

Tour du Mont Blanc - France, Italy, Switzerland

Le Flip-Flops, Too Much Cheese, and Queer Eyes for Straight Hikers (and Cysters) Around Mt. Blanc



Left to Right: Chamonix, Allison and Lac Blanc, Allison and cow just after crossing from Italy into Switzerland

Introduction

The European Alps have LONG been on my to-do list - although visiting Nepal delayed my interest in going because I was concerned they, like the Himalayas, would have too little wilderness, too many people, and too much civilization. Based on recommendations from fellow JMT hikers, I initially decided the Haute Route (Chamonix/Mont Blanc to Zermatt/Matterhorn) was the one - even though the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB) had been the one for most prior years of contemplation. Three weeks after booking this trip (in November 2005), my body fell apart. At the time, I figured my symptoms represented latent side effects of sinus/tear duct surgery. First, there was the kidney infection (something I'd NEVER suffered before). Then, I spent 2 weeks passing NOTHING (which will make you INSANE). Fortunately, an alert sonogram technician figured out the problem, confirming suspicions of female friends: a grapefruit-sized ovarian cyst. And all of a sudden, there I was in major surgery again. In what was an easy decision, I asked Allison to be my guardian during the 2-day hospital stay and the 4-week recovery period thereafter. Nonetheless, many contingency plans had to be developed: including deciding what would be done if - upon removal - the "mass" was shown to be cancerous (i.e. a biopsy would be performed while I was open). Fortunately, everything was alright - although this does not accurately express how long the real recovery took: 6 weeks to comfortable walking, 5 months to feeling "normal" (I was said to be as hormonally whacked as a postpartum mother). In any event, Allison and I had a lot of time to discuss things; although I hoped to talk Allison (my usual rafting companion) into the Hulahula, she has this thing about Alaska being too cold. But the Alps... that was it. Last May/June, Allison spent 5 weeks visiting several major European cities; her single attempt at visiting the Alps was notably marred by foul wet and cold weather. Somehow, we assumed that going in August would mean a sunnier trip (HA HA). In selecting the Haute Route, I was bummed by the fact that we would not visit Lac Blanc. Years ago, Cara (who seems connected to every trip I do) won a June trip to Europe with her brother. One of her fondest memories was climbing up to Lac Blanc through the snow in blue jeans and sneakers, barely making it up in the fog by nightfall - and then waking up in the refuge to clear blue skies - nothing but mountaineer types in all directions. Her descriptions of that trip have mesmerized me to this day. Consequently, there was NO WAY we were going to Chamonix and NOT seeing Lac Blanc. In the end, we planned 5 days in Chamonix before the guided trek began, with all hotel/airfare reservations made by March. Unfortunately in May, we received word from MTS that the Haute Route would not be run because only Allison and I had signed up. Thankfully, MTS ran a TMB trip at precisely the same time out of Chamonix - which we were able to add onto. Of course, the TMB did include a weather-dependent Lac Blanc side-trip option... but, by this point, we didn't care. In contrast with last year's "ultimate challenge" JMT (MTS' highest difficulty rating), all Alps trips are "strenuous." Given that I'd easily done "strenuous" trips before (e.g. Nepal and Patagonia), I was not too anxiety-ridden about my fitness level. This is not to say that I didn't work out daily once I was back up to speed - but I had no concerns about having lost 3 months after surgery. I was, however, frequently concerned about Allison. Even though she has been an excellent rafting companion, she has not done significant hiking (never anything as sustained or challenging as this). Her main form of training is serious but low-impact competitive swimming - although she also irregularly runs (and has, consequently, suffered some funky ankle and knee issues). In contrast with Ellen and I (well - not me the last 8 years), Allison has also struggled with weight issues her entire life. To make a long story short, though, Allison KICKED MY ASS (I mean: REALLY kicked my ass!), easily placing in the front third of the party during the whole circuit (with me, as usual, among the final third). I, on the other hand, could totally feel the lost workouts in my reduced aerobic capacity - not to mention in the 10 lbs I gained during those sedentary months.

August 10-11, 2005 - Getting to France

Our flight schedule took us first to Chicago and then to Frankfurt via Lufthansa. I enjoyed the gorgeous 747 flight over the north Atlantic because we were given bulkhead seats next to new mother and her quiet 20-day old son (both on their way to Israel). However, we did not have good karma at Frankfurt (mind you, our return was worse): first, Allison accidentally left her purse on the plane and didn't realize this until we had just passed through some security area. Given that neither of us spoke German, we had quite a time talking her back onto the plane. Stressed out, we made our way to the departing gate where, after another substantial security area, we realized there were no restrooms (needless to say, we got to know the security officers well during the 4-hour layover). Frankfurt was the only place that we encountered annoying levels of smoking, despite vacuum system areas for smokers (i.e. the numbers of people crowding said units exceeded the processing abilities of the machinery). By 10 a.m., we were on our way to Geneva in a rattling Airbus. Flying over Germany's farming communities was striking by comparison to what we had just seen across our Midwest. The amount of green space (bona fide trees and sparkling rivers) between the numerous small communities, and the irregular sizes, shapes, and colors of the plots being farmed really spoke to America's obsession with big cities and corporate farming. Even so, a stark band of purple haze grew

evident as we neared Geneva. I do not believe we ever saw Geneva proper and so I have no clue how big it really is. The airport, though, was pleasantly small and clean - exactly what you want after 22 hours of little sleep. After retrieving our bags, we proceeded through a customs area where we finally got to show our passports - although officials did not stamp them or ask questions. Although I had pre-paid shuttle transport to Chamonix, we had not brought any foreign money because we thought we would have a moment to retrieve some from any number of ATM's (e.g. for a tip). There were several - but they only gave in Swiss (I honestly thought Switzerland was EU and, like everyone else, used Euro's). Consequently, we had to pay an additional fee to change money. In retrospect, we could have gotten away without a tip. After finding our driver near the main exit, we waited 15 minutes for a family from England. When we were ready to leave, the van was a long walk - with us carrying our own luggage - to a parking lot. Aside from these 2 non-tip-deserving annoyances, the ride was quick.



Left to Right: near tourist information center, our hotel - exterior and interior

Chamonix, 70 minutes away, was reached via a fast-moving toll freeway. One of my big fears about Chamonix was that it was going to be HUGE and overrun - by people and ugly resort skyscrapers. Although my first impressions were slightly consistent with said fears, I found Chamonix to grow smaller and more quaintly beautiful each day - particularly given jaw-dropping Glacier des Bossons, a massive, blue, spiky tongue of ice that laps to within 1000 vertical feet of the town (all the way down from Mont Blanc). Chamonix, site of the first Winter Olympics, is the largest of several French mountain villages at the base of Mont Blanc. Chamonix's Italian-equivalent, Courmayeur (which we would visit during the TMB), is equal or larger in size. Home to 10,000 permanent residents, Chamonix hosts thousands more in summers and winters. Fortunately, residents have enforced an excellent standard of construction, the majority of buildings resembling charming chateaus - heavily garnished by geraniums. Our hotel, La Prieure, gets high marks - although I have to state that those are based heavily on the massive views from our deck (Mont Blanc, L'Aiguille du Midi, Glacier des Bossons) and the relative quality of hotels we stayed at during the TMB. Its only serious problem: weird toilets/odors, too-small pillows, and the 3 p.m. check-in time... although they did take our luggage so we could deliriously walk the streets for 3 hours - bag-free. With photocopies of Rick Steves' Chamonix section in hand, we proceeded diligently to the Tourist Information center, a 4-block walk from the hotel. Allison and I each have about the same amount of public school French training. Where Allison's vocabulary was greater, my accent was better. Fortunately, the desk attendant spoke good English - something that was NOT consistently observed during any part of this trip. We obtained a good city map, purchased a hiking map, and received useful information about public transport and how to buy our BEST deal: the Multipass, 80 Euro's per person for 4 days - unlimited access to all things run by the Compagnie du Mont Blanc (lifts, gondolas, mountain trains, ice cave tours...). By the end, we calculated that we each got 120 Euro's out of each card. My only regret: that we didn't pay another 15 Euro's for a fifth day so we could take Les Grands Montets gondola or the Tramway du Mont Blanc (neither of which were listed in Steves' book - but SHOULD be). We then located an ATM, took our more cash, and found a café. Here, our exhausted states, propensity to drop silverware, and failing French frustrated the waiter. I enjoyed a substantial salad while Allison failed to finish some kind of savory crepe. Hopes to enjoy fruit crepes for dessert were dashed by a French phenomenon that would repeat throughout the trip: 1-2 hour waits for any form of service, including the bill. Mind you, it was not like we ripped through lunch and were demanding rapid service on the bill. In the end, it was 3:30 when we returned to the hotel. Exhausted, we took turns showering and promptly went to bed for 14 hours straight.



Left to Right: Labels - Purple.gondolas, Red/Grand Balcon Nord, orange/train; along Grand Balcon Nord, Mer de Glace

August 12, 2005 - Le Grand Balcon Nord

At 6:30 a.m., I had both of us out of bed - and down to breakfast by 7. Outside, the blue skies were promising - although we had been warned that it was often clear in the mornings - with a rapid decay to cloudy and/or rainy by noon. Another reason

La Prieure gets high marks was its breakfast buffet (included in the room cost). Although the eggs were weird, the bacon was boiled, and the fruit salad was spoiling, the unlimited yogurt, croissants, and hot milk were exquisite! Walking 5 blocks, we reached L'Aiguille du Midi lift by 8. There, 2 daunting lines of people were waiting - 1 to buy passes and 1 to get on the lift. We purchased our beloved Multipass within 5 minutes, lining up in the chalet-like station and progressing slowly toward the gondola. For some reason, I assumed that gondola's were little things that held 4-10 people. Although a couple lifts were like this, most were en par with what we were about to enter: a trolley-sized car that crammed 50-100 people, all standing (and the French REALLY like to cram you in there). Each gondola did have its own driver - somewhat comforting given that NOTHING about safety was discussed. I was also not expecting the gondola's to go up so fast. Without a word, we were just shooting up that mountainside, treetops far below us: 4000 feet in 5 minutes. Needless to say, my head was spinning from the altitude, from the motion sickness (every time the gondola went over a pylon, it was slowed so the boat-like swaying could stop), and from the dizzying heights below. Indeed, it REALLY was surprising I made it up... and went on to do this again. Shots below are of our gondola continuing up from where we stopped (Plan de L'Aiguille) to the actual L'Aiguille du Midi.



Left to Right: gondola, Aiguille du Midi, looking down the Grand Balcon in the cold morning air - many other aiguille's

When Allison and I headed up, we were not sure if we were going to hike all day or proceed to the top of the Aiguille du Midi for just sightseeing (the latter all the way up to about 12,000 feet). The legendary thing to do from here - as if the Aiguille is not enough - is to take another 4-person gondola over to Italy, crossing the upper portion of the Mer de Glace (France's largest glacier and, I believe, the second largest in Europe) via 3 continue miles of pylon-free cable (this side trip was NOT covered by the Multipass). After the harrowing ride just to the Plan de L'Aiguille (at just over 7000 feet), we made the unanimous decision that we'd had enough dangling in mid-air and it was time to feel the ground beneath our feet. We'd have to think about the obviously scarier Italy ride later. While most people continued directly onto the Midi line, we - along with 20 others - left for the hike: the Grand Balcon Nord - grand northern balcony - directly beneath the other Aiguilles next to Midi (which means midday as the tower aligns with the midday sun at some key point during the year). Likely the most popular hike in the valley, we did what most tourists do (albeit 3-4 hours earlier): hiking from the Plan de L'Aiguille to Montanvers, the classic viewpoint for the Mer de Glace, and then taking the train back to Chamonix. Given that European guidebooks, trail signs, and maps do not give mileages, I can only say that this trip had a suggested time of 2-3 hours and was said to drop 1500 feet (I strongly questioned both). I was pleasantly surprised to learn that general public skiing (including open chairlifts) and summer paragliding were banned under all Aiguilles along the Grand Balcon Nord (in contrast with the Grand Balcon Sud directly across the valley). Indeed, we encountered few lifts, gondolas, etc. except in Chamonix during the entire TMB - an unexpected and pleasant surprise. Having said these glowing things, however, Allison and I were at a loss to figure out where the actual trail was. An unopened cafe stood 300 feet across a rocky arm from the gondola station and we ventured over there to catch our breath, and consult the map. Given that the other 20 people had vanished quickly (probably because they were used to high elevation and not jetlagged), we sat for 10 minutes staring at maps and terrain before committing to 1 of at least 10 social paths in the vicinity. Incidentally, the landscape was like Boston Basin - the land and line of sight falling precipitously down meadows and, eventually, over the steep forested slope we'd just ascended. Given that it was only 8:30, the sun had not come over the towering granite Aiguilles - leaving the air cold, the sky gray. The correct trail, ascertained in retrospect, first heads down for half a mile/300-400 vertical feet (directly under the cable) to a refuge. At this point, the official trail heads right. Clearly, MANY people did not appreciate backtracking and thus had carved social paths radiating right from the gondola station. Trying to be good, we proceeded down 5 minutes but then said - SCREW THIS - and proceeded right down another new social path. At some point, we did attempt to ask this father/son-looking pair whether we were on the trail to Montanvers but they did not understand (I think they were Italian). We also passed a small flock of dirty sheep. So, whatever: I think the only possible mistake would be to pass the refuge entirely and start down the official trail that takes you back to Chamonix.

In what was a big surprise to me, all trails (social and official) were extremely rough and rocky... and, at this hour, icy. In general, ALL of the TMB was extremely rough, rocky, and not well-maintained (not to mention - WAY steeper than anything US National Parks would call public trails). I would personally rate 40-50% of TMB as more like a climbers' route. While hiking, I was often reminded of climbers' routes in the Wind Rivers - although not even they were as consistently steep. Having just thought about Boston Basin, I would say that if you mixed Boston Basin with the Wind Rivers, you would get the TMB. After 10 minutes of descending and contouring (during which time Allison questioned whether I knew where I was leading her), we met up with the freeway Grand Balcon trail (3 times wider - at least at this spot - than the social trail we'd been on). Given confusion and slow paces, we were now being passed by more people - new gondola loads who obviously knew the area well. I will say that a pleasant thing Allison and I did enjoy about all our days in Chamonix was that we never felt we were, like, at some big foreign tourist destination. We were in a French tourist destination with other French people (LOTS of families with kids - all of whom enjoyed hiking). Of course, we had a harder time with language as a result of this - but we also blended in more because we were well trained in the art of saying bonjour to everyone. By now, the light was growing more glorious, the

scenery stunning. Stupidly, however, what we thought was the top of Mont Blanc was actually some lower point to the right - the true summit eclipsed by the MASSIVE Aiguilles in the foreground. We descended from virtually all rock into green meadows studded with light-colored granite rocks. At some point, we heard distinctive bells and, indeed, came quickly upon a small herd of cows. Allison, strangely, was afraid to walk through/by them. I, on the other hand, wanted to pet them.



Left to Right: typical Grand Balcon view (Mont Blanc = white summit), Dru, cairns heading to Mer de Glace, crazy cave tour

We continued along the rolling balcony another hour. In the distance (growing closer), we could see/had been dreading our fate: steep lines of zigzags up this green hillside. Indeed, there is a point when the trail obviously splits (thank god there was a sign): left is the "direct" route to Montanvers and right is "Signal," a more scenic but less direct route. We did not take the direct route because Rick Steves said it was hairier. Although Signal involved more elevation gain (500 feet up/down), we REALLY enjoyed the views over the Mer de Glace, the distinct terrain of fascinating granite slabs, and the Dru - an historic spire in the climbing community. At some point, we were offered nuts by a friendly French couple who spoke some English and pointed out Mont Blanc's real summit. Near the top was also this really substantial cairn garden. Incidentally, Allison and I only carried water and some candy bars. We had long decided that we were only going to spend big money eating out during the day at mountain refuges. At night, we would eat groceries on our "grand balcon." After confusion about where the real trail was, we continued down a series of LONG switchbacks with more views onto the Mer de Glace. A stunning array of flowers bloomed everywhere - surprising given how many friends said we would see no decent flora in the Alps. Given that we had to stop/step off the trail for SO many hikers, we took an hour to hike maybe 1.5 miles down to Montanvers. For some reason, I thought Montanvers was a mountain village with residents, farms, etc. In fact, it was all tourist stuff: hotel/restaurant, visitor center, cheap café, train station, and a gondola station that lead to weird, man-made ice caves which - regrettably - we did visit. Our first order of business, however, was lunch at the hotel restaurant. Seating ourselves outside, we stumbled through ordering; not only did the waitress speak no English, but the menu contained no English and many terms were unfamiliar. I did enjoy the fabulous Mont Blanc beer, a local product of Les Houches, a village down the road (our first night once we started the TMB). However, the main dish was SO HEAVY that I couldn't stomach cheese for the rest of the trip (even though I had to). I forget the actual word (something like "tartiflette") - but my dish consisted of potatoes, cheese, cream, ham, tomatoes, and chanterelles layered baked in an oven-hardy oval bowl. Allison had a similar dish - but no meat. Lunch ran about \$35. But you really cannot beat eating and drinking with the views we had that day - literally, from the table.

Given that it was only 2 (our target was the 3:00 train), we stupidly decided to brave the crazy crowds and visit the silly ice caves. At the time, we didn't think our Multipass covered this side-trip but, for better or worse, it did. The gondola ride down the near-cliff was interesting - although didn't really take us near the ice cave opening. After 10 minutes of walking down crazy stairs - HUNDREDS of people in front and coming in the opposite direction - we reached the caves. My shaky understanding of the cave's history is that some guy started this spectacle in the early part of the century - carving them out and then, as if that wasn't enough, sculpting weird scenes inside. Allison and I probably made the fastest tour of the caves in history, cutting in front of MANY people who somehow found all this acceptable and interesting. By the time we FINALLY made it back to Montanvers proper, I had REALLY had it with people and, fortunately, Allison and I easily got on the train. As we would learn in the coming days, it was nearly impossible to just step on a returning anything (train, gondola, etc.) after 3:30. The half-full train was pleasant - although did have some death-defying edges that freaked me out. The train station was about 7 blocks from the hotel and, by this very sunny hour, the streets were a mess of people. Even so, the call of a colorful fruit display in front of a small grocery was too much. I would say there were about 5-8 small groceries in Chamonix, most operated by the same company: Petit(e?) Casino. As with Patagonia, peaches became Allison and my obsession for the next several days. In addition, we purchased tomatoes, bread, cookies, juice, ham/sausage, and wine. In sharp contrast with the restaurants, the groceries were cheap (e.g. we got about 1.5 days worth of dinner and snacks for \$25). And thus began dinners on the grand balcon. Our Chamonix hotel (unlike many others) did have a television. Of 12 available channels, only the BBC was in total English - with German MTV often in English with German subtitles. And thus began our nightly obsession with BBC news and "Pimp My Ride." The Germans had added their own spin-off called "Pimp My Bike." We also were amused with the number of French game shows, many of which were actually helpful in reviewing our language skills as they wrote the multiple choice questions on the screen. For some reason, we were not expecting the French to have so many game shows. Allison will tell you, however, that I did nod off around 9:30, following a luxurious bath.

August 13, 2005 - Le Grand Balcon Sud

The next morning, we were up again at 6:30. Today's skies were not, however, promising. Clouds were descending and thickening. After much debate, I decided that we would take our chances with the Grand Balcon Sud - accurately predicting that the scenery here was probably the least impressive and, hence, would not be as impacted by shitty weather. For this trip, we walked 3 blocks UP behind the hotel (and it definitely was UP). As with the Grand Balcon Nord, we would take a lift (Plan

Praz), hike 2-3 hours, and then take a lift (La Flegere) down - in this case, to the town of Les Praz (not to be confused with Plan Praz). Afterwards, we could choose between a 40-minute walk or a 10-minute bus-ride back to Chamonix (buses were free, thanks to passes from our hotel). The Plan Praz gondolas sat 4 and were the second most harrowing thing I rode during this whole trip. Demand for Plan Praz was low, permitting Allison and I our own gondola. I don't know if we were higher or if being in a tiny can with only Allison seemed like we were higher - but I was in a state of near-panic the whole ride up (which was longer than yesterday's ride). As at the Plan Praz station, most people continued up higher to Brevent, a nearly-8000-foot point along the Aiguille Rouges - the rocky range which comprises the south side of the Chamonix Valley (and under which we walked as we hiked the Grand Balcon Sud). We may, in fact, have been the only ones who set out in the fog that first hour. But fog was GOOD in comparison to the rain that soon fell upon us as we trudged up the road from the lift station. Although there were less social trails, the amount of ugly development was greater: dirt roads in many directions, small open chairlifts not currently in operation, major earth-moving equipment parked variously, etc. For the first mile, we walked a bona fide rocky road - several sections loose and steep. Allison's greatest issue with hiking seemed to be going down loose rocks. In retrospect, it is amazing how far she came in the course of 2 weeks - given such loose-rock trails. By the end, she was only 5-10 minutes behind me on most long descents (where, at the start, she was 20-40 minutes behind). Anyway, the rain lasted only about 15 minutes. At the time, we figured that putting up with the rain was a good character-building exercise for the trek (HA HA). Although it never grew warm or sunny - at least while we were on the trail - the immediate scenery was beautiful (provided that you overlooked the frequent skiing shit). Once we left the road for a bona fide trail, there were lots of interesting thin and edgy sections that reminded me of the route between Heart Lake and Mt. Carrie in the Olympics. And everywhere: there were berries. Of course, this meant that I had to stop and forage (which Allison questioned, assuming I didn't know basic plant identification). In the middle of the route, 2-3 young French guys were camping. I don't know if they heard us coming (i.e. yacking in English) or if they were serious (i.e. thought we were French) - but their apparent leader came running toward us talking/yelling/singing unbelievably fast in French. We could only laugh and continue, not even bothering to discuss a translation because we figured he was just messing with us silly Americans.



Left to Right: views along the Grand Balcon Sud

In contrast with yesterday (where we ran an hour late relative to European hiking times), we arrived at La Flagere in the predicted time of 2 hours. Here, massive construction detoured us all over the place. Given that the weather had declined severely, we felt no incentive for spending bucks at the refuge (FAR more rustic than that at Montanvers). And so we rode down - nearly alone - in the trolley-sized lift (a similar elevation loss as Plan de L'Aiguille). Given my terrified response to the last 2 lifts, I found La Flagere enjoyable. At the bottom, the town of Les Praz was calm and nice. After a couple blocks, we easily located a scenic riverside trail along L'Avre River, the main river in the valley. Here, we walked among local-looking people carrying groceries, walking dogs, pushing strollers, etc. After 20 minutes, we were in Chamonix's industrial district (i.e. a quarry). Next, we passed several tennis courts, swimming facilities, the local rafting company (who dissed my emails 6 weeks before) and the public university (fully subsidized by the government). We entered downtown near the Montanvers train station and thus walked through much insanity back to the hotel, arriving there around 1. After a 2-hour nap, we decided to head down near the station for the Aiguille du Midi lift, to this recommended crepe place. Unfortunately, it was closed until dinner. After briefly stewing in a state of sugar-low bitchiness, we settled for REALLY bad pizza and crepes at this cheap dive directly adjacent to a Chinese/Thai restaurant - notably run by the same owners. On the way back, we finally found - like - the BEST gift shop, run by this darling older couple. Cowbells, framed dried mountain flowers, cuckoo clocks, and the thing I was MOST looking for - a friendship or amity cup (this carved wooden, multi-spouted drinking vessel). Upon returning to the hotel, I felt utterly exhausted/jetlagged and promptly slept another 12 hours straight.



Left to Right: Allison and I en route to Lac Blanc, buildings at Lac Blanc, actual lake and Aiguilles

August 14, 2005 - Lac Blanc

The pact was: if Mont Blanc was visible, we were going to Lac Blanc. This had been a difficult decision because we knew we'd probably only have 1 more good weather day until the trek. Do we do Lac Blanc (2-3 hours 1 way, during which the weather

could deteriorate to the point we saw nothing) or do we do the Italy gondola (fast but terrifying)? Given my drive for Lac Blanc and my responses to most gondolas so far, the former won. By this point, though, Allison was getting difficult to awaken (not that I am a morning person). I had to go down to breakfast without her - AND threaten to leave on my own. Lac Blanc is most directly reached via La Flagere. Consequently, we took the Chamonix bus to Les Praz and were on the first gondola up. By now, high clouds streaked the sky. I accurately predicted that it would be raining by 1 - when we should be down. But the Mont Blanc massif was fully in view. Lac Blanc - like the Grand Balcon Sud - is great because of its commanding views across the valley... not to mention new peaks and glaciers up the valley: notably, Glacier du Tour and d'Argentiere. We may have actually even seen Mont Dolent, a prominent peak more from the Italian side - but I cannot be sure. Although the views were phenomenal, the initial trail sucked. As with the Grand Balcon Sud hike, we followed a steep, loose-rock road for half a mile. The immediate vicinity, also like the beginning of the Grand Balcon Sud, was littered with man-made junk, most related to skiing. I have to note that there are a couple routes to the lake. Given our questionable impressions of so-called official trails, we were not interested in tackling what the French called a climbers' route (L'Index) that went higher through all rock/rubble to access the lake from above (it required riding an open-air ski-lift to access, something I don't do). In terms of the easy route, we hiked through mostly meadows, ascending via long contouring switchbacks. After the initial road pinched into a real trail, the terrain was beautiful, reminiscent of something between the Wind Rivers and the North Cascades. Of course, the berries had been heavily consumed on this popular route. Where Allison kicked my ass fully on the final upper sections, I would kick her ass fully on the down sections. And thus I spent most of the climb in huffing my sorry ass 15 minutes behind her.

After arriving at this bench with a small puddle, the way zigzagged steeply through rock, some sections blasted from solid boulders and requiring scrambling. But we did beat the crowds, arriving at the lake around 10. Although it makes sense now, I was surprised to see that Lac Blanc was opaque gray/blue/brown. There were also more - and larger - structures than I was expecting, with even more stuff (likely new bathrooms) under construction. Owing to a brisk and icy wind, we found refuge on the lee side of a boulder-covered knoll across the lake - where we ate peaches, cheese, and bread. Although being at Lac Blanc was magical, I freely admit that the weather breakdown in progress did distract some part of my mind. The refuge restaurant was just opening when we finally decided the weather was too cold and retreated therein - Allison needing an espresso like there was no tomorrow. Despite earlier bitchiness, Allison was TOTALLY exuberant about Lac Blanc and even forgave my bitchiness about needing to move early. High on caffeine, sugar, and/or adrenaline, we proceeded down through THROGS of people (more than on almost any other hike during this whole trip). I felt bad for folks who were just now arriving because the views were diminished. Every morning we had shared the breakfast area with this hardcore group of Japanese hikers/tourists - but, so far, we had yet to run into them on the trail. About 15 minutes down from Lac Blanc, there they finally were. We could not fathom why we had not seen them on that first gondola given that we always ran into them at breakfast. I also engaged in 2.5 conversations with French hikers: the first was with a woman who asked me how far it was to the lake. I understood the question but could only convey my answer with a couple words and lots of gesturing. I also came upon this large man gobbling down a bush of sparing berries and decided to formulate an actual sentence explaining there were many more along the Grand Balcon Sud. Although he understood the gist of the statement (i.e. more berries elsewhere), he did not seem familiar with the Grand Balcon Sud. Oh well - not bad for a couple years of high school French 22 years ago. Amusingly, too, me and the ONLY other guy wearing sandals (during the whole trip) also hysterically pointed at each other's shoes and laughed agreeably. We were back in Les Praz by around 12:30 and, by this point, hungry. A hotel restaurant called Lancher tempted us 5 minutes after getting off the gondola. The Australian waitress' ability to speak English was, I am slightly ashamed to admit, awesome given our stumbling French. Within 5 minutes of sitting down - guess what: it began to pour! Lancher's bistro-style meal was, by far, the best food we enjoyed during the pre-trek part of our trip: the tomato salad, grilled lamb, and a lemon tart remain memorable even now. Even though it was still raining as we wrapped up our 2.5-hour meal (including still-challenging bill retrieval), we were in good spirits, electing to hike through the drizzle back to Chamonix. Unfortunately, Allison's knee was now giving her problems and so we stopped at a pharmacy to buy a WAY-too-expensive knee-brace (that, in the end, was never used). As usual, I slept while Allison read and sipped wine on the Grand Balcon.

August 15, 2005 - L'Aiguille du Midi

As a reward for all the morning starts, we slept in - knowing the weather was to be poor in the morning... but improving later. We had resigned to go up L'Aiguille du Midi at noon regardless because this was our last Multipass day. All morning, Mont Blanc and L'Aiguille du Midi had been teasing us - appearing and then disappearing into dynamic clouds. Where Allison did not like going up in fog, I thought it would make me calmer. Our ride to the Plan de L'Aiguille was less terrifying. When we arrived there, however, all you could see was fog, snow, and ice ON the rock - TOTALLY freaky. But we jammed in with all the tourists and were quickly whisked up the face. I'm not really sure that I'd fully digested our final elevation (about 12,000 feet) prior to doing this - but I know I started feeling whacked as we rose. L'Aiguille actually consists of 2 towers: the first point is the top of the lift. A giant structure of conglomerated boxes has been built all over and around the tower, housing the lift mechanism/station, a cafeteria, gift shop, and viewing decks. To get to the top of L'Aiguille proper, you cross a 30-40 foot bridge (10 feet wide) from the lower tower to a blasted hole in the upper tower - and then take an elevator about 200 feet to another bunch of tourist crap. About 500 feet of open air hangs under the bridge. Several thousand open-air feet hang under any of the faces of both towers. The gondola enters the first tower - swinging - via this blasted hole on the sheer outer face. As we approached said hole, we rose on a 50-60° line, the ice-encrusted rock in front of us testimony to the fact that it was well below freezing. After stepping off the still-swinging gondola (less than 10 feet from the full open face of the lower tower), we walked through a maze of blasted tunnels to the bridge. Well - I went full-on panic-attack (altitude sick, light-headed, full-on vertigo) when I stepped onto the bridge and had to hang just within the rocky tunnel for some time before I could piece my way slightly out. In the words of Rick Steves, I suffered "Alpus interruptus." When we first arrived, Mont Blanc was not visible. At some point, it cleared for 5 minutes and that was enough to get me 10 feet onto the bridge, clinging to the rails. The wood and metal bridge was covered by 2-4 inches of slick, stamped-down snow. Beyond, lines of roped climbers were ascending this ridgeline. When Mont Blanc vanished, I had to return to my hole to calm down. Allison, meanwhile, vanished up this staircase to some upper viewing deck. I examined the stairs but decided against them when I realized they were see-through - several thousand feet straight down. Allison eventually found coffee and returned to me via an "inside" set of stairs. And so I

followed her up this wooden tunnel that had been fixed to the outer edge of the lower tower. The tower side was rock but the outer wall was wooden. At several places, you could look down the wood/rock interface and see that you were several thousand feet up and out there. NOTHING about the Aiguille made me feel happy or safe. By now, we knew there was no way we were going any further; it was time to GET DOWN. After a short wait in this solid-looking room (i.e. concrete walls, no windows), we calmly took the gondola back down - every foot of more oxygen gained making me euphoric. I think, however, Allison was disappointed by the poor weather and my inability to deal with the now-EVIL Aiguille du Midi. Given temporary oxygen overload, Allison and I were unable to make up our minds about how to spend the rest of the day. Fumbling through the streets, we tried to do a little shopping. Hunger and exhaustion mounting, we gave up after 4 souvenir ventures, returning to the hotel for BBC/MTV, eating, and napping. Most of my Europe-experienced friends had warned me that the jetlag going there would be terrific (because they are 12 hours ahead). For me, it took a full 4 days to wear off needing to nap every day. Unfortunately, today marked the second time we came home to news of a plane crash (first Greece and then Venezuela) - which did NOT sit well given that we still had to fly home. Craving Indian food for dinner, we found said delights 2 blocks away at a place called Annapurna. Although the vegetables/spices were amazing, the usually curdy paneer cheese was replaced with the richest, creamiest goat cheese imaginable... once again, destroying my interesting in fermented milk products.



All Shots: frightening trip up the Aiguille du Midi - Mont Blanc, crazy bridge I couldn't cross, upper tower...

August 16, 2005 - The Lost Day

With no Multipass and Allison's knee acting up, we seemed hopeless - particularly given that the skies were sunny and clear. I'm not even sure I can say what should have happened, in retrospect. After a late start, we decided to take the bus to Argentiere, a small town up the road. I found what looked like a neat little walk to a creamery near the moraine. From there, we could walk back via an easy trail along a portion of the Petit Balcon Nord (a lower network of trails that paralleled the Grand Balcon). For reasons I cannot recall, we tried to catch our Argentiere bus near the Montanvers train station. Here, the only bus signs were on the wrong side of the street, suggesting the bus did not go the way we thought it did/wanted. After some arguing, we headed to what should have been the next up-valley town/region with a bus stop (Les Moilles) - and there WAS a sign on the correct side of the street. For ONE HOUR, we sat there - NO BUS. To this day, I cannot explain this. Allison's knee started acting up again - just standing - and this rattled me because I didn't think she had been tending to it enough since yesterday. After another argument, we wound up just walking to Les Praz - where we were not sure what was going to happen given that it was 1 and we had to be back at the hotel by 6 for our pre-trip dinner/meeting. Obviously sugar-low, we stopped at a pretty café for amazing salads and beer. I made Allison upset by insinuating I wasn't sure she was going to be able to finish the hike given her knee - and went on about all the things I thought she needed to be doing to improve her situation (i.e. icing/heating an hour after walking, stretching WAY more, and taking regular ibuprofen). Even after everything, we decided to take the bus back. When we arrived at the stop, however, an up-valley-running bus showed up and I figured: what the hell? Let's ride it to the end and then come back - we KNOW we'll eventually wind up in Chamonix AND we'll get some sightseeing in. That - and lunch - were the best decisions of the day. And so we rode up as far as the bus system went (scenic Col des Montets, where our last day on the TMB would commence), turned around (scraping 1-2 cars illegally parked on the side of this tiny 1-way road section), and were back to Chamonix by 4. In the process, we realized walking around Argentiere wasn't worth it... but, alas, the gondola from near there would have been.

That evening, we met our TMB guides and team. I've gone back and forth about how to describe our team and, in the end, settled with keeping everyone except our guides fairly anonymous. First and foremost, the majority of this trek involved abysmal weather and so it really is something to say that, in the end, the team and its leaders TRULY made the experience memorable and positive. Our leader, Mike Cooper, was the best hiking/trekking leader I've worked with. Mike, 53, was this tall, somewhat-hulking curly-haired blond ex-Brit who moved to Chamonix over 15 years ago after a career working with kids and outdoor education. Mike established immediate respect and came across as 100% secure. Given experiences on last year's JMT, I liked that Mike was older and just BIG (easily the tallest in the party) because I knew there was no way he was going to let anyone walk all over him (whether in terms of opinions about the trip or hiking pace). He was also easy-going and

always clear on expectations. Early on, Mike said to expect cold weather because all summer had been unseasonably cold - to the point he'd just had to re-route his last Alps trip because of snow. Mike's co-leader - typically at the end of the line (i.e. with me and the other snails) was 40-something Blaise - which was also Pascal's first name, I recently learned. Honestly, the first combination of words that comes to mind invoking Blaise: classic French playboy, hopefully just a mid-life-crisis. Make no mistake, I absolutely adored Blaise and he was good-looking, charming, and WAY into women (his ogling tendencies over-the-top)... but I have to laugh even now thinking about how stereotypical my impressions remain. Blaise spoke fairly good simple English but I hesitate to imagine how many of our conversations have been lost in translation. I did, eventually, get it out of him that he was recently out of a LONG relationship with an older women - and had just started some long-distance thing with a MUCH-younger chick in the US. My favorite end-of-the-line conversation with Blaise took place near the end of the trip - when he talked about growing up in small-town (relatively speaking) Chamonix, going to the local public university - all very familiar concepts given where I live and what I do. Although Blaise sometimes seemed a wee bit restless being at the end of the line (i.e. with all us poky Americans), he never came off as insecure. When I asked why he wasn't more involved with MTS leadership, his (paraphrased) response: if I took on more responsibility, I would not be as free to do other things that may come along. Classic Blaise. While Mike and Blaise hiked with us daily, Carole drove the van that transported our gear from village to village - and shopped for lunch food during the day, and carried our duffles to our rooms... Carole joined us for most nightly dinners but, as compared with Mike and Blaise, I can't say I got to know her well. Unlike Mike and Blaise (both contracted from the Compagnie du Mont Blanc guide consortium), Carole was an MTS employee. Being a single mom with 2 kids, Carole did not commit to as much guiding, even though she was obviously in extreme shape - as evidenced by the couple days she joined us for lunch, having plowed up some massive pass to reach us AFTER doing all her other tasks.



Left to Right: Les Praz, L'Avre/Chamonix, Mike/Grand Balcon Nord, Mike and Blaise in Italy, team beginning trek

In terms of the party, we were a full crew: 14 people. The largest sub-group in our party was an east coast family unit: a divorced 60-something contractor father and 2 of his 20-something kids, both with their 20-something partners. For the first 36 hours of this trip, I was concerned dad did nothing but drop comments about his kids' prestigious universities. But then he just, like, opened up to me and I had a bad crush on him for a whole week because he was interesting, deep, and genuine (first over-60 crush, I freely admit). I didn't get to know the kids as much because they were ALWAYS in the front - but Allison loved them all dearly. The big thing about dad that softened my first impression: he'd lost half his foot to frostbite, terminating a modest period of serious climbing in the Himalaya. Although he wore a foot prosthetic and was occasionally in pain, dad made the whole trip (close to my pace), was in amazing shape. The second largest sub-group was a family of 3 from California who, at times, drove a lot of us nuts with ultra-conservative and rude-sounding, socially-inept comments (e.g. you're from Oregon - don't just hippies live there in communes?). I rode out dad's early comments, though, and found him REALLY interesting to talk with - even when we disagreed. Given that both of us shared professional ground in microbiology/medicine, we actually got along well most of the time. Mom was another story - so I just politely ignored her. Unfortunately, their sweet and demure 17-year old daughter probably won't know who she is for a long time given the degree of sheltering she's lived with (although this crazy trip was helpful). The final 4 were interesting pairs from the southwest: a couple of female friends (a 40-something engineer and a 60-something postal carrier, both from Arizona) and a poorly-defined mixed-gender couple from Utah (70-something retired male academic and his 40-something female traveling companion). Of these, I loved and was the closest to Arizonans - not only because we hiked about the same pace but also because they were so funny and free-spirited. Of course, this brings me to why I chose part of the title: 2 members of this trip were openly gay. Remarkably, this was my first guided trip with openly gay members. Having led a sheltered life, the first openly gay people I ever met were in graduate school. My Ph.D. advisor was in the process of coming out when I joined the lab; sadly, a lot of her professional struggles revolved around her being both an outspoken female and a lesbian. Unlike most professors, she had a life outside school, took weeks of cool vacations each year, and was friendly and open with her staff/students (pissing off her mostly male colleagues). That she was female attracted a lot of women to join the lab, although none were lesbian. But we did have 2 gay men, both open and out (1 married and religious, the other neither). And so I enjoyed the queer eye thing long before it was a popular reality show; indeed, my boss and co-workers were key reasons I finished graduate school. Nevertheless, when people look at me and my independent lifestyle, I do get asked THE question. My response: no, but I spent my most formative years being raised by awesome gay people and crazy women. I also still enjoy being more like my boss than the dreary professors who refused to recognize her outstanding achievements. Obviously, our fabulous Arizona ladies were openly gay - although not as a couple together. Sometimes, it seemed like the more the conservative family brought up politics or morality, the louder the lesbians hollered back, delivering lines not even I will repeat. Not surprisingly, people began speculating about east coast son and his male friend - clearly a couple but still not out. We were, indeed, QUITE the soap opera. Whether MTS attracts more conservative or liberal people is an interesting question given last year's JMT party (which seemed too heavy with the former, albeit probably amplified because of weaker leadership). On this trip, I loved that I could talk with a variety of

great people every day - and I loved being able to laugh so much, even when the weather was utterly horrible, the views nonexistent. It really was like the best of times with my family in the old lab.

Another impacting difference between the JMT and this trip was that we'd be sleeping in inns or hotels every night. NOT being total slaves to the weather made us a more social bunch - and made the experience of eating and drinking together each night a higher order event. I'm not sure it's fair to say we were more polite all the time - but I think we'd all have been WAY less friendly if we'd not had a bed, shower, central heating, and hot meals. I also appreciated that Mike's leadership extended well into this experience. He really was the perfect host and I never saw him falter - indoors or out. An interesting thing we did learn, though, was that the leader determined whether/which/how much wine would be free/available (patrons could obviously pay for their own too). Apparently, there were other TMB leaders who chose not to provide wine. I don't know whether Mike's clear seniority positively affected his budget - but he made it clear during our first night's meeting that wine would be plentiful. Nobody on our trip - conservative or liberal - had a problem with Mike's leadership in this regard. Interestingly, though, a fellow teammate on the Hulahula trip (June, 2005) told me that she did NOT enjoy the MTS/TMB trip because, in her opinion, there was too much drinking. So - there you go. All I will say: my anti-drinking mother would NOT have approved of this trip but, in comparison to other things I've seen, we were a tame and orderly bunch. Anyway, our pre-dinner meeting was short. Mike gave us each maps and discussed the general features of the tour. For folks who don't know, the TMB is about 130 miles around, with about 27,000 feet gained/lost. We would only be hiking about 80%, the remaining miles lost to van transport "to avoid hiking roads" (i.e. paved roads with regular traffic). Our mileage - on paper - was similar to the Wonderland Trail around Rainier, something I'd obviously done carrying a big pack and camping. Even so, something about the scale of the TMB map made it look MUCH more difficult. Although you can buy maps that show a trail called the TMB, the truth is there are many routes. Before I did this trip, I actually wasn't sure about the value of using guides because I figured the route was easy; planning trip logistics, knowing where to stay, and booking places in small villages - I thought - was the hard part. After doing the TMB, I would actually reverse these preconceptions. Mike knew all these alternative trails that kept us off more roads. He could also easily escape down lesser-known routes if the weather was terrifically foul. And he was able to fend off at least 1 angry farmer who didn't believe a trail went through "his" pasture. Meanwhile, we always stayed in fairly substantial towns with road/phone access. Of course, I cannot say the same for the true mountain refuges - which, after seeing them, I really would not want to sleep in. After our meeting, we proceeded to a fine dinner at the hotel restaurant: pumpkin soup or salad, grilled lamb or fish with potatoes and this celery-like vegetable side dish, and a layered fruit/chocolate dessert. During dinner, Mike gave a preview of tomorrow's warm-up day: a repeat of the Grand Balcon Nord - only this time, no gondola up. After this, Allison and I each scared Mike in our own ways: she told him about her knee and I told him I'd be wearing sandals. I think it is safe to say that he was more upset by me - insisting that in his 15 years of guiding, he had NEVER had someone wear sandals. Although he didn't like them - or that I actually did wear them the WHOLE time - he never made it an issue (and, believe me, I met at least 1 other European guide who said he/his company would NOT have allowed me on the trip in those things). My response: if Europeans think it is safe to bike the TMB (which they do), then they should not have a problem with sandals. Blaise, for the record, seemed more supportive of the sandals. Upon returning to our room, Allison and I discussed our first impressions of everyone, watched some bad TV (Allison icing and heating her knee the whole time), and went to bed.



Left to Right: warm-up/Grand Balcon - cows, finally topping out, Dru, Allison and Mer de Glace

August 17, 2005 - Sizing Up the Team

As compared to my wake-up times, Mike's 8 a.m. breakfast call was nice. A disagreement that had arisen between Allison and I was whether she should skip out on today's hike given that resting may mean the difference between completing the TMB and riding in the van later (something trip literature presents as a friendly option but, in reality, seemed discouraged). In the end, Allison chose to do the hike because, as she put it, she wanted to size up the team's actual hiking abilities (Allison, in general, seemed more concerned about this than always-slow me). Anyway, we each made our own lunches from a spread of materials the guides prepared and laid out on a side-table in the hotel lobby: bread, cheese, vegetables, fruits, hardboiled eggs, meats, yogurt, and candy/cookies/granola bars. Additionally, we were each responsible for carrying all our own water (with no access to water filters during the day). Although we often passed farms or refuges during the day, I questioned how potable many recommended sources were (e.g. open-air troughs of water with running spigots from god knows where). After stuffing daypacks, we met in front of the hotel and were walking by 9. The trailhead was behind L'Aiguille du Midi gondola station and, for the first mile, directly under the cables. Over half way up, we passed a farm (I believe Blatiere - also the name of a prominent Aiguille) with cows. Said farm was indicated by a low electric wire (intermittent low charges, as was seen all around the mountain), its summer dwelling covered with solar panels. In general, we saw more solar energy use during this trip than I've seen my whole life in the US. I think it's pretty sad that farmers in the Alps are completely solar and less than 100 homes in hippie/commune/tree-hugging Oregon have made this conversion (with our state apparently higher than most non-hippie/commune/tree-huggers). After a snack break, we climbed another 1000 feet before stopping for lunch in this quiet

meadow just off-trail. It was around noon and we still had another 300 feet to climb before we would reach the Grand Balcon trail proper. Our total elevation gain for the day would be around 4000, higher than any JMT day (although that trip involved WAY higher altitudes). But the ascent had not been too bad, the trail and flora reminding me of the Cascades. That first day, I was intentionally hiking near the end of the line. At least 2 people seemed really, really, really challenged. For me, part of hanging back was that I hate sweating (and it was REALLY hot) but part was that - after my experiences with the JMT snails - I felt the end of the line needed more members so no one felt left behind. Even so, Mike never let the fast folks get as far ahead as Jay did on the JMT. Mike, I swear, could stop anywhere for a nature or history talk if need be. He also made it clear that anyone who thought they were going to beat any TMB records should consider that the shortest TMB time stands at 16 hours (achieved on an ultra-marathon, this year's version of which would start the day we returned to Chamonix). During our hour-long lunch, I enjoyed talking with the 20-something portion of the east coast contingent. After lunch, we quickly ascended to final "flat" middle section of the Grand Balcon. Here, we were all mostly together. Even though I'd already seen this area under clear and sunny conditions, I thought the views today were actually better... something bigger and more colorful about the Aiguilles. I felt slower during the climb up to Signal. Aside from fresh snow on the Dru (which added some new dimensions), this area seemed about the same as it looked before. Unfortunately, we arrived at Montanvers around 3 - HUGE lines of people (2-3 full train's worth). After some refreshments (in my case, Orangina - an old favorite), we got into line. After the first train came and went, we moved up significantly. A bunch of 20-something French or Italian climbers had the balls to visibly cut into the line about 100 people up from us - at which point Blaise went ballistic: leaving the line to chew them out, reporting them to the ticket office (who did nothing), and repeatedly arguing with them as we moved forward. I was, honestly, surprised a full-on fight never erupted. I was never certain what Mike thought of this; he seemed slightly indifferent and possibly a little amused - but definitely unflappable. Meanwhile, the rest of us learned: NEVER piss off Blaise. After returning to the hotel, we were on our own for dinner. Allison and I decided that a fine grocery dinner on the balcony was the most fitting. The views were grand... but notably streaked with high clouds.



Left to Right: Glacier des Bossons, hotel in Les Houches, Allison faithfully icing her knee in hotel room

August 18, 2005 - Day One of the TMB: Petit Balcon Sud to Les Houches

And so finally began the actual TMB. Not to diminish anything but I want to make the following statement upfront: at the end of this trip, I had taken 13 rolls of film: 7 from everything before this moment and 6 from our 9 TMB days. This telling but disproportionate ratio reflects truly poor weather we encountered a large percent of the time... and so be prepared for WAY fewer spectacular mountain pictures. Whether the Alps ultimately wind up on my "bad weather karma" list is not certain at this time... but it will be a long time before I venture back there again. And this is truly sad given that the things I thought would be negative (e.g. lack of wilderness/flora, too many people, lifts everywhere, suffocating levels of smokers...) were relatively unfounded. That and I'd really like to have Mike as a leader again. Anyway - if you've been paying attention (and picking up some French), you will have figured out that today we were hiking down-valley via the lower elevation trail system along the Balcon Sud (earlier - Allison and I hiked up-valley on the Grand Balcon Sud in the fog/rain). Consequently, we began by hiking UP behind the hotel 4 blocks, this time bypassing the lift station. This hike looked easy on paper: 2000 feet up, a few miles across (this part looked flat), 1500 feet down. The problem: midway across, a recent landslide had taken out the trail - and thus we detoured down about 1000 feet... which meant descending and re-climbing. Also, I would NOT describe the flat part as such (indeed, me and meter-based maps never get along). At first, we hiked what most Americans would call a forested dirt road - still surprisingly rocky and often steep. The footpath - once reached - was worse. Given these ongoing demands, I remained in the back (and stayed there most of the whole trip). After the detour, we made this crazy-steep ascent around this nature reserve/zoo (Parc Animalier de Merlet) where a fair number of cars and people were present. Shortly thereafter, we lunched at the edge of this big cliffy viewpoint where it outright rained. Most of the LONG descent through the woods was pleasant, even in the rain. After an hour, we came to a chalet and meadow (the owners elsewhere for the summer), rested, and then hiked a road (paved near the end) until we reached the pick-up point. Given only 1 van, Carole made 2 hotel runs. These transfers were fine because, with 2 exceptions, they lasted under 15 minutes. Over time, we learned that dinners lasted 2-3 hours, leaving NO time for anything afterwards (if, like me, you wanted 8-9 hours of sleep). Significantly, we DID photograph our rooms each night, many pictures featuring Allison icing her knee. Allison did complete this the whole trip and, with minor exception, diligently treated variable/ongoing pain every day/night. At first, I wrote I was "very proud" of this - but, really, I'm not sure people should suffer for no reason. In any event, I am proud she learned a lot. After luxurious baths, we enjoyed dinner: turkey or salmon in a light curry sauce, green beans, and - after MUCH confusion - a loganberry tart. Tonight was my only evening getting vocally opinionated - because vaccine safety got brought up.

August 19, 2005 - Day Two of the TMB: Les Houches to Les Contamines

The second morning found at least 2 people who were not able to hike: an older experienced hiker with heel bone spurs that were acting up, and a young inexperienced hiker with new boots that had skinned both ankles/heels. Given a crappy forecast,

a LONG hike, and comments heard during the lunch line, a couple others would have preferred to opt out too. But Carole put her foot down, suggesting the van limit was 2 - and riders needed tangible excuses. Getting to the trailhead required a short drive UP and Mike wanted slow folks in the first van. Driving up green pastures in drizzling rain, we stopped at this floral refuge, a steep dirt road (on which we hiked) continuing to our major pass (Col de Voza, 5500). After we started hiking, the weather was sunny and pleasant 90% of the way. Halfway up the Col de Voza, the fast folks caught up (no surprise there). Although things were scenic, we were hiking a road by the last ski lift we would see for a week. At Col de Voza, substantial resort facilities littered the landscape - not to mention the tracks for the Tramway du Mont Blanc, the highest train in France (also - the fastest approach to the easiest climbing route). Stopping at a refuge for snacks and drinks in the sun, we enjoyed a commanding view - including Mont Blanc's summit dome with a visible cattle track of climbers' footprints. Relative to pre-trip literature today's itinerary had been downgraded considerably. Originally, we were to drop 500 feet to a village, Le Champel. From here, we were to climb 2000 feet to the Chalets de Miage and Truc (next to the Glacier and Domes de Miage). We would then drop steeply to our hotel in Les Contamines. Mike said that they had not been doing that for some time (which MTS SHOULD correct). Our easier route dropped on a half-paved road to Le Champel and then maintained a contouring descent through forest (no views of mountains or glaciers). After lunch at this big river (Gorges de la Gruvaz), we left the road for my second least favorite section (notably NOT the map-defined TMB): this tiny, narrow, slippery, sloping, annoying cat-track that clung to this cliffy forested hillside. At many points, muddy rock outcrops and roots threatened certain disaster. At each, we log-jammed, each person 5-pointing down. Part of me wondered if Mike was trying to point out the merits of road-hiking. Our final trial was a pasture that looked friendly but, in fact, it was "owned" by an evil troll who sat on his new front porch waiting to argue with Mike. Blaise, who had just done the MTS Express TMB (a shorter version of our trip - but more intense), had warned Mike. And so we all waited 20 minutes while Mike waved maps and tried to be diplomatic. For claiming to own all the land, we thought it was interesting the troll put up electric wire on BOTH sides of the trail (i.e. creating a space for walking).



Left to Right: views up Chamonix Valley from trailhead, Mont Blanc from Col de Voza, disputed trail through farmer's pasture

After this LONG day, I figured we'd arrived in Les Contamines - what with houses, streets, and cars. No - we were in some other village still an hour away. Dropping to and crossing a river, we climbed and hiked a bike path/trail along a wooded hillside. And, of course, it began to drizzle. But soon we were in Les Contamines - a downpour greeting us at the town's north edge (our hotel at the south)... along with another detour. Given that we were now road-accessible, Mike summoned Carole to come for us. Not wanting to just stand in the downpour, the second van load (me included), decided to just keep walking. Thus, I arrived like a foul wet cat. Strangely, Les Contamines pipes music downtown - the Dixie Chicks' version of Landslide playing when I trudged through (later - disco). Given that we arrived at the hotel well after 4, Mike pushed dinner back to 7:30. This was our only hotel without in-house dinner service - which meant walking and eating elsewhere. Our hotel was, at first glance, not very pretty: the stairs were dangerously small, steep and uneven, and the plain rooms barely held 2 people (much less 2 giant duffles and 2 substantial daypacks). Their only redeeming feature: Jacuzzi bathtubs (seriously). The other thing notable about many rooms: twin beds always pushed together. For the first few nights, Allison and I separated them - but the cleaning staff kept putting them back together and we just said: oh well - and slept together. Middle sister Ellen (jealous of this so-called cushy trip to Europe) would definitely have NOT tolerated 19 nights next to me in bed. But, then again, Ellen hadn't put up with "pants-free, half-open robe Sarah" and her oozing pubic hairline surgery wounds for 4 weeks.



Left to Right: Les Contamines church and hotel - exterior and interior

Although described as an historic and authentic local restaurant, I had to keep from gagging in response to the strong, weird, and bad smells (wood-smoke, outhouse, goats) permeating the stuffy group dining room. Tonight's meal featured no vegetarian options: vegetable/bacon soup, baked cheese/ham, and this frightening dessert made of sour berries over "fresh" sour cream. While Mike did his best to discuss the situation with Allison, a couple of us teased her lightly. Unfortunately, 1

person was not as friendly in their pointed line of questions - most of which sought to find inconsistencies with her lifestyle (e.g. you are wearing leather...). And so Allison departed - even before the soup. Although she didn't make a scene, word traveled quickly that she left upset - and Blaise wound up carrying a meal to her (through pouring rain, thunder, and lightening) during what I can only call our terrible meal. Although Allison sustained days of various emotions, I (and a few others) was thankful she did it because it did tone down too-frequent commentary, most offensive and/or judgmental. Plus, I learned that Allison is not as thick-skinned as she comes across. Like I said to her that night, if this person has been pissing you off so much, then stop engaging them - period. Although I'm not that thick-skinned, I have fewer problems than Allison when it comes to ignoring people, and worrying what they think of me. Of course, I had hoped she and her adversary would be able to exchange pleasantries by the trip end. But that was not to be - although each did privately voice regret to me over the situation... and I did my best to convey these sentiments. Unflappable Mike correctly chose to stay COMPLETELY out of this can of worms.



Left to Right: team leaving Chalet de la Balme, Plan des Dames, climbing to Col du Bonhomme (gap to right)

August 20, 2005 - Day Three of the TMB: Les Contamines to Les Chapieux

Given yesterday's messiness, we failed to call my mother for her birthday (which actually falls on the 20th). This ongoing failure, the team insisted, was why the weather got nastier. Today was the beginning of several really hard days - most involving 3500-4000 feet gained/lost over alpine terrain. Our hike today featured 2 passes (7641 and 8100 feet). As with yesterday, the forecast was not promising - but everyone turned out in force, hoping the weather predictions would, once again, be wrong. They were not. A 10-minute van-ride (mostly up) marked the beginning of today's trek. We continued on foot, ascending a WAY steeper and rougher high-clearance vehicle type road: a mix of hard granite slabs (possibly bedrock?), concrete, and gravel. Amazingly, this was also an historic Roman road - the upper pass used by Hannibal and his armies (which Mike insisted included elephants) during the Carthaginian (North Africa) invasion. After 15 minutes of trudging, Mike received a radio call from Blaise (still at the hotel getting the fast group together) that 1 person in the slow team had forgotten to turn in hotel keys (they were, literally, in a pants pocket). Of course, this meant Mike had to hand-carry them back down, give them to Blaise - who had to drive back and return them before leading the fast folks up. Mike had warned us that this happened at least once on every trip. As Mike rolled his eyes, I recommended he start doing a pat-down and pack-check each day. I'm not sure Mike appreciated my humor at that moment - even though I was serious. In any case, no one forgot any more keys again. Before Mike left, he gave us permission to continue to this obvious bridge about 10 minutes up. In no time, our party had regrouped - Mike scowling only a little. We took 5 minutes to admire spectacular narrows under the bridge (Cascade de Combe Noire), a cross between Sol-Duc and Deer Creek Falls. From here, the road grew less steep as we ascended to the Chalet de la Balme, a refuge in the middle of cow pastures. As we snacked, the cows in the fields amused us with licking and mounting behavior. The Arizona contingent accurately pointed out that they were all female - some even different colors. As we set out again, MANY wet people appeared - distantly descending from the fog, which became a COMPLETE downpour. The descending party was also a guided group - but they had mule support and were camping at or near refuges each night. Interestingly, the most popular rain attire along the TMB (having observed many data) was the poncho. Over time, I went from wearing my goretex shell over a midweight capilene long-sleeved shirt (and sweating so hard I was chilled) to wearing just the shirt. For someone who has hiked so much, it really is pathetic (but lucky) how little hard-core rain I have put up with - to the point that, on this trip, I seriously questioned whether I had a firm grasp on how to manage it. Meanwhile, Allison - who claims to not enjoy rain and cold - was doing amazingly well... and continued to perform consistently better than me under adverse conditions. Oh well - it's probably menopause. And so began the march to pass number 1 (Col du Bonhomme - Hannibal's crossing). After slogging through the worst of the rain up a rocky trail, we reached a brief plateau, Plan des Dames. Beneath the large pile of rocks, several women were buried (I can't recall how many or which century). I believe they had come up here (I want to say tending sheep - but that's probably wrong) and then a huge snowstorm blew in, freezing them to death. Initially, they were buried and covered with a few stones - over time, passersby added more. The current pile was about 20 feet across and 5-7 high. Above the Plan des Dames, the party spread out - the rough, rocky, and crazy path (made up of 3-5 social trails, dead-ends, shit everywhere) climbing steeply.

Fortunately, the final 100 vertical feet to the pass were mellow and we were on top by noon. Of course, it was nearly freezing and views were extremely limited. Not surprisingly, the 8-person warming hut was fully occupied. To this day, I have no idea what we were supposed to see - although I am 90% certain that it did not feature Mont Blanc. Not surprisingly, I donned all my gear. Unfortunately, I had packed this miraculous lunch and accidentally left the meat/cheese portion on a table back at the hotel. East coast dad, though, gave me 1 of his 3 sandwiches - and the Arizona women offered me more meat and cheese. As if all this wasn't bad enough: Mike warned that the next pass was still up and around the corner (Croix du Bonhomme). At some point, we had a brief show of the looming rocky and cliffy route (which scared the crap out of me), the sun momentarily bursting through the clouds. When we finally did it, though, I thought it was pretty reasonable. We didn't, like, lose any major elevation before climbing gently (7641 to 8100 feet). The trail was similar to the upper sections of Lac Blanc: VERY rocky, with a lot of scrambling around/up gigantic boulders or solid rock. Although I fared better given the fog (because there were some big drop-offs), I did regret not seeing what looked like a spectacular view. In addition to sustaining

some rain, we also got blasted by major winds and passed another gravesite (some lone guy with fewer rocks). From the Croix du Bonhomme, we quickly RAN down to the refuge. Wet, cold, and tired, we ordered hot drinks, changed as many clothes as we had back-ups for, and sat warming up in the lukewarm interior. This was the first refuge where I saw the sleeping quarters - and, man, I was glad we were in hotels. Earlier, I made the comment about how I felt Nepal delayed my coming to Europe. Well - I thought a lot about Nepal every time I came to a mountain refuge - because, honestly, they were barely a cut above the teahouse-type places we saw in Nepal. Very third world in many ways - places I wouldn't trust the water, where I wouldn't want to expose my gear to the bedding (and definitely not any skin).



Left to Right: Col du Bonhomme view where we came from, where we were going; climbing to Croix du Bonhomme

After we were fairly rested, warmed, and dry, we continued down about 2700 feet. Although 80% of the way involved a reasonable trail, 20% was hideous and will continue to degrade if no maintenance efforts are made (which will never happen given, minimally, that stock and bikes are allowed). In addition to WAY too many crappy paths all over (social, livestock, dead-ends, shit - everywhere), there was no attention to rain/water diversion - which meant water/mud everywhere (reminded me of Chile's shitty trails). And, be prepared, it gets worse later. Halfway down, we came to a gigantic herd of sheep - a few goats mixed in. A surprising fact I learned during this trip is that many herders (of cows, sheep, goats, etc.) transport their animals TO the mountains at the beginning of summer - often several hundred miles by train or truck (and obviously return in the fall). If dairy animals were involved - it meant daily milking... and thus the many milk/cheese stations in the valleys (typically at road-ends). Generally speaking, nearly all meadows/pastures used to belong to single farmers but, over time, they got split among descendants. This left a patchwork of increasingly small plots that were increasingly useless for farming. In response, many areas and owners have resorted to cooperative agreements. Between 1950 and 1980, relevant European governments gradually established the TMB trail as public land - but ONLY the trail... which is amusing and confusing given that the trail is often an enlarging 20-foot swath of social trails, animal paths (i.e. used by the herds), mud, or all of the above.



Left to Right: leaving the refuge below Croix du Bonhomme, sheep during descent, dorm-like accommodations at auberge

After 2 hours, we reached the van. Mike gave us the choice of riding back in 2 shifts or driving once, with Blaise leading eager hikers down another trail directly to the inn. As a team, we chose the latter - Allison and I opting for the van. This was our first night in an auberge, an inn with shared bathrooms and few amenities. We didn't arrive until 5 - which seemed VERY late given that we'd started hiking at 9. Although we took an hour longer than pre-trip literature expectations (if you total only hours walking), we dallied a LOT. Indeed, I started wondering why we seemed so poky as compared to the JMT group (where, in addition to crappy weather and longer hikes, we camped). Key differences: that team was in more uniform/good shape, the trails were WAY better, and the views - despite the weather - were usually present (i.e. inspiring and motivating). So, yes, if I sounded like I was getting bitchy - I was. Making matters worse, the building's hot water supply was gone in 20 minutes - which left me with no shower before dinner (and inn rules stated no showers after 8). I did get to sponge-bathe with cold water as we did have a sink in the room. But the bedding was minimal (I actually questioned how clean it was) and the rooms were freezing - to the point I showed up to dinner shivering (despite heavy fleece tops/bottoms over my usual city clothes). I could ALMOST overlook said problems given the filling meal: vegetable soup, roasted lemon/garlic chicken, potatoes au gratin, a plate of locally-made cheese, and a berry tart. But we ate in a super-crowded room (70 people at 3 long tables that were so close together that you couldn't easily get out of your chair to, say, use the bathroom) that was way too loud and bright (although it was clean and fresh-smelling). Back in my room after dinner, I continued to be cold throughout the night.

August 21, 2005 - Day Four of the TMB: Les Chapieux to La Palud (Into Italy)

Despite the weather and lack of views, today was - in terms of hiking - pretty straightforward: 1 major pass (Col de la Seigne at 8245 - about 2500 gained) followed by 1 long descent. From Les Chapieux, we rode in the van about 2 miles up-valley to

the Ville des Glaciers. Here, we waited for the second van so that we could all enjoy a tour of the cheese-making facilities: milking area, a guy curdling a GIANT vat of milk, cheese-aging cave (which made me and a few people gag upon entering - sad, given that I am a microbiologist). After about a mile hiking up a dirt road, we briefly rested at this run-down farmhouse (a few horses and mules milling about the weedy, muddy garden) before tackling the big ascent. During said hike, whatever big peak is closest (I believe Aiguille des Glaciers) appeared briefly through the mist - but then vanished, leaving us 100% viewless until we arrived at the pass. Given that I was - of course - getting my period, I was iron-drained and exhausted. After last night's freezing, shower-free, too-many-people auberge experience, I was also feeling congested and run-down. Given freezing winds howling over the pass, we dropped 10 minutes down, lunching among some boulders. Earlier, Mike had predicted we would hit fresh snow up here but - thank god - there was none. After an hour, we continued - a few spots a little crazy (a la yesterday) but overall MUCH easier. Sadly, this was where we were supposed to begin seeing Mont Blanc's sheer "Himalayan" north face. Of course, there was not a shred of hope that this was going to happen... and most of us were already predicting that we were not going to see it even tomorrow (our only other chance before rounding the corner into Switzerland). After an hour, we arrived at the end of a LONG flat hanging valley. Here, we started hiking a gravel road that continued almost to the end. Above, glacier toes protruded from the mist, partly making up for the lack of Mont Blanc views. Several old buildings - a stone refuge, religious structures, and many ruins - also lay in view, reminding me again of Nepal. The path zigzagged widely down to another hanging valley, a grand array of flowers in between the switchbacks.



Left to Right: cheese cave, Aiguille des Glaciers, Col de la Seigne, religious structure during descent to Italy

After regrouping, Mike explained that today's transfer was almost an hour 1-way. To keep folks from boredom, he proposed half of us hike up the moraine of the lowest glacier while the other half proceed to town. Allison and I chose the former and, at least during said hike, did enjoy ourselves. After slogging UP the 200-foot moraine, we could see the glacier's snout and Lac du Miage. Blaise lead us on a cool loop down to the lake edge and then back around through this larch forest. Unfortunately, we then had to put up with 3 annoying things. First: a 1-2 mile hike down a fully paved road (owing to a rockslide a couple years back that - for whatever reason - had never been cleared). Second: I had, given zillions of day-hikers, been unable to pee for the last hour. We were to be picked up near a bar with, presumably, a bathroom. Unfortunately, when we arrived it was closed. Carole arrived in moments and was whisking us - we thought - to the hotel. Which brings me to the third annoyance: we were dropped in downtown Courmayeur because, it seemed, they thought we wanted to, like, go shopping and eat gelato (despite being trashed, cold, and wet). Using a bathroom in a café meant buying something (in my case hot chocolate). Actually, Blaise bought me said drink and then Allison bought him gelato in return. Needless to say, I was not the most pleasant person to be around - even AFTER the bathroom. Around 5:30, we were picked up and driven 20 minutes to neighboring La Palud.



Left to Right: Allison on gravel road section, Lac du Miage, Italy hotel in Courmayeur

Our full-service hotel was fascinating, its darkly colorful interior reminding me of Diane's childhood home décor (her mother was East German). The GIGANTIC lampshades everywhere - in colors that were WAY out there - were just WOW. Alas, though: no bathtub - just a strange little shower with peculiarly-opening doors - and the twin beds were separate (although AMAZINGLY comfortable). Prior to our 7:30 dinner, Allison decided I needed a stiff drink and so she bought me her favorite: a mojito (I only gave it so-so marks because it tasted too leafy). At dinner, the friendly hotel owner presented us with all these appetizers: small pizza-like objects, a ball of what tasted like potato salad with peas, artichoke/cheese-filled crepes, sliced veal in a tuna sauce, fresh mozzarella with pesto, and red roasted peppers in anchovy sauce. Even I ate and liked both fish items. The main course featured turkey again (a surprise to most of us - this "American" poultry item), potatoes au gratin, and

lightly-spiced boiled spinach. Amusingly, the dessert featured 3 precise balls of AMAZING ice cream: chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. Unfortunately, said "balls" became a daily theme in trail or dinner humor. Given the shower, bed, and HUGE meal, I enjoyed sleep immensely.



Left to Right: Cormayeur valley, closest view of Mont Blanc, trail along Mont de la Saxe, SHUD, SHUD, SHUD!!!

August 22, 2005 - Day Five of the TMB: La Palud to Lavachey

Today was the worst day of the whole trek... by a mudslide (by MANY mudslides). First, we woke to hard rain. Although it stopped during breakfast, it POURED as the first vanload departed - and continued the first 90 minutes of the hike. I was hoping that Mike would call an hour delay. But there was no stopping with hotels and vans. When we awoke to similar conditions along the JMT, our leader - in contrast - was able to begin later and adjust. For the first time, I appreciated the relative flexibility of camping. The map-defined TMB was different than our final route, although we did overlap at the start. From La Palud, we drove 10 minutes back down toward Courmeyer - but then turned up this side-valley (Val Sapin), where we stopped at the Torrent de Tsapy. From here, we hiked up a dirt road through wet and dripping forest for about 15 minutes. There, we left the road for a good trail that climbed UP, UP, UP a steep hillside... rain, rain, rain everywhere. Given that we were under many tall trees, though, we and the trail were somewhat less wet. About 15 minutes from our first goal, the Refuge Bertone (still on the map-defined TMB), we began to switchback up meadows, an icy wind howling across the open landscape. The refuge, built on the lee side of Mont de la Saxe, a high and long ridgeline peak (which we would contour for the rest of the day), was a welcome sight. We arrived there around 11 and nearly everyone ordered simple hot drinks. A few smart people also ordered terrifically expensive soup. After orders were filled, the staff then sat down for a LONG lunch (i.e. if you hadn't requested food before, you were not getting it now). Given updated forecasts that suggested some clearing in a couple hours (which never happened), Mike decided to call lunch here to wait. Also, a guide from Courmeyer died yesterday on Mont Blanc and so Mike and Blaise were invited to eat with the refuge owners. My impression is that such events - sadly - happen rather frequently. Even this refuge was built to honor a guide who was killed too young on the mountain, many pictures of him adorning the walls. And thus we ate our lunches, the wind and rain audible against the windows.

By 1:30, there had been no real clearing - although the rain/wind had relented. And so we continued. The map-defined TMB proceeds along the summit of Mont de la Saxe, drops into a gully (crossing Torrent d'Armina), climbs over the Pas entre deux Sauts, drops again (descending along Torrent de Malatra), ascends briefly (to Refuge Bonatti), and finally descends steeply to Lavachey. Well - we didn't do anything near that... although I wonder if that higher path would have been less insane than what we did. Instead of ascending, we hiked around and down onto the steep north side of Mont de la Saxe on what Blaise later deemed a poor track that livestock built and people continued to stamp out. Sidehilling for 2-3 hours, we walked in muddy everything until we hit a gravel road - which descended quickly to the valley (the last mile overlapping with the map-defined TMB). At several nasty points, the mud widened to 30 feet - and was mixed with stinky goat shit. These nastiest of the nasty spots corresponded to several slightly wider/flatter areas where shanty animal structures had also been built. A large herd of the shit source lingered on-site at least once. And thus the term SHUD was coined by yours truly: shit mixed with mud. Coming in a close second were these thin, cliff-hanging mud ruts where it was - honestly - dangerous. The mud was slick and up to 8 inches deep in places. Most of the main track was a mess of sliding bootmarks - often running over hairy rocks and roots. And, yes, I stuck to the sandals. There were always a few clean rocks and hard-earth edges. Even Mike will attest to my socks being 95% clean at the end of the day (unlike most people - mud all over boots, socks, and/or gaiters). As I maintained that afternoon, even if I was in boots, I would have been pussy-footing down that mess - some of the worst hiking I've ever endured. We obviously skipped Refuge Bonatti completely - even though it was a half-mile away when we hit the road. And thank god for that road. By then, it was raining hard again. At the bottom, Allison and I decided to forgo the van and walk to the auberge (15 minutes away). Near the hotel, we passed a fish farm with sturgeon and trout. Amusingly, this place featured a fee-based pool where you could hook the latter - like many white-trash campgrounds in the US.

Despite a truly shitty day (in every sense of the word), auberge number 2 (no pun intended or deserved) was delightful. As with the previous auberge, we had a sink in our room - but shared showers. Unlike the previous auberge: the large rooms were warm, the beds were fabulous, and there were more bathrooms (not to mention the fact that the hot water never ran out). Although more rustic, the bar and dining areas were larger but quieter (although our group was louder and less tired). Having arrived before 4, I was finally able to enjoy an awesome shower, hang ALL my gear to dry, and take a nap (imagine that). I was in SUCH a good mood that I joined Allison and the emerging card-playing fanatics in the bar, paying her back with a stiff drink and enjoying a fine glass of Bailey's myself. In the bar, I noticed several aforementioned friendship/amity cups and correctly wondered if THAT was coming out tonight. Within 30 minutes, we moved to the adjacent dining room and, finally, had what I had been craving for several days: pasta (albeit as a starter). The main course featured pounded-flat chicken breasts that were breaded, pan-fried, and served with lemon slices (VERY tasty). Dessert - tiramisu or apple tart. At 9, Mike

and the bar mistress predictably showed up with the biggest friendship cup (10 spouts) and explained this tradition. Friendship cups are filled with "groelle" (spelling?). The only recipe I could find was that with my 5-spouted cup from Chamonix: 6 cups coffee, 6 "little glasses" of brandy, lemon rinds (our bar mistress substituted with LOTS of orange liquor), 18 teaspoons of sugar - some on the rim of the cup. As directly quoted from my directions: "stir the edge... with sugar, wet with brandy, and then set on fire." After the edge fire burns out, the cup is covered and passed around - NEVER set down (or you start again with a new cup). In response to my question about germs, Mike's response: the alcohol, heat, and fire will kill them (and, yes, I questioned this at the time). After a burning sip, you are to say, "Sante bonheur!" to the next person - and they are to respond with "Que grand bien te fasse!" before their burning sip. Can't tell you what that means except to note that there are lots of "goods" in there. Our LARGE vessel went around 3 times (although some people downed more than others). Despite the coffee (which could BARELY be tasted, I can assure you), I was in bed - magnificently asleep by 10.



Left to Right: auberge, Allison/groelle - wind-up, don't take that picture or mommy will know I was drinking, just do it

August 23, 2005 - Day Six of the TMB: Lavachey to Les Champex (Into Switzerland)

Mike was blunt in his presentation of the foul weather forecast - particularly given that we were crossing the highest pass: Grand Col Ferret (8300 feet). Indeed, morning views up the valley were frightening: the darkest clouds we'd seen to date, consuming the pass. But there was a promising feature: high winds (25-35 mph), which I felt might FINALLY blow this shit away. Mike's standard first vanload of slow folks rode 5 minutes to the trailhead and proceeded UP this steep trail - 1 section of which recalled yesterday's shuddiest areas. Admiring dozens of raging waterfall ribbons, we then dropped into this ravine of whitewater that, on any other August day, would have been a gentle creek. But, no - 3 days of intense rain had waterlogged the earth, overflowed every streambed, and taken out the bridge. Thankfully, a crew was actively building a new bridge, having placed temporary planks over the churning waves. Which reminds me to mention that the last 3 days of weather caused some of the largest European flooding in decades, most in mountain villages. A couple bridges we had traversed in Contamines were now gone, with much damage throughout that valley. Within the week, Katrina would demolish New Orleans. So, in many ways, we were pretty damn lucky we had a trail - not to mention road-access. After walking the plank, we trudged up another short hill and proceeded to Refuge Elena. The winds were SO strong that many of us nearly toppled over if we were not bracing carefully as we lifted and placed our feet. This refuge was the largest, most solid, and new refuge we'd see. In what remains a sticking point, members of the second van showed up within 5 minutes - having sauntered up this TOTALLY easy road from the valley floor RIGHT below the refuge. Consequently, some of us gave Blaise a hard time for letting them get off easy. Although Mike claimed Refuge Elena made the thickest hot chocolate (i.e. you could stand your spoon up), most of us agreed that Refuge Bertone's held that title. Before us, the amazing Mont Dolent (12,000 feet) and her remarkable glacier (Glacier de Pre de Bar) plummeted down the gully. In searching for the restrooms (simple holes in a ceramic floor-setting - just like many in Asia), I will say that I was more impressed with this refuge's clean sleeping area. Not that I would want to spend a night here (imagine 4-6 wings - each 20X50 feet, with continuous bunk beds on either side and every inch of bed space covered with mattresses). After an hour at the refuge, we proceeded back out into the winds.



Left to Right: big mystery mountain (Grandes Jorasses?), Refuge Elena, Mt. Dolent and Glacier de Pre de Bar

With every step up, the skies grew sunnier. Although I don't know which mountain that is, I'd like to think it's BIG (either Grandes Jorasses - which we pronounced "Grand Your Ass Is" - or Dent du Geant, Giant's Tooth). I do know it was NOT Mont Blanc. Even though this was a hard ascent, the trail didn't suck, we started high (total gain = 2700 feet), and once we got over the pass, it was all downhill. Today was the first day we hiked alongside another group going, most 30-50 year-old women from Paris, plus a couple from England. After being plowed over by French hikers in Chamonix, it was refreshing to

finally see French people huffing and puffing like the rest of us. I enjoyed a long conversation with the British man and made good progress in "Frenghish" with several of the women. All us snails, though, made record time today.



Left to Right: climbing to the Grand Col Ferret

Although views coming up the pass were good, views over the pass remained obscured by clouds (these included giant Mont Rosa, something I'd hoped to see). Even so, Allison and I took our time down, taking pictures and discussing the history of AIDS in the US, with an emphasis on the poor response by the Reagan administration. Astoundingly, Allison knew virtually nothing about this. After 30 minutes - during which time we passed our first group of bikers ON the trail - we came to several classic cows munching grass. Shortly thereafter, we came to a fork and - fortunately - chose the correct/right path to the Refuge la Peule, our lunch stop. Although most people bought drinks to accompany packed lunches, Mike and Blaise went for full-on ham/egg/cheese scrambles. For reasons that emerged only later, we stayed at the refuge 2-3 hours. While I enjoyed a sunny nap, 3-4 officious Swiss border guards showed up and - ha ha - picked only Allison out the crowd to fully question and passport-check. Bored, the east coast boys and I wandered down to this big pig who had been lying in the mud/sun. Hearing us, 4 more pigs scurried out of their little trailer, sliding down on lots of way-rank shud. Even so, they were cute - particularly when surrounded by all these crazy ducks and geese. Given my fondness for and daily intake of prosciutto (salt-cured ham), it's probably important to acknowledge the source. When Mike/Blaise appeared to be moving again, we were given 2 options because today involved another hour-long transfer: 1 party would hike with Blaise 40 minutes down a gravel road to the valley floor/van and proceed from there. The others would hike a 2-hour trail with Mike, contouring/descending hillsides to the valley. Allison and I were all about the early van. As our group took off, though, the refuge owner called us over for a tour of his cheese cave - accompanied by the Swiss border officers. Here, we pretty much witnessed a full-on payoff, the owner handing each guard a wheel of stinky cheese. With everyone happy, we were finally free to leave. In no time, we were in the van and heading - we thought - to the hotel. As with the mess in Courmayeur, today's transfer was wrought with problems. As discovered later, the Swiss have a problem with tour companies who provide their own transportation when public services are available. Given the poor weather, Mike thought the officers would not bother with Refuge la Peule today - but, alas, he was wrong. During the last trip, Blaise said officials had gone so far as to watch the party get into the company van, follow the van to the first town (with bus service), and then reprimand leaders for using their own vehicle. Given this, Mike hoped to throw the officials off by driving vanload 1 into the first town, and putting us on the Swiss bus to our hotel. Meanwhile, vanload 2 could sneak back. Well - that was all fine and dandy for vanload 2 - who (not surprisingly) arrived at the hotel before we did. But for those of us in vanload 1, there was nothing but confusion - in part because Blaise did not explain anything outright.



Left to Right: Swiss Refuge la Peule, pigs, and hotel

At first, the Swiss bus arrived immediately and was cushy. We then proceeded quickly through several small towns, picking up mostly backpackers. But then we arrived in a more substantial city (not on TMB map - can't remember the name) where the bus pulled into, like, grand central station. Here, we stopped for an hour. Fortunately, I had been sitting in the front with Blaise and so I knew this was a stop/wait. Although Blaise yelled to our card-players about the stop, they were WAY in the back and not really paying attention. Unaware of this miscommunication, Blaise left to likely walk off frustration. By now, I had to use the bathroom. My problem: when I returned, the bus was gone (re-fuelling while the driver took a break). But I figured the bus would come back - and it did. Within 30 minutes, Blaise, who seemed in a foul mood, arrived and we entertained each other with discussions of regional stereotypes (i.e. what the French thought of various countries, starting with - given today - Switzerland). Evidently, the French are like west coast urbanites: liberal outdoors-people who can come off as arrogant. Meanwhile, the Swiss have the reputation for being more like midwesterners plus a dash of south. But I'm going to stop right there given that, as with all stereotypes, there are exceptions. While on the bus, the card-players reported that the bus-driver rudely approached them (something about: if they didn't get off, they would be stuck for an hour with no air conditioning and

unable to leave). They elected to stay, which did not please the driver. By the time the bus returned to the main station, 30-40 elementary school-aged children had joined Blaise and I. Having just gotten out of class, the kids were loud and unruly. During the 40-minute ride (pretty much up a mountainside on railing-free 1.5-lane roads), Blaise and east coast dad yelled at a pair of boys who were REALLY out of control. Sadly, 1 was developmentally disabled, walking with leg braces and unable to control outbursts even after his friend moved elsewhere (i.e. after being yelled at twice). When we FINALLY arrived at the hotel, everyone needed immediate space. Even Allison - who had been a joy all day - vanished into town alone (although her main aim was to find cheap internet and write friends). Our apparently upscale hotel was located on the shores of Lac de Champex. Although called a resort, it was just another mountain village hotel (albeit with a BIG Swiss pricetag). Left to my own devices, I enjoyed a hot shower and nap. Despite frayed tempers, dinner was excellent - even though the portions were fancy small, the modern dining room too sheik for my casual city clothes. In order: a spectacular carrot soup, a salad with greens and smoked duck, scalloped chicken with mushrooms, some kind of bulgur side-dish, and a black current layered dessert. Although the main course was not my favorite, the soup, salad, and dessert were the best, in my opinion, on this whole trip. Unfortunately, I left for bed immediately after dinner, suffering heartburn (rare for me), feeling run-down, and debating seriously whether I was up for hiking tomorrow.



Left to Right: Lac de Champex, last shot of big gully before I ran out of film for the day, hotel at Col de la Forclaz

August 24, 2005 - Day Seven of the TMB: Les Champex to the Col de la Forclaz

Although I considered the van (given that I was now feverish and congested), the good forecast was too tempting. Sun and fresh air - that can't hurt. A couple things about today: first, there are few pictures because I failed to put back-up film in my daypack. Although this was unfortunate, most views were of developed valleys. Second, today included the steepest single section on our whole trip, followed by easy meadows and then a long drop to the Col de la Forclaz. Even so, other groups were doing/did this wicked alternative: over the high and rocky Fenetre d'Arpette and then scrambling down the moraine of the Glacier du Trient to the Col de la Forclaz. After passing Lac de Champex, we walked a mix of roads and forest trails, passing an old laid-rock water channel. Within an hour, the road we'd been climbing pinched to a tiny, rocky trail. Contouring this massive gully, we fought trees/brush, crossed 3 loud but easy creeks, and narrowly escaped menacing cows. Right before the route started climbing for real, we took a long break. Several locals were picking huckleberries nearby, using hand-held devices that combed the bushes, stripping mostly berries. Of course, this was when the film ran out. After Mike handed out slabs of his dark chocolate and hazelnut bar to several enthusiastic women, Blaise made the error of unwrapping his candy in front of the Arizona contingent who asked, with a straight face: and what kind of nuts do YOU have for us? Sadly, his bar contained only citron fruits. Anyway, the scrambling truly began after this. I would liken the trail to Lake Constance: 1500-2000 feet/mile for a mile, all in thick forest with most of the climbing up/in a small creek. Allison and I hiked up together, positioned in the middle of the group. We both enjoyed this climb because it kept you thinking more than the other slogs. We knew we were at the top when we had broken out in open dry meadows. For the next hour, we ate and napped. The now-perfect trail contoured around a hogback, with views over the Rhone Valley and distant Bernese Oberland. Within 30 minutes, we stopped at another refuge, enjoying - in my case - a beer and bread soup. Afterward, we climbed 100 more feet and then finally began our LONG descent through meadows and forest. At times, some sections felt - even to me - like a knee-buster. But Allison was still going strong. The Col de la Forclaz intersected with the major highway leading directly to Chamonix (90 minutes away by car). It had clearly been developing over the years: large inn, restaurant, bar, gift shop, petting farm, and gas station. Given our proximity to Chamonix, Blaise and Carole went home for the night. This inn was a mixed hotel-auberge, with half the rooms sharing bathrooms. Our room, while large, was weird, dank, and musty - with bizarre mismatched furniture, animal heads on the walls, and bedspreads that I found questionable. After a shower and nap, I did a little shopping at the gift shop and then joined Allison and company seated outside the restaurant/bar. After multiple attempts to order one of the glistening raspberry tarts on display, I gave up and bought a pre-made/frozen cone at the gift shop. Later, a couple other teammates showed up, having strolled out toward the Glacier du Trient. In retrospect, I wished Mike had presented this option when we arrived because it would have been nice to see. We then moved into the dining room where we enjoyed a family style meal: a white/yellow vegetable soup, ratatouille, fried potatoes, cheesy cauliflower, and more ice cream balls.

August 25, 2005 - Day Eight of the TMB: Col de la Forclaz to le Buet (Back Into France)

Although yesterday's forecast suggested gorgeous weather, Mike downgraded expectations come morning - and altered the route. Originally, we were to ascend the Col de Balme, the highest pass above the Chamonix Valley from the east. But unfortunately, everything was now likely to be clouded over by noon. Thus, Mike pulled back on the map-defined TMB route, electing to push for a lower Col des Posettes. Notably, part of what we hiked did not appear on our maps. Today began with a 10-minute ride down the hill - meaning we'd be gaining all that back on foot. Here, we did not ascend the map-defined TMB gully but, rather, climbed a hillside off to the side. Mike preferred this variation as it gained the ridge earlier. We hiked half the time on a road - the other half on a trail. Although we were in forest, we were granted many good views back onto the Glacier

du Trient. Apparently, before refrigeration, people chopped out blocks of ice from its snout, carrying them down on mules. It took most us until 11 to reach our first meeting place just under the first ridgeline. Here, we rested and snacked. Given the large wooden cross in the ground, Mike (definitely ex-Catholic - although he was caught wearing a fish-covered hanky with WWJD acronyms) said farmers felt the need to display crosses because they were often condemned by valley-dwellers for being unfaithful (because they didn't attend church as regularly). Although there were arguable distance issues, typically independent mountain farmers seldom believed a faithful life required church - much less the approval of village people.



Left to Right: Arizonans and the mountain cross, trail above Vallorcine Valley, first big view of Mont Blanc in a week

After the break, it was up a little more before contouring open hillsides, views over the Vallorcine Valley - the mountains above which are continuous with the Aiguilles Rouges (and contain dinosaur bones and caves). A prominent dam(n), which forms Lac d'Emosson, slightly ruined the otherwise pristine view. The sidehilling went on forever - with no views of Mont Blanc and our party spread out significantly. At some point, Allison and I came upon a signed fork. Given many distant people in both directions, we asked a nearby British family if they noticed whether a bunch of Americans went left and the father was certain they had. After 10 minutes and 200 vertical feet, we noticed 2 of our teammates heading right and then saw our whole group across this big meadow WAY down and likewise (on a trail which didn't appear on our map). And so we climbed back down and trudged across a brushy field. Meanwhile, everyone was climbing again and my motivation vanished. In 20 minutes, we'd caught up. Owing to extreme cold and high winds, Mike called lunch behind this mound near some tramline pylons (the Tete de Balme, I believe). Everyone seemed demoralized by the temperature drop and took to donning all serious gear. We also figured there was NO WAY we were going to see a damn thing once we arrived at the Col de Posettes. I overheard Mike - in French - explaining to Blaise how he'd screwed up by letting Allison and I get off-course. And so I assured him he shouldn't feel that way - which shocked both men since they didn't think any of us knew the language. Eventually, we had to wrap up lunch and face the wind. After 15 minutes of nearly flat hiking, the whole of the Mont Blanc massif - clouds swirling - appeared and joy overtook the weary team. Only Allison and I, though, seemed to want to take lots of pictures. Once we realized we were the only ones still left, we started down the trail and were teased by Mike for dallying.



Left to Right: Col de Posettes and first view of Mont Blanc in a week, descending to Vallorcine, le Buet hotel

From here, we left the map-defined TMB (which we had briefly intersected) and descended a dirt road for 20 minutes. Many dayhikers from nearby Tour or Col des Montets were also retreating, albeit via trails directly to the Chamonix Valley. Our road eventually became a narrow trail that descended FOREVER into the Vallorcine Valley. Half the time, it rained and I took to jogging down second in line. After an hour, nearly everyone arrived in le Buet. Although we had been encouraged to visit some waterfalls and caves before dinner, I found the bathtub (ah - France!) more inviting - particularly given still pouring rain. Our bedroom was large, with 2 uncomfortable beds against different walls (no Allison right next to me?!?). Meanwhile, the east coast kids discovered a 30-minute train to Chamonix and needed more entertainment than wee le Buet had to offer. An hour before dinner, Allison and I convened in the spacious bar for reading, writing, re-capping, hot chocolate, Orangina, and beer. Mostly, I made a rough trip outline, FINALLY pulling out pre-trip literature and the TMB map. Eventually, others joined, helping to fill in some gaps and then playing cards. Although Carole returned to Chamonix, both Mike and Blaise narrowly beat the east coast kids back to our family-style dinner: vegetable soup, light brown mystery meat slices, green beans, cheesy potatoes, and a tart berry tart. And serving was also a tart with, like, the perfect boobs and ass; Blaise was beside himself, his eyes on said features whenever she entered the room (to the point that watching him watch her was a spectacle in and of itself). Given that Mike had decided to sit next to me, though, I did have to behave a little. With a big grin, I asked him if I

was allowed to ride in the van tomorrow for my birthday. No, he smiled. With the rain still POURING, I turned in - not exactly looking forward to tomorrow.



Left to Right: Allison shakes her bootie back to Chamonix, not supreme weather progress over a matter of hours

August 26, 2005 - Day Nine of the TMB: Col de Montets Back to Chamonix

Well - today was number 38. Given that 37 had been dramatic, I hoped to turn a new leaf in terms of health. By now, though, I was getting a bad cold (possibly a sinus infection or worse). After a night of almost solid rain, the morning looked utterly dismal: a light drizzle with low clouds and fog. When I showed up for breakfast, I received hugs and double-cheek kisses from Mike and Blaise. There would be lots more of those - and I would just laugh about them all. As people showed up for breakfast, several attempts to sing happy birthday were mostly thwarted. We drove 10 minutes up the road to the Col des Montets, the place where Allison and I had ridden/turned around during our annoying day of Chamonix buses. Here, we disembarked in thick fog, unable to see more than 100 feet up the mountainside. Once again, we were on an alternative route (something called Tour du Pays du Mont Blanc), the map-defined TMB farther down the road at Tre-le-Champ. Anyway, Mike had warned us that today would be extremely steep and rocky - although we were in official French wilderness. Indeed, we immediately passed a visitor center and botanical signs that identified representative plants. Although the trail was hard, there was evidence of actual trail construction - which, aside from signs and a few bridges, had been lacking on most of this trip. Within the hour, the fast crew arrived - including Allison, clad in only a light cotton T-shirt (which I thought insane - with or without a fever). After about 1000 feet of steep, short switchbacks, the sky began to lighten - as though we might actually be climbing ABOVE the clouds. And then the ibexes started appearing everywhere. Ibexes reminded me of what we call curly-horned mountain sheep - only ibex horns were textured differently, longer and more crescent-shaped. Over the next hour, we saw probably 10 of them in various groupings - including babies. At some point, we took a substantial break by this long promontory and the clouds partly opened just across the valley - revealing Aiguille du Chardonnet and Argentiere Glacier. A huge new party caught up and thus we departed, the clouds rolling back. Today included the weather-dependent Lac Blanc hike. For whatever reason, though, Mike called lunch at the Lacs des Chesreys, a set of off-trail ponds. Although avoiding people and weather were probably his key reasons for skipping Lac Blanc, I hoped his decision had nothing to do with Allison and I having been there - not to mention the fact that our team seemed poky. Although Lacs des Chesreys were off-trail, there was an obvious social path to them. Under foggy skies, we ate - our special treat being exquisite quiches.



Left to Right: ibexes, Aiguille du Chardonnet and Argentiere Glacier, Mike condemns le flip=flops

By the time we finished lunch and were leaving, it was around 12:30. Returning to the main trail, we re-joined the map-defined TMB and proceeded to contour glorious rock-strewn meadows on a route that paralleled the trail Allison and I had hiked up to Lac Blanc - only several hundred feet lower. Almost without warning, ALL clouds moved or vanished or something - and there was the whole Mont Blanc massif against fully blue skies. As I said to Allison that day, I stumbled more times that afternoon than I had the whole week before. Had it been this clear all the way around, I probably would have tripped and hurt myself bad. With the party COMPLETELY spread out, Allison and I hiked by ourselves to La Flegere, talking about many aspects of this quickly-ending trip. At some point, we passed Mike and asked him to pose with me and "le flip-flops" (as Blaise called them) in some way that represented how he felt about my having done the whole trip in them. Unfortunately, the camera flash wasn't on so you can't really see his hilarious expression while cursing them. Indeed, Mike never came to like le flip-flops and probably isn't looking forward to any future trip members who show up intending to hike in them. Allison and I arrived at La Flagere around 2, joining the east coast contingent (who were the first on the scene). Together, we toasted the fact that we'd all made it without riding the van. The rest of the party arrived over the next 45 minutes and, with little fanfare, half the group (including us) was riding down - a few gondola-virgins terrified. For some reason, Allison and I assumed we would be walking back to Chamonix - but there was Carole at the station. Relinquishing everything but our wallets to the van, we took our last

stroll down the Avre. Back at the hotel, though, things were a little messy given that everyone had now vanished (i.e. the hotel staff couldn't find our packs or luggage for 30 minutes and they gave us, and a few others, the wrong room). Much as I loved Allison, I was not in the mood to fully hare a bed (particularly because I was now coughing a LOT). But everything was soon sorted out and I finally enjoyed a LONG bath. Amusingly, however, strangers with keys (another hotel mishap) showed up while I was, like, in the tub. Although the pending birthday/celebration dinner should have made me more enthusiastic, the truth was: I had a sinus infection, deepening cough, and dizzying fever. The best I could do at the moment was down some Nyquil and spend 3 hours napping before making a decision about dinner.



Left to Right: Allison's victory pose at La Flagere, walking the final time down L'Avre, TMB ultra-marathon commences

When dinner time came, I was feeling slightly better and very hungry. Just prior to dinner, we watched the start of the big TMB ultra-marathon, which began a block from the restaurant. I don't know if it was the fever, birthday, period, or Nyquil - but watching 2000 racers (about 20% female) begin brought a few tears to the eyes. Thousands of people lined Chamonix's main street - with more cheering from all levels of the multi-decked buildings and roofs. Although most runners wore traditional attire (including small packs), several wore serious or ridiculous costumes and carried flags. In 10 minutes, they were gone - the streets eerily silent. Mike said that only 500 total would finish the race. Over the course of dinner, lead runners would make it over the Col de Voza (our TMB day 2). Amazing. Dinner featured 2-3 choices for each of the 3 courses. In my case: a slice of terrine made from fresh mozzarella, basil, tomatoes, and sautéed zucchini followed by a steak-like duck breast with garlic-mashed potatoes. My dessert, an apricot-almond tart with sorbet, arrived with fully-lit whirling sparklers and everyone finally singing for real. I was also presented with a WAY-too-small Chamonix T-shirt made in the Hard Rock Café style, featuring a cartoonish buxom barmaid. Blaise attempted to explain that this was because of my daily nipple issues (indeed, I had a habit of accidentally sitting on, pulling off, or losing the nipple end of my Platypus water bag). By just after 10, we had made it out only as far as the restaurant foyer, where we said our formal goodbyes - given that tomorrow we would be divided into a couple groups for various departure times to Geneva. Mike, Blaise, and Carole presented us each with certificates from the formal Mont Blanc guide consortium and we were hugged and kissed in a gender orientation-specific manner (i.e. Carole heartily kissed and hugged the Arizonans where I got Mike and Blaise again). Given my state, Allison escorted me back to the hotel room where I fell into bed. Meanwhile, she socialized with the east coast kids.

August 27-29, 2005 - Getting Home

Aside from more overnight coughing, I felt a little more lucid the next morning. As we were on the later 11 a.m. van, we thought we could enjoy a relaxing breakfast and then use the internet to find an earlier flight to Frankfurt (i.e. we were not relishing sitting at the Geneva airport for 6 hours). Unfortunately, a hotel-specific power outage occurred (the third on this trip, another similarity with Nepal) and so we went in search of a poster tube for our certificates. Although Allison made fun of my failing French, I deserve some credit for successfully miming my way through "Do you have a long tube for posters?" Shortly thereafter, we were riding with the east coast family back to Geneva, Mike at the wheel. We said our goodbyes again, Allison holding back tears. Sick or not, though, I wouldn't have felt compelled to weep. Fortunately, we were able to get a 2:30 flight to Frankfurt AND check our bags in a day early (as we were staying 1 night in Frankfurt). After an overpriced salad, yogurt, and drinks, Allison got stopped at a security gate for having a carabiner hanging off her pack. Needless to say, she was quick to point at my dangling carabiner (which they'd missed) - and so we BOTH had to turn them in. In the end, the flight crew laughed at our confiscated carabiners, handing them back to us once the security officer was out of sight. All I remember about our flight: 80% Japanese tourists. Upon landing, our next task was to call our Holiday Inn shuttle (yes, the American franchise). What can I say: cheap, airport shuttles, and continental breakfasts. Indeed, the whole efficient process, honestly, could have taken place anywhere in the US. Our hotel was 15 minutes from the airport; although today's shuttle was free, tomorrow's would cost us each \$6. Our room was like a bad (but clean) Ikea explosion (but I was NOT cognizant enough to photograph the fascinating décor). I showered and napped while Allison vanished to deal with emails and take a walk. By 7:30, she decided I needed fresh air and dinner and so we walked 2 blocks to an Italian restaurant by this RV camping area (which reminds me: Chamonix also hosted hundreds of German RVs, their latest vacation fad). Although the meal was simple (salad, bread, spaghetti with meat sauce - in my case), it was SOOOO good. Given that I still had a fever, that meal not only hit the spot but probably kept me strong enough to survive the LONG, HELLISH flight home the next day.

After breakfast, we were back at the airport by noon for our 1:30 p.m. flight. Only American-bound passengers were subject to a special final security check that included a full-body pat down (not necessarily by a gender-matched officer). Fortunately, I had a stoic female officer and was not too offended (although many non-Americans were). Although staying in Frankfurt had not been our first choice, we initially felt it would be worth the effort to take a DIRECT flight back to Portland. Had we known we were going to be on the flight from hell, I'm not sure we would have retrospectively made this choice. Since Allison and I had checked in the night before, we were (again) given bulkhead seats. After 30 minutes of waiting, I (with my coveted

window-seat) noticed some guy who looked like a pilot and several grounds-people pointing at this big wet spot under the outer right engine. I actively commented to Allison: that can't be good. Within 15 minutes, Captain Klaus was on the loudspeaker bluntly explaining that nobody on the ground could identify the liquid so it was going to be a bit longer before he decided whether it was safe to fly. Hmmmm. Over the next hour, several vans of technicians arrived, wheeling ladders up to the engine and climbing inside with flashlights. Hmmmm. Captain Klaus returned and appeared to be kicking some ass. The most amusing sight, though, was this grounds-guy bending down, touching the puddle, and smelling it (duuude - that is SO NOT technical). Given that 3 plane crashes had occurred since we arrived in Europe, I was happy the pilot had bothered to question what the puddle was. But I could not help but wonder what the fuck these people had been doing all afternoon. Is it the pilot's job to notice a 4X10 foot puddle 30 minutes before takeoff? Shortly thereafter, Captain Klaus boomed over the loudspeaker: well, it's fuel and I will not fly this aircraft - so we're changing planes and this will take 2-3 hours. Of course, we sat in the bad plane the WHOLE time, breathing and coughing stagnant, dry air. After another hour of buses, re-situating, calming down, taxi-ing all over the place, we were FINALLY in the air (it was 4:30). Needless to say, we were all nervous that first hour, wondering if the engine was going to fail. But the weather was fabulous and we followed the sun all the way across the Atlantic and North America. Doped up on non-drowsy Dayquil, which did keep my coughing and sinus pressure to a minimum, I didn't sleep a wink. I'm sure this flight added even more germs and/or exacerbated my sinus infection to what would, over the next week, become bronchitis and then - thanks to a week of medical bumbling - pneumonia.

Once we hit the Norwegian Sea, clouds obscured the earth below. Although we never saw Iceland, the clouds vanished 10 minutes before we reached Greenland's east coast. At first, I thought my soupy brain was playing tricks when these white objects appeared - but, sure enough, they were ICEBERGS... hundreds of them. We flew a LONG arc over the southern tip of Greenland (crossing near the lower boundary of the Arctic Circle) - the rocky fjord-like coastline of rugged mountains and calving glacial icefields lasting 15 air minutes. Then I thought another cloudbank had formed - but, no, we'd reached Greenland's central icecap: white nothingness for an hour... followed by another coastline of ice, rock, and icebergs. An hour later, we began flying over stark Baffin Island - less snow, but still rugged. Beyond the Hudson Strait, the land was tundra-like, occasionally dotted with small villages, airstrips, or sparing gravel roads. For an hour, we flew over the open waters of Hudson Bay before hitting the marsh-like nothingness of Manitoba. Regardless of all earlier problems, I cherish the amazing views we were granted. After not knowing where we were for an hour, I recognized Banff and Glacier National Parks (it was around 4 p.m. Portland time). By then, I had lost my voice, was physically exhausted, and questioned whether I had the stamina to drive back to my home tonight. Allison was getting edgy about how late we were arriving because she had to be back at school in less than 48 hours (a 5-hour drive to Whitman with our parents at the wheel). We flew into PDX in a mild rainstorm, the worst turbulence of the whole flight occurring during those final 30 minutes. Although customs proceeded effortlessly, the luggage wait was extreme. I was on the verge of passing out, Allison having sent me to sit in the corner while she stood with the cart, watching baggage circle. Our mom was waiting just beyond the international arrivals exit door (my father circling in the van because he refuses to pay for parking). By now, I knew there was no way in hell that I was going to survive 90 minutes of freeway driving - and so I checked into my favorite airport hotel, took a shower, and (at 9 p.m.) fell into bed for 14 hours. The next morning, I cautiously drove home and visited my physician, insisting I was developing pneumonia. Unfortunately, doctors don't like to believe that pneumonia happens to people under 50 (especially when they show up after hiking 100 miles in the Alps). Because I was running 101° and producing green somewhere, I was pacified with a wimpy antibiotic (the drug that most pneumonia-causing bacteria have developed resistance to). Within 3 days, my fever was 103° (textbook pneumonia) and my physician's nurse placed me on a stronger antibiotic but - refusing to believe it was pneumonia - only gave me 5 pills (which did reduce the fever). But after 4 days, I was at the immediate care clinic with breathing problems and a doctor who neither gave me a chest X-ray nor extended my prescription. Within 4 days, I relapsed and - FINALLY - they diagnosed me with and properly treated me for X-ray visible lobar pneumonia. Given 2 weeks of bumbling, though, my recovery took longer normal - including cutting into fall term. As a professional microbiologist, I was offended that not a single doctor analyzed any cough/sputum samples or checked my blood - whether for oxygen levels or bacteria.

Conclusions

This is a difficult section to write for a variety of reasons. And so I will start with the most important statement: Mike said he had not seen weather this bad in 15 years of guiding the TMB. Weather is obviously an unpredictable component of any trip. But, unfortunately, our weather remains a serious blemish on my perceptions about the Alps (and lack of perception) - and certainly did not help my health. It's funny how I and so many others viewed this trip going in: a cushy hike around Mont Blanc with hotels every night, substantial meals, van support, etc. You compare those kinds of amenities with, say, the Hulahula (Arctic camping/rafting for 12 days) and most people would probably bet that I was more likely to catch pneumonia in Alaska. But people don't catch germs from the cold; they catch them from people (and sometimes animals). Cold weather enhances germs getting through immune defenses - as does lack of sleep, smoke, poor nutrition, and stress. Given that, Europe was crawling with people and germs - airplanes, airports, old buildings with bad plumbing and poor air circulation, crowded dining areas, questionably clean refuges, dirty farm facilities, and just plain shud everywhere. Lord (and my mom) knows - I am not a clean freak... but, as a microbiologist with a background in public health, Europe made me want to do nothing but bathe, wash my hands, and do laundry. And, problematically, Europe was stealth dirty. By that, I mean that when you visit a place like Nepal, you go in with your guard up about obvious things (e.g. water, food, crowds, animals...). But Europe - you just sort of think first world and don't modify a lot of your basic practices. I've gotten really ill from 2 personal traveling experiences: Nepal and Europe. Nepal saw 2 bouts of acute GI illness (plane and Katmandu food) and 8 weeks of bronchitis immediately after returning (75% of the Nepal team suffered similar illnesses). Although Europe saw no personal GI problems, the respiratory problems have been worse - and, honestly, I would rather puke 15 hours than suffer 6 weeks of pneumonia. In Europe, 30% of our team suffered mild to moderate upper respiratory illnesses - with a strong bias towards people (like me) who did not take a break and ride the van. The other disappointment for me in Europe was the quality of the trails. Responses from friends/family to this observation have been fascinating. At one end of the spectrum is Jenn: "of course our trails are fucking awesome - why do you think so many Europeans come HERE on vacation?" At the other end is masochistic Japan resident Ellen: "America totally babies hikers with easy trails - nobody else in the world would waste that

kind of effort building easy trails. " I don't know if I am getting soft or what - but I expected WAY more from a culture and region that I consider a key birthplace of modern hiking. The only comparably bad "official" trails I have ever experienced were in Patagonia - and I expected and/or forgave them because that region is such a young trekking destination. Even Nepal had better-constructed trails. And don't get me wrong - I've willingly hiked lots of nasty climbers' paths in the US... but I did so knowingly, anticipating that I would be scrambling seriously rocky and steep terrain. Fortunately, such routes did not have the added burden of livestock herds/shit, bikes, or significant numbers of people who actively disregarded trails - going out of their way to cut switchbacks or slide down fragile alpine wilderness landscapes. Even though I remain offended by the poor trails (particularly because of what it says about the regional wilderness ethic), I was surprised at the extent of wilderness there was. I really was expecting no extensive forests or native flora, human structures every 5 minutes, ski-lifts and gondolas everywhere. Although there was some evidence of all these forms of impact, there was far less than I thought there would be. That many buildings used solar power almost made me forgive the development and trail situation.

Despite disappointments, I did enjoy several aspects of this trip. Probably the single most important and valuable thing I learned is that Allison is more than capable of handling a difficult and sustained hiking trip. Given Ellen's fickleness when it comes to even considering serious trips, Allison is likely to become the person I ask once I resume international trekking in a couple years. I also truly adored and respected Mike. Although Mike does not replace Alsek Brian as my all-time favorite leader (for some of the same reasons), Mike does earn the top award for best hiking leader on a professional trip - and he made me appreciate having a guide on these kinds of trips (i.e. non-rafting). When I think about what a poor or weak leader would have done to this trip... I shudder. Mayhem and mutiny - 10 times what happened on the JMT. I attribute our team's amazing morale (in the face of WAY more challenging weather and trails) to Mike's ability to lead, command respect, and be socially adept in every setting. I also did enjoy socializing with the team and did, despite occasional filth and crowding, relish our creature comforts - whether sipping hot chocolate at a refuge in the middle of a stormy afternoon or sizing up a hot cheesy meal in a dining hall (preferably with good heating and a bathtub back in the room). And, despite a few strong personalities, I truly enjoyed this team. In general, I would rather have a feisty, opinionated, lively group than a bunch of quiet people with no character. Whether I agreed with everyone or not, each member of this team had GREAT spirit. And in my opinion, when you walk away from a group trip and feel you could (and would want to) write a short story about each person on the team - then you know you had a great experience. Finally, I loved the fact that Allison and I had such a positive experience exploring Chamonix and enjoying spectacular mountain views on our own. I loved the fact that it didn't feel like we were at some gigantic international tourist destination. Being American was not an issue at any time (as some people had warned me about); indeed, I think I had more small-minded Americans respond negatively to the notion that we would willingly choose to visit France. Unlike Allison (and a lot of people), I have never had the urge to do the whole European city tour thing. For me, understanding what I view as "a culture" is more about feeling intimate with real people in a small setting (e.g. villages, farms, mountains...). As stated, Chamonix represents an extremely important and historic epicenter with regards to hiking/climbing (in the same way, I venerate Himalayan villages for their spiritual trekking significance). Neither embody the same wilderness ethic as the US - in large part because both places have long been home to mountain people and farmers (and you really can feel that similarity); thus, you cannot expect their mountains to BE like those in the US.