

THE HARD FACTS

Climbing Mont Blanc 4810m



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Who's writing this article?

Hello, my name's Kingsley, and I'll almost certainly be out in Chamonix when you make your ascent of Mont Blanc. I first climbed it unguided when I was 17, and have since been up it many tens of times. Now I work as a UIMLA guide for Icicle, and when back in the UK, I live in the Lake District, where I'm also on the local Mountain Rescue team. As well as climbing, I've run many mountain ultra-marathons up to 200 miles long, and have also written several mountain guidebooks. I assure you that Mont Blanc is far harder than you ever imagined. I'll bet you'll confirm that to me too!

This article is not a scare tactic, but it's been a long time in the coming. We've operated guided ascents of Mont Blanc for well over 20 years now, and whilst sometimes we think we've seen it all, there's always room for some more surprises. The decision to write this, was based on trying to give people a serious reality check, so they better understand what they have signed up too, and what an ascent really involves. There's still time for you to train more before your trip, to adjust your equipment, and also mentally prepare too. Hopefully reading this will give you the final kick up the bum to do just that. Good luck, and see you out in Chamonix this summer!



Mont Blanc is the most dangerous mountain in the world! Google will spit out the facts at you, but without any context, they're meaningless. Nanga Parbat, K2, or Kanchenjunga have a far better claim on that title. The statistics for Mont Blanc are a factor of numbers, in that every day of the season where weather allows, up to three mountain huts full of people, will set out on their bids for the summit. Compare that with just a handful of say Everest summit days each year.

The sheer numbers on Mont Blanc, with a few accidents, soon generate misquoted statistics. Drill down into those numbers, and you'll see that the safety of guided ascents is vastly superior than that of unguided groups. Simply put, guides know the mountain backwards, they know the conditions and weather patterns, and they want to get you up it, and to get safely home themselves.

We get a few phone calls each year from worried partners, who've scared themselves silly about what their other half's have signed up for, so please also consider them for a second, and put their minds at ease. In over 20 years of guided ascents, none of our group participants has died on the mountain, or even had a significant injury! For sure we've seen our fair share of sprains, fatigue, and blisters, but nothing too serious. Let's keep in that way.

This article is really designed as some bedtime reading for you, in the weeks and months before your trip with us this summer. For sure not everyone will read it. We know that not everyone even reads the itinerary on the website, that they booked up to. Let's start with the hard fact, that most people ignore;

HARD FACT #1. You are NOT guaranteed to reach the summit of Mont Blanc

Why would we spoil your dreams with that hard fact? We live in an age where challenges are often seen as a consumable. Every time we look on the TV or social media, someone is achieving a 'bucket list' goal, or doing some extreme sport. Contrary to what is portrayed on our screens, there's also failure, and that's rarely reported, but the harder you push yourself, or the greater the challenge, the higher the chances of failure. There are many things on Mont Blanc that can collude against you, and here's some to consider.

Rain - Many of you will be travelling from the UK. Icicle is based in the Lake District, so we know we see our fair share of rain. It doesn't really stop us in the Lakes, or any of our National Parks, so why is it a game changer for Mont Blanc?



Firstly if you get soaked on your way up to a hut, there are not sufficient drying facilities for over 100 people's wet clothes, so you might have to set off the next

day in wet clothing, which would freeze, and possibly cause you hypothermia or even frostbite, especially on your extremities.

Snow - Where there's rain lower down, there's sure to be snow up high. Generally snow makes you cold rather than wet, but from a purely physical viewpoint, the quantity of snow far exceeds what we are used too in the UK, and can impede progress to a complete standstill, or trap you in a mountain hut. If heavy snow is forecast at altitude, it's game over for an ascent of Mont Blanc, and you will need to consider an alternative summit.

Avalanche - With snowfalls, comes avalanche risk, and whilst most sections of Mont Blanc, via its normal routes are along ridges, there are several snow faces to negotiate, such as the Dome du Gouter. After fresh snow, or wind transported snow events, these faces become

very avalanche prone, and are a no-go area until the snowpack has stabilised, generally a day or two later. If it's even a consideration to wear avalanche beacons for a summer ascent of Mont Blanc, we don't go, as it's too risky.

The statistics for this speak for themselves. Over 95% of all people who die in an avalanche, trigger the very avalanche that kills them. In other words, we are the enemy after fresh snow, and it's our weight that triggers the avalanche.



Crevasses - There are crevasses on Mont Blanc, though generally they are form in very predictable places, and whilst on the upper ridges of the mountain, there is very little rotational slow of the glaciers affecting the ice cap, as generally you are above the rimaye / bergschrund anyway. However, whilst the location of crevasses is generally known to the mountain guides, a coating of fresh snow does obscure all the telltale signs of crevasses lurking below, and is a minor consideration after fresh snow on the mountain.

Wind - This is the major one in this list, as it's virtually impossible to summit when wind speeds are gusting over 60km/h. From the valley floor, it might look a perfect day, but



high up on the mountain, it can be hellish. Any winds of 80km/h (50mph), and it's impossible. Gusts on the ridge line can quite literally blow you right off your feet. On

the steep summit ridge, it's not somewhere you can afford to take a fall at the best of times, let alone when in a wind storm event.

Lightning - The weather forecasts will often highlight if there is lightning risk predicted. It's very rare to get fair weather electrical storms, so typically this is when bad weather is forecast anyway, but it might be the final nail in the coffin when deciding whether it is safe



to even attempt the mountain. Lightning is one of the objective risks in the Alps that kills the highest number of people, and it needs to be highly respected at all times. If

lightning is on the forecast, you don't go! In the summer months, the greatest likelihood of lightning is in afternoon storms, which occur in the late afternoon, when you are either safely in a hut, or back down off the mountain. Don't worry about these storms, but about frontal active weather systems.

Rockfall - We live in an age of global warming and rapid climate change. In the Alps, the level of permafrost melt is accelerating high up into the mountains, with the effect that areas that are prone to rockfall, are becoming more so. There is no more famous place for rockfall, than in the Gouter Couloir of Mont Blanc.



When there has been a good refreeze, or a covering of snow, there is virtually no rockfall. When the sunlight moves around, and hits the couloir, the heat increases rapidly, and rocks can come crashing down. Sometimes they are very small. Other times they are the size of grand pianos or small cars. The guides hate this section of the climb. It is the most risky, and aside of watching and listening, there's virtually nothing you can do to increase your safety, apart from moving

quickly and nimbly across this section. The guides will have been watching your footwork and fitness like hawks on the approach to the Gouter Couloir, as it's their final opportunity to judge if it's safe to attempt to cross it with you or not. As a top tip, go and practice your movement over scree and boulder fields, when doing your training before you go to the Alps. It will improve your confidence and fluidity over that kind of terrain and might be the difference between success and failure on Mont Blanc. Go and actively seek out the rough ground and the awkward terrain!

HARD FACT #2.
In event of major rockfalls it is sometimes illegal to attempt to climb Mont Blanc



Sickness - A common cold, or heaven forbid

the great 'man flu' might strike at any time. In the valley you might be fine with this, but up at altitude everything is amplified significantly. A cold has the capacity to dehydrate you. Flu can give you horrendous headaches. Eating food that gives you an upset stomach can be a nightmare experience, when you are hours from the next toilet. Whilst you can guard against getting sick, you can stack the odds in your favour by keeping healthy, eating foods that you are used to, and treating any illness at its earliest stages. Being ill on Mont Blanc is horrendous, and you wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy. If you are feeling sick on your trip, go and see a doctor sooner rather than later. An appointment generally costs between 30 - 50€, and you can usually see a doctor within 48 hours, so tell one of the Icicle team at the first opportunity, if you need a visit. The cost of this usually needs to be paid directly, but good insurance will cover you for this.

Fatigue - OK, so you know climbing Mont Blanc is going to be tiring, but just so you can put it in context, we've had Royal Marines who have said it nearly beat them, triathletes

and Ironmen / women who found it hard, and even the guides themselves find it a very long day. On the other hand, we've politely put, had some interesting body shapes who have made it. Whilst they're an exception to the normal, our experience to date has never to meet anyone who said Mont Blanc was easier than they thought. Along the way, we've met some quite big personalities, and all were honest about how much effort Mont Blanc was. Before the climb we've heard it all; "it's just a walk", or "nothing can stop me", and all that trash talk, but at the other end of the scale we've had more than one person who quite literally shat themselves with fatigue. I'll leave that mental image with you a while.



Motivation - There's nothing easier than to say you are highly motivated. It's just air passing through your vocal cords. President Trump would probably say that; "I'm the most motivated-ional person in the world. No one is as motivational-erated as I am, or has ever been seen". Whilst we laugh at Trump-isms, just keep your motivational thoughts under your breath, lest they come back to haunt you. It's impossible to be completely motivated for the unknown. Keen, and driven, yes. But when you don't know what you are facing, it's hard to have motivation to match. By its very nature motivation assumes knowledge. Your energies are far better used than in blustering. In our experience, it's usually the quiet who get on



with it and succeed, and it's the loud who ail noisily and spectacularly. Humility is key, and Mont Blanc has an uncanny knack of finding out who is who.

Psychological - Years ago someone stopped their ascent of Mont Blanc about 30 minutes shy of the summit, as their iPod batteries had run out. We don't know what their playlist was, but without it, the ascent soon fizzled out. It's apparent that everyone has a slightly different reason why they chose to attempt Mont Blanc on their own or with friends. For some it's a physical challenge to test them. Others really it's for their moment of Facebook glory, or to impress the office colleagues. Some, it's for the history surrounding the first ascents of the highest peaks of the Alps. Take a moment to consider why you signed up, and be honest with yourself. If it's a flaky reason, you've got poor foundations to put yourself through a huge exertion during the climb, and you don't want them to crumble. Preparing yourself in psychological terms is not just a motivational exercise. It's far more than that. Take the worst case scenario, and imagine telling your loved



ones that you hadn't reached the top. Would they think any less of you, or just be glad you were safe, or happy you'd enjoyed yourself anyway? It's all too easy to get

personally absorbed in a climb, and never to consider failure, but it's important to do just that. Have a good think why you want to climb Mont Blanc, and what it really matters if you don't make it for whatever reason. Some groups who have been thwarted by weather, have gone on to tackle safer but more technical climbs, that made them far happier and more satisfied than Mont Blanc ever would. Ask yourself why you chose Mont Blanc. Was it the biggest? Well it's not the biggest in Europe as that's Mount Elbrus. Was it because you had heard of it, or a mate had climbed it? You can do better than that.

HARD FACT #3. Mont Blanc will seek out and ruthlessly exploit your weaknesses. Prepare yourself for this before you travel

Equipment - It's easy to obsess about your kit to the detriment of spending the equivalent time training. The correct equipment is important, but worrying about 100g here and



there, rather than on your gut, is illogical. You will already have been sent very detailed kit lists for your trip, so please read them. As you will already have read, you

aren't dressing for as bad weather as you might encounter in the UK, as snow could make an ascent unsafe. You are looking for lightweight layering system with good flexibility and ventilation. Heavy-weight 3 ply Gore-tex or Paramo, thick fleeces, and warm but wet systems such as Buffalo, aren't ideal for the Alps. This isn't being snobby in the slightest. These items have their place, but it's not on Mont Blanc. If you are lean and light, and so is your kit, you've again stacked the odds in your favour. If you rock up with a military style Bergan, and kit from the 80's, the chances are you're making life very difficult for yourself. Another top tip is to watch what

the guides are wearing and taking each day. If your bag is any way near the same size as theirs, and they are also carrying ropes, ice screws, first aid kits etc, you



are very clearly taking too much. Each season there are a few testy conversations between clients and guides or Icicle staff, regarding the size of a rucksack, where obviously the client is always right. That's customer service! The guide has probably climbed Mont Blanc over a hundred times, but what do they know?

Partner - It's not me, it's you! Finding a good partner for Mont Blanc is not always obvious.

Some people come with a partner or friend, and others match up with someone else on the trip. Generally it's this latter group who we have the least issues with, as no one wants to let down or be let down by a relative stranger, and so these pairings usually work well. If there's issues on the mountain, the guide can try any swop pairings if there's others around, but they cannot abandon you anywhere other than a manned hut. If you are in doubt, then do not progress above a hut, as there is a risk of you both having to turn around. Whilst you could have to return due to an unforeseen circumstances, but to continue when your ascent was already in doubt, is selfish and dangerous.



Altitude - On an ascent of Mont Blanc, it's very very rare for altitude sickness to stop an ascent, but the majority of climbers will exhibit one or more of the minor effects of altitude sickness. These minor conditions include a loss of appetite, nausea, poor sleep, and a mild headache. If allowed to progress, then more serious effects such as nausea, loss of balance, and severe headaches will develop.

HARD FACT #4. Every single day you invest in acclimatisation before or during a course, will increase your summit chances. Five days is an absolute minimum for a safe ascent

The simplest remedy is descent. Beyond this, the severe mountain sickness signs are of pulmonary and cerebral oedema, which can cause respiratory issues, and in cerebral cases a coma and even death. Mont Blanc is 'only' 4810m high, so oedema's are phenomenally infrequent, but the early signs are exhibited in almost every climber. The altitude and your acclimatisation get blamed for everything. You should consider a longer course if possible, or if you are arriving on the Saturday or early on a Sunday, then get up to the Aiguille du Midi

3842m via the cable car, and spend several hours up there. Not just an hour or two, then followed by a walk at an altitude that won't give you any acclimatisation, but spend a full



day up there. Read a book. Sleep in a shady corner. Just do the full tourist thing. Every minute and hours you spend up there, will assist you in acclimatising for

Mont Blanc. On the Mont Blanc one week course, ascents are either on the Wednesday and Thursday, or the Thursday and Friday. Which days are a function of the hut spaces, and route choices, so if you want a guaranteed night at altitude, before Mont Blanc, then plan to get out on the Saturday and to book in a hut for the night, to spend a night in one of the easy unguided non-glacial access huts, such the Plan d'Aiguille hut. In our experience, most of the reports of guests saying they have altitude sickness are actually dehydration, sunstroke, or fatigue related, rather than being primarily due to altitude. To put it in context, one season I arrived in Chamonix from the UK, and ascended Mont Blanc via the Trois Mont Blanc traverse from the first cable car the next morning. I had no acclimatisation whatsoever, and it hurt. It didn't stop me, but it slowed me by about an hour. Acclimatisation is more about your relative comfort on Mont Blanc, than a complete arbiter of whether you succeed or not. It helps, but rarely decides.

Forecasts - Weather forecasts are just that, as their name says. When the weather is looking doubtful for an ascent, the guides and Icicle team may suggest another summit to consider. The vast majority of people reject this advice, and it's only made when a majority of forecasts concur that the ascent isn't likely. It's frustrating for everyone if the forecasts for an ascent suggest it's not going to happen, and you should prepare for this eventuality.

You want to climb Mont Blanc, and it's easiest for us if you do exactly that. We've gone to huge lengths to secure hut spaces, secure guides, and prepare you for it, but the weather is the weather. Many clients seem to feel that they should attempt the mountain at all costs, and so (where it is safe to do so) they make an abortive attempt. It's hard to sympathise in these circumstances when realistic alternative summits have been suggested, rather than certain failure. Why is it good to fail, rather than to listen & adapt to then succeed in safety on another summit?



Individuals - We're all individuals, with very different reasons to tick, but what's infuriating is people pitting themselves against the mountains with an 'at all costs' attitude. The Alps are big mountains, if you're used to the UK National Parks, and they need to be respected far more. It's consequently harder for UK climbers to accept and adapt to the conditions, that for those say from Canada or New Zealand, who are accustomed to bigger peaks and their associated weather patterns.



HARD FACT #5. No guide will ever let you set foot on the mountain, where mountain rescue is a likely outcome for the weather or your skills set

The guides have our full authority for all safety decisions on the mountain, and it is their choice alone whether they actually set foot on the mountain with the prevailing weather and conditions, and your skills set. In much the same way as we respect you as an individual, we must all respect the guide safety decision.

Well, that's it for all the doom and gloom about what could conspire against you making a successful ascent, and hopefully I haven't missed anything. Oh yes, there's just one more thing. In 99% of cases, it's someone or something else's fault that the summit wasn't reached, very very rarely the individual in their opinion. Strange that statistical phenomenon! In the era of snowflakes, and being potentially overly sensitive over everything, it brings us to another hard fact for Mont Blanc.



HARD FACT #6. It's time to 'grow a pair' and get over yourself. Mont Blanc will hurt, and shit may happen metaphorically or literally. You need to accept a very high level of personal responsibility

Sorry for that fact, but the words Mont Blanc and holiday, should never be used in the same sentence. If you prepare very well, the ascent should be uneventful, and perhaps enjoyable, but there's no escaping that the descent is long. Very long. There's 2500m of descent.



That's twice Ben Nevis, in big boots, on tired legs, with the effects of altitude, and after a very early start and a long day. You'll get grumpy, pissed off, and even

the shine of a perfect ascent, will have a slightly soured ending. That's the way mountains are. They're big, and brutal, and they don't give a monkeys about your feelings.

Please try not to take it out on those around you. We're used to it, but not immune, and have noticed a strong correlation between

little whinges and a long day, albeit successful and without issue. If you're prone to being a tired and grumpy git, head to bed as soon as you get down. You're sleep deprived, suffering from mild altitude sickness, dehydrated, very smelly and tired. Your social skills will not be at their peak. Before you set off, put a cold drink or two in the fridge, and enjoy them in the bath / shower as soon as you get back, then head to bed for a power nap. You'll become a person again, and able to enjoy your ascent soon after!

Remember that guides are people too, and need their beer and a sleep too, after an ascent. If you've made your ascent before the end of the week, there's always guiding provided on the remaining day(s), though you may wish for a later start



to allow for a lie in. In this case, if you are asked what your plans are for the next day, straight after you are down from Mont Blanc, 75%+ say they want a day off the next day, and over half regret that impulse decision the next morning. You don't have to do a full day, and could maybe do a few hours rock climbing or perhaps climb a via ferrata.

Please don't arrange an activity with your guide, then go out on the piss, and not turn up the next morning. They've got out of bed for nothing, and are always gutted! Even if you don't want to do an activity, maybe arrange to meet your guide to buy them a coffee, or take them out to lunch, or just give them a nice bottle of wine as a thank you. It's always much appreciated by them.

So that's all the hard facts for Mont Blanc then? Not at all. We're still just scratching the surface. The greatest misconception is that because people have climbed a higher peak such as Kilimanjaro or even Aconcagua, that Mont Blanc will be easier. Far from it, as there

is far greater snow cover on it, that these other peaks, and walking in crampons is far more effort than just in boots, which suffice in normal conditions for those other peaks. As Mont Blanc is far lower, it's clearly far more than the effects of altitude. Physical fitness and endurance are the key, as well as quick recovery times. Let's take a different tack for a while, to take a look at the top 10 tips to help you achieve the summit...

Tip 1 – Take the right kit. The old army adage of the 7P's Proper Planning and Preparation Prevents Piss Poor Performance, couldn't be truer than for taking the right kit on Mont Blanc. Whilst it is fine to hire all the technical equipment, your choice of clothing is exceptionally personal, and it is key to select good kit that fits well, doesn't rub, moves well with your body shape, and is light yet tough. This choice comes from experience of long days in the mountains, in all weathers, when you really discover what kit works for you.



Tip 2 – Gouter Couloir. Ghouls can scare themselves silly looking at YouTube footage of incompetent teams in the Gouter Couloir. Its meagre size, is disproportionate to the amount written about it. As long as the timings are respected on the mountain, you help minimise the risks of rockfall. Go early in the day when the couloir is cold and in shade, keep an eye



out for any rock-fall (impossible in the dark), move quickly and efficiently, and don't stop for any reason. It's over before you realise.

Tip 3 – Coping in the dark. An early start at around 3am is required on summit day, to take advantage of well frozen snow, lower winds, and to manage objective risks. Many people aren't used to being in the mountains in the dark, and the LED light gives a very flat light 2D perspective where it is hard to gauge depth perception. Practise at home going out on training runs or walks in the night, so you build up confidence in dark, and get used to minor details such as finding pockets in the pitch black, and adjusting your hood with gloves on.

Tip 4 – Train to succeed. Every single training session you put in before your trip will raise your chances of summit success incrementally, and in climbing the measure of success is not reaching the top, but returning home with a smile on your face. Someone arriving completely spent on the summit, is unable to take in the surroundings, and then faced with a huge task of the huge 2500m descent of the mountain. Training is not just for the summit, but for enjoyment and to increase your safety. Don't skip a single training session.

Tip 5 – Look after your guide. The IFMGA mountain guides are phenomenally experienced and well trained, but they cannot pull you up a mountain, and are there for your safety. Don't forget that they are not climbing robots, and it's always great to see groups showing interest in their guide as a fellow human. By looking after each other, you develop a personal relationship, that is essential for a successful and happy ascent. Simple acts like buying the guide a drink, or asking about their life away from Mont Blanc, goes a long way. This point has been raised before in this article, and it's no mistake that it's been repeated here.



Tip 6 – Improve your footwork. No previous crampon experience, or climbing rope-work, is required for an ascent of Mont Blanc, however



the 1:2 guiding ratio ensures that technical experience can be gained during the week. The one thing no guide can teach that quickly is how you can move

quickly and efficiently over broken mountain terrain such as scree, easy scrambling and boulders. The best training for this can be done in the modest hills in the UK, to develop balance, confidence, efficiency and ankle strength progressively.

Tip 7 – It is steep! Some people complacently state that Mont Blanc is ‘just a walk’. We call bullshit on this claim, as the summit ridge is like walking along the roofline of a church, apart from in this case the roof is over a kilometre long, with a drop of several hundred metres on either side. When the weather is good, there is a decent track on the mountain, but both you and your guide will be highly attentive to the steep sections. Whilst the route is technically relatively easy, it demands constant respect.

Tip 8 – Adjusting your pace. Good pacing is crucial on Mont Blanc. That doesn’t mean going slowly. It means moving efficiently, not losing time,



judging well your aerobic / anaerobic thresholds, respecting the timings on the route to minimise objective dangers (afternoon storms, rockfall, crowds etc), and keeping safe. The guide’s key role is to set a suitable pace for

their group, and consequently all teams generally move at different rates, acting independently from other groups in the mountain. Pacing’ is advanced mountaineering.

Tip 9 – Dealing with the crowds. People often ask when is the quiet season to climb Mont Blanc. Look at the reservations for the Gouter Hut, and you’ll see it is normally fully booked every day throughout the summer. There is no quiet season, aside of bad weather days. If it’s quiet on the mountain, someone knows something you don’t. Prepare for the crowds by training well to get ahead of slow groups, take ear plugs / iPod to sleep well in the hut(s), and pack your rucksack to avoid time lost faffing in the post breakfast pre-dawn melee.

Tip 10 – Determination. Some people claim to be so determined that nothing will stop them. There’s a very strong correlation between these people, and those with no previous experience of mountaineering. Determination is an educated state of mind, that requires some knowledge of what it is determined to succeed on. The most genuinely determined people don’t share their thoughts. They quietly get on with it, constantly learning, taking in their surrounds, and focusing on the job at hand. They succeed.



What is a very key message in this article, is that we want you to enjoy your ascent of Mont Blanc, not

to simply cope. We climb mountains for fun, to share experiences, and to learn about a different part of the world.

HARD FACT #7. The group of people who are most likely to succeed on Mont Blanc, are those who obviously are trying to learn skills, and see the summit as a bonus rather than a guarantee

So by now you have either gone to sleep, or are terrified about the climb ahead. Hopefully you are actually in the middle of the two extremes, and now have a healthy respect for the task ahead. Let's go back to the hard facts again, as we've no wish for delusional or complacent thoughts. There's still a good few weeks before your trip, so in an ideal world, here's how we'd like you to prepare, and some pitfalls to be aware of.

Countdown tip 1 - Realistic training. By now you should have built up a very good aerobic training base, and it's time to include some quality hill training into your regime. Whilst running around the park, or cycling to and from work, may have been part of your aerobic schedule, it's important to include real hill training. Nothing can prepare your feet and legs for the hills, like more hills! Rough ground, wearing boots, using trekking poles, and carrying a sensibly weighted bag to help 'acclimatise' your shoulders and back, are all really useful. Nothing beats quality time on your legs. Enchain several hills, rather than just walking up and down one peak. Try and give yourself some long days, as on Mont Blanc your summit day could be 12-18 hours



long, so a 2-3 hour hike just won't cut it. Some people find a group environment useful for their training, or want an instructor to help them with navigation,

safety and training in the mountains. Icicle offers Alpine Training Weekends based in the UK Lake District, for just £99 for the two days guiding, and some people sign up to a few to

provide them a more structured and regular training, and to help them explore the region better in good long hill days. The instructor will ensure that you get plenty of experience on broken rough mountain terrain, with some scrambling, to build up your confidence and footwork. If you are keen on attending one of these weekends, here's the website link; <http://www.icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk/UKtraining.html>. When you are back at work during the week, try and adapt your training to make it more hill specific. When going for a run, try and go off road, to cross train your ankles. When at the gym, rather than simply using the hill stepper, put fist shaped rocks on each foot tread, to stand on these. Your ankles will wobble and strengthen, with the compensatory actions that replicate walking on mountain terrain.

Countdown tip 2 - Injury prevention. While you near the end of your pre-trip training, you'll be highly aware of how many hours of your time has been invested in preparations, and to waste it at this stage with an injury would be gutting for you. Injury prevention needs to be built into your regime. Some of the actions you can take, such



as avoiding resistance training (carrying big weights) will undoubtedly help. Also, you can investigate with a personal trainer, suitable exercises for both injury prevention and toning. These might include high reps of light weights, climbers yoga or pilates. Not only are you focused on getting fit, but also to look after your body. If you're walking or running in the mountains, use trekking poles to take some of the strain off your knees, and to protect your ankles from being rolled over.

Countdown tip 3 - Activities insurance. Sadly each year we hear from people who injure themselves before the trip, who have

not got suitable activities and travel insurance to cover them. Get the best insurance you can find. The holiday isn't cheap, so why wouldn't you get cover for all eventualities for a few extra pounds. One activities insurance policy should suffice to cover you from the point of booking, until the end of the course. The same insurance should also cover you for if you



have to curtail your activities on the trip, due to illness or an injury. Getting good cover could save you thousands of pounds in event of even a small injury which

prevents you from either attending the course, or ascending Mont Blanc. Check with the activities insurance providers that you are covered for pre and during trip activities, injuries and illness cover. Generally we've seen that climbing specific insurance, such as through the BMC, seems to provide clients with the best and most comprehensive cover.

HARD FACT #8. Despite seemingly endless prompts for clients to obtain activities insurance before travel, one or two people each year arrive in Chamonix without insurance, so can't climb

Let's come back to the elephant in the room. Fitness, and what's the minimum and ideal level required for Mont Blanc. If you've done your research into various companies, you'll have found Icicle suggests the highest level of fitness required for an ascent. We suggest being able to run a half marathon in time of 1hr45 or less, and ideally you are marathon fit.

Of course running times don't always equate precisely to mountain performance, but the results are a very close, and are an excellent measure of aerobic output and your training. There's no corners you can cut with a running race of this distance. Either you have done the training, or you haven't. When on a mountain that is 4810m high, you can't hide low fitness.

Why we've chosen this as the measure of fitness is multi-fold. Your knowledge of your aerobic thresholds will be amazing. You'll be great at pacing yourself when user aerobic duress. If you want a less technical definition of aerobic distress, substitute 'sweating your bollocks off' or perhaps 'blowing our of your arse'. There's plenty of time for that on Mont Blanc. Running is an exercise that can be done anywhere, whether you're based at home, are on a business trip, or on holiday.

Let's put it another way. We've never had a fit half-marathon runner who failed on Mont Blanc due to their fitness. Just think about that for a second. Isn't that the 'golden key' you were after for your ascent? Surely that's so beautifully simple and achievable, that there's no reason why you wouldn't do it. And yet, as sure as eggs are eggs, we'll get someone who arrives in Chamonix, knowing better. They'll be a sweaty mess after day one, and there will be many excuses ensuing why they are struggling which we'll have all heard before; the guide is too fit, my boots don't allow me to move quicker, it's the altitude (after a day at 2000m), no one understands my pacing strategy, and a whole list of others! You're warned.

Each season we have a few Mont Blanc hopefuls who state that they haven't run because their knees can't take it. You guessed it. Time for another hard fact.



HARD FACT #9. If your knees aren't up to running training, they almost certainly aren't up to the arduous of climbing Mont Blanc 4810m

The excuses that people have come up with over the years are funny in retrospect, but at the time they are shared, they're downright depressing. We know it'll be a tough week ahead, that you will struggle on and probably not enjoy. The physical effort will stress you,

and you'll stress at us and others around you, which can create an unnecessarily tense or awkward atmosphere. You'll probably



complain about something else that also wasn't your fault. All of this that everyone has to stomach, all because you were too lazy or busy to put the time into your

training before-hand. Sorry if this really does come as a reality check to you, but it's one of the saddest and most frustrating things to witness in my life. Generally we see people coming to achieve amazing things in stunning mountains, and a sweating, whinging lard arse doesn't add to the atmosphere. I'd go further to say it would probably alienate you from other climbers on the trip who have put in the effort, and don't want their ascent to be endangered in any way by someone who doesn't care as much.

Good luck with your training for Mont Blanc. If you want a few tips how to improve and enjoy it more, you'll be more likely to keep motivated and succeed, here's a few ideas to consider;

Training tip 1 - Variety. The key reason that people fall off the training waggon, is that they get bored. Don't stick to the same exercise or route each day.

Mix it all up. Explore different areas and try out different activities. Running isn't just a lone sport. Try urban orienteering, or hashing events,



where the focus is on the route rather than purely on the running. Get off road at least once a week. It's better for your legs in terms of lower impact, and also mentally too.

Training tip 2 - Sharing. Some people find it easier to train and suffer on their own, whilst others find it much more fun with others. If that's you, then join a fitness class or club, sign up for group events. Run with a mate, your partner, or a family member. Others use social media as a way of sharing their training with others, to get motivation from others. Whatever you method, sharing training with others might be easier psychologically, than doing it all on your own. After all, climbing is a team effort, shared with others who are tied on a rope with you, so team training is good too.

Training tip 3 - Rewards. Training is hard, and often lonely. It is very important to find ways to reward yourself whilst training. This might be



as simple as eating a Jelly Baby after a steep uphill, or a new piece of kit when you hit a specific training goal. Rewards don't have to be to the detriment of your training,

so don't think that a run reward is a visit to McDonalds, but they could be something you might like or look forward to; an open water swim, a walk with your dogs, or a massage.

Training tip 4 - Equipment. Gone are the days of needing to lace up the Green Flash gym shoes to jog around the streets. Kit is far better and more affordable than ever before, so get yourself some decent running shoes, and look after your feet and legs. It'll be the best investment you make.

Training tip 5 - Measures. Sign up to a race, and do a half-marathon or even a marathon. If you enjoyed off road running, do a trail running event. It's the best way to gauge how your training is going to enter a timed event, so see how you are performing. Even a ParkRun is a good weekly measure, albeit on a short run distance, but there's nothing stopping you running home afterwards.

I hate the context that the word holistic is often used in, but your training isn't just the hour here and there, where you are getting all hot and sweaty. Extra training can be integrated into your lifestyle and working day. Cycle more. Eat better. Take the stairs rather than the lift. Do more gardening. Get off the train / tram / tube one stop early, and walk a bit further. Sleep well. Hydrate.

HARD FACT #10. If you can't deal with the psychology of regular training, it's unlikely you'll have the right mindset for Mont Blanc

Training doesn't have to be boring, and living in denial either. If it is boring, that's a reflection on your personality and creativity, so take some time to think how you can make it fun. For sure you can go out for a meal in a pub,



but either run there, or do a longer training session beforehand to boost your metabolism, and to make you feel as if you've earned it properly. To

deny yourself any pleasures whilst training will only depress you, so make sure that you don't ignore this important element in your plans.

Mental health is quite a hot topic in the media at present, for all the right reasons, though probably it's not as hot a topic as it should be. Mont Blanc is not a goal to aspire too, where you have any concerns you are trying to work through. Climbing isn't escapism. It's quite the opposite, where your ethics, motivation, and emotions are laid bare. Mountaineering is hard, often belittling, and it hold no prisoners. It doesn't care if your job is rubbish, or your relationship is dull. If you're fragile, without much substance, climbing can break you. We've seen CEO's in tears, questioning their credentials, abilities and achievements. It is very important that you are climbing Mont Blanc for all the right reasons.

Mountains are complete levellers, and that's one of the most appealing things about them.



They don't care who you are, or think you are. They don't care about your ego, your boasts, and swagger. They don't listen to the blah-blah-blah. This great levelling is

amazing to watch, as often a quiet and unassuming person comes out of their shell slightly to be a natural and great leader. An inspiration to others, and someone who helps others to get it done. Mountaineering is such a team effort, that team players are required. Self-obsessed drive will falter. You need to watch the backs of your team mates, for them to trust you and catch you when you falter too.

Charity is obviously great, but Mont Blanc is not the place for charity fundraising challenges for so many reasons. As it states on the Icicle website; "we never knowingly take bookings from people who openly inform us that are involved in a charity or challenge attempt on Mont Blanc. The reason for this is that we believe it puts the individual under too much pressure with a focus on one named summit. This could be at the detriment of mountain safety, which is both unprofessional, and has a negative impact on the enjoyment of others in the group. Also many activities insurance do not provide any cover for charity ascents of mountains".

It's an ethos that we even extend to our UK mountains, where we say; "Please note that we do not provide any guiding for charity challenge events in the Lake District (or abroad), such as the National Three Peaks. On ethical grounds we will not, and have never,



guided any of these types of event. They put intolerable stress on the local infrastructure, communities, and mountain rescue teams". You'd have thought that these quotes from the website were clear enough, especially the one about Mont Blanc, but we've had clients asking their guide to ignore an approaching storm due to their sponsorship, and even trying to stay on the mountain due to the pressures of their fundraising whilst vomiting and dehydrated through sickness.

A couple of people each year even have the gall to ask us to sponsor them, generally in the format of a cheaper or free Mont Blanc trip. This would be unfair on everyone else, and we never discount our trips, so everyone is on the same level paying field. Charity doesn't have a home in the mountains, especially one such as Mont Blanc where it's crucial to focus on managing the objective dangers without undue influence.

HARD FACT #11. Anyone found to be charity fundraising on Mont Blanc, will be removed from the course. It's as you agreed in the terms

Two elements do earn a final mention, to end;

1) An ascent of Mont Blanc is beautiful. The views and mountains are stunning. The summit ridge is one of the best snow ridges in the Alps. The achievement of reaching the top is one that many climbers find profoundly significant in their lives and careers, as a benchmark for all future endeavours.

2) Whilst technical rope work and skills can be taught in a week, that presumes high fitness, high aptitude in mountain terrain, high ability to learn quickly, and perfect acclimatisation. If you worry that any of these factors could let you down, get extra training beforehand.

Good luck on your ascent of Mont Blanc!





Second Edition 2022 Updates & Revisions Chamonix, August 2022

Heatwaves - With climate change has come some periods where the Alps are affected by heatwaves. Whilst this brings very stable and very predictable weather, it also degrades the condition of the snow bridges, snow pack, and snow cover on the glaciers. In some cases the melt associated can accelerate glacial flow, due to sub glacial lubrication. This is one theory for why the Bosses Arête fractured near its base after the dry winter of 2021/22, followed by the heat waves of Summer 2022. The impact on this section of the mountain was to make it far more technical than before, and it made us increase pre-requisite levels of crampon skill that was needed for those planning an ascent. In addition the heatwaves have caused such an increase in rockfall in the Gouter Couloir, as the local mayor (St Gervais) closed the Tête Rousse and Gouter mountain huts, until there were significant snowfalls and cooler temperatures with overnight re-freezes.

Skills - Following the dry Winter of 2021/22 and the heatwaves during Summer 2022, the glaciers have changed significantly, becoming more technical and open, with sharper ridges. Lower down there is greater rockfall risks, and so better footwork makes you quicker and safer. For all ascents with Icicle, it was a very welcome and timely decision to raise the pre-requisite skills and endurance requirements for anyone booking onto a Mont Blanc course. Now it advertises the following; "You need excellent fitness, stamina and determination. Following the glacial evolution during the heatwaves of 2022, sections (e.g. Bosses Arete) are more technical, so a minimum of 2 days crampon experience is now a pre-requisite, and ideally a 4000m Alpine peak / altitude experience. Great balance, combined with the ability to move quickly and efficiently over broken mountain terrain, is essential. You should be confident on steep ridges. You are taught any necessary ropework and skills during the week."

Marmite - When this was first published in 2019, we received a complaint letter, stating that it was too negative and had put them off considering an ascent. I guess that's really one to chalk up as a win. The article really isn't designed to panda to snowflakes, but on the other hand, I never intend it to be flippant or in any way rude. The key desire is for those who are a little on the fence about an ascent, to give it time to research in detail, and to train and prepare far more. I'm sorry if it puts you off an ascent, but can't help but think that if it does, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Too many climbers and operators declare it an easy ascent, but I think it demands far more respect than many give it. That's my goal, so raise the awareness of all readers, of the objective risks, and how to make an ascent realistic for you!

Footnote - Lastly I thank you for reading this far, if indeed you still are, and I leave you with a final thought. I look back on my first ascent of Mont Blanc, as a naive 17 year old, and the key memory is that of adventure. In the tens of ascents since then, the clothing, kit and skills have improved, as has the documentation of ascents from the GoPro & 'Gram generations, but the adventure must always be there. By necessity an adventure has an uncertain outcome, and I fear that this concept has been dulled or even lost over time.



If you are planning an ascent of Mont Blanc, please remember than a summit should be the icing on the cake, but that the experience as a whole must be an adventure, from your first training runs or walks in the UK mountains, to your days building up crampons skills, and then the excitement of your travel to the Alps. Just don't forget to enjoy every single second!

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