



TOUR DU MONT BLANC & SWITZERLAND

AUGUST 16 - SEPTEMBER 2, 2019

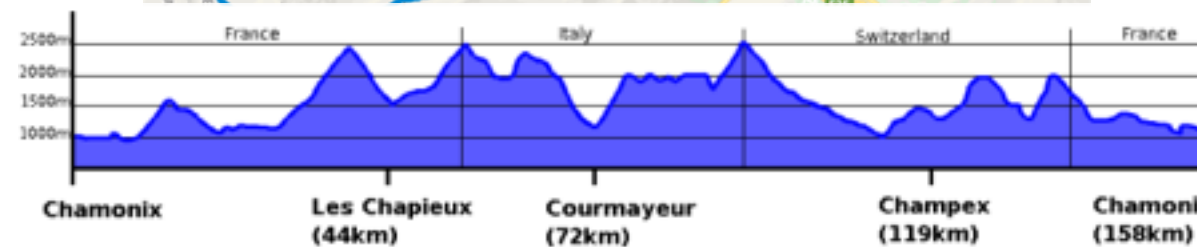
DAYS 1-2: TRAVEL & LES HOUCHES, FRANCE

After a stop at Heathrow Airport in London just long enough to get my favorite PRET breakfast of a chocolate croissant and flat white, we found ourselves in Geneva on the Swiss side of the airport (it has a side in France too!). During our transfer to Les Houches, we excitedly watched as we drove towards snow-capped mountains and after a series of tunnels, the highway was eventually nestled on the floor of the valley. We glimpsed our first sight of the behemoth Mont Blanc, which is the tallest mountain in the alps and around whose mountain range we'd be hiking during our trek on the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB) trail.

As it was still the early afternoon, we had time to explore this first town. Oddly enough, aside from its notoriety as the starting point of the TMB, Alexis Bouvard, the astronomer who discovered Neptune was born here! We wandered through the town and gawked at the blue sky and gorgeous scenery before stopping at a cafe to enjoy a celebratory “we made it to the start” beer. As I looked around town, I saw a lot of people hobbling by with bandaged toes and knees. What did we get ourselves into??



Tour du Mont Blanc



The TMB is a classic hike in Europe and we opted to complete the “highlights” which meant we would skip several of the less scenic portions of the full trek through the use of public transportation. Our trek would take six days to complete and during that time we would hike 65 miles with an accumulated height gain and loss of over 21,000 feet!

An early pioneer of the TMB, JD Forbes, concluded that “the most successful of Alpine travelers will, if disposed to be candid, admit that the happiest, if not the proudest, moments of their experiences, had been spent on some of the more majestic passes of the Alps”. We couldn’t agree more.

Date	Route	Total Time	Hiking Time	Distance	Ascent	Descent
Sunday, August 18th	Les Houches to Les Contamines via Refuge de Miage	7 hrs 30 mins	5 hrs 30 mins	8.61 miles	2,149 ft	4,140 ft
Monday, August 19th	Les Contamines to Refuge des Mottets via Col de la Croix du Bonhomme and Col du Fours	8 hrs 25 mins	7 hrs 48 mins	13.78 miles	5,318 ft	2,930 ft
Tuesday, August 20th	Refuge des Mottets to Courmayeur via Col de la Seigne and Col Checrouit	7 hrs 45 mins	5 hrs 57 mins	11.80 miles	3,714 ft	3,537 ft
Wednesday, August 21st	Arnuva to La Fouly via Grand Col Ferret	5 hrs 30 mins	4 hrs 52 mins	10.09 miles	2,606 ft	3,264 ft
Thursday, August 22nd	Champex to Trient via Fenetre d'Arpette	7 hrs 25 mins	6 hrs 47 mins	10.43 miles	3,852 ft	4,554 ft
Friday, August 23rd	Trient to Argentiere via Col de Balme	6 hours	5 hrs 29 mins	10.30 miles	3,625 ft	3,753 ft
Total				65.01 miles	21,264 ft	22,178 ft

An aerial photograph of a mountain valley. In the foreground, a small village with several houses is nestled in a green field. A winding river flows through the valley, surrounded by dense evergreen forests. The background features steep, rocky mountains with patches of snow and a clear blue sky with scattered white clouds.

DAY 3

LES HOUCHES TO LES CONTAMINES



At 6:30am, I woke to the smell of chocolate croissants wafting into our open window. Not a bad way to start the day! We had a hearty breakfast at the hotel and departed just as the church bells were tolling 8am. We snapped a picture at the official start of the TMB and then made our way to the Telepherique de Bellevue, a cable car that would take us up to the plateau to the start of our hike. This came highly recommended by our guide book as it removes a boring 2,624 ft ascent out of town on an old forest road. It being our first day on the trail, we didn't want to push it.



Once at the top, we set out for our first mountain pass at the Col de Tricot. The hike was steep, but afforded us spectacular views of the Bionnassay Glacier as we walked along cliffs and through meadows. At one point, we even had to cross a Himalayan-style suspension bridge over the raging waters from the glacier runoff.





Upon arrival at the Col de Tricot, which sits at 6,955 ft, we had a fantastic view! This ridge spur forms a partition of sorts between the Bionnassay valley to the north and the Miage to the south. We had a brief rest here where I enjoyed the beignet pretzel I picked up at the market. Trust me, it's exactly what you think it is and is amazing and I need to figure out how to replicate it at home! Almost 2,000 feet below, we saw our next waypoint, the Chalets de Miage, a cluster of refuges huddled in the pastures. We proceeded to make the slow and steep descent via numerous trail switchbacks.



At the bottom lay the Refuge de Miage which had a cute outdoor patio where many people were enjoying lunch. We sat down on a nearby rock in this secluded valley to eat some of our packed lunch before carrying on the trail. The path took us up the walling hillside to the Mont Truc ridge crest and we elected to make the short climb up Mont Truc ("truc" means rounded summit). We're so glad we took the detour which led us past grazing cows with bells that sounded like wind chimes. From the top, we had more beautiful views of the mountains and the pass we had just descended from.





The day's hike finished with an hour-long trek down a forested track. We eventually reached Les Contamines and while the official TMB route ended at the tourist office in town, we detoured to the patio of a restaurant to enjoy a beer. Our hotel was about a mile walk out of town along a river path. We were delighted to find that the hotel had an outdoor pool, so we took a quick dip before enjoying another beer on our room's private balcony. Dinner was included at our hotel, and we enjoyed a salad, a local pasta dish with cheese and bacon, and a fruit sorbet for dessert. As is usual when we travel, we headed to bed early to prepare for the next day!



**The picturesque town
of Les Contamines and
our mountain-themed
hotel, the La Chemenaz
Chalet.**





DAY 4

LES CONTAMINES TO REFUGE DES MOTTETS

At some point during the night, we woke to thunder and pouring rain. It was somewhat of a precursor of what was to come since it was still pouring when our alarm went off. Although we were prepared with rain gear, after our experience in Patagonia, we were not keen to hike in the rain all day again. Thankfully, as we made our way along the beginning portion of the trail that followed the river on a gravel path, the rain stopped! We quickly shed our rain gear and carried on, passing the pilgrimage chapel of Notre-Dame de la Gorge. It was here that the day's work began, as we climbed steeply up a wooden ravine over Roman-laid slabs. Along the way, we traversed a gorge with a raging waterfall and then continued onto a more open and exposed path that would take us to the Col du Bonhomme. First though, we had to cross a large patch of snow!



While reaching the col at 7,641 ft was a milestone, it was somewhat anti-climatic because we had more to go! It was only 11:30am, so we snapped a picture with the French flag and decided to wait for lunch at Col de la Croix du Bonhomme at 8,164 ft. We zigzagged across streams and the lush valley on our way to the saddle.

We had planned to take the tougher route today, which would lead us through yet another col on our way to our refuge. When we reached Col de la Croix du Bonhomme, it was the turning point for that TMB variant. Based on our guide book, that route was only recommended in good weather conditions and with clear visibility. All day it had remained overcast, but not raining.



Well, wouldn't you know it but within minutes of reaching the top, fog started pouring into the valley. It was otherworldly, watching the tendrils of fog and mist curl around us so quickly. Climbing to the cairn that marked the summit, we could barely see the marker and then it started dumping rain that turned to sleet. We were bummed because this meant we would have to take a different trail than anticipated AND the scenic lunch stop we were looking forward to was ruined. Drenched and cold, we started trodding down the trail only to run smack into a refuge. We exchanged one look, which was that of relief, as we dumped our gear outside and headed into the warmth of the crowded shelter. Everything was so wet, our plan was to dry off a bit, get a hot drink, and hope that the weather cleared somewhat so the rest of the day wouldn't be a total wash. As luck would have it, within a half an hour, the weather had completely cleared!! Spirits high, we headed back to the col to hit the original trail.



**Summit
view dur-
ing and
after the
storm!**



**Tasty hot
chocolate at
the refuge**



We soon reached the Col des Fours, which at 8,809 ft is the highest point on the TMB. We were thrilled to have been able to climb here in good weather!



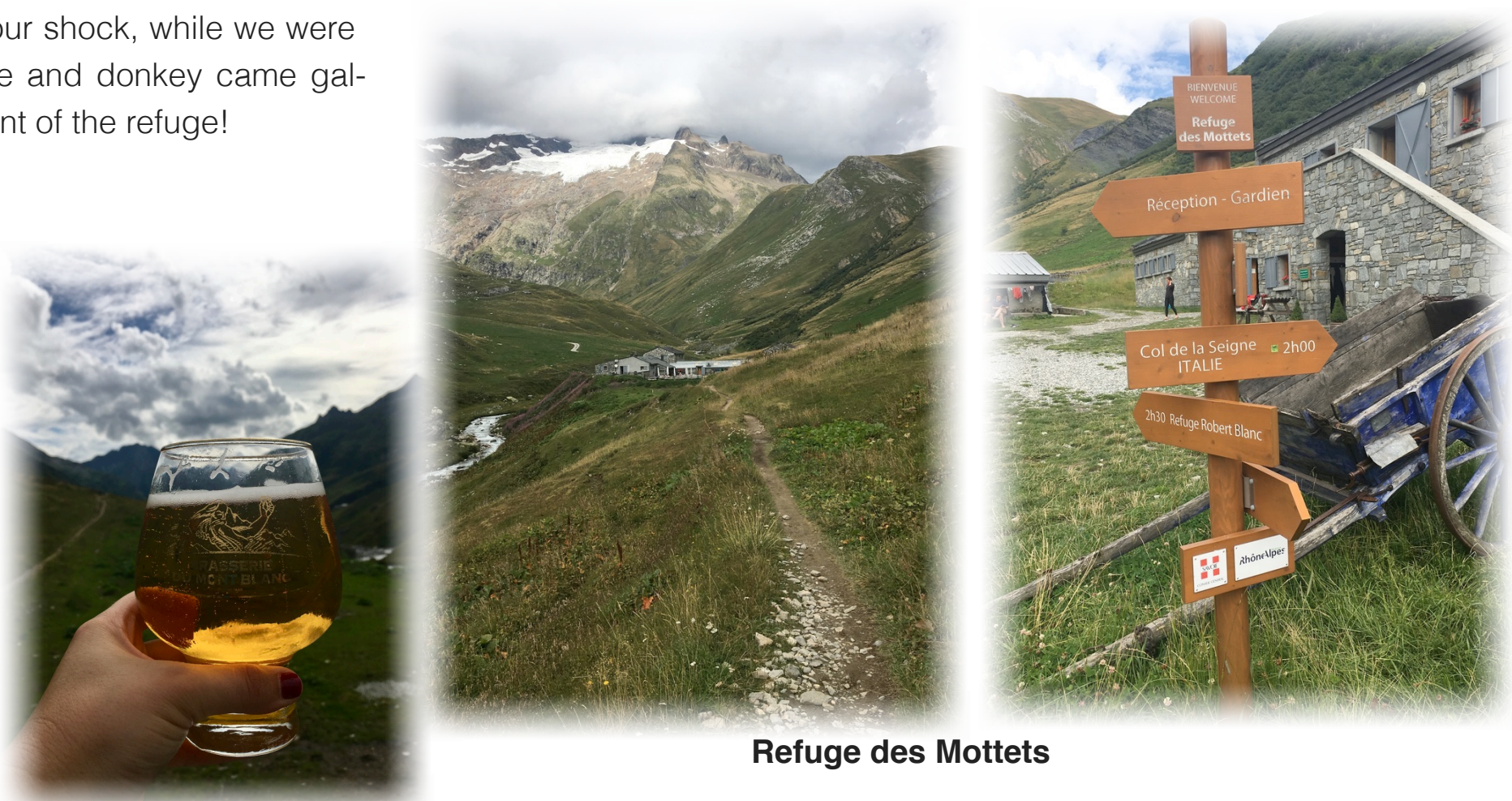
From this point, the trail was down a steep slope to a valley dotted with cows, waterfalls, and streams. Despite the rain, the trail was in good shape and not too muddy. Further on, the trail turned onto a jeep track at the end of which we were only 30 minutes away from our destination - Refuge des Mottets!



**A snail friend
found on trail**

Nestled in the Valley of Glaciers, this refuge was a welcome sight in such a remote and pristine location. By this time, the sun was even shining! Before making our way to our room, we rested on the picnic benches to enjoy a hard-won beer. To our shock, while we were admiring the scenery, an unattended horse and donkey came galloping up out of the valley and grazed in front of the refuge!

The dinner bell rang promptly at 7pm and we were ushered inside to partake in a family-style dinner at picnic tables. The food was great - a hearty soup with bread, salad, rice, potatoes, beef, and cheese and pudding for dessert. Midway through the meal we were treated to music from a carillon a musique “chimes of music” box and the room had a singalong of sorts. Shortly after, we retired to our room. Most of the accommodations here are dormitory-style, but we had secured a private room with an ensuite shower. It’s the little things!



Refuge des Mottets



DAY 5

REFUGE DES MOTTETS TO COURMAYEUR

Today's motto was "rain rain go away". Breakfast at the refuge was served early, at 6:30am, so we took advantage of that to get an early start to the day. We were surprised at how many groups of 8+ people were hiking the TMB together on guided treks. We were always able to easily pass them while on trail, but it's nice to start ahead of them and have the trail to ourselves. Last night we had checked the weather forecast posted on the bulletin board at the refuge which called for light to moderate rain all day with a near zero percent chance of sun! At this point, it was only drizzling and we set off on the path behind the refuge to make our way towards the Col del la Seigne. As our guidebook promised, we ascended the 2,000 ft on a series of broad, well-graded switchbacks. As we neared the top of the initial climb, we looked below to a line of fluorescent-colored ants which were the hikers' backpacks rain covers. As we climbed, I could feel the toll of yesterday on my legs and felt like we were moving through molasses. We beat the predicted hiking time by a half an hour though, so maybe it only felt like we were moving slowly!





Upon reaching the Col de la Seigne, we reached our first border crossing going from France into Italy! Although it was overcast and misty, we had eye-opening views which were dominated by the verticals of the surrounding mountains. Cascades of ice tumbled from rugged peaks and spiky ridges and below us lay the green valley into which the TMB would descend. We got our picture with the Italian flag and kept moving on!

The path braided its way down a sloping hillside and we soon passed a former customs house called La Casermetta. The Col de la Seigne has long been an important gateway for people and goods going to and from France.

We descended further along the track and passed a group of friendly cows and not long after, we arrived at Rifugio Elisabetta which has the most amazing views. It was only 9:30am at this point and too early to stop for lunch, but unfortunately, it began to downright pour at this point so we hightailed it down the trail. We were soaked and our hands were freezing, but our spirits were buoyed by the sight of the valley in Lac Combal. Milky-blue water, wildflowers, and marshes surrounded us. Despite the pounding rain, we smiled at every hiker we passed going the opposite direction. We were all in this together!

In about an hour, we had reached the day's decision point. The easier option would have us out of the weather in about an hour because we'd hike up the valley floor to the town of Visaille and catch a bus to Courmayeur. This was not our original plan, however, as we had wanted to stay on the TMB "high route". The situation called for a Snickers bar as we contemplated what to do. As we stood there eating, the rain began to let up and we said screw it, we're going the high route.



La Casermetta



We turned onto the path which angled up a steep hillside to ruins and then once we were above the tree line we had a view across the valley directly to the Miage glacier. Even with the clouds, this route was so special. It is considered a balcony path and we understood what this meant as we proceeded to see the entire southern face of the Mont Blanc range revealed to us. By now, the rain had completely stopped and the sun even threatened to come out. We saw no other human on trail and passed through pastures with no company but the cows. The views were one of our favorite of the entire trip.

At this point, we had somewhat dried out and so at the highest point, Mont Favre, we paused to enjoy our packed lunch from the refuge. The French do food so well. Our lunch contained bread, cheese, sausage, pate & crackers, a tomato, egg, applesauce, dried apricots, and a candy bar! Not long after, we heard thunder and saw dark clouds threatening in the distance. Given how quickly yesterday's storm rolled in, we didn't want to take any chances so we hastily packed up the remaining food and jetted down the trail.



At one point, it looked like Armageddon looming above us. It recalled a scene from the movie Independence Day. But, no aliens, just buckets and buckets of large hail were unleashed. It really hurt! Thankfully, the hail was short-lived and we were able to stay fairly dry as it lightly rained before the SECOND round of hail. Mercifully, the thunder still sounded fairly far away as we continued down the trail and at last arrived at Col Checrouit which contained a refuge. Our initial plan was to stop for a quick bathroom break and finish up our lunch under the tent they had set-up outside. As we did that, however, a huge flash of lightning and crack of thunder sounded as if it were right overhead. It was too close for comfort, so we headed inside for a cappuccino to wait for the storm to pass by. Although it was still rainy and very foggy, things settled down in about 20 minutes or so and we made our way to a bluff where we happily learned that the chairlift and cablecar we had planned to take down to Courmayeur were working!





A short walk from the cable station had us at the family-run Hotel Bourton d'Or in the bustling town of Courmayeur. After cleaning up, we set out to walk through this charming town. Many people doing the TMB elect to take a rest day here as it is a large town and a good base for many activities. Of course, we sat down to enjoy a beer and did a bit of shopping. You can never have enough Buffs, so we each picked out an official TMB Buff as a memory of our time on the trail. Dinner was on our own this evening, so I had booked us a table at an Italian restaurant in town. It was overcast and chilly, so it wasn't the romantic patio table I had dreamed of, but we were still on the (now enclosed) patio and greatly enjoyed a hearty meal of

pate and pizza with red wine. We ate every bite!!



Over dinner, we reflected on our day and felt like after our experience in Patagonia, no weather while hiking really seems that bad in comparison. This would be our only day of horrendous weather the entire trip and little did we know at the time that it would be the "Tuesday" that lived in infamy. Everyone we met on the TMB and even in the Jungfrau region of Switzerland would give a knowing nod about the terrible weather that day.



DAY 6

ARNUVA TO LA FOULY





Sun! Glorious sun! We were thrilled to wake up with no sign of rain and clear skies. Since we were hiking the highlights of the TMB, today we would take a local bus from Courmayeur to Arnuva and start our hike there. The prior evening, we debated heavily about whether we wanted to take the first bus of the day at 7:50am, which would mean skipping breakfast at our hotel because it technically began at 7:30am, or waiting an hour until the next bus. In the end, early won out! We got down to breakfast a bit early and found it to be open, so we ended up being able to sit down and enjoy a proper meal before getting to the bus stop. It was at that point that we remembered our lunch was sitting in the hotel

fridge! Cue my mad dash back to the hotel. Sandwiches were retrieved and I made it back before the bus had arrived. Phew!



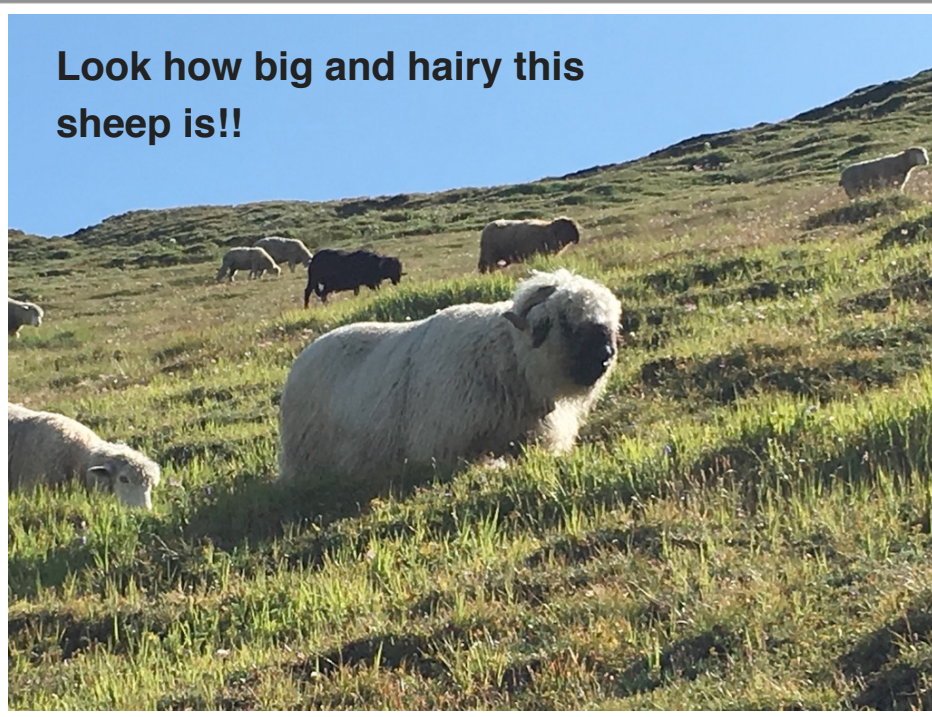
Upon arrival in Arnuva, we headed up a steep climbing path past a group of ruins, over a footbridge crossing a stream and after a bit arrived at the Rifugio Elena. This refuge is actually built into the hillside for protection because in the 1950s the original version was destroyed by an avalanche! The views here and along the trail across the valley to the Glacier de Pre de Bar were amazing. The icefall is literally squeezed between two banks of rocks, making it appear as if it were dripping down. It was too early in the day to stop at the refuge, so we pressed onwards and upwards, once again leaving the groups behind.



As we approached the Grand Col Ferret, a huge flock of sheep came trundling by. It was a never-ending procession of sheep that came in all shapes and sizes. We were the only people around and it was an amazing and somewhat comical sight. We just stood by and watched in awe. Just a few steps later we found ourselves at the col peering over into Switzerland!! As compared with the view we just left, this was a bit subdued, but a beautiful panorama nonetheless.



Look how big and hairy this sheep is!!



We made our way down trail, now officially in Switzerland. Here, there was less snow and more grass-covered mountains, streams, and waterfalls that punctuated the landscape. No glaciers! We took a quick detour our guide book recommended which afforded us more fine views. We eventually reached the Alpage de la Peule, a summer dairy farm, where we ate our packed lunch on picnic benches. Following a jeep and mountain bike track, we descended to the small town of Ferret with the most charming alpine-style chalets with window boxes teeming with flowers. Further still, we walked through a forest track to reach the town of La Fouly.



It was just after 2pm in La Fouly and most everything was closed. We got cold sodas at the grocery store and sipped them while admiring the views. Our day would end with a bus ride too and we had to wait until 3:50pm for the local bus that would take us to our lodging. Just before 5pm, we were deposited in the lakeside town of Champex and walked along the lake to Hotel Belvedere, which was perched on a cliff. I would describe the outdoor and indoor decor of the hotel as interesting and eclectic, but our room was great! It was in the corner and had two balconies and the most comfortable bed with down comforters and pillows. I wanted to sink in and never leave! Of course, there was beer to drink, so we ordered two steins and enjoyed them in the garden patio. Dinner was at 7pm and there were only 6 patrons total. The hotel is family-run and the home cooked meal was truly the best of our entire trip. We started with a salad with Camembert cheese, the main was pork with mushroom sauce, broccoli, and potatoes, and a dessert of a tangerine tart with ice cream. We savored every mouthful and the herbs picked freshly from the garden literally popped in our mouths. That coupled with the views made it a meal to remember!

View from hotel garden



DAY 7

CHAMPEX TO TRIENT



Lake Champex



After a blissful night of sleep and a good breakfast, we set out towards the trail, stopping at the local market to pick up lunch. We learned the bread they were baking would not be done for another 15 minutes. We'd later discover it was worth the wait for our fresh-sliced salami and cheese sandwiches!



No dogs or farting?!

Due to the TMB variant we'd be taking today, we initially had a bit of trouble finding the trail but quickly got back on track. The trek took us up a jeep path and then into an open meadow where we got to watch a Swiss helicopter ferry supplies to a remote location. Then, we began the slow and arduous climb through a legit boulder field. The poles were stowed as we often needed both hands for rock scrambles. Sometimes the TMB trail markers just pointed straight up!



From here our destination, the Fenetre d'Arpette, came into view but looked so far away from the chaos and maze of boulders we had to navigate to get there. Along with the previously summited Col des Fours, this is the highest point on the TMB. This was easily the toughest portion of the entire TMB. Pausing to look up and around at the surrounding mountains littered with gravel and boulders was almost vertigo-inducing.





Many, many slow steps, later, we eventually reached our goal. Fentre means window, and reaching the Fenetre d'Arpette was truly a window to another world and a highlight of the TMB. Only at the very top could we see the Trient glacier spilling out towards the Trient Valley it created below. Absolutely magnificent.



We took a good, long rest here. Those sandwiches? Amazing and SO fresh!! We took a lot of pictures and reluctantly packed up our gear because what goes up must come down. Thankfully, the trail down was an actual path and not just over rocks. Plus, it gave us plenty of opportunity to pause and admire the glacier and we inched farther away.

Eventually the path drew closer to the river but our next marker, the Chalet du Glacier, seemed to take forever to come into view! At last, we saw it through the trees and dropped our packs for a rest. As you might sense, we have an intensive post-hike reward program which generally involves beer. Since we weren't quite done hiking yet, I savored an ice-cold Fanta and soaked in the views one last time.



From here, it was a 40-minute walk to our hotel in the town of Trient. The accommodations at La Grand Ourse were basic - we had a sparse, private room with shared bathroom facilities. Before dinner, we enjoyed beer on the patio and conversation with some other Americans from Texas and Colorado. Dinner was at communal tables and we sat with our new-found friends there too to enjoy soup and bread, chicken with rice, and a flan for dessert. Same drill - early to bed to prepare for our last day on trail!!



DAY 8

TRIENT TO ARGENTIERE



We awoke giddy about our last day on trail! We were among the first to get to the 6:30am breakfast and were on the trail at 7am with no one else in sight. It was a clear, yet crisp and chilly morning. Perfect for hiking! Today, we would cross back in to France and do so at the Col de Balme. We got a real workout climbing a steep path of seemingly endless switchbacks through the forest. We came across some picnic benches and BBQ pits built by locals. Heck, we even saw two dachshunds out for a walk by themselves!! Above the tree line, the path levels out to what our guidebook called “a benevolent angle” and in under two hours we had reached the col.



Along this border between Switzerland and France, Mont Blanc once again came into view along with countless other glaciers and snow-capped mountains. There was a refuge up top that has apparently been burnt down several times as a result of disputes between the countries. There are even two signs that give conflicting altitudes. Unsurprisingly, purchases can be paid for in Swiss francs or Euros. :)

It was early in the day, so we hiked down along the French border to the Col des Posettes which wasn't much to look at and really just served as a multi-junction of paths. From there we began the final ascent of the TMB to L'Aiguillette des Posettes along a crest with some of the best panoramic views of the hike. I tripped a lot during this section, distracted by the view off to my left of Mont Blanc and the Glacier du Tour. The summit was our stopping point for a snack and we spent a good long while there.



Sufficiently fortified, we began the steep descent to Tre-le-Champ. We were tired, but the path was fairly unremarkable and we were able to get down pretty quickly. Once in town, we had to walk another 30 minutes to the town of Argentiere where we'd catch a local bus to Chamonix. Ravenous, we bought a sandwich to split and ate it while waiting for the bus which was a bit late. We arrived in Chamonix at 2pm and were happy to find our hotel room ready upon arrival! The hotel's location was right on the river and we had a third floor corner room. Throwing open the balcony doors gave me the feeling of sleeping next to a raging river with rapids running by. The room was such a delight for our last night on the TMB!



Priority #1: Ice Cream



Priority #2: Beer (and charcuterie)



Priority #3: Burgers

We had a grand afternoon exploring and eating our way through Chamonix. The sport of mountaineering was virtually invented here and I was happy to see it alive and well today. We saw plenty of people making their way through town with ropes slung around their shoulders and ice axes peeking out of backpacks. Mont Blanc was first summited from here in 1786 and in town there is a statue of Balmat (part of the first party to summit) pointing out the route to de Saussure, a man who had offered a reward to those first to summit.

The town was even more lively than usual because the UTMB, an ultra-trail marathon over the TMB route was due to begin in a few days. At that time, over 2,500 runners would set out on the trail we had just completed. It was hard enough to hike - I can't imagine trail running it! This year the male winner completed the course in just over 20 hours and the (American!) female winner finished in just over 24 hours. Major props!



DAY 9

CHAMONIX TO WENGEN

This was largely a travel day as we made our way to the town of Wengen where we'd be spending the remainder of our trip. Thanks to no traffic and an easy border crossing back into Switzerland, our transfer to the Geneva Airport arrived much earlier than expected. We hurried over to the train station where we were able to catch the train that left in nine minutes from the time we arrived. We'd quickly learn how easy to use (and punctual) the Swiss transportation would be. For now, we sat back and relaxed as we were able to leave the area two hours earlier than expected. We had to switch trains in Bern, Interlaken, and Lauterbrunnen but around 1pm we found ourselves in Wengen!

We enjoyed an impromptu picnic lunch in the town's park of sandwiches from the grocery store, picked up our keys, and made our way uphill to our chalet. We couldn't have asked for a better Airbnb - the entire chalet was rimmed with balconies and there were two bedrooms, a bathroom, living area, and eat-in kitchen. After savoring a beer in town, we played a round of miniature golf at Lauberhorn Crazy Golf. The course is modeled after the town's famous downhill alpine ski race held every February. We had fun and learned a lot too!





We had to ring the cowbells during golf!



Our chalet occupied the second floor



View of Wengen from our balcony

DAY 10

SCHYNYGE PLATTE TO FIRST HIKE



Giving ourselves a mere one day break, we set out early to complete the 10.55-mile hike from Schynige Platte to First. Getting to Schynige Platte, however, was an adventure in and of itself! The entire Jungfrau region is connected by a mass of trains, gondolas, and cable cars which makes getting around incredibly fun. We had purchased travel passes that allowed us unlimited travel on most of these modes of transportation. As with most days, our day began with the steep trip on the railway down to Lauterbrunnen. From there, we switched on a train towards Interlaken, but got off at Wilderswill to catch the slow rail to Schynige Platte. The rail line opened in 1893 using steam traction but was electrified in 1914. In just under an hour, our train climbed 4.5 miles of track and gained an astounding 4,659 ft! At the top, there is a hotel and restaurant and alpine flower garden which we had fun exploring before setting off on trail.



Fun in larger than life picture frames! A friendly cow wanted in on the action too!



Our trusty rail car





This hike is referred to as one of the “classic walks” in the Bernese Oberland area and we were lucky enough to experience it on a day with clear skies and abundant sunshine. We passed through beautiful scenery, boulder fields, and mountains. Although the trail was undulating, thankfully there was nowhere near as much vertical ascent as on the TMB. As is typical in the region, we turned a corner at one point and came across a refuge whose only supplier is a helicopter that drops supplies at the beginning of the summer. We stopped for a rest to enjoy the views while Mike sipped a cup of coffee.



Upon completing a steep climb, the Faulhorn mountain came into view. Along the way, we saw countless paragliders who jumped out of a plane do so in some sort of extreme combo sport. Very cool!! At last, we reached the base of the Faulhorn and pretty much climbed straight up in a series of short switchbacks. But boy were the 360-degree views at the top worth every bit of sweat! Mountains, glaciers, and lakes were all in view as we sat on a bench and enjoyed our lunch.



Making our way down to First, we passed the magnificent Bachalpsee Lake which sits at almost 7,500 ft. With glaciers in the distant background, this was probably my favorite view of our entire time hiking in this region. Things were a bit more crowded here due to its accessibility via gondola from the valley. It was a shock to see so many people after a relatively quiet day on the trail. Once in First, we did the “cliff walk” on a catwalk they’ve embedded into the cliff and then took a gondola ride down to Grindelwald. Below, we watched as people biked down the mountain and even took a zipline. After a series of train rides, we finally made our way back to Wengen completely exhausted but happy with our first hike in the Jungfrau region!



DAY 11

MIKE'S BIRTHDAY

Today was Mike's birthday and ended up being my favorite day of the entire trip. Even though we had a lot of fun adventure activities already scheduled, the weather was amazing and all the impromptu spots we stumbled onto were better than we could have planned!

The day began with a paragliding trip from Mürren down through the Lauterbrunnen Valley. All we had to do was take a few running steps off a cliff and away we went. The flight was absolutely sublime and so peaceful and relaxing. It was completely unlike the jarring experience of skydiving. I enjoyed this one much more and felt no adrenaline, only a sense of calm. We soared near waterfalls and skimmed the treetops. I felt like I was part of an IMAX movie. It was surreal! After having the opportunity to take over the controls and then do rollercoaster drops towards the valley, landing was just as easy as taking off. We landed right on target and upright!





**Paragliding
Fun!**

Paragliding Fun!





Once back in town, we took the cable car up to the town of Mürren again where we'd begin the second helmet-required activity of the day. The Mürren to Gimmelwald via ferrata!! Via ferrata is Italian for "iron path" and we'd be making our way along the 1.5-mile route using our own two feet plus a series of ladders, iron rungs bolted into cliffs, tightropes, and bridges! While we could have gone with a guide, we elected the DIY trip and stopped in at the Intersport store to get outfitted with a harness to clip into the via ferrata route and a helmet. After a short briefing, we were pointed in the direction of the start and away we went!

At the start of the adventure!





After a steep downhill portion, we came to the exposed cliffs. Nothing but 2,000 ft of straight drop below those iron rungs!



This part was so exposed and epic!!!





The last part of the via ferrata took us over a waterfall on a tightrope of sorts, a series of ladders we used to navigate more drops, and the final fun, a crossing over a Nepalese Bridge. We waved at the horrified gondola riders as they passed by above!





Having worked up a sweat over the prior two hours, upon exiting the via ferrata we saw a sign for a beer garden. Well placed! Yes, please! The place is best known for their Schwarz Mönch whose motto is “tall, dark, and snowcapped”. It was SO delicious! They describe the beer as lighter than a stout with English hops, coffee and dark roasted chocolate and malt flavors. I call it creamy and delicious! It was the perfect way to unwind after an adrenaline-packed two hours. The patio had gorgeous views too!



We had to make our way back to Mürren to drop off our rental gear and realizing our shared sandwich on the via ferrata wasn't going to cut it, we stopped at a local cafe for the best cappuccinos and egg-topped rösti (think hash browns) of our trip!



After relaxing and enjoying a beer in town, we made our way to dinner at Hotel Bären. I had let them know we'd be dining to celebrate Mike's birthday and they thoughtfully decorated the table which was so special. We proceeded to enjoy an amazing bottle of Swiss wine (a pinot noir and malbec blend) and a gourmet tasting menu. Slightly drunk, we laughed as we got lost under the stars walking home while trying to take a “shortcut”. This was a day to remember!!





DAY 12

JUNGFRAUJOCH - THE TOP OF EUROPE

Today we traveled to Jungfrauoch which is billed as the “top of Europe”. Standing at 11,333 ft, this attraction boasts the highest-altitude post box in Switzerland, chocolate shop in Europe, and watch shop in the world. Getting to Jungfrauoch is an adventure in and of itself along a railway that is a true engineering marvel. Construction on the track from Kleine Scheidegg began in 1896 and was not completed until 1912. Thousands of workers participated in the manual blasting that needed to occur to create the tunnel for the track. Indeed, about 30 minutes of our train ride was completely inside a tunnel which winds through the mountain. The literature we received says that each week a member of the railway staff checks the entire track on foot.



photo credit: jungfrau.ch

Upon arrival at the top train station, we disembarked and headed to the Sphinx observatory platform where the cloudless day afforded us amazing views of the surrounding areas. Although we were surrounded by snow and ice, it didn't feel too cold!



Some of the first visitors and a more modern visitor





We then turned our attention to the Alpine Sensation which walked visitors through the process of building Jungfrauoch from the moment the idea was conceived through completion. We then moved on to the Ice Palace which contained really cool ice sculptures and ended up being the coldest part of our visit! Brrrr!!

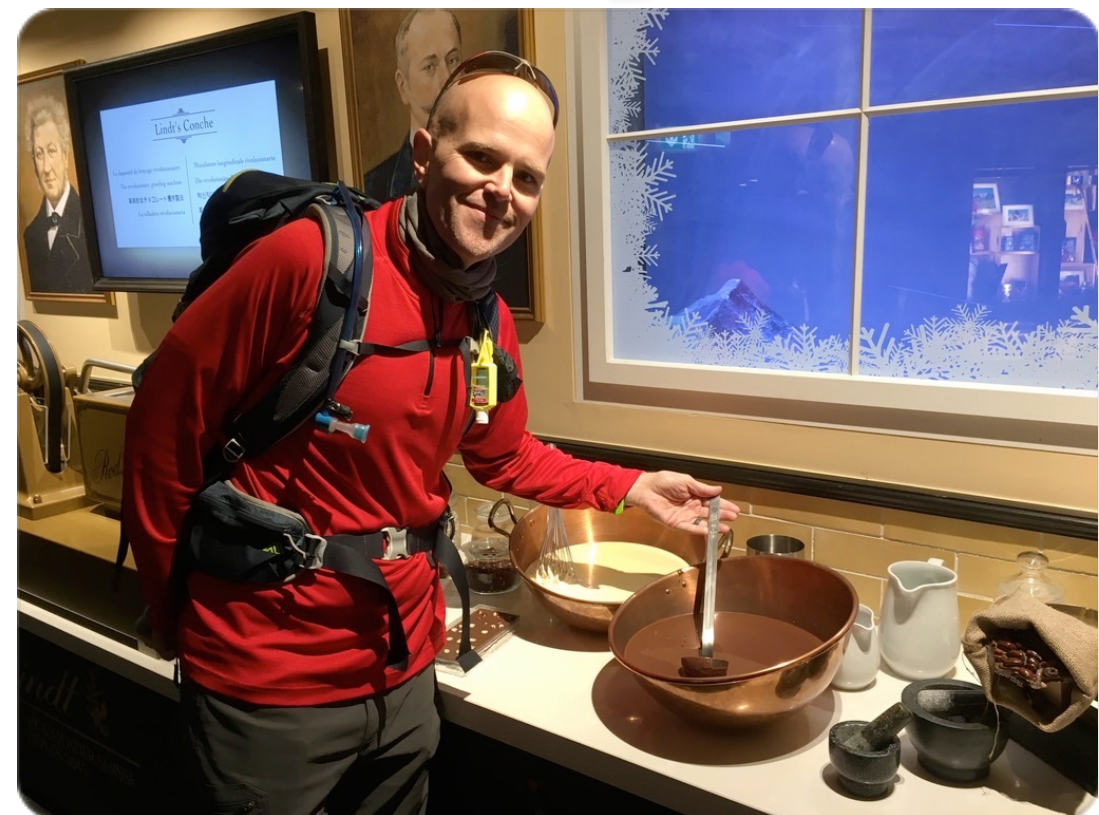


After making a quick pit stop at an ice plateau outside of the observatory, we headed out onto the true ice to hike to Mönchsjochhütte along a marked path. This hut is open to the public for drinks and snacks, but also serves as the base for most people attempting to summit Jungfrau. At this point, we had taken off our jackets. It was a difficult and slow uphill climb at high altitude so we were working hard! Upon arrival at the hut, we elected to simply turn around and walk back to the main station. Along the way, we passed the snow park which is open all year round. You can go tubing or even ski and snowboard here!



Mönchsjochhütte

After stopping at the Lindt Swiss factory so Mike could practice his chocolate-making skills, we headed down via train to Kleine Schiedegg where we enjoyed a coffee and lunch before we began our afternoon hike on the Panorama trail to Männlichen.



The Panorama Trail was a fairly easy hour and a half stroll and the views were out of this world. As we passed other hikers we heard so many marveling at the views of the three major mountain peaks above (Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau) and the village of Grindelwald far below in the valley. At Männlichen, they had a fun area where we bowled and Mike went down a slide in the shape of a cow. We ended our time in the area by taking the “royal walk” to the top of a hill with a great viewpoint.





After soaking in our last views, we headed down to Wengen via the cable car. We hadn't had enough yet though because before heading home, we did a scenic walk down to a secluded viewpoint of the Lauterbrunnen Valley in the town of Wengenwald. Although I was so tired at this point, I'm glad we made the trek because it was peaceful to sit on the bench by ourselves and have time to reflect. I don't think I could ever tire of this view. With a sigh, we got up, walked to Wengen, and headed to the chalet to end the long day!





DAY 13

INTERLAKEN

This was our ninth wedding anniversary!! We had originally planned to go to Jungfrauoch on this day but switched the plans with the day prior due to the weather. In the morning, we made our way to Interlaken by train to catch a boat that would cruise along Lake Brienz. The lake was a beautiful turquoise color and we enjoyed spending an hour on the water as it was different from any activity we'd done on the trip so far. We disembarked at the stop for Giessbach, home to the beautiful Grandhotel Giessbach and the Giessbach Falls. Although there was a funicular from the boat ramp up to the hotel, we opted to stretch our legs and took the footpath up to the hotel and falls viewpoint. The path even led behind the waterfall at one point which was really neat!



Leaving the falls, we hiked the high trail from Giessbach to the next town on Lake Brienz called Iseltwald. The trail was mostly flat and was a nice walk through the woods. We came upon so many storage places for wood - people were already stocked up for the winter! Once in the town of Iseltwald, we enjoyed our lunch on a bench right next to the water. We saw a swan and several ducks that were great fisherman, darting under the water and always coming up with a catch!



At this point, we could have caught the boat on its way back to Interlaken but decided instead to walk to the next town of Bönigen. Although this also only took one and a half hours, this trek felt like torture! It was midday, hot, and the trail gained a LOT more elevation than we anticipated. We had thought it would be an easy stroll along the lake but it was decidedly not. When we reached the next town, we both agreed to take the short boat ride back to Interlaken instead of walking!

Upon docking in Interlaken, we walked around the town which is fairly large and touristy. We were able to pick up a few souvenirs and made refreshing stops for gelato and espresso. Always on the hunt for local craft beer, Mike had found a Thai restaurant in town that was the home of Mountain Madness Brewing. We had to wait a half an hour for them to open at 5pm, but the beer was good! Only afterwards did we learn the beer we drank wasn't even from that brewery. Ha! We made our way back to the train for the dinner reservations I had made in Lauterbrunnen. It wasn't exactly the day we had planned and by this point we were both SO tired. In addition, we didn't have time to shower or change before dinner, so we rolled up in our hiking gear and backpacks. Our table was outside, so it was fine. :) The table was sweetly decorated with folded napkins and a candle! We each enjoyed rösti platters but were too tired to even enjoy dessert! As we took the train back up to Wengen, we learned that we had walked over 15 miles over the course of the day. We ended our night by enjoying cookies in our chalet and watching a storm roll in in the distance!

Anniversary love!



Pre-dinner tired Heather



DAY 14

LAUTERBRUNNEN VALLEY

Yesterday we hit a wall of sorts. The past two weeks of intense hiking nearly every day had finally caught up with us. For those of you who know me well, I know it might be hard to believe, but during this portion of the trip I had built in some unplanned, flexible days. <insert gasp> Our travel passes and extended time in the region afforded us the luxury of having a schedule that could be easily changed. We took advantage of that in order to take a rest day and relax. That meant not waking up in the dark to flip on the coffee pot half asleep, then shoveling down a bowl of yogurt and granola before running out the door to catch the train. Instead, we slept in and enjoyed reading in bed and leisurely sipping coffee. Later in the morning, we took the train down to Lauterbrunnen to visit the Airtime Cafe (a cafe run by the company we went paragliding with). We had more coffee and a real breakfast of ham and eggs on toast which was delicious! We then set out on foot to explore the bottom of the valley which was teeming with 72 waterfalls. Our first stop was Staubbach Falls which drop from a height of almost 1,000 ft above. We had to hike up a path and through a tunnel which got us very close to the falls. We then continued to meander up the valley and past more waterfalls.





Our next stop of the morning were the Trümmelbach Falls. These are a series of ten glacier-fed waterfalls inside a mountain!! Over 20,000 liters of water flows through this area every second. My understanding is that in the early 1900s a farmer discovered the falls and built a series of steps to allow the first visitors to view the falls. Over time the infrastructure has been built up to include more stairs, a tunnel-funicular, and illumination. This attraction has earned a coveted three-star rating from the Michelin travel guide for its dedication to preserving the natural beauty of the falls and adding minimal infrastructure. Seeing the smooth rock eroded into massive holes by the pounding water was so powerful. We took the funicular inside of the falls and explored them from the top-down.



Fälle / Chutes 6-10

After we had our first Schwarz Mönch beer earlier in the week, we knew we had to make our way back there before the end of the trip. This seemed like the perfect day to stop, so we walked along the valley to Stechelberg. Then, did we hike up to Gimmelwald? Heck no! We took the cable car to enjoy delicious beer and a slice of apricot cake.



Not wanting to be total sloths, we did hike up from Gimmelwald to Mürren and then took the path to Grütschalp where we could take the cable car back down to the valley. The views here were sigh worthy too.





DAY 15

ISENFLUH & SUWALD



Refreshed and ready to rock, we made our way down to Lauterbrunnen by train (are you sensing a theme here?) and headed up the trail to Isenfluh on the other side of the valley. I found this hike buried in someone's blog, so it was definitely not widely well-known and had a more remote feel than some of our other hikes in the area. The trail was pretty much straight up and unremarkable other than the waterfall we hiked by and the now familiar drone of a helicopter ferrying supplies to a remote refuge. Once in the small town of Isenfluh, we had the choice of walking up to the next town of Suwald or taking a cable car. As advertised on their website, the tiny cable car fits eight people or one cow! Thankfully, we were two of only six human passengers and we quickly made it to the top. The operation is so small there was no staff in the cable car with us or at the top - we had to let ourselves out! Before starting the next portion of our hike, we took the opportunity to first head to a lookout.



Back on trail, we made our way to Lobhornhütte and the nearby Sulsseeli Lake, or the magical cow lake as I came to call it. This path was beautiful with alternating views of the forest and the surrounding mountains. As we approached the top, the view opened up and the trail followed a waterfall and stream. This would be our lunch stop later!



After passing by the Lobhornhütte, we couldn't even see Sulsseeli Lake until we turned the corner. This tiny mountain lake was so idyllic, dotted with cows happily munching away. I felt like we had stumbled upon a secret location.





We turned to head down the trail and decided to stop at the aforementioned waterfall and stream to have an early lunch. I even took my shoes off to soak my feet in the (frigid) water. As we sat there enjoying in the views, I'm pretty sure I said life doesn't get much better than moments such as that one. Pure bliss.



Dragging ourselves away from the rocks, we headed down a different trail that would take us to the cable car station at Grüt-schalp. This trail was even better than the one of the way up! It led us through the forest and by some magical mushrooms and we had amazing views across the valley.





Thanks to several well-placed benches, we were able to take our time and savor every moment on trail.



Once back down, we had the Airtime Cafe on our list as a hiking reward. We enjoyed cappuccinos and sweet desserts - a brownie for Mike and ginger banana bread for me. Delicious!! Once back at our chalet, we enjoyed beer, pretzels, and watching a huge storm as it rolled through the valley. Another day in mountain paradise!

DAY 16

EIGER TRAIL



We chose to spend our last day in the area on the Eiger Trail. Switching trains at Kleine Scheidegg, we got off the trail at the Alpiglen stop on the way to Grindelwald. This would be a point-to-point hike that followed the north face of the Eiger. We had an early start and the trail was still entirely in the shade which was nice. We hiked over steep alpine pastures, past waterfalls, and streams. Near the end of our hike, we even saw a climbing team high above us on the mountain!



Bonera	1 Std. 10 Min.	Alpiglen 1616 m
Gletscherschlucht	2 Std. 15 Min.	
Grindelwald	2 Std. 50 Min.	
Höhenweg 2000		
Bustiglen	50 min	
Männlichen	2 h 20 min	
Kleine Scheidegg	1 h 30 min	
Holstein	2 h 10 min	
Brandegg	25 min	
Grindelwald	1 h 30 min	
Eiger-Trail 2 h 50 min.		
Eigergletscher		
offen ouvert/open		
UNESCO Welterbe		
St. Petronell		





When we reached the end of the trail, we then walked downhill to Kleine Scheidegg along the Jungfrau-Eiger walk and celebrated with a beer in the beer garden!



We liked the Panorama Trail to Männlichen so much that we decided to do this again as our last hike. We stopped often to admire the views and once in Männlichen it was my turn to go down the cow slide! We enjoyed a cappuccino and a Snickers bar on the patio of a cafe as the sky darkened and threatened rain, but ended up releasing nothing more than a few droplets.



We found ourselves back in Wengen via the cable car pretty early in the day, but that gave us plenty of time to relax and pack-up. We had booked dinner in town where we were finally able to share a pot of fondue. Our first during our almost two weeks in Switzerland!

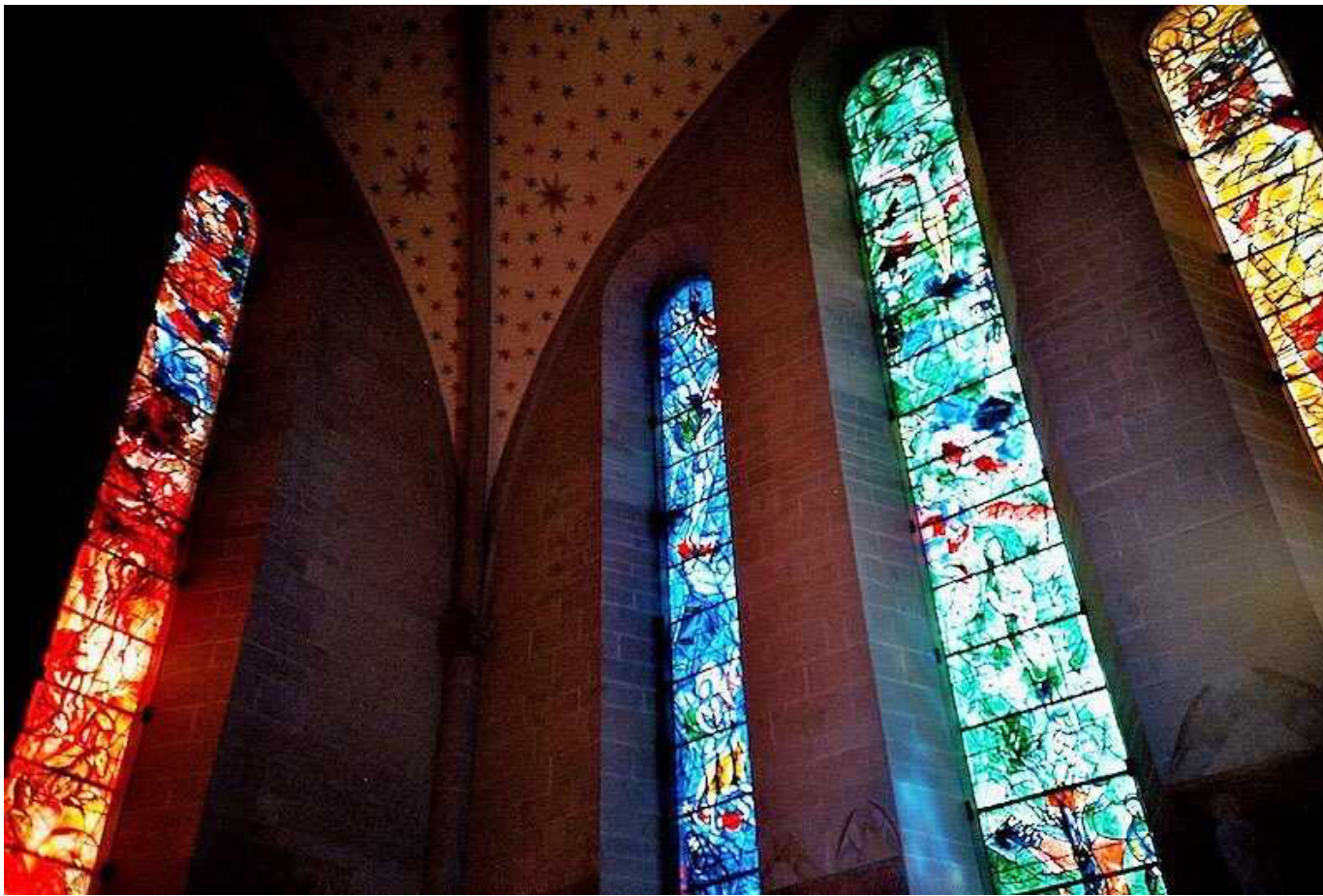
DAY 17

ZÜRICH

Waking early, we each enjoyed a few minutes alone on the patio and heard the church bells toll in the distance one last time. We spent the majority of our morning traveling by train to Zürich. Upon arrival, we dropped our bags in our room and set out in search of a much-needed second coffee. Most of Zürich's shops are closed, by law, on Sunday so the city had a deserted feeling. We stumbled upon a Starbucks and I am not ashamed to admit it was a welcome sight and I enjoyed every sip of my iced latte. Iced drinks are so hard to come by outside of the US!

Next up, we visited the Fraumünster Church after the end of Sunday services. The church is actually a former abbey that was founded in the mid-9th century which was subsequently dissolved in the mid-16th century and became a Reformed Church. As such, the interior of the church is very plainly adorned. There are no gold altars here. There are two notable exceptions - a large pipe organ (the 3rd largest in Switzerland) with almost 6,000 pipes and stained glass work by Chagall which is stunning. We did an audio tour and wandered about the church learning about the history, before ending our visit in the crypt whose foundations date back to the 9th century when the abbey was founded!





No pictures were allowed inside the church, so the photo credit for this picture of Chagall's windows goes to zuerich.com

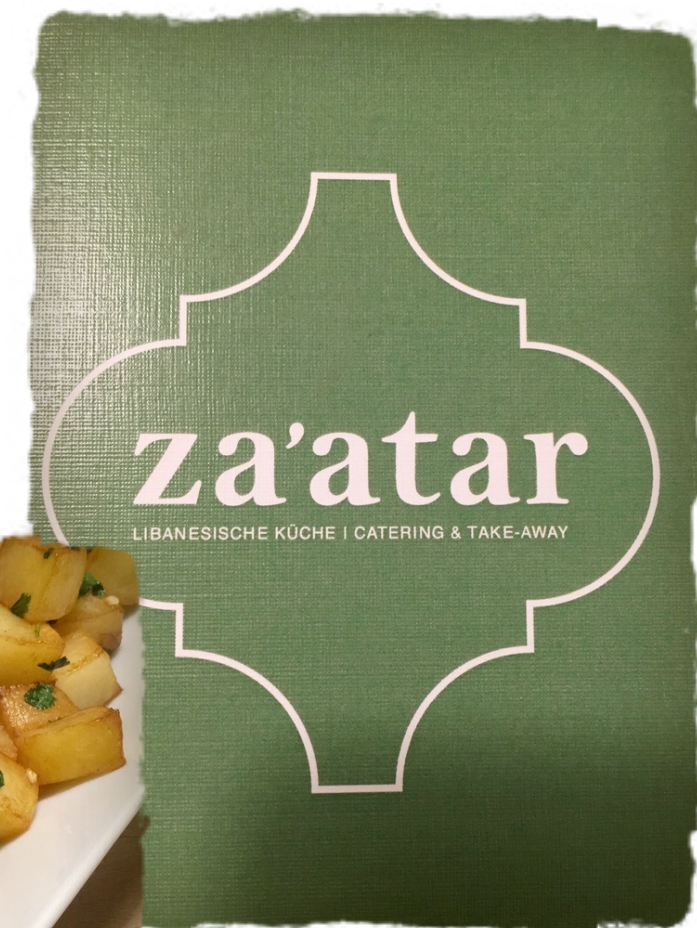


We had worked up an appetite walking around the city and stopped by a pier for a delicious lunch of sausages and fries before moving on to the afternoon's attractions at Museum Rietberg. This museum focuses on art and archeology and contains pieces from all over the world, some dating as far back as 7,000 years ago! With over 20,000 objects in the collection, it was a lot to take in. We particularly enjoyed their "visible storage" room which contained all the objects in storage, in glass cases for visitors to view. It was like entering an amazing attic full of wonders and oddities.





We found ourselves at beer o'clock and made our way to the International Beer Bar where we proceeded to enjoy sipping beer on their patio before dinner. The remainder of our trip was all about food! We had booked dinner at a tiny Lebanese restaurant called Za'atar, which happens to also be one of the top ten-ranked restaurants in all of Zurich. It is a two-man operation but the food was some of the best we had during our whole trip. The fresh falafel rivaled those we had in the Middle East. We shared a mezze platter for two and it was pure bliss.



I would be remiss if I didn't mention we ended our trip's food tour at Brezelkönig, or the Pretzel King. A whole store devoted to every kind of pretzel imaginable? Count me in!



Our time on the TMB and in Switzerland ranks as one of our favorite trips of all time. No words or pictures can do it justice. The hallmark of any truly special trip in our book involves us immediately beginning to plot how we can return. I found out that in the winter this area is home to the world's longest (10 miles!) sledging run with an optional pub stop in the middle, so we may be back sooner than we think...