



THE PATH LESS TRAVELED MAY NOT ALWAYS BE THE EASIEST, BUT IT OFTEN LEADS TO THE MOST REWARDING DESTINATIONS.

SELF GUIDED TOUR DU MONT BLANC: VARIANT ROUTES EXPLAINED

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EXPLORING THE VARIANTS OF THE TOUR DU MONT BLANC

The Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB) is a legendary long-distance trail that loops around the majestic Mont Blanc massif, passing through France, Italy, and Switzerland. This iconic hike offers some of the most stunning alpine views in Europe, making it a must-do for outdoor enthusiasts. While the classic TMB route is already a fantastic adventure, there are a number of variants that allow hikers to experience different aspects of this breathtaking region. Whether you're looking to add more challenge, take in unique views, or simply shorten your trek, these alternatives can offer something special.

Before you set out, it's important to note that many of these variants involve high-altitude paths, and they should only be tackled when the weather conditions are favourable. Especially during early season (mid-June to early July – this can fluctuate depending on how much snow fell in winter and the spring melt rate) when snow can make some routes dangerous – we do not say this lightly there have been deaths on the trail early season with trekkers not realising the danger. During this time the variants can be very dangerous due to snow, particularly the Col des Fours which has melting snow bridges over hidden strong flowing rivers. Always check conditions with your refuge (they tend to have more accurate details as they are closer to the trails on a daily basis) or with us before venturing out, and remember, safety is key on these trails.

1. COL DU TRICOT VARIANT

Trail description:

For those seeking a more scenic yet slightly challenging route, the Col du Tricot variant offers spectacular views of the Bionnassay Glacier and the Miage Valley. Starting from the railway tracks, follow the path toward Col du Tricot, traversing alpine meadows along the way. You'll soon cross the iconic Himalayan suspension bridge before beginning a short climb to a clearing with large boulders—a perfect spot to take in the view of the glacier and enjoy a lunch break. If you look carefully, you'll notice wild bilberry bushes scattered around the area.

As you continue, the summit of Col du Tricot comes into view. It's a steady climb to the grassy saddle, where you can take a moment to admire the panoramic vistas of the Miage. From here, you can spot Refuge Miage far below, and if you look to your left, you'll see a stone archway marking the 'smugglers route' to Refuge Plan Glacier.

The descent is steep and takes around an hour, so be sure to use your poles for extra support. Once you reach the valley floor, follow the signs to Refuge Miage, a charming cluster of farm buildings set in an idyllic rural setting. The view of the Dômes de Miage (3600m) from the refuge is absolutely stunning. From here, the trail winds briefly past Auberge du Truc—another great spot for lunch—before continuing down into the French town of Les Contamines.

Key Tips: This route is exposed, and weather can change rapidly, so it's best tackled on clear days. The descent can become very slippery when wet. If conditions are bad or it's early season, it's safer to stick to the main TMB route via Bionnassay.

Distances:

(11.3kms / 662m+ / 1251 m- / 4 hours) From Bellevue Gondola – Les Contamines

(7.2kms / 596m+ / 675m- / 3 hours) From Col de Voza to Refuge du Miage

(13.2kms / 783m+ / 1281 / 4 hours) From Col de Voza – Les Contamines

***SMUGGLERS ROUTE – PLAN GLACIER**

If you are staying in Refuge Plan Glacier you will have the option to go via the smugglers route which has a large amount of exposure. Trekkers who do not like heights or who are not confident on a narrow path should not choose this route. Alternatively, you can go via Refuge du Miage – however you will come down the same way the following day. The smugglers route takes between 2.5 – 3.5hours to get to the hut. It's a further 520m elevation climb. The route has metal railings on the exposure sections and at these help with skirting around this balcony route. However, you MUST not attempt this route in bad weather or indeed too late in the day. Give yourself plenty of time.

2. COL DES FOURS VARIANT

Trail description:

A truly off-the-beaten-path experience, the Col des Fours variant offers a rugged, wilderness-like feel as it takes you over a lunar landscape with stunning views of the Mont Blanc Massif. This route begins just before Refuge de la Croix du Bonhomme, where you'll follow the trail through spectacular scenery. Tip: Be sure to take the 10-minute detour to Tête des Fours, a viewpoint offering a bird's-eye view of the entire area. From here, you can see where you've come from and where you're going, with incredible vistas of the Montjoie Valley and the Vallée des Glaciers, as well as trekkers climbing Col du Bonhomme. The view of the Mont Blanc Massif from this spot is nothing short of spectacular.

After enjoying the viewpoint, you'll continue your descent, which leads you into the Vallée des Glaciers, where you'll eventually pick up the main trail at Ville des Glaciers. The descent is steep, so make sure to take it easy and use your poles. This variant route cuts out the hamlet of Les Chapieux entirely, offering a more remote, wilderness experience.

Key Tips:

This route should only be attempted in perfect weather conditions, as it involves high-altitude terrain and can be dangerous in poor visibility. Also, avoid it in early season due to snow there can be melting snow bridges over strong flowing rivers. The terrain underfoot can be tricky, with loose and sometimes slippery sections, so make sure to watch your step.

Distances:

(6.6kms / 183m+ / 879m- / 2 hours) From the trail junction before Refuge Bonhomme – Ville des Glaciers.

3. COL SAPIN VARIANT

Trail description:

You can take the variant Col Sapin (2436m) from Refugio Bertone instead of the gentle contour of the Southern ridge of Val Ferret. Again, you'll only take this variant in good weather – if not follow the easier, faster traditional balcony route to Rifugio Bonatti.

From the junction path near Refugio Bertone the path climbs steeply up to Mont de la Saxe. From here the ridge line trail heralds jaw dropping views of the south wall of the Massif du Mont Blanc from Col de la Seigne which you climbed over from France yesterday all the way along to Grand Col Ferret which you'll climb tomorrow into Switzerland. On a clear day this panoramic view is incredible!

The path then descends steeply to Col Sapin (2436m) across Vallon d'Armina onto Pas Entre-Deux-Sauts (2524m) and into Vallon de Malatra before popping out just above the infamous Refugio Bonatti.

Key Tips:

Like the other variants, this one is best done in good weather. The views, however, are well worth the effort and some of the most spectacular on the entire trail, especially if you're looking for a quieter, less-traveled route.

Distances:

(10kms / 794m+ / 766m- / 4 hours) From trail junction after Rifugio Bertone – junction just above Rifugio Bonatti.

4. FENETRE D'ARPETTE VARIANT

Trail Description:

For the more adventurous hikers, the Fenetre d'Arpette variant is one of the most challenging and technical sections of the TMB and the trail is not marked well and can be easily lost. The boulder field just before the Col requires a lot of attention and trekkers need to be mindful of loose screw and rocks that dislodge easily and can be fatal to trekkers below. Set off super early though and you'll be in for a treat. When you finally summit the Col you will feel a real sense of achievement – it's the only place on the trek we've experienced other trekkers congratulating each other a real sense of camaraderie.

Key Tips:

This variant is not for the faint of heart—it requires careful navigation through loose rocks and boulders, so make sure to go in clear weather and be prepared for tricky conditions. Early season is not ideal, as snow can make the terrain treacherous.

Distances:

(12.8kms / 1216m + / 1192m- / 5 hours) From Champex-Lac – Trient

5. LES GRANDS VARIANT

Trail description:

The Refuge Les Grands variant is the least known variant on the TMB. For those of you who can sum up the energy, the Refuge Les Grands variant route will not disappoint. A historic trail heralding incredible views of the Trient glacier this little trodden trail takes you high above the tree line to Refuge Les Grands and then follows a glorious high traverse on a good path around the lower flanks of Les Grands Otanes (2679m) connecting to the traditional TMB trail at the Col de Balme.

Key Tips:

While it's not the most popular variant, the Les Grands route offers solitude and beautiful views. As always, avoid this variant in early season due to snow risk.

Distances:

(8.8kms / 1086m+ / 226m- / 4 hours) From Trient – Col de Balme

(9.1kms / 980m+ / 323m- / 4 hours) From Col de la Forclaz – Col de Balme

6. LAC BLANC VARIANT

Trail description:

Though technically a variant, Lac Blanc is a must-see stop for many trekkers on the TMB. The route involves a series of ladders and steep ascents, but the effort is rewarded with stunning views of the lake, nestled high in the mountains. This detour provides a unique perspective of Mont Blanc and the surrounding peaks.

The route climbs steadily until you reach the infamous TMB ladders – a series of 13 ladders and metal ware built into the rock. It's the most exciting physical aspect of the entire Tour du Mont Blanc. At the Tête aux Vents, a large cairn (2132m) which borders the national park you can choose to detour up to Lac Blanc or traverse along the trail to La Flégère. Lac Blanc (2,352m) has a mythical stature.

Key Tips: It's worth visiting Lac Blanc, but be prepared for crowds during peak hours, as it's a popular spot. For a more serene experience, try staying overnight at the Refuge Lac Blanc to enjoy the quiet after the day-trippers leave. In your app you will be given an alternative route to the ladder section if you struggle with vertigo or exposure, which is what the famous UTMB race follows.

Distances:

(8.2kms / 997m+ / 510m- / 4 hours) From Tre-le-Champs – La Flegere via Lac Blanc

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT VARIANT FOR YOU

When selecting a variant, consider these factors:

- ***Weather:*** Always prioritise safety. Some of the more technical variants (like Fenetre d'Arpette and Col des Fours) require good weather conditions to be safe.
- ***Fitness Level:*** Some variants, especially those with steep ascents and descents, may be more demanding. Choose a variant that matches your fitness and hiking experience – Fenetre d'Arpette is definitely the most demanding.
- ***Time Constraints:*** If you're limited on time or running late, opt for the main route or skip the more challenging routes like Fenetre d'Arpette.

The Tour du Mont Blanc offers countless ways to tailor your trek, whether you're after a more remote experience or want to challenge yourself to some of the more strenuous parts. Just make sure to always check the weather, plan accordingly, and know your limits. With the right preparation, your TMB adventure will be one for the books!