Alpilicious European Vacation 2018

Netherlands, Swiss Alps, and Mini-Mont Blanc Redemption

Left to Right: (top) Delft windmill, Dutch botany, canoeing Delflandhoeve, biking Texel, Jungfrau reflection; (middle) rainy Eiger, Turk's Cap Lily, Matterhorn en route to Zmutt, en route to Gornergrot, Monte Rosa/Liskamm/Gorner Glacier; (bottom) edelweiss in situ, hiking to Sunnega, Chamonix, Mer de Glace, Mont Blanc massif from Italian/north side – Grandes Jorasses is prominent peak

Introduction

This was an unexpectedly excellent trip – for reasons that will emerge in the write-up. About a year ago, I noticed a new itinerary being offered up by Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS), the trekking company I most patronize: the Alps Trilogy promised moderate/level 3 dayhikes (5-7 miles) in the Swiss Alps (Grindelwald, Lauterbrunnen, and Zermatt) and Mont Blanc (Chamonix, France & Courmayeur, Italy). Given that my post-stress fracture foot had lots of short-term hiking but had not been tested out this many days, I thought this trip looked PERFECT… plus MTS was offering an early booking discount that, in combination with my repeat client status, was a plus. As someone who enjoys doing favorite hikes more than once, the prospect of repeating some Grindelwald hikes (which Ellen and I enjoyed during our super-hard Via Alpina in 2015) as well as hikes near Mont Blanc (things Allison and I hiked under great conditions prior to our Tour du Mont Blanc/TMB trip in 2005, or things that were wash-outs we never saw during the RAINY TMB circuit). And then there was the prize: my dad's beloved Zermatt/Matterhorn, which I'd never managed to visit… would I see anything? But as has become the custom: my trip to Europe began with a week of insanely poor jetlag recovery and visiting with Ellen in the beloved Netherlands…

Left to Right: Delft - canal above underground parking, Prisenhof Museum, creepy armed vase, Molen de Roos – view of old Delft

June 26-29, 2018: Heat Wave in the Netherlands – Mostly Delft

Now on my fifth trip to visit Ellen in the Netherlands (albeit this time school was out so I could not make my annual pilgrimage to see the kids and John), we focused on Delft (a great new town for me that was not insanely crowded), an overnight trip to one of the outer

islands called Texel (pronounced “Tessle”), and a repeat trip to the charming seaside fishing village of Marken. Other than finally watching “The Shape of Water” (which was so interesting – and disturbing – that I didn’t sleep more than a couple hours), my flights to Amsterdam were uneventful – although we did land an hour late thanks to delays in Iceland en route… meaning Ellen was stuck at the airport waiting the whole time, having just dropped off one of her friends that morning (following their excellent road-trip to the Dolomites the week before). In contrast with previous trips, I decided NOT to nap day one, hoping to decrease my jetlag recovery time. No dice – probably because the Dutch heatwave of 2018 made sleeping extremely challenging (nobody has AC… and there are, apparently, few rules about doing loud apartment renovations in the country). Alas, it would take nearly a WHOLE WEEK (and, basically, leaving the Netherlands to cooler conditions) to finally adjust to the time-change.

Left to Right: heading to central Delft, canal, old pharmacy statue, market by Stadhuis/town hall, East Gate Two-Tower Bridge

The next day, Ellen and I headed to Delft – about 20 minutes away by car. For me, Delft is scientifically famous for a couple reasons – like being the birthplace/home of father-of-microbiology Van Leeuwenhoek, and also for being an epicenter for many famous stains and dyes that have proven highly valuable for biological research. Of course, most tourists who know about Delft are more familiar with its famous blue pottery. Anyway – we parked in this underground parking lot just outside central Delft, about a block away from the Molen de Roos, a big working windmill that (shockingly!) was free to enter and climb… as we would do later that morning. Our first destination, though, was the Prisenhof Museum – most famous because it is the actual site where William of Orange (a key leader of the Dutch revolt against the Spanish Hapsbergs and Catholicism, in general) was assassinated. Said site, complete with real bullet holes in the walls, features a projection system that recreates the whole scene using shadows. Beyond that history, though, the museum is a little sad – especially because its Van Leeuwenhoek section is so, well, microscopic. From the museum, we headed back to the Molen de Roos in search of food. As stated, we were both shocked you could fully enter and climb the working windmill (which was actively milling grain into flour) and see all the working parts, including stepping out onto the upper deck for a great view of the town and to hear the whoosh of the turning sails. Of course, we DID feel obligated to buy some very whole-wheat cookies and bread down in the gift-shop – the guy running the place feeling oh-so-Portland. Not finding any simple-looking restaurants, we headed into central Delft to one of the main squares between the impressive old town hall and one of the big churches (notably, where Van Leeuwenhoek is buried – although we did not pay to visit his gravesite). In the square, a lively and very mixed public market was going on – with everything from second-hand/antique junk for sale, to stalls selling all kinds of tempting, freshly-cooked (mostly fried) foods. Opting for something healthier, we headed for a Dutch franchise brick-mortar bagel/coffee shop/café along the market edges and got bagels and salad with fru-fru power-drinks (mine was some kind of almond-turmeric-maple concoction).

Left to Right: Delft Tech-U Botanical Gardens, moss, venus flytrap, “cucumber tree,” take-out Thai dinner with Bruno

After lunch, we walked about 10 blocks – leaving central Delft via the highly scenic East Gate double-tower bridge – to the university botanical gardens (the entrance located notably next to the microbiology building). The gardens weren’t earth-shattering but they provided a lot of shade and it was HOT; I swear Ellen and I just sat on benches discussing all sorts of stuff almost an hour in between looking at plants. The marijuana plants (labeled as “for hemp/fiber only”) were notable, the insectivorous plant collection was good, and the hot tropical greenhouses had some unusual stuff – including the cucumber tree (above). There were also some interesting art installations and a funny area for kids. Heading back to the car (now on the opposite side of town, meaning retracing steps back), we decided to search for take-out Thai from a well-rated restaurant (Mekong) a couple blocks off the main square. Having attempted several times to find what I would call good Thai in the Netherlands, I would say this place (notably run by a Thai family) was the BEST I’ve found so far. While waiting for our take-out, Ellen and I hydrated (receiving free tap water on request) and enjoyed some spring rolls (we had a communication mishap with the waiter because we asked if they were fresh and not fried… and the waiter answered yes – but they were actually fried) and then shared a plate of mango sticky rice. We then hauled our big Thai booty back to the car, delivering an exciting meal to awaiting Bruno. It was EXCELLENT… although it did not improve my ability to sleep through the night.

The next day, Ellen and I headed to the suburbs of Delft for some canal kayaking. Based on on-line searching after the fact, we were in an area called Delflandhoeve. It felt obscure, like someplace only the locals knew about. We basically drove through lots of farmland,

along a big canal, and then parked – walking down a dirt road to some kind of private structure with signs saying “kampingterrain.” The owner was a little old-hippie like – very laid back. Ellen, who had done this trip before, knew the drill – which was good because the owner took our money and left, leaving us to find our way through a field out back, cross the RV/camping area, and launch ourselves – choosing from a selection of several watercraft. It should be noted that we brought our own PFD’s (which the Dutch do not use/provide… nor do they wear bike helmets) but I never wore mine because the heat was stifling and the water was so shallow.

Left to Right: all Delflandhoeve paddling except last 2 shots – goat farm and Bruno’s birthday cake

We spent about 3 hours on the water. In contrast with our crazy urban paddle in Utrecht last year (which cost almost double and featured a LOT of competing motorcraft obstacles on the water), we were paddling in nature/greenery most of the time. That said, there seemed to be a walking path/bridge system which we often passed – with lots of joggers and walkers about; but there were also some remote-feeling narrow thicket areas that were more challenging to paddle. Also, there was a fair bit of bird-life and some good flora, including lots of cattails and lilies. But the funniest moment was when we came out of a thicket, rounding a bend into this central area with a mowed grass knoll – only to find this couple working vigorously to what they clearly hoped would be a complete blow-job. Ellen and I looked at each other to make sure we agreed on our assessment and then Ellen amusingly coughed/cleared her throat very loudly – causing the poor girl to leap up, and the guy to whip up his shorts. Meanwhile, we paddled straight into some cattails before doing our best to vacate the open waterway area into another set of thickets. From then on, we were nervous anytime we came out into the open again – wondering what new sex act we would happen upon. Ellen and I did discuss that this was the second time we had someone partly naked on the shore while we were on a boat in a Dutch canal… so folks might want to be aware that this is what happened thanks to William of Orange driving out Catholics in the Netherlands – despite his assassination.

From Delflandhoeve, we then visited the famous goat farm (Boerderij ‘t geertje) we so enjoyed after our Via Alpina trip – perhaps hoping to polish up our innocence post-kayak. But we promptly went from near-sex to near-death: as we arrived, several ambulances were arriving because one of the visitors (part of a group from an assisted living/retirement facility) had collapsed (probably because of the heat). Needless to say, these circumstances shortened and cast a shadow over our visit. We shared a grilled cheese sandwich and apple cake – but didn’t feel compelled to buy a bottle of milk for the baby goats this time around. Returning home, we took a walk at the Queen’s Forest and enjoyed mixed leftovers, big salads, and an ice cream birthday cake with Bruno, who was leaving tomorrow to climb in Georgia’s Caucasus Mountains (his actual birthday was in a few days, coinciding with a hopeful summit of Mt. Ushba).

Left to Right: Texel – ferry, StayOK, De Koog to Slufterbollen trailhead, annotated map of activities

June 30-July 2, 2018: Some Relief on Texel

The next morning, Ellen and I headed to the island of Texel (pronounced “Tessle”), located in the North Sea. After a 90-minute drive, the less-than-30 minute ferry ride was almost over before we climbed three crowded levels to the viewing deck. Our hotel (the StayOK, which offers everything from hostel-style group dorm rooms to private or family rooms) was about 25 minutes away in the central town of Den Burg. Arriving at noon, we were at first concerned because we quickly learned that Ellen accidentally booked the wrong night (i.e. last night)… but, amazingly, the staff didn’t charge extra for the mistake AND managed to find us a room. And they even let us

drop our things off so we could head out for the day to explore. Now – all that said – when I first saw the room and its little patio, I was concerned because our across-the-courtyard neighbors were a bunch of college-aged men-boys who seemed loud and unkempt. The room itself was basic and dormy – 2 bunkbeds and a simple bathroom set-up… but dark and cool. After dropping our stuff off, we drove to and through the town of De Koog (20 minutes away), selecting a 6-ish mile rectangle hike (hike 1 on map) from a dune-area up to a wetlands area called Slufterbollen, and then back along the beach. Our original hope was not really to hike the rectangle version but, rather, do some winding trails through some smaller wetland/lakes in the rectangle; unfortunately, we failed to read the fine print – not realizing said area was closed because of nesting birds. Heading out, we reached Texel's highpoint within 20 minutes (we learned about this from a female couple we were more or less following). We then walked a white-sand road along the inner rectangle side, eventually coming to the northern perimeter – along the Slufterbollen. Although the couple had indicated that the Slufterbollen was the most famous thing on the island, I'm not sure Ellen and I actually knew what it was/referred to. We left the official trail at some point and made our way to this sandy path by the big lake – just as a bus-like carriage being pulled by 2 Clydesdale-like horses rolled by.

Left to Right: (top) De Koog area hike - trailhead, highpoint, roadwalk, horse-option, Slufterbollen; (bottom) beachwalk, Texel lighthouse, post-dinner attempt to find orchids on abandoned trail… but a nice, cool evening walk!

We hiked through the big dune cut and returned to the car via the long beach. It was nice exercise and soft on the feet… but that's it. After returning to the car, we made a short driving tour before returning to our hotel for dinner. The first was at the official Slufterbollen overlook (not interesting or enlightening enough to include a photo), followed by a quick stop by the lighthouse (we did not pay to enter). Here, you could actually see the next island over – which, I believe, was walkable if the tide was low enough. By this point, we were getting close to the narrow hotel buffet dinner window – and so we headed back to clean up and eat. While the meal will not go down as anything special to eat, it was super-cheap and it was all you can eat (tonight was "Asian night" chicken skewers with peanut sauce, egg rolls, stir-fry vegetables…)… and eating there definitely allowed us to see a microcosm of real Dutch people on real vacations. In addition to the college kids, there were also many families – but, most impressive, there was a huge group of developmentally disabled adults (many with Down syndrome) – all shepherded by a handful of extremely patient college-aged women. In general, Ellen and I lamented that you rarely see this much attention paid or outing opportunities afforded to populations like the elderly (in the case of the goat farm) or the disabled (in the case of here) in the US. Having finished eating by 7:30, we decided to make one more nearby visit to walk off some dinner: specifically, we were given a local map/information suggesting that some famous orchids could be found at this wetland-farm area about 10 minutes from the hotel. Long-story short: the closest access point appeared to be a private home and the more official access point (labeled as a trail coming in off this side-dike) was definitely not being cared for. We made it about a quarter mile through thick grass before giving up and going home. Given my exhaustion level, I was in bed (with earplugs) by 9 – and out like a light ALL night (my first good sleep)… thanks to the dark, cool room. Ellen would remark later that she was shocked I never stirred because the noise level was high until around 10 – most of the developmentally disabled adults directly adjacent to our room.

Left to Right: Den Hoorn area hike – Den Hoorn church, trailhead, heather, bunker, hairy cows

The next morning, we enjoyed a really nice breakfast buffet – complete with a tough-looking bald/tattooed folk-singer crooning Eddy Veder-esque tunes on his guitar. On the agenda today was another 6-mile loop located between the village of Den Hoorn and the sea-

adjacent dunes (hike 2 on map above). We basically did this boxy figure-8 trail through what apparently were stunning heather fields (we were a little too early for the full effect), intermixed with hairy cows and war bunkers. At some point, we walked along (and briefly into) this THICK forest (all man-planted). While we agreed this was not the most amazing hiking in the world, it was pretty darn good for the Netherlands. After completing the hike, we headed back to Den Burg, this time heading into the town center and aiming for a well-rated bakery (Bakker Timmer)… which definitely deserved its high marks. I bought a couple giant cake-like nut cookies (walnut and sesame) and a really spectacular strawberry gelato. And then it was back to the hotel to rent some bikes for our afternoon activities: riding 3 miles to the coastal town of Oudeschild, to visit the Kaap Skil Museum, and then taking a longer/5 mile route back. My last time on a bicycle was notably in 2013 – also with Ellen on a rental bike in Holland. That time, it really sucked because the seat was TERRIBLE (I didn't think my junk could hurt that much!). This time, the rental bikes that StayOK offered were MUCH better – and so I agreed to take on this longer jaunt. Even so, I have horrible balance on a bike and need a LOT of room for even the slightest movement. We stuck mostly to bike paths that were separate from roads, which was good… and of course it was flat. I would definitely consider more biking in the Netherlands in future – and thought this outing was a highpoint of the time on Texel.

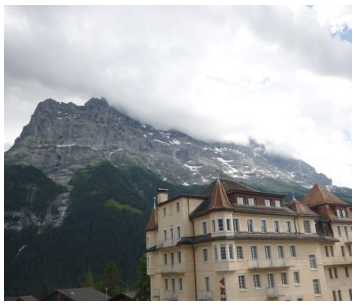
Left to Right: (top) StayOK bikes, half barn-houses, Kaap Skil Museum main building and beach-junk, bikes by the dike; (bottom) little horses, heading back to Den Burg, Leiden "pancakes," Marken

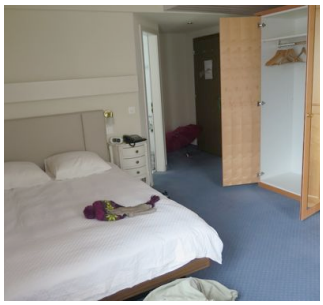
After a shaky but quick ride to Oudeschild, we parked outside the museum and spent about an hour inside. Most of it felt like a tiny version of the open-air museum we visited last year (lots of period structures with antiques and mannequins, including an "audibly farting and snoring" old man-nequin sleeping in this tiny fishing cabin bunkhouse). The most unique exhibit was the beachcombing/junk building – WALLS of bottles, shoes, toys, you name it… literally hauled up from the sea around Texel. After the museum, we headed down to the harbor and ate our bootleg lunches (sandwiches we built from the breakfast buffet). We then biked home via a 5-mile route that initially took us along this IMPRESSIVE seaside dike (really scenic!). We could have taken the dike all the way but we decided to obey some construction signs and walk our bikes down the dike early (even though we later saw other people biking all the way). We then headed inland back to Den Burg – half along sleepy farmlands on quiet paths, half along highway-side paths (albeit with a strip of grass separating us from the cars). Like I said: I would definitely get on rental bikes again in the Netherlands! After returning the bikes, we hit the road for the ferry – hoping to catch the 5 p.m. one so as to hit Ellen's favorite Dutch pancake house in Leiden en route home. After a somewhat busy drive and a short bout of directional confusion, we parked in a new underground garage on the outskirts of INSANE Leiden, a college town where it seemed today that ALL the students were outside drinking… and many were on the water doing drunken things in small boats or other watercraft. Thankfully, though, our target restaurant was a quick walk and very quiet. I cannot say that my pancake riff on Canadian bacon and pineapple pizza was something I'd get again – but it did hit the spot. Unfortunately, I endured yet another bad night of sleep at Ellen's; namely, I tried to move from the excessively hot guest room into the cooler livingroom only to have the air mattress slowly deflate throughout the night.

Left to Right: more Marken – hollyhocks, bike, the redneck part of town, harborside tavern, dike-walk out of town

The next day, my last day with Ellen in the Netherlands, was spent in the historic town of Marken, which I'd visited via ferry and then bus on a guided tour in 2016. Today, we drove there - about an hour from Ellen's place, just northeast of Amsterdam. Entering from

the big parking area, we fought a few busloads of people walking the popular town. We saw a little more of the town than I did in 2016, including some less quaint housing on the outskirts, which didn't necessarily match the tourism covenant standards (i.e. freewheeling toys, inflatable pools, free-form farms/gardens). After walking about the houses, we hit the harborside area for lunch at the Taverne de Visscher, the same place our tour lunched in 2016… and, within 10 minutes of being seated, the same tour company/group arrived fresh off the ferry (different leader, however). Although our main meal was great (I had a green salad with grilled chicken and Ellen ate the fish and chips), I have to say that I actually liked the tour group lunch meal more (apparently not on the main menu). Said meal featured more variety and small plates (chunky tomato soup, curried chicken salad over lettuce with fries, and an apple cake). At some point, I decided to chat up the leader – telling him I returned here today because their tour was so great. The restaurant owner overheard our exchange and gave me a sweet discount on the meal… very appreciated. After lunch, Ellen and I walked by the hilariously tiny public beach (about 15 feet of sand beyond the harbor – nonetheless, full of sunbathers) and then walked about half a mile to/from town on this grassy dike. Being that it was SWELTERING, we then visited the town museum (spending more time watching the movie, which I skipped in 2016) and then we considered walking 20+ minutes to the local lighthouse… but gave up that idea in favor of getting home early. We did make one pass through the wooden shoe display/shop (which I really loved in 2016) but because there wasn't a big captive group, they were not doing demonstrations. And so we headed home, made dinner, walked in the cool Queen's Forest… and then I attempted to go to bed 10 hours early (given a 6:30 a.m. departure for the airport).





Left to Right: first balcony view of the Eiger, spacious hotel room, group part-way up Mannlichen gondola

July 3-6, 2018: Mixed Weather in Grindelwald and Lautebrunnen, Switzerland
After another terrible night of sleep, today was much rougher than it should have been, and I was not particularly coherent. Were I to do this travel leg again, I would find a better carrier/flight between Amsterdam and Geneva. Instead, I chose from what were very limited KLM options, and wound up departing TOO early and then sitting around the stifling hot/stuffy Geneva airport for nearly 3 extra hours (the MTS group was to all meet at between 1:30 and 2). Originally, Ellen was going to shepherd me to the airport on the train… but unforeseen construction meant the train station's commuter parking area was closed, meaning a very stressful drive to the crazy airport during rush hour. In the end, the flight departed/landed 15 minutes late. Luggage took forever and, like I said, the Geneva arrivals hall was not pleasant – made less so by the fact that the airport does not exactly have free wi-fi (it makes you jump through a bunch of hoops… like presenting your boarding materials to a visitor center official to get a password that is good for only 2 hours). In the end, I opted for spending a more pleasant 90 minutes eating real food (salad and quiche for $25+) in a sit-down restaurant. Thankfully, everyone in our group was there at 1:30 – and we actually left early… given a nearly 3 hour ride to Grindelwald on what was a fairly small private bus. As per usual, I took the back seat along with a few others. I don't honestly remember much about the drive other than we passed Interlaken, and it was very pretty – the lower mountains velvety green, the higher mountains shrouded in dynamic clouds. Indeed, the forecast going into this trip had NOT been pretty and I was DREADING a washout (a la 2005 TMB). The other concern had been that the winter in the Swiss and French Alps had been legendarily big/bad – and it seemed to me from the air that there was a LOT more snow than usual out there. I had actually asked MTS about this a week before (i.e. will our hiking be impacted, should I bring yak-trax?) and was told no… but my eyes and my gut told me otherwise. More on that shortly.

We arrived at our very central hotel (the Kreuz and Post, near the train track terminus) around 4:30, meaning an extra 30 minutes to clean up, buy/guzzle fresh OJ from the nearby Coop, and power-nap before the 6-ish group meeting (YIPPEE!). My first impression of the hotel was mixed; it seemed like it was going to be noisy, the room was hot (no AC) but spacious, the bed was comfortable, the balcony offered a view of the Eiger (half-clouded at present), and all our dinners (it was announced) were set affairs in what was a strangely quiet dining room. Over time, though, the hotel won me over – particularly as the weather cooled off, and it became clear that set dinners (with spectacular bread, soup, and salad bars) meant less bullshit time, more going-to-bed-early time. At around 6, we met in this back-bar area for introductions. Our party was 13 (5 west coast, 6 midwest, 2 east coast), with ALL having done MTS trips before. The age range was 50-72, with 5 couples, 1 pair of female friends, and me. At least 3 party members (including me) commented that they chose this trip because they wanted or expected it to be easier for various reasons. The most concerning thing revealed, however, was news that lingering snow WAS going to change MANY hikes – including tomorrow's planned Eiger Trail (which the guides claimed was closed with snow). Although I could see some patches of snow crossing the route (like – from my balcony), I am not sure trails get closed officially… plus, I saw lots of people descending from the Eiger Trail the next day at Alpiglen (Ellen and I hiked the Eiger Trail up from Alpiglen in 2015). Instead, the guides announced, we would take the Mannlichen gondola up to the middle platform, hike to Kleine Scheidegg pass, and then – instead of dropping via the higher Eiger Trail – we would hike back down to Grindelwald via a series of dirt farm roads (a notably 1800 foot climb with a 4300 foot descent – more on that shortly). Not knowing what tomorrow's weather would bring, we sat down to an excellent four-course meal; I did not record all meal details on this trip – sufficed to say that all the set meals here included spectacular bread, rich/creamy/complex soup, a great and very green salad bar, a well-portioned main course (lots of meat and vegetables), and dessert. Given that my open-windows had cooled my room considerably and Ellen's melatonin did the trick, I slept FANTASTICALLY for the first time since Texel. Praise Jebus!

The next day, July 4, is always an interesting day for the Boomers because it is the anniversary of our dad's death. It actually didn't occur to me until half-way up Kleine Scheidegg – the Swiss Alps SOARING – that it was July 4… but, as noted in my nightly emails to

the family/friends: he would have LOVED today's hike. As stated, today's hike involved an 11-ish mile hike with 1800 up and 4300 feet down (well BEYOND a level 3 trip). Although I'm not going to spend much more than this paragraph on this issue, I am going to point out that this is the first time MTS has run this trip and, as I know all TOO well from other first-run experiences (e.g. their southbound John Muir Trail/Whitney 2004): there are ALWAYS interesting kinks to work out. The original itinerary had stated today was only 5 miles between Kleine and Grindelwald, with 1000 feet up/4200 down (elevation changes hadn't actually been printed in the first itinerary a year before and I didn't catch those updates until about a month before the trip). As someone very familiar with the Eiger Trail, I did promptly write MTS to point out a number of math/mileage errors and elevation issues in the day one notes: namely – the only way the Eiger is 5 miles is if you hike from Kleine to Alpiglen ONLY and then take the train back to Grindelwald; the train eliminates about 2000 feet of that gain, meaning the elevation loss should only be 2300 (consistent with a level 3 trip). These questions/corrections seemed to confound MTS one month out; after consulting with the guides (sub-contracted out of Chamonix), MTS assured me that they would put interested clients on the train from Alpiglen to match those spec's.

Left to Right: (top) Jungfrau and Silberhorn, lily, alp-horn, forest/trail, flowers and Wetterhorn; (bottom) me and Monch/Jungfrau, flowers and Jungfrau/Silberhorn, Eiger with cloud and Monch, best Monch

So what really happened? After a very good buffet breakfast at the hotel, we made our way to the Mannlichen gondola station in two back-to-back van-fulls; we had one driver/van who shuttled luggage and prepared lunch materials (AMAZING… BEST hiking food EVER on any trip!!!), which we packed each morning after breakfast. At around 9, we rode the gondola (4 people in each cabin) up to the intermediate Holenstein station, the weather extremely promising. From Holenstein (at around 5000 feet), we hiked a series of dirt roads (mostly used by local farmers) and short hiking trail sections through meadow, cows, and forests – eventually reaching Kleine Scheidegg (at over 6700 feet). Most on-line accounts say this part of the hike should take about 2 hours – but we were SUPER-slow (probably 1 mile an hour overall), which was fine by me given that I'd lost so many nights of sleep and am now more careful about pounding the feet hard and fast. About a third of the way up, we passed by this set of long alp-horns that were set up in a fenced but public yardspace – which many people played (our one horn-experienced group member was really good!). Had I remembered my handi-wipes, I might have… but I wasn't enthusiastic about contracting group mouth germs this early in the trip (all in good time at dinner…). Today's hike was the only day we encountered some hungry flies and mosquitoes – which produced about half a dozen itchy bites on my arms and legs. We stopped in a woodsy section for some cookies and chocolate. Our leader was also very effective and knowledgeable in terms of talking about flora, fauna, and history – which punctuated our slow pace. The final 30 minutes of the climb to Kleine were on very steep dirt roads and it was definitely hot. Once at the crazy pass (around noon), the leader gave us 20 minutes free-time and then we would begin the LONG descent – the planned lunch about 30 minutes down in a quieter meadow.

Left to Right: gentian, Monch and Jungfrau from Klein (note traintrack cut – going to Jungfraujoch), heading down, happy cows!

As I knew from 2015, Kleine is sort of insane (minimally, because trains dump tourists here from two directions – Grindelwald and Wengen/Lauterbrunnen – and the famous Jungfraujoch cog train departs from here and climbs through the Eiger to the icefields above… still haven't done that). All I was interested in was a real (and FREE) bathroom (which I enjoyed) and a little gawking at today's insane views of the Eiger, Monch, and Jungfrau (as impressive as they were in 2015!). I somehow managed to avoid the

temptation of ice cream, pastries, and sodas (which caught a few in our crowd) but I was, by this point, hungry for real lunch. Being, like I said, a punctual group, we amassed and headed down mostly easy dirt roads until we came to a quiet area where we stepped into the meadows and gorged. Lunches consisted of amazing sandwich materials, multiple local cheese varieties each day, full-on salads, fruits/dates, candies/bars, baby-sucky applesauce, and potato chips. In Switzerland, the avocados were perfection so I often ate crusty bread sandwiches with avocados, cheese, and different meats with different fruits and dates. I am a sucker for applesauce and potato chips, however. As the trip progressed, I would put together elaborate fruit/nut/cheese trays that were out of this world… and I also loved the pate that appeared in France (although not many others partook in that). As should be obvious, I was VERY excited about food on this trip! Anyway – after maybe an hour, we continued down… and down… and down. We came upon some very photogenic cows, the weather briefly deteriorated to the point it sprinkled a little as a giant squall passed overhead, and we eventually arrived at Alpiglen. I don't think anyone understood that this was the last easy train option down, and the guides were not offering up the option of hopping on board. Given the SLOW pace, my feet weren't talking much – and so I resigned to doing the whole day. But within maybe 30 minutes of Alpiglen, it seemed that several others were DONE hiking. We had lots of slowing down, a fair bit of chatter about shortening the day, and a full-on bonking episode – causing the guides to summon the van. In the end, probably 6 people cut out about 2 miles from the end, and the rest of us (me included) made it to the "bottom" – a tiny village along a river that was about 1 mile and 300 feet below Grindelwald proper. I was satisfied – not only in my spec's for the day, but also the fact that the team had effectively and coherently communicated that we wanted a level 3 trip… not a level 4 trip. We arrived back at the hotel around 4:45, which meant some very nice downtime for cleaning up, organizing photos, emailing, and relaxing.

Left to Right: cheese plate porn (ONE day's selections), rampion, post-rain views of Grindelwald, cloudy Eiger, nearly-clear Eiger!

The next day, the planned itinerary was changed a lot – but mostly because the original plans were too strenuous and the forecast was poor. In the original itinerary, we were to hike from Grosse Scheidegg (the other pass above Grindelwald) to Bachalpsee Lake (about 1500 feet up) and then descend almost 3000 feet to Bussalp; Ellen and I had done some of this (we went First to Bachalpsee, up to Faulhorne – and then down to Bussalp all in wet fog!). Setting out, our revised level 3 plan was to take the gondola up to Bort, hike up to Waldspitz, consider hiking up to Bachalpsee, and then hike over to First and descend on roads back to Bort. Although the early morning had been very clear (based on my Eiger-balcony assessment), it was foggy as we rode to Bort. It even began to rain as we started up this super-steep trail (albeit with LOTS of tight switchbacks and good stairs) that shot up this waterfall-filled gulley-valley FILLED with wildflowers. For whatever reason, though, I was feeling very awake – and took the spot behind the assistant guide (who had the lead) and powered up the 1200-ish feet over the next mile or so. This may explain why I have few pictures from the climb. When we reached the "top" – i.e. the intersection with the road – we were shocked to find that the clouds were largely open near the big mountains, revealing nearly the whole range from this angle: Wetterhorn, Schreckhorn, and Eiger… complete with a few lucky parasailers (probably the only ones of the day). After some snacks, we passed the Waldspitz Berghaus (who was probably disappointed we didn't partake in coffee or snacks) and then continued up the dirt road, passing oodles of flowers everywhere… including ONE edelweiss (which was probably 30 feet above our vantage point, growing out of a rock outcrop).

Left to Right: foggy Bort, steep climb above Bort, almost panorama – Wetterhorn (see the parasail?), Schreckhorn, Eiger

Shortly thereafter, we arrived at a junction where our leader gave everyone the option of doing a longer hike (up to Bachalpsee Lake and then dropping back to First) or proceeding straight to First. With tantalizing glimmers of blue skies here and there, everyone decided to proceed to Bachalpsee. Although I had been to Bachalpsee via First (all on wide dirt road), we went up a very rudimentary grass and rock path (sometimes, it was hard to see there was a path) that wove its way along a creek, occasional pools or waterfalls, and flat marshy areas. The group sort of bifurcated about halfway up, 4 of us breaking away with the assistant guide and doing a faster pace. I was in that group, mostly because I was hungry – and I figured I needed to keep in decent shape for a pending August trip in the Sierras (that was ultimately smoked/fired out). Eventually, we arrived at the dam(n)ed boundary of Bachalpsee (the guides said they were now having to put dams in to retain the water because, without them, the lakes readily dried up in the summer) and found places to sit down and enjoy lunch… albeit not before putting on (in my case) pretty much ALL my gear. Indeed, once you stopped, it was cold, windy, and pretty apparent that bad shit was about to hit in the form of rain (which it did, as all the others arrived). As with my last time at the lake, there were a lot of people (mostly Japanese and Chinese tourists) down at the shore hoping the clouds were going

to part, revealing one of the more famous reflections in the Swiss Alps. But, as with Ellen and my trip here in 2015, there was no view today. Oh well. Given that I carried my umbrella, I enjoyed my lunch up on this wooden bench overlooking the lake from a little knoll – while most others crammed into a 3-sided shelter below. Within the hour, folks were ready to leave and I (along with several others) were actually sort of cold. I probably underdressed today, having not brought proper pants (i.e. I was wearing shorts and rainpants, but nothing in between) and having forgotten my gloves (it is rare my hands get cold – but today they were).

Left to Right: sunny arnica, lovely gentian, possible primula, vague creek-side path to… misty Bachalpsee

And so we all marched down the wide road to First, passing SO many improperly dressed people (most Chinese tourists) still coming up in the constant rain. During the final 15 minutes, a tremendous cold wind and drenching rainclouds passed overhead – no-doubt defining the rest of the day's choices. One of the new weird things that has been built near First since 2015 is this cliff-walk platform along this big rock outcrop… and, despite horrible conditions, a few from our group went out – only to get blasted from all directions – on the catwalk. I was not one of them; I was second in line for the ginormous bathroom inside the First station. Before our leader (out on the catwalk) arrived, the majority of our group had effectively decided it was time to take the lift down… no exercise walk to Bort today! I think it's safe to say that after yesterday's lack of participatory decision-making at key trailpoints offering escape, today – most people were probably too proactive. Having actually done the rainy walk between First and Bort with Ellen (most on paved farm-roads that are sometimes very steep and slick if wet), I had ZERO interest in that side-trip… after all: we'd ALL done the extra climbing to Bachalpsee. I'm not sure whether our leader was happy about our refusal to hike more; sometimes his feelings escaped me because I couldn't tell if he was trying to be funny or if this was his idea of being critically motivating (e.g. after nobody budged on the gondola decision, he just remarked that he would be walking down because he did not come to the Alps to ride gondolas). Fair enough. It was great to be back by 3 and have some solid time to clean up and relax.

As should be obvious by the pictures below, our last full day in Grindelwald (which was actually in Lauterbrunnen and Murren) was a total washout. In the original itinerary, today was INSANE: we were supposed to do some 4000+ foot climb to the top of the Schilthorne (via Rostockhutte, which Ellen and I snacked at en route to Sefinefurke Pass), hike down 1000 feet, and then use gondolas to return to the valley floor. In the end, we did a 7-mile loop with minimal elevation gain that combined the waterfall trail between Lauterbrunnen and Stechelberg, the gondola to Murren, the flat walk back to another gondola – which returned us to Lauterbrunnen.

Left to Right: Lauterbrunnen (top) Staubachfall, cemetery, farmer vending machines, in living color; (bottom) snail, Murrenbachfall, salamander, Murren Jesus lunch shelter, our only dirt path…

Lauterbrunnen, one valley over, required a 30-ish minute transport time. Because we didn't have a dedicated mini-bus except on big transfer days, we accomplished the transfer in a couple shifts using a combination of the smaller luggage van and the train. The train notably dropped us off across the street from the memorable hotel Ellen and I stayed in. When we first set out, our leader was still holding out hope that the weather would improve – and he actually thought we were going to take the gondola up to Murren first and then hike some flower trails up there. I asked the assistant if we were going to do the waterfall trail given the rain, and it was soon decided that enjoying the valley was a better plan for the reality of the weather. Although the day was wet and foggy ALL day,

everyone seemed to enjoy the day. Even though, as stated, I'd done most of this walk before, there were a few surprises: like – how did I miss that cemetery? I can't say the waterfalls were any bigger than when Ellen and I hiked, though… although the weather was pretty similar. Ellen and I did manage to find more soft dirt paths along the river… but I didn't want to make any more guiding suggestions. The guides talked about the geology and did point out Trummelbach Falls across the river; I had to hold my tongue about how great that was because they were not taking us up there today, which was unfortunate given that we had the time. Something for MTS to reconsider if Lauterbrunnen is rainy on future trip offerings. We then took the gondola up to Murren, which was a little different than Ellen and my version (we rode to Gimmelwald and then walked up 1000 feet to Murren). From Murren, we walked through the town and then along the traintracks 30 minutes, eventually finding a 3-sided structure where we all crammed in and ate lunch. The phrase "Jesus loves you" was written in chalk on one of the ceiling beams. After lunch, the trail became more natural, leaving the train area and climbing a little into pastures and forest… before then descending to the big gondola station we rode down (SHOCKINGLY steep!). On the way back to Grindelwald, I was in the train group – after which I did a little grocery and gift shopping before enjoying a great bath and packing up for tomorrow's move to the fabled town of Zermatt. Unfortunately, around 5 a very loud outdoor live rock festival started up about a block away – thus explaining why earplugs had been left by the hotel staff (specifically tossed into my room while I was enjoying a bath around 4). During dinner, it was announced that we would be riding in the famous Kandersteg car-train to Zermatt; having seen that in 2015, I was SOOOO excited! Although others complained that the music festival kept them up deep into the night (like – 1 a.m.), I shut all my windows, put in my personal earplugs, and was asleep by 11.

Left to Right: Grimsel Pass – road from Meiringen, dam(n)ed lake, distant peak, road to Zermatt (eventually)

July 7-9, 2018: Jaw-Dropping Weather in Zermatt, Switzerland

The next morning, the cloud-free Eiger watched over us as we loaded all our gear into the van and the mini-bus/tow. Unfortunately, our leader dashed all my excitement about the car-train when he announced that the mini-bus/tow was not allowed on the car-train and so we would be taking some other route to Zermatt. Although he didn't say the word "longer," I knew it was and I made sure to carry my pack (with water and lunch) IN the bus; most others stored theirs in the tow and were very hungry come Zermatt well over 4 hours later. I have mixed feelings about our route. Basically, we drove back to Interlaken and then headed to Meiringen (the Sherlock Holmes-famous place Ellen and I had lots of hotel issues with smoking back in 2015… not my favorite town). From Meiringen, we climbed over Grimsel Pass. While the lower sections of the pass were highly scenic (incredible granite formations!), the actual pass was sort of junky… this high alpine set of basins dam(n)ed for hydroelectric power. Pointing out at these unearthly spigot-like waterfalls that seemed to shoot out from solid rock for no reason, our leader explained that the Swiss had dug tunnels inside all the mountains to collect water inside – and that's what was shooting out every so often, filling multiple dam(n)ed reservoirs. While the mountains weren't, like, HUGE soaring Eigers, they were still beautiful mountains… reminiscent of Glacier Peak Wilderness – but with all kinds of hydroelectric development, hotels, junky parking lots, etc. After a 20-minute pitstop, we continued on our way – DOWN this incredible wall of switchbacks. Although the valleys were very deep, I can't say the surrounding mountains were impressively huge; as we continued down this long valley dotted with little villages (some very under-developed, at least for Switzerland), it was impossible to guess where the Matterhorn was. At some point, we passed under this steep escarpment of mountains and I noticed the name Fiesch whiz by… Fiesch is the name of a gateway town above the majestic Aletsch Glacier, the longest in Europe. It is one of the remaining places – along with Saas Fee – that I have yet to see in Switzerland. Shortly thereafter, we passed through Visp (which is near the Lotschberg Tunnel) – the other end of the car-train from Kandersteg (which the driver and the assistant guide used). Visp was less than an hour from Zermatt – but it was already coming up on 1 and people insisted on a bathroom/gas station stop before we began the big climb into the final valley (with most people buying major snacks because they were very hungry). By this point, I had eaten half my lunch already – the leader unenthusiastically noting my snacking (as most French feel, in general, about snacking).

Left to Right: first view of Matterhorn from downtown Zermatt, heading to Zmutt – larch, cows, looking down on Zermatt

Our mini-bus had special driving permits to take us past the town of Tasch, where most people must leave their cars and take the train in (Zermatt is mostly car-free – although there are shitloads of narrow electric vehicles, mostly used to moving stuff). And so we proceeded all the way to the surprisingly industrial and cement outskirts of Zermatt, finally stopping in this concrete parking area. From here, it was walking time. For reasons no one really understood, our leader insisted we visit the hotel first (to get our bearings), and

then head out on a “short” hike to the village of Zmutt (above and behind Zermatt), stopping for lunch after we were a little out of town/just up the trail. And so we walked about 4 blocks through crowded downtown, then headed another 4 blocks UP a side-hill to spot the hotel, then back DOWN through downtown, and then UP, UP, UP this grassy trail. It was extremely hot and everyone was famished and probably motion-sick from all the sitting/driving. Within 15 minutes, we were all seated in the dirt gorging on lunch; it was well after 2. Today’s hike was a 5-mile loop hike encompassing an upper trail to Zmutt, and a lower trail from Zmutt. The high trail initially followed the same trail that ultimately climbs 2300 feet up to the Trift rifugio (and then another 1200 feet to Holbalmen); I mention this only because tomorrow’s original itinerary had us doing some insane loop encompassing Hohbalmen and well over 3500 up/down. After lunch, we did NOT take the Trift branch and instead headed left – climbing up through pastureland, cowfields, and large larch stands for about 500 vertical feet. At the first of many junctions, the leader offered to guide a shorter lower loop (which 4 people opted to take) and the assistant guide took the rest of us up another 500 feet higher – climbing through grassy meadows. I was definitely pokey and at the end of the line, mostly because the combination of sitting in the moving bus for hours and then gorging on lunch while hunched over in the dirt had given me one of the most insane bouts of GI cramping and thankfully just gas that I can remember. You’d think all the farting would have propelled me upwards but I was SO hot and crampy – and concerned about shitting something awful out every time I let anything rip. There was also NO place to go to the bathroom that wasn’t in full view of something. Staring down at Zermatt, I cannot say I was in love with the town; it was very compact, surrounded by sort of ugly quarry-like hills, browning forests, too much development… it didn’t have the charm I felt in Grindelwald or its wide-spanning mountain range of views.

Left to Right: (top) climbing up the “longer” option, me and the Matterhorn, more gentle contouring, amazing grass; (bottom) asters, another peak down a side-valley (probably above Sunnega), “dinner on your own” on the balcony, balcony view with alpenglow

At some point (after bypassing a few side-trail branches heading down), the assistant guide thought we were going too high (in looking at maps now, it seems like we started heading up a “Hohbalmen direct” trail… so we turned around and took a side-trail down, down, down… around the corner, and then more down to Zmutt. I cannot say Zmutt was very impressive. There was no view of the Matterhorn because you were down too low. The village consisted of maybe 15 very old buildings; one was a lively café where you couldn’t use the bathroom unless you sat down and ate or drank something full-on. One of our teammates guzzled a whole beer very quickly so that his wife could use the toilet. Meanwhile, several of us were chomping at the bit to head down – being that this “short” hike was turning into a much longer hike. And so we sort of got permission to follow the VERY obvious signs back to Zermatt. Within an hour, we were downtown. Tonight was a “dinner on your own” evening (the only one of the trip). I decided to honor Allison and my Chamonix-started tradition of grocery dinner on the balcony – by heading to the grocery and picking up salad, bread, hazelnut yogurt (a call-out to Ellen and my Via Alpina trip, where I first discovered said local specialty), orange juice blend, and a pastry dessert. After cleaning up, I enjoyed dinner on the balcony – a decent view of the Matterhorn, and eventually some nice alpenglow. Although today was WAY too busy and chaotic, I remain impressed with how amazing the hike/pictures are. That said, my email to the family made the comment that I still wasn’t sure what I thought of Zermatt – mostly because it was sort of crazy and, so far, we really could only see the Matterhorn and so I was worried it was a one-trick-pony town. One thing worth mentioning is that MTS could not secure its usual hotel (the Best Western/Butterfly – usually used for their Haute Route trips ending in Zermatt), which is apparently in a funky location that is busy and offers little/no view. Although Bella Vista was a bitch to climb up to, I would TOTALLY do that hotel again because it was SO quiet and the view was SO awesome.

The next day, as mentioned, was supposed to have doing some 8+++ mile hike to Trift/Hohbalmen with 3700 up/down… but given that the guides were now revising everything to a level 3, we did one of the best hikes on this trip (one that was, shockingly, not in the original itinerary): we took the train up to Riffleberg (around 8500 feet), hiked up to Gornergrot (over 10000 feet), hiked down to this reflection lake area, and then looped back to Riffleberg. But I have gotten ahead of myself. Although our hotel didn’t have a restaurant for dinner, the breakfast was simple but delicious: home-made baked goods, really great yogurt and toppings, amazing local cheeses and meats, an orange squeezer machine for fresh juice, and these tasty ramekins of home-made egg salad (I LOVE egg salad and theirs was GREAT). After breakfast, we headed out on foot (briefly followed by the hotel’s “Slinky” cat) to one of many train stations (in Zermatt, the number of lifts, gondolas, trains, funiculars… was shocking – nearly all corners of the town were prepared to quickly elevate you someplace higher up). Along with a fairly full train, we headed up on the Gornergrot-terminating train, in our case riding up

to Riffleberg. The skies were completely clear and the views were shockingly great. The train ride took about 20 minutes, traveling slowly through larch forest, under wooden snow-drift protection, waiting for an occasional opposing train to pass. Although Riffleberg was around 8500 feet, I cannot say that I felt the elevation as we stepped off. After a bathroom run and map-orientation, we crossed the traintracks and began following a non-descript gravel road up the hill. Although it was easy to get hypnotized by the amazing mountains in all directions (with the Matterhorn at the head of the crown, so to speak), you could not ignore all the ski-junk visible… something I am NOT a fan of. We stayed on the road for about 30 minutes (heading up, you could feel the elevation), and then our leader sort of went off-road – cutting through stark rocky, low-plant meadow areas.

Left to Right: (top) hotel Slinky, Matterhorn from train, train leaving Riffleberg, more Matterhorn - train below; (bottom) meadow-hiking, mountains behind Trift/Hohbalmen, last section of road to Gornergrot, oh the junkiness…

Within the hour, we began to see Gornergrot in the distance: it looks sort of like a castle with observatories on several of the turrets. Because no one had officially said we were going to Gornergrot, I was SUPER-excited when our leader said those of us who wanted to go up there were welcome to continue on ahead/faster. That's because I had seen pictures of all these ginormous mountains/glaciers from Gornergrot and they were amazing. I totally took off, following what became a VERY steep service road trail all the way up. At one point, NO one in the group was moving for, like, EVER and so I sat watching/waiting for something to happen because I wasn't sure if maybe the leader had changed the itinerary AGAIN. In the end, half the group came up and half the group broke off and stayed lower – heading straight to the reflection lake area. Gornergrot was definitely scenic – although clogged with traintracks, cables, junk, junk, junk… the "castle" had a mall with all these super-fancy stores on the main floor, a glorious terrace restaurant, and a no-doubt expensive hotel on the upper floors. I thought the terrace area was "the top" but, in fact, there was another knob of rock/earth to climb to in order to get the full effect of Monte Rosa, the Liskamm, and the Gorner Glacier (the second longest in Europe – after the Aletsch).

Left to Right: Gornergrot restaurant/terrace, Liskamm & Gorner Glacier, Breithorn, Matterhorn, runny cheese & sausage bruschetta

After exploring upper Gornergrot, the long-hikers regrouped in this rocky area below the castle – a full view of Monte Rosa, Liskamm, and Briethorn – and spent a slow hour eating lunch. It was especially delicious today – in part because the heat melted all the gooey cheeses, making them easy to swab up with the crusty bread. After lunch, we followed a real hiking path up and over this rocky mound (briefly crossing a full-on snowfield) and then dropping in a big crowd to a few reflecting lakes/ponds. Prior to this trip, I had come across tons of great pictures showing the Matterhorn being reflected in some pond; at the time, I assumed there was, like, one famous pond. But now, having been in Zermatt, I know there are at least half a dozen different ponds situated all around the amphitheatre-like ring of mountains that can reflect the Matterhorn. After the trip, I figured out that Riffelsee was at least one of three ponds in the area we were hiking too; pictures of the Breithorn group and Matterhorn flank the title/cover section on the first page. I cannot say we spent a ton of time at the lakes – mostly because the main one with the Matterhorn reflection was crazy-busy with tourists. While there wasn't a lift or train right to the lake, it was a gentle 35-minute climb from the Riffelberg train station (and googlemap suggests there is yet another train station 10 minutes away in another direction – but which we did not see). Probably after 20 minutes (at the most), we headed back to Riffelberg – the walking trail and views truly pleasant. While some people decided to hang out on the veranda with a

glass of wine and the big view, most of us headed back to Zermatt on the train… because, let's face it, the views were astounding everywhere. Indeed, any fleeting notion that Zermatt was a one-trick-pony town were dashed by today's experience!

Left to Right: the big rock face, heading down, beautiful moss campion, Riffelberg comes into view… and the money shot

I cannot recall when I got fully back to the hotel but it was between 3:30 and 4:30 – leaving a couple hours to do my laundry (a daily task in terms of hand/sink-washing my shirt, shorts, underwear, and socks – followed by a meticulous towel-wringing, and careful positioning on the towel warming rack) and then getting my dose of the BBC (at the time, all the news was about the Thai soccer team trapped in the cave). Tonight's dinner was a group affair that was about 8 blocks away. After all our nights of efficient set-hotel meals, I knew a restaurant setting was going to be wonkier and longer… and it sort of was. There was no great salad bar BUT we did enjoy the best rosti on the whole trip.

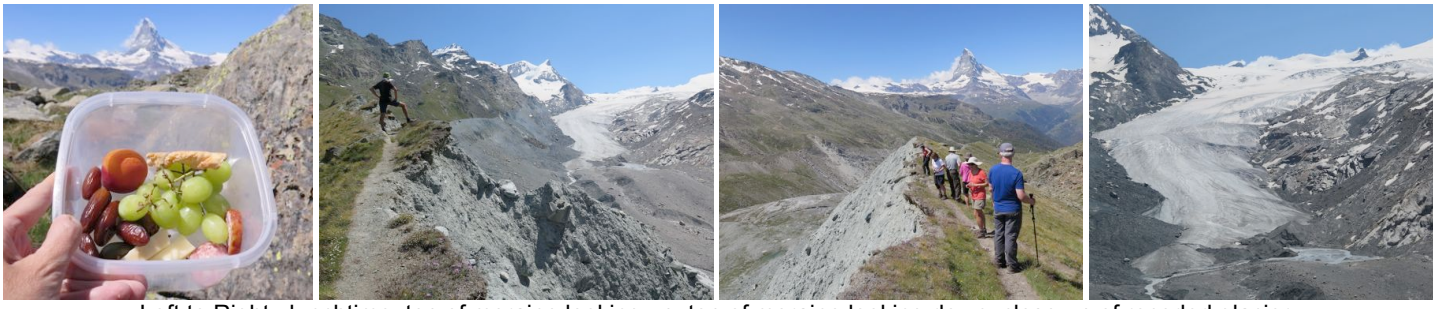
Left to Right: Leissee Lake below Sunnega – with junk, shot to cut out junk; anemone, fascinating succulents

Despite some funk predicted in the forecast, our last day in Zermatt was almost as good as Gornergrot in terms of blue skies. I think we mostly followed the itinerary, which included Sunnega and Stellisee – another reflecting pond - although I was confused much of the day because I had thought yesterday's reflection pool was Stellisee. After another great breakfast, we walked down towards the Gornergrot train station but then went into some nearby cavernous structure that was the funicular to Sunnega. Most of us assumed the funicular was going to be similar to the one in Bergen, Norway – where you can see out while you are whizzing up the hill. But no – this was the totally dark and scary cave funicular and we shot up that hillside with zero views. At Sunnega, the leader showed us our intended route on the big map. We would be dropping to this sort of junky lake called Leissee, which the Swiss Tourism websites tout in terms of being an outstanding family destination; indeed, there were lawnchairs, BBQ/picnic areas, a funny rope-pulled raft you could haul yourself across… all with reflections of the Matterhorn. Walking the length of the lake, it did get a little more natural at the far end – but, at the time, I was a little concerned that this was the Stellisee finale (seriously?). From the end of Leissee, we looked down the deep valley separating us from the soaring flank heading up to Gornergrot. At the valley floor below us, there was a much larger lake and a lot of development, including visible camping tents; above, the trains cogged up and down the mountain. We, on the other hand, contoured gently up our side of the valley. I think we all felt a great deal of Matterhorn overload after yesterday (if that is possible) and there were discussions about how we simply COULDN'T take ANOTHER picture of that because we had so many. While the Matterhorn was soaring from all directions, though, what made this hike great was the insane levels and diversity of flowers.

Left to Right: trail up from Leissee, edelweiss, contouring garden trail, coming to the moraine valley

After coming home, I would find a fair bit of on-line/tourist information indicating that Zermatt is pretty famous for its flower diversity. Indeed, I certainly took WAY more pictures of flowers than are on this report (although, in retrospect, I half-registered many new and interesting flowers en route to Zmutt but I was so zonked that I did not photograph sufficiently there). The things I've chosen to highlight from Sunnega are the insane numbers of anemones (the main flowers had mostly gone to hairy seedpod – but we did fine a few and they were PURPLE!). There were also fascinating succulents – at least 2 different kinds that were sending up amazingly

weirdo-looking flowers. For all the yellow we saw along the trail, I failed to do a close-up of those. I did find a clump of avens (one of my favorite flowers, which I associate with the arctic) but they were looking too ragged to photo-display. But lastly, this was BY FAR the BEST, BEST, BEST natural location I've ever encountered for edelweiss: we passed at least two MAJOR colonies on this route (once along this contouring up section, and again as we descended – sort of under the gondola). There are supposedly lots of edelweiss colonies if you take on the ginormous hike to Trift/Hohbalmen – so something to motivate me the next time I return to Zermatt.



Left to Right: lunchtime, top of moraine looking up, top of moraine looking down, close-up of receded glacier

After crossing a pretty stream, we gained what felt like a hanging valley area all under this imposing mound: the moraine above the Findelglacier, which flows down the other side from Monte Rosa. After dropping our packs, most people made the short climb up the rudimentary moraine trail to the top, which reminded me a little of the eroding moraine above Newton Creek on Mt. Hood. Sadly, the glacier was highly receded. Below us, on another mound of earth and rocks, was the Flualp refuge; and way above us on a higher hogback was the Rothorn (where all the gondolas were going) – although a trail did continue on up from our lunch spot, climbing another 1800 feet, to that highpoint. After a highly satisfying lunch and some nap-time laying in the grass, we headed up to the Flualp and then down to the ACTUAL Stelisee Lake (finally, and so confusing). Of course, when we arrived at Stelisee, there was a fierce little wind blowing and no reflection to be had… not that it wasn't a lovely lake. Hiking down its length, we then took a really scenic hiking path down, down, down to Sunnega. Although it went along/to the side of this rocky spine/ridge area that seemed to parallel the gondola route (up to Rothorn), we never saw or felt near the gondolas until we were, like, 5 minutes from Sunnega.

Left to Right: Stelisee, looking back up at Findelglacier, neat trail back to Sunnega, the BEST edelweiss!

Given that the trail down passed a lot of rocky walls, it should be no surprise that this area saw our BEST edelweiss of the whole trip… multiple colonies of them, so many we lost count… and they just seemed to go on and on up and down the steep hillside. Of course, hiking down, it felt like we were in our only CF in Zermatt… we were caught between or working through multiple groups of hikers. At a few points, there were some interesting wood-carvings of local fauna (e.g. marmots, which we never saw at all during this whole trip!)… but the light was terrible and so all my pictures were too shadowy/dark. After arriving at Sunnega, we used the restrooms and promptly headed down on the funicular because tonight was a packing night.

Left to Right: my room, cheese-melter, cheese-scraping, sides, a proper raclette plate – potato, dried beef, cheese, pickles, onions

But it was also our big Swiss specialty dinner: I cannot say if MTS always offers such a night or if this was unique to this hotel (which, like I said, is not on the usual docket in Zermatt)… but tonight, our hotel opened its breakfast area for Swiss dining featuring the choice of either fondu or raclette. I am not sure if the hotel owners set up the meal or if they brought in caterers… but, in any event, the breakfast area was taken over by a bunch of women with boiled potatoes, cheese-melters, and bubbling pots of fondu… plus all the typical sides (e.g. onions, pickles, dried beef, bread…). Earlier in the day, we each put in an order – mine was green salad and raclette (because Ellen and I had already done the fondu thing in Zurich in 2015). The alternative choice was mixed salad and fondu. There would also be local white wine and, in my case, I ordered an aperol spritz for dessert (because the hotel bar was offering it on sale).

For folks who don't know what raclette is, the word means scrape… and it is scraped melted cheese that you eat with all the sides I mentioned. Historically, the wheel of cheese was melted by placing it near a fire; but modern raclette is made by placing the wheel under a salamander-like broiler. I personally ate 3 raclette units (i.e. 1 unit = scraped cheese, 1 potato, a few onions, a few pickles, and some dried beef) and my salad. Most others got through 2 raclette units only. Although simple, it was a highlight meal on this trip; my only complaint was that I really wanted something sweet for dessert… and after 3 raclette units, I was NOT going to roll myself down and up the hill for pastries from the supermarket.

Left to Right: bye-bye Bella Vista, Zermatt luggage transport, cloudy Matterhorn, Saillon with Col de la Forclaz/France behind, grapes!

July 10-13, 2018: Chamonix and Beyond… and Home

As with our last transition day, today was wonky yet again. Following another great breakfast, we moved our luggage to the hotel's electric transport vehicle and then walked ourselves back to the big parking garage where the rented Swiss mini-bus (no trailer/tow this time) was waiting. Although today was wonky, it was not because the driving times were excessively long. We basically drove about 90 minutes, heading towards the French border, our route sometimes close to the final towns (e.g. Lenk and Launen) where Ellen and I spent the last days on the Via Alpina. We then stopped at this parking lot near an elementary school in this farmy-town. Outside, the temperatures were oppressively hot – and only getting worse. Alas, whoever came up with the idea of hiking low-elevation winery trails in the summer probably needs to rethink the added value of this side-trip. Indeed, our immediate goal was the medieval village of Saillon (complete with a castle tower) a couple hundred feet UP the terraced cliff/hillside – vineyards of green grapes in all directions – and then UP, UP, UP… to exactly where was never clear. Unfortunately, the guides were not familiar with this outing AND the itinerary print-out screwed up meters and feet (i.e. we were told we'd be gaining/losing 300 feet… but that was meters, meaning 1000 feet).

Left to Right: (top) pilgrimage glass art hiker, surrounding mountains, target bridge – Via Farinetta; (bottom) bridge gorge, winery trail, Saillon wine and local cheese/sausage tasting, ahhh – Chamonix's familiar Boisson Glacier through the mist

After an awkward and at-times unsuccessful search for the bathrooms (which we eventually found in a park a block from the school – where, of course, I had to demonstrate the flying fox with my full pack), we headed up the cliff/hillside walkways to Saillon proper. I am not clear on all the history about this town/pilgrimage that was discussed (sufficed to say it involved some Robin Hood-like figure). We passed by the wine-tasting room we would later visit and then mostly followed a series of stained glass pilgrimage signs out of town and, initially, up paved roads. A few times, our leader decided to take us up very steep and loose-rock paths through the vineyards but many people were so put off by these routes that our party would split on the way back – half the group walking only paved roads back (and thus taking almost 30 minutes longer). After 90 minutes of climbing, we entered a cooler deciduous forest and it was decided that the goal was this big suspension bridge thought to be another 30 minutes up. Despite some whining, we did make it to the bridge (the Via Farinetta)… only to discover a shitload of people, all of whom had easily driven close to the other side of the bridge. Oh well. I don't remember how long or high the bridge was but it scared the shit out of me – to the point I got full-on vertigo less than half-way across and had to return (I even attempted the walk again after I had eaten/drank a little – same thing!). We then descended to a less crowded spot along the trail and ate our lunches, sitting in the dirt. As stated, our group split into two factions on the way down once we came out of the trees – half refusing to take any dirt path short-cuts, and me/everyone else who wanted to be DOWN. My group

somehow found a different set of well-marked dirt paths through the vineyards that were much more civil/gentle and, as mentioned, got us to the wine-tasting room 30 minutes before the others. Needless to say, we emptied a few pitchers of water and used the restroom extensively. Once everyone arrived, we were given an nice introduction to the local wines – as well as 4 generous tastes (2 whites, 2 reds), accompanied by 3 local cheeses and incredible sausage. Notably, I was at a table with only 3 others (all other tables had 4) and only our table requested second helpings of the cheese and sausage. It was delicious and we were not shy about eating!!! Of course, we still had to stumble down the cliff/hillside to the bus.

From Saillon, we were less than 2 hours away from Chamonix. If you look at the picture of the Saillon silhouette (with the castle turret and the mountains in the background), you can actually see the French border where we were headed: specifically, the lower-point pass called Col de la Forclaz. Indeed, our drive effectively covered the final 3 days of Allison and my 2005 TMB (and later on this trip, we would hike most of our day five). Where we began climbing the Col de la Forclaz, we could look south and see the pass where Les/Lac Champex was (Allison and my TMB day six, the only night we slept in Switzerland on that trip). From Les/Lac Champex, Allison and I hiked to this highway-side complex on the other side of the Col de la Forclaz (TMB day seven). From the bus, I actually recognized the insanely steep forested trail that we descended to get to our inn for the night. From the Col de la Forclaz, we continued under the same steep, forested hillsides – eventually driving through La Buet (Allison and my TMB day eight… more about that later). And soon we were driving through Argentiere and making our way into Chamonix proper (Allison and my TMB day nine). In general, my impression of all these TMB sections was one of head-shaking wonder: the hillsides were so steep, and so thick with forest, and so dark and forbidding. There were no views of anything other than trees most of the time. Alas – I would NEVER do the TMB again… and especially after seeing this area again. Too many trees, too few views from high up at big mountains, too steep, too much pressure to complete long days and keep moving. When we arrived in Chamonix, the bus dropped us off 5 blocks from the hotel, which was more central than the charming place Allison and I stayed in 2005 (that place also offered big balconies – all with views of Mont Blanc). Although our hotel was quite regal-feeling with its castle-like feel and dark wood interior, many rooms (including mine) did not have a view of Mont Blanc and there was no balcony; plus, it was hotter than biscuits in there throughout the day and early into the night – NO AC. As in Zermatt, this hotel did not have a dining room – and so, after a good clean-up, we walked about 5 minutes to a very good restaurant for dinner. Although the daytime temperatures had been HOT (meaning a bunch of us underdressed for dinner), it cooled down QUICKLY; our leader somewhat jokingly asked the waiter if they had any blankets for us… and himself seemed shocked when half a dozen red-maroon fleece throws were procured. Making the situation even funnier, I'd been wearing my Rajneeshpuram T-shirt a few nights before – which meant I had to explain the story to the guides, who hadn't heard about Oregon's famous cult. Thus, the sight of half a dozen people wrapped in maroon was even more amusing. Our meal was memorably delicious: a beautiful green salad with local goat cheese, an amazing roast chicken breast with potatoes and squash, and a ginormous ice cream sculpture with meringue and chestnut sauce whose name involved Mont Blanc. Fat and satisfied, I scampered back to the hotel given no warm clothes!

Left to Right: clear early morning Mont Blanc, guides/history mural across from… our hotel, Balmat statue, Montenvers cog train…

The next day, we did THE quintessential Chamonix dayhike: The Grand Balcon Nord – between the Montenvers/cog-train and L'Aiguille du Midi midway gondola platform). Shockingly, that was not on the original itinerary (said plan had us doing a 7 mile, 2600 footer over by the Col de Balme – east of the city). Although the Grand Balcon Nord was much shorter (like 4-ish miles with 1500 rolling up/down), it felt much harder – especially the way we did it (reverse of the way I've done it both times before in 2005). Even though I have hiked this trail under super-awesome conditions twice, it was TOTALLY worth it to hike again – particularly because it was earlier in the year and the flowers and greenery were so much more amazing. That said – it was a total CF. Setting out around 9, our leader spent nearly 30 minutes in the square outside our hotel explaining every detail of the tromp l'oiel mural/fresco of all the local mountain guides, which was painted on a building across the way. Of the most interest were the 2 women – one who seemed to have been forced up as a poor maidservant, and the other who went up by choice. At some point during this trip, I learned from the female assistant guide that women represent about 30% of the Companie du Mont Blanc guides (I also learned that certification requires a 60 page thesis describing something like 20 days of hiking/climbing – from all standpoints: natural, technical/planning, personal motivational, historical…). After this introduction, we walked several blocks to the train station, spending a short time at the Balmat statue. The train station and train were crowded/busy but we all found seats and the ride was, at times, cliffhanging (more than I remember from before). At the top, I was immediately saddened to see how much the magnificent Mer de Glace had receded and was basically puddling with melt-out and dirty rubble. When Allison and I visited this area in 2005, we took a small gondola down from Montenvers to the glacier – and then walked onto and then into the ice – into this weird man-made tunnel system with odd art/ice sculptures. The guides said that the glacier has receded so much in the last 10 years that the hike between the gondola and the ice is much longer and more challenging; the concessioners who run all that stuff are contemplating whether to build some new kind of glacier-access system much farther up the beautiful valley in which the Mer de Glace flows (which would be SUCH an eyesore/shame). In an effort to avoid the throng heading immediately up the trail, we were taken over to this new glacier museum. The best part was the talking glacier narrative, which accompanied all these over-time graphics that were projected onto a 3D representation of the Mont Blanc/Mer de Glace massif. After that, several additional rooms contained scientific efforts to describe global warming effects on the world's glaciers. From the museum, we proceeded straight up the trail – which climbed quite steadily about 1200 feet to Signal, a pseudo-summit of slabby rocks with a commanding view over Mer de Glace (no Mont Blanc yet, though). While sometimes an

exhausting stair-climb, the flowers (particularly the azaleas) were utterly magnificent – meaning I stopped a lot to photograph and stare at stuff. At Signal, our group found an area in the rocks for our morning snack and a long presentation about this area by the leader.

Left to Right: can't resist - Allison and my memorable patio lunch area from 2005, climbing, and more climbing… to Signal

After resting and snacking at Signal, we continued – the trail a bunch of teetering rock slabs for a fairly long stretch, which wasn't appreciated by all. Rounding the corner, we got our first straight-down views into Chamonix. And then it felt like a big CF pretty much all day… if we weren't in the thick of some group trying to pass through our group, we had group after group coming at us – trying to pass from the other direction. We also began seeing Mont Blanc through swirling clouds pretty much on/off the rest of the day.

Left to Right: rocky trail – see it in the first shot? on it with the Dru in the back, on it with Chamonix below, still on it!

After the rocky section came the surprise switchbacks down the green meadow bowl and soon we began looking for a real lunch spot – eventually finding a nice meadowy promontory 60% across the route. Given limited bathroom options, the women took turns using this area just up the hill where you basically squat into a shallow… your pants-free area not visible to EVERYONE passing because of the meadow shrubbery – but your shoulders up were totally visible. This caused some stage-fright. After lunch was a continuation of mixed rock and meadow. We did make a sometimes wet pitstop at this marshy area with a creek so that folks could find a proper pee rock; I must have been very hydrated because it was a 2-pee day for me! We could see the gondola station on the ridgeline most of the way and it just seemed like it took forever to get there – particularly the final rock-bowl area; I was definitely ready to be done.

Left to Right: (top) surprise switchbacks, lunch area/view, post-lunch hiking, looking back at balcony – you can see surprise switchbacks; (bottom) rocky bowl under gondola station, windy Mont Blanc, non-civil gondola, looking back on the Grand Balcon

Of course, the thing I knew was about to happen did – but it was fairly shocking to others. You see: operators of the L'Aiguille du Midi gondola are very famous for physically cramming as many people as possible into the gondola… whatever you think is an uncivil or unacceptable personal space violation, they will actually add 10 more. And today was no different. The operator could actively be seen

shoving a couple additional families into the cabin, audible protests from the crowd. Although some people were initially worried they had nothing in reach to hold onto, people quickly realized that you were not falling over because there was no space in which to fall over. Any annoyance with the cramming, though, quickly vanished as we went over the first tower – because the outward inertia is such that the whole gondola swings at least ten degrees out and then recoils back, the whole time going over the edge on its 4000+ foot descent. In unison, the whole cabin was, like: ooooooh, aaaaaah… waiting for the minor swings in anticipation as we went over each tower. Tonight's dinner was probably my least favorite on the trip; it was a short walk towards the center of town and I thought the food was a little boring (everyone but me had a fish in paper; I had a steak, which turned out to be a tasty ribeye but so big that I shared with someone who was not enthusiastic about the fish).

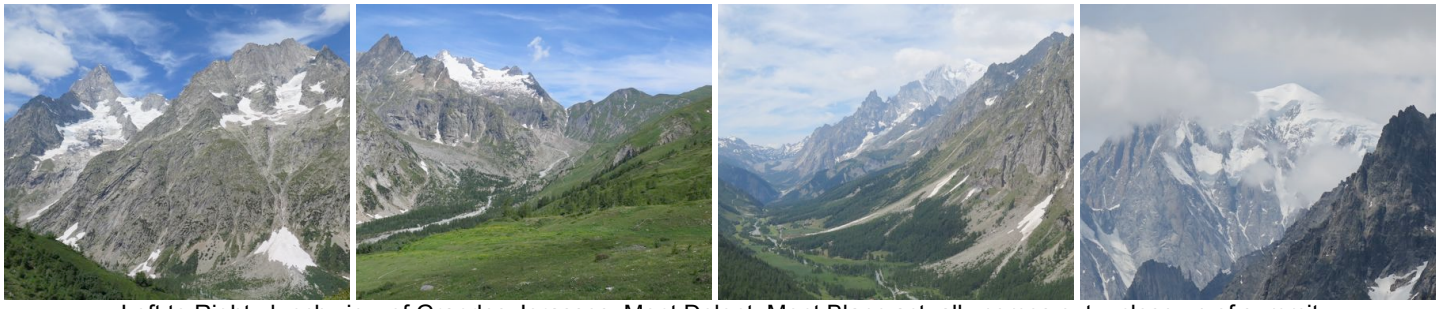
Left to Right: road-hiking and views of Mont Blanc and flanks of Grandes Jorasses; last shot from climb to balcony trail

The next day was, for me, one of the most anticipated hikes on this trip – one I'd waited 13 years to repeat properly. This hike was – as recorded in my journal/report from 2005 - the single worst day on Allison and my TMB trip AND the day that we officially coined the word SHUD (a rain-induced mixture of shit and mud). The hike was on the Italian side of the Mont Blanc massif (so - our group drove through the famous tunnel under Mont Blanc) and it basically involved a balcony trail traverse along Mont de la Saxe, which is supposed to have some of the most mind-boggling views of the north side of the Mont Blanc massif. Although the guides dispute my assertion that, in 2005, Allison and I (as confirmed by my journal/report) went up from La Palud towards Mont de la Saxe, hit Refugio Bertone, and then escaped back down shuddy trails to Lavachey (entirely skipping Refugio Bonatti), that is exactly what we did because it was a hard-rain ALL DAY with no views at all (effectively a west to east traverse of Mont de la Saxe). In contrast, we did an east to west traverse (which is how the guides insist current TMB itineraries are run) – parking 5 minutes up-valley from Lavachey (a key overnight inn along the TMB), walking a paved road up the valley for an hour. Then, we headed right/up by the Chalet Val Ferret (here, the TMB continues left – climbing over into Switzerland and the aforementioned Lac Champex) – and made a big square loop trail back to Lavachey, stopping at Rifugio Bonatti. Based on all my excellent journals/records, I don't think ANY part of what Allison and I did in 2005 overlapped with what we did in 2018… mostly because 2005 was such a washout that we had to escape.

Left to Right: massif looking towards Mont Blanc/Jorasses, looking towards Switzerland/Dolent, balcony and Mont de la Saxe, one of a few steep river gullies to navigate

Anyway – we left the hotel in 2 vans today. I had never been through the big tunnel, although I'd heard about it after a tunnel fire in there killed 35 people – with subsequent lawsuits pointing to many levels of negligence. That reminds me – I also heard that the famously long gondola between France and Italy (which used to begin at L'Aiguille du Midi and proceed out over the icefields) has been permanently closed down after last year's accident with multiple cars getting stuck mid-icefield). Anyway - to get to the tunnel, we drove a very zigzagging highway up above Chamonix (it almost felt like a good thousand feet up) and then entered. Because of the fire, there were all kinds of rules and lighting systems designed to keep cars a certain distance from each other; there were also more fans and emergency pull-over recesses. It took just over 20 minutes to get through the tunnel – which emerged above the Italian village of La Palud, where Allison and I stayed the night before Lavachay on the TMB; La Palud is immediately above the more charming village of Courmeyer (which we briefly visited on both trips). Descending to La Palud, I could readily see half of Allison and my TMB day four: a long descent next to this HUGE glacier-cut quarry, at the terminus of which was the Lac du Miage (Allison and I were able to see the glacier snout and the lake so both were very familiar). After passing La Palud, I also began to get strong déjà vu recollections about how Allison and I went up from there and made a crossing of Mont de la Saxe from this side (our TMB day five)… but the guides were very insistent that that was not the usual TMB. Well – it had been for us because the weather was SO horrible (at the time, our TMB leader indicated it was his foulest weather circuit in his 16-year career). In contrast, our vans headed up the long quiet valley where the rustic inn complex of Lavachey is located (again – a key overnight along the TMB). I definitely recognized that correctly as well. Shortly thereafter, an official stopped our vans and said we could not drive any further. So – we parked and would walk from here. To this day, I have no idea if this was the original plan, or something the guides adjusted on the spot. Although paved road-walking is never my favorite thing (especially when too many cars seem to have access – which was the case here), the views even from the road were really impressive – already vastly superior to our previous TMB views from this area. At some point, we rounded a corner and the valley end came into view: all these rolling velvet green hills… and I remember asking the guide, "Is that the

Swiss border?" Yes – I remembered that as well – mostly because it was one of the clearest of our TMB days (Lavachey, Italy to Champex, Switzerland). Already, I felt like today was almost redeeming THREE days of Allison and my TMB: to Palud, to Lavachey, and at least seeing the Swiss border to Champex.



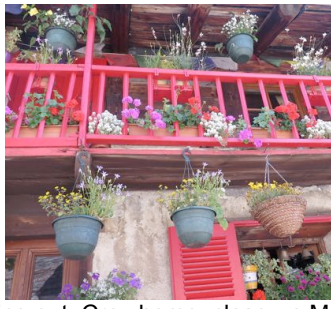
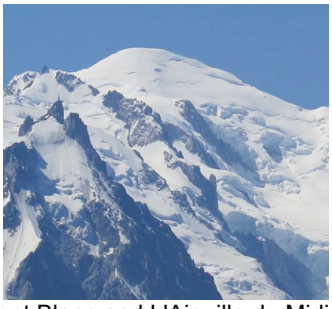
Left to Right: lunch view of Grandes Jorasses, Mont Dolent, Mont Blanc actually comes out – close up of summit

After an hour, we arrived at a well-developed and new-looking Chalet Val Ferret; I had zero recollections of this elaborate a structure here back in 2005. I swear the van just dropped us off at the end of the road (which I also swear was NOT paved in 2005) and we took off STRAIGHT UP the trail (the trail UP looked ENTIRELY familiar, for the record). Instead of heading up the pass, though, our party headed right – weaving our way up in between a group of bikers who were pretty much walking their vehicles up the switchbacks. I will say that I was acutely aware all day that the trail was super-dirt/clay-like… the kind of stuff that, in the presence of rain, turns into a mudfest; notably, we did not encounter any animals/shit, however. After about 1000 feet of climbing, we came to an empty concrete hut, where we took our morning snack-break. And then the route basically turned into a long undulating balcony trail (all – dirt/clay) that was utterly glorious. Probably every 20 minutes, the way cut into a deep gully (sometimes with a stream) that had to be navigated a little more carefully… but, all in all, it was easy and amazing walking! At around 1, with a head-on view into the Grandes Jorasses, we stopped for a highly satisfying lunch. At times, the true summit of Mont Blanc also revealed herself through dynamic clouds. While half of us would have been content to lie around napping, the other half were chomping at the bit, perhaps because there had been talk of spoon-standing hot chocolate and beer at Rifugio Bonatti (about 30 minutes away).

Left to Right: (top) big bridge before Bonatti, pretty yellow flowers, trails everywhere, Rifugio Bonatti under Mont Blanc, chocolate; (bottom) weis-beer, Mont Blanc from near La Palud, the infamous tunnel, glorious alpenglow on Mont Blanc… or Mont Orange?

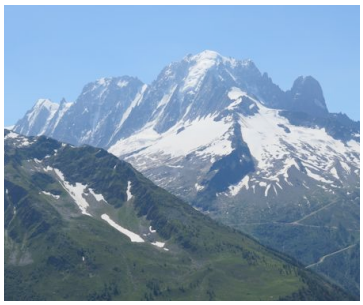
When I first heard we were going to Bonatti, I SWORE Allison and I had been there on our TMB… and only my journals said otherwise. I didn't have any strong recollection when I saw the place, though… although it seemed a little newer than the place we were in 2005 (which, like I said, turned out to be Bertone). While I don't recall being tired at Bonatti, I know I had to go to the bathroom badly… and there was only a squat-hole toilet. Once that was done, I suspect the hot chocolate sent all my attention to my stomach. So – perhaps these facts explain why I took no photos of Bonatti, and no good pictures of my chocolate. Oh well. Bonatti was surprisingly busy, with people lounging all over the outdoor decks – clearly coming in from all trail directions along Mont de la Saxe. Although getting a big tall glass of beer was very tempting, I knew we had a long and probably steep descent back to the vans (which you could almost see directly below in the valley). Indeed, the descent was steep – and surprisingly loose-rocky at times. But we made it down in good time, my only problem being that I wandered over to the big river where some people were fishing, and then my hat fell off but I didn't notice, and the fishermen were beside themselves trying to explain the problem in Italian and having me not understand. Eventually, I did catch on. Being that it was only around 3:30, the guides turned us loose in Cormayeur for 40 minutes, recommending an obvious gelateria, which was excellent (provided you brought cash, which I did). We then headed back to Chamonix for one of the best dinners of the trip: appropriately, at an Italian pizzeria. Although some of the lettuce in the green salad was a little dicey/rotting, we each got our own pizza (I did a margarita, and ate nearly all of it – just a few crust pieces left on the plate), and of course then there was more ice cream for dessert. Across the way, some kind of sports climbing event was loudly taking place; I probably offended our very

interested leader by not stopping by the monstrosity on my way back to the hotel, which – as usual – I left for earlier than some. But I DID make the effort to take some fantastic alpenglow pictures of Mont Blanc before going to bed, which looked even more impressive than the Matterhorn alpenglow from Zermatt.

Left to Right: clear skies setting out, Croz home, close-up Mont Blanc and L'Aiguille du Midi, high meadows/Balcon Sud

Although I genuinely hoped we would get to hike Lac Blanc (on the Balcon Sud side of Chamonix) because that hike remains an inspiration for my initially wanting to see Chamonix/Mont Blanc way back when, I was not disappointed that that the guides picked something else. I know how crazy Lac Blanc is – and, after some dissatisfaction with the Grand Balcon Nord CF experience – the guides rightfully picked a less crowded destination: Col de Posettes. What I did NOT know at the time was that supposedly I had hiked this before (our second to last day of the TMB – a shorter/easier hike than the planned Col de Balme route, owing to rain). Looking at those 2005 pictures, though, hardly anything of the trail looks familiar. What I suspect is that Allison and I climbed up to the Col from the opposite side and then took a different route down – being that we were coming from the Swiss direction on the TMB. In contrast, our group took the train up from Chamonix, disembarking at Montroc and then hiking up/through the village to this big parking area that seemed to serve gondolas heading up towards the Col de Balme. En route, we visited the historic/maintained home of Croz, a famous climber/alpine club figure from the area who died during the first successful ascent of the Matterhorn. Near the parking lot, the leader announced that we would have the choice to do a shorter/slower route or a longer/faster route – the former would gain 1000 feet to an intermediate meadow and then descend; the latter would gain 2000 feet to the top of the ridgeline (officially – we did not go over the Col de Posettes, it should be noted… which may also explain why none of the TMB pictures ring a bell), go down a very steep trail, and eventually descend the same area as the short hikers. The leader said he was not going to stop much to wait so people needed to be prepared to hike, hike, hike, and climb, climb, climb. Unfortunately, this plan was foiled somewhat an a few counts: first, a group of variable-speed Koreans led by a totally douchey guide (we're talking – hilarious felt climbing hat, cigarette dangling from his mouth… the only thing missing was full-on lederhosen and an alphorn) got in front of us; and, second, a few of our slowest team members decided they wanted to do the longer option and the leader did not question that choice. The leader did eventually let 3 of us (the fastest, which shockingly did include me – despite a visibly larger belly full of pizza) go up ahead so he could navigate the slow people who got caught/lost in the Korean team's slowest sub-group. Consequently, we made it to the designated lunch spot (probably a third of mile below the official Col de Posettes) about 30 minutes ahead of the party tail.



Left to Right: (top) Aiguille Verte (snowy mound) & Dru (dark rock), pizza-belly, Aiguille Rouges, looking up at Col de Posettes; (bottom) Glacier Tour – and close, BIG climb for last day of the TMB, strange tiki garden near the end of the hike

I personally found the lunch spot a little unnerving because it was on a ridgeline and the back area was a rather sheer drop-off into this big valley between us and the Aiguille Rouges (notably, where Ellen/Bruno spent a week hiking/trekking a few years back). But fortunately, the front area was a more gently descending meadow and the views were great: Aiguille Verte and the dark Dru (which looks totally different than from our pointier view of it at Signal), the Glacier Tour (which was showing serious signs of recession!), and the full Mont Blanc massif. That said, the skies were a little hazier and during lunch some BIG cooler winds seemed to blast out of nowhere – drawing a temporary blanket of white over parts of the mountains. To our left was the official Col de Posettes, a higher point

from which party after party was descending (this made it extremely difficult to find a place to pee after lunch… and I have no doubt that I showed off my bum to some group). After eating and peeing, we headed right on a trail that would meander briefly through stunning meadows – some with marshy areas and cotton grass. And then it decidedly dropped very steeply… so steeply that the French actually installed long wooden stairs at many points (I think I was so shocked to see actual stairs that I failed to take any pictures of them!). Between my impressions of steepness and the stairs, I am fairly certain that Allison and I did not hike this route down – although I honestly have no idea where we descended. As we descended, we enjoyed ridiculous views of the HUGE ascent up the big final massif that makes up the Balcon Sud/Lac Blanc area – which encompasses the final day of the TMB. Allison and I did hike up that beast (in mostly fog, I recall)… but it definitely spoke to the relative difficulty of a TMB day vs. one of our days.

After a good hour, we arrived at the place where the shorter/slower hiker route came in/merged – and then it was a rather long and HOT descent through mostly woods to the bottom. The leader let the faster contingent descend at our own rate, provided that we all meet by the "Easter Island Statues." We weren't sure what to expect but, indeed, some resident has a field of tiki garden statues. From there, it was 10 minutes to the train and an easy ride back to Chamonix. Our last night in Chamonix was definitely our best meal – although the restaurant was sort of stuffy and weirdly crowded (another MTS group was there celebrating, I assume, the end of the TMB). Not holding back (on fat or food morals), I cleaned all my plates: foie gras with jam appetizer, morel pasta with veal cutlets, and an apricot pastry (that could have been sweeter). The next day, our party was split up for the tranfer back to Geneva – meaning I never felt I got to say proper goodbyes. Being that my flight was one of the later departures, I also got stuck sitting in the departure/ticket area over an hour before Icelandair's counter opened up. Thankfully, though, I got to mostly enjoy the lounge… minus some Swiss dude telling me not to put my feet up, and there being NO in-lounge toilet. The flights home were uneventful – other than thoroughly enjoying Black Panther!

<u>Closing Thoughts</u>

At the outset, there were 3 goals in choosing this trip: (1) to test my feet with hiking continuously for over two weeks, which – including the Netherlands - this whole trip represented; (2) to hopefully see the Matterhorn and scope out Zermatt for future trip possibilities; and (3) to hopefully have a better impression of some TMB areas we never saw in good conditions – the highest on the list being the Italian side/Mont de la Saxe. With those goals in mind, this trip was an epic success. The cherries on that sundae, though, were several: Most importantly, our group (who I have chosen not to detail beyond a few remarks) was one of the finest I've hiked with. People were easy to socialize with, hike with, dine with, and converse with – and I appreciated getting to know every person on this trip in some way, large or small. Despite some itinerary challenges, I loved our guides and our driver/lunch-maker greatly. I cannot speak highly enough of the food across the board on this trip – whether in terms of homemade salads, insane cheese-spreads at lunch, or a simple meal of raclette. And, lastly, everyone appreciated the fact that we stayed at good hotels multiple nights and there wasn't this overbearing pressure to move every day – like on the TMB. I took a whole day after coming home to carefully read and study my TMB report/journals and feel even more strongly about those assertions. As I remarked on my trip feedback survey to MTS after the fact: I realized more than ever doing this trip that I would never want to do the TMB again because it's just not what I'm interested in… and as MTS develops this itinerary, I think they are going to find a healthy group of people who want exactly what this trip offered: great, moderate hikes every day, amazing food, better downtime than on a trip like the TMB, and the chance to experience settings like Grindelwald, Zermatt, and Chamonix for multiple days.