelljohns.com

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Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/800/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly-available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to info@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, Cumbria LA9 7RL.

Register your book: To sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk.

Front cover: Running on the Plan d'Aiguille above Chamonix (Route 1)

Mountain Safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

International Distress Signal (emergency only)

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

Helicopter Rescue

The following signals are used to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:
raise both arms
above head to
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:
raise one arm
above head, extend
other arm downward



Emergency telephone numbers

France: PGHM (Peloton de Gendarmerie de Haute Montagne):
tel 04 50 53 16 89; Emergency services: tel 112 (mobile phones)

Italy: Carabinieri: tel 0165 84 22 25; Emergency Services: tel 118

Switzerland: OCVS (Organisation Cantonale Valaisanne de Secours): tel 144

Weather reports

(If telephoning from the UK the dialling codes are:

France: 0033; *Italy:* 0039; *Switzerland:* 0041)

France: Chamonix: tel 08 92 68 02 74, www.meteo.fr or tel 3250

Italy: tel 0165 44 113

Switzerland: tel 162 (in French, German or Italian), www.meteoschweiz.ch/en

Note Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.



Route 6

La Jonction

Start/Finish	SNCF station, Les Bossons (1012m/3320ft)
Distance	12.5km (7¾ miles)
Ascent/Descent	1530m (5020ft)
Grade	Trail running, Level 4 (with Skyrunning, Level 3, above 2000m)
Time	3hr 45min
High point	La Jonction (2589m/8494ft)
Maps	IGN 3531 St Gervais 1:25,000, Rando Editions A1 Pays du Mont Blanc 1:50,000
Public transport	Train/bus to Les Bossons
Season	July to September
Note	Due to path erosion, and some unstable moraines overlying rock, there are several sections of paths on the ascent to Col Corbeau which are especially delicate after heavy rains. It is now highly advisable, especially on wet days, for runners to use the descent route described both for the ascent and descent of the route, as these trails are in the best maintained condition.

This route takes you into the mountains, and they seem close enough to touch from the top at La Jonction, where the glaciers of Bossons and Taconnaz split apart. Steep gradients and big exposure are encountered in this harsh yet stunning scenery. The route shares the first part of a trail that Jacques Balmat and Michel-Gabriel Paccard took when they made the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786, making it one of historical importance for Alpinists.

Safety

Do not contemplate this route if there's any snow at all remaining. It's easy to view the upper section and the east-facing gullies from Chamonix, and you can get a perfect view onto the whole route from the cable car station at the summit of Le Brévent. The higher part of the trail is a notorious accident hotspot with hikers attempting to ascend the route out of season. Also beware of undertaking this route if it's raining, as the upper rocks become very slippery, especially in running shoes.



Pace in the race

This race is busy, and there are several bottleneck points, so it's important to set off quite quick to ensure that when your pace has settled you're ahead of the main pack and can keep a decent pace through the narrow sections.

path on the far side; it soon eases gradient and there's a wonderful section of single track leading to a path junction at 1579m.

- 9 Turn R and climb a long series of zig-zags, which brings you to **Bas de la Trappe**, the end of a ski run. Head directly up the ski run until you see the **La Flégère** cable car and hut ahead. Aim just to the L of the lowest buildings, where on race day there's the final refreshment post.
- 10 Beyond the hut, follow the signs towards Planpraz. This part of the trail is in the midst of the Aiguilles Rouges nature reserve. Descend a narrow, steep section shortly after Flégère, then there's a wonderful section of trail through the Charlanon gully, followed by a narrow rocky section before you reach a jeep track, which gets steeper and steeper on the final climb towards **Planpraz**.

The finish line is at the paraglider take-off zone at 2050m, and after all your efforts you're rewarded with one of the best views of the Bossons icefall and the summit of Mont Blanc.

The final 2km of this route have been slightly changed, to move the finish slightly up the hillside to the top of the Teleski du Stade. This improvement is much welcomed by runners, as you finish on single track trails, rather than a stony 4x4 track. The route from La Flegere is as before until you reach the 4x4 track beneath the cables of the Telesiege du Col Cornu. Here you run diagonally L across the big track, and turn R onto the Tour du Pays du Mont Blanc path. This climbs in a rising traverse, around the bowl of the Montagne de Parsa, to reach the finish line just above the Teleski du Stade.



Route 9

80km du Mont Blanc

Start/Finish	Town hall, Chamonix (1035m/3395ft)
Distance	83.7km (52 miles)
Ascent/Descent	6048m (19,840ft)
Grade	Trail running, Level 4 (and Skyrunning, Level 3)
Time	18hrs
High point	Col de la Terrasse (2631m/8631ft)
Maps	IGN 3630 Chamonix 1:25,000, IGN 3530 Samoëns 1:25,000, Rando Editions A1 Pays du Mont Blanc 1:50,000
Public transport	Train/bus to Chamonix
Season	Mid July to early September
Note	On this route you cross the border into Switzerland and back into France, so remember to carry your passport.

This route is raced once a year as part of the Marathon du Mont Blanc series, and was first run in 2013. It explores some remote areas such as the Tré les Eaux valley and Col de la Terrasse, as well as many popular balcony trails. For a running race, it tackles some quite technical terrain, where mountain skills and awareness are required.

The race is run in late June, when significant snow patches can often remain, so the organisers have three separate route plans that they select from to minimise risks to runners. The route description given here is that of the first edition of the race, which was run in June 2013. Note, however, that running this route before mid July is not recommended; it is best to wait until snow patches have melted completely or softened sufficiently.

After the first few years of this race, the organisers found that the 80km race, which was held at the last weekend in June, typically had too much snow on the higher sections, and so in recent years they have adapted the course to remove sections such as the Col de la Terrace, and to extend the race course to 90km and include a visit to Emosson in Switzerland. Less time is spent at altitude on the 90km du Mont Blanc route. This description of the old 80km race route is, I believe, a far nicer route in terms of the terrain visited. It follows the new 90km route as far as Le Buet, and includes the last section from Le Bois to the finish, but the whole section around Vallorcine is completely different.



The guidebook recommended season of mid July onwards is correct, and explains why the race organisers had to adapt the course.

The race route is described in two stages, with Vallorcine providing a stopover for those who would prefer not to undertake the whole circuit in one day. From there you can return by train to your accommodation in Chamonix, or stay in the village. Gite Mermoud is very traditional, and centrally placed (www.cvmmontblanc.fr or tel +33 (0)4 50 54 60 03).

Safety

If running on your own, beware of snow patches on north-facing slopes or shady gullies, as the snows will remain hard and slippery well into the afternoon. For those who are confident of their mountain skills, carrying some instep crampons or spikes will increase your security. If you're ever in doubt, turn back before getting into difficulties. The Office de Haute Montagne in Chamonix can advise you on prevailing snow conditions before you set off.

Stage 1 – Chamonix to Vallorcine

44.5km (27¾ miles), 3860m (12,665ft) ascent, 3560m (11,680ft) descent, 9hr 30min

- From Chamonix town hall, run past the church and up the hill on the road to the Brévent cable car station. Take the track to the L of the pylons, and just before the track heads R, turn sharp L and follow the signposts towards Bellachat. Be careful not to miss the R turn at 1382m, where you leave the wide track and ascend steep single tracks, soon leaving the treeline below. After a rocky ramp, spot the **Bellachat hut** above you at 2276m.



Bellachat refuge in the Aiguilles Rouges



Make every step count

With a rocky upper section on this run, the tendency is to throttle back and only use every second or third step to really drive forwards, when your foot is securely braced against a good rock. Try and make every step a positive one in order to gain better momentum; position each step well so that you can push onwards and upwards with every pace.

Premier refuge and runs above the Le Tour ski area. Pass the ephemeral Lac de Charamillon at 2271m, and the path cuts across a slope with an increasing gradient above and below.

- As you round the corner to the L there's a short, slightly more technical section with fixed equipment across a rocky outcrop. This is soon passed, and ahead lies the final section of the climb. At 2484m the trail reaches a junction at the lateral moraine ridge of the Le Tour glacier; run up this to the **Albert Premier hut**, where refreshments are available. After taking in the panoramic views, return down the moraines to the path junction and this time take the LH path.

Safety

The direct lower section of path as described below, is getting more worn and steeper with erosion, so is now recommended only for experienced runners. If it is wet, or you wish to avoid a steeper and more technical ascent, retrace your ascent trail to Col du Balme, then follow the direct descent via Charamillon to Le Tour.

- Run down the wonderful moraine ridge, marvelling as you pass the crumbling snout of the glacier. The smooth rock slabs below are testament to the rate of recent climate change. The kilometre following the viewpoint of the Fenêtre du Tour is the most technical of the route, as you zig-zag down Les Esserins. Be careful here, as your legs will be tired and the ground is steep.
- The ground suddenly eases off as you cross the Combe de la Vormaine and run across the beginner ski area to reach the village of **Le Tour**. The bus departs from the bridge in front of the cable car station. Take a moment to look back at where you came from, with the snout of the Le Tour glacier far above and the twin summits of the Aiguille du Tour behind.



Route 27

Croix de Fer

Start/Finish	Trient church (1290m/4232ft)
Distance	16.6km (10¼ miles)
Ascent/Descent	1135m (3725ft)
Grade	Trail running, Level 3 (with 2km of Skyrunning, Level 3)
Time	4hrs
High point	Croix de Fer (2343m/7687ft)
Maps	IGN 3630 Chamonix 1:25,000, Rando Editions A1 Pays du Mont Blanc 1:50,000
Public transport	Bus to Trient from Vallorcine or Châtelard
Season	June to September
Note	The section of this route from the Bisse de Trient-Combe, up to the Col de Balme, via Les Grands, is the mountain section of the newly introduced (2018) MCC race route of the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc race series. This race starts in Martigny, and ascends via Martigny-Combe to Col de la Forclaz, before following this route to Col de Balme, then descending to Argentiere and the finish in Chamonix.

This circuit features amazing views of the Trient glacier, and takes you through rough and remote terrain on some of the least used trails in the Mont Blanc massif. You feel like you're running in the wilderness here. The route takes in the Col de Balme on the border with France, and the airy summit of the Croix de Fer, before running a section of UTMB down from Les Tseppes to Trient.

Safety

There are a few sections where you'll need to use your hands, so running poles might get in your way on this route. Don't be tempted to take in the summit of Croix de Fer if it's wet or stormy, or if there's any remnant snow, as it's very exposed. Instead, traverse across and down from the Col d'Arolette at 2277m to the Catogne path at 2065m, bypassing the summit.



at the end of Stage 3 (www.auclubalpin.ch or tel +41 (0)2 77 83 11 61). See Appendix A for more contact details for sourcing accommodation on or near the route.

Whatever speed you run this route, to finish it is one of life's great achievements. The UTMB race attracts runners from around 80 different countries, which demonstrates the route's fame and magnitude.

Safety

This route is over four marathons long, plus nearly 10,000m in height gain. Only undertake it if you're properly prepared. Remember that only about half of those who set off to run this as a single push reach the finish. Listen to what your body is telling you, and don't be afraid to stop if you need to.

Additional climb

Since 2015 the UTMB race have added an additional small, but technical, climb to the route that is not mentioned in the guidebook route, although with weather conditions this extra variation has been raced only twice, which adds just under 2km in distance. After the initial c.200m descent from the Col de la Seigne, instead of descending directly to Lac Combal, the route now turns N to cross the higher of the two Col des Pyramides Calcaires at c.2650m. It then descends E to Refugio Elisabetta Soldini before rejoining the standard route to Lac Combal. This section begins with a vague path on grass that shortly turns into extremely rough scree and snowfields (depending on the season). The descent is very technical steep scree, on a path that becomes clearer and broader as the descent continues. Unless you plan to follow the 'official' UTMB route to the letter, this variant is not recommended, as it is largely not runnable, crossing rough and loose ground.

The UTMB as a training route

If running this route for yourself and not as part of the actual UTMB race, you'll need to plan ahead for where you can get food and drinks. Mountain huts will all sell you a hot meal and refreshments, and all the villages you run through have shops. Don't set off thinking you have to carry everything completely unsupported.

Route 38

Orsières, Champex, Chamonix (OCC)

Start	Main church, Orsières (911m/2988ft)
Finish	Town hall, Chamonix (1035m/3395ft)
Distance	53km (33 miles)
Ascent	3300m (10,825ft)
Descent	3176m (10,420ft)
Grade	Trail running, Level 2
Time	10hr 30min
High point	Catogne (2040m/6693ft)
Maps	IGN 3630 Chamonix 1:25,000, Swiss Topo 1345 Orsières 1:25,000, Rando Editions A1 Pays du Mont Blanc 1:50,000
Public transport	Train to Martigny, then bus to Orsières
Season	June to September
Note	Recent editions of the OCC have slightly altered this route, to descend from Col des Montets to Argentière, for an extra aid station, before ascending more directly to La Flegère. This route change has added another 2km in distance, simply to provide a more accessible opt out point for race runners, but the route described here is more enjoyable and logical, without the race constraints and considerations.

This is the 'little sister' of the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc. The route starts in Orsières below Champex and follows the final section of the UTMB (Route 37), with a few minor alternations to make it more accessible and faster to run.

The village of Trient is an ideal place to split the trail if you choose to run the race route over two days. The Auberge du Mont Blanc is well situated and reasonably priced (www.aubergemontblanc.com/en or tel +41 (0)2 77 67 15 05).

Safety

After very heavy rain the stream at La Jure is dangerous to cross, so only run this route in a period of stable weather.

Extension

From 2019 route has been extended to 145km with +9100m vertical height gain. The route remains the same to La Gittaz, then has been adapted to reach the towns of Beaufort and Hauteluce, via the Col Ouest de la Gittaz and Pas d'Outray, then after Mont de Vorès it rejoins the old route at Col du Joly. The key reason for the change is to include a more major aid station at Beaufort, from which it is easier for runners to retire if injured. The former TDS route, as described in the guidebook, is far more aesthetic, and it is sensibly run in three days. The new race route of the TDS is probably better run as a four-day stage route. See <https://utmbworld.com> for details.

Stage 1 – Courmayeur to Col du Petit Saint Bernard

37km (21¾ miles), 2600m (8535ft) ascent, 1635m (5360ft) descent, 8hr 45min

- From Courmayeur bus station, run under the main road underpass to cross the river into **Dolonne**, and follow the road up L to the nursery ski slopes before following the ski piste up the hillside to **Col Checrouit** (2256m). From here, run along the UTMB (Route 37) in reverse via **Arête Mont Favre** to **Lac Combal**, and just after passing the **Elisabetta Soldini hut**, cut L and start ascending steeply to **Col des Chavannes** (2603m). This is the highest pass on the route, and the descent on the far side is gentle and fast to run.

