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TRAVEL DIARY

100 Miles, 10 Days, Three Countries and a Lot of Cheese

The epicurean pleasures of the Tour du Mont Blanc, Europe's most indulgent trek.

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The quest story that enjoys the greatest currency in America, aside from the postapocalyptic road trip, is the grueling distance hike. The genre is capacious, and can be inspirational (Cheryl Strayed's ''Wild'') or slapstick (Bill Bryson's ''A Walk in the Woods''), but the plot doesn't vary much: Out of a sense of profligacy or shame, one takes to the long narrow path as a kind of purgatory, stripping off various regrettable excesses — drugs, sex, food, Internet. At the trail's end one emerges remade: chaste, humble and slender.

There is something distinctly American about the self-abnegation associated with Bryson's Appalachian Trail or Strayed's Pacific Crest — a Calvinist idea that the long walk can't possibly justify itself on holiday terms. There are, of course, thousands of Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims who circumambulate Tibet's Mount Kailash each year, some of them on their knees, and hundreds of thousands of strivers who endure the privations of the long walk to Santiago de Compostela, but the European variants of distance trails lack our hair-shirt baggage. For if you ask a Western European to list the continent's most famous and popular long-distance treks, you'll inevitably hear about the Tour du Mont Blanc — which, despite its formidable challenges, is an endurance stroll of a different order: less a ritual of purification than of epicurean indulgence.

The Tour is a 105-mile, three-country circumambulation of the Mont Blanc massif, usually accomplished in about 10 days. Popular lore has it that the first pedestrian circuit of the daunting ultramontane orbit dates to 1767; and by the middle of the Victorian age — when Europeans decided that the mountains and glaciers they'd held as largely impassive had all along been hiding in plain sight as agents of the Romantic sublime — the route had become, for the adventurous, a staple of a European circuit. These days, more than 10,000 holiday makers embark on the route each year, most of them beginning in Chamonix, in France's Vallée de l'Arve, and then continuing counterclockwise into Italy's Val Veny and finally along the Val Ferret into Switzerland.

The average ascent of the tour's 11 traditional stages is about 2,700 feet, and so a thru-hiker, by the time he or she closes the loop, has in aggregate climbed the equivalent height of Everest from sea level. The trip is arduous, but it's also indulgent, actively promoted and taken up for its sumptuary pleasures: Savoyard wines, hot chocolate thick enough to keep a metal spoon upright, treadmills of raclette. One chronicler described her experience on the mountain's flanks as a cheese tour with a strenuous but largely incidental mountain-climbing component.

In fact, our starting point of Les Houches, a hamlet of wood-shingle-roofed chalets a few miles down the valley from Chamonix, seemed less like a habitable town than it did a rugged depot for unrestrained cheesemongering. It was hard to walk more than a few yards without accidentally buying more cheese. My wife and I had aspired to provision ourselves with a single modest wedge of something nosey enough to please my wife, who grew up in northern Italy and was weaned on Gorgonzola and fontina, yet unobtrusive enough not to isolate us from other hikers. We'd been told, furthermore, that the next village, Les Contamines, just two valleys away, had a wonderful street market, so we didn't need more than one long day's worth of food. But we were helplessly charmed and bullied by one of the local mongers, and soon our packs, which we'd kept bindle-like in their austerity, had nearly doubled in weight with hulking cross-sections of tomme de Savoie, séchon de chèvre d'Isère (a beige hockey puck of dried goat cheese), Saint-Nectaire and a young Comté. As we set out the next morning, our knees buckling under the weight

of so much cheese, the proprietress of our inn, worried that we might perish on the high Col de Tricot from malnutrition, foisted upon us a wrapped parcel of fresh croissants. ‘‘Remember,’’ she said as we left, ‘‘this is a holiday!’’

A central element of that holiday is supposed to be the views. Unlike the Matterhorn, Elbrus or Fuji, the highest mountain in Western Europe lacks the kind of stately silhouette that might be beheld from a single vantage. It is instead something of a monstrous refuse heap of unmatching mountain-parts: Its long, broad, elliptical massif of a base supports a jumbled pile of massive snow-covered domes, tonguelike glaciers of mottled gray gutter snow and, here and there, jagged spires of granite. Each stage of the long ascent up to the saddle of a pass is thus rewarded with a portion of a cumulatively panoramic view of the cubist beast.

For most of the four days it took to get us from Les Houches to Courmayeur, the most fashionable outpost on the Italian side, the views were primarily of the fog that obscured all but the continuously steep path before us. But we certainly did not want for astonishing beauty. We crossed the high, hanging valley of Miage, its soft belly mowed at the leisure of belled brown cattle; we made our way across the moonscape of barren moors below the Col du Bonhomme, its steep five-hour ascent across treeless expanses stippled with gentian, aster and flax; we approached from above the isolated mountain inns of Refuge des Mottets and Rifugio Elisabetta, their roofs of wet-slicked rough stone. But when the guidebook told us that we would surely want to linger a while for the breathtaking vistas of the Col de la Seigne, which forms the unmanned border of France and Italy, we mostly just wanted to get down from the blurry cold. My wife joked, once we had crossed over into her native Italy, that the views had at last improved — but one of the great credits of the tour is the way that the punishing ups and treacherous downs render those borders more immaterial than ever. The only real difference on the Italian side was the great proliferation of whiny marmots.

At the Refuge des Mottets, a converted stone dairy farm at the top of the empty canyon of the Vallée des Glaciers, we found ourselves part of an affectionate little windblown group, coalesced over an almost parodically copious family-style meal. We sat at long benches in the dark tavern, the heavy beams of which were hung

with old cowbell leathers and superannuated cheesemaking tools like medieval dental equipment. We bonded in commiseration over the fog, but when that conversation ran dry we could always return to the cheese, served to us at every stop and in every permutation: here as a raclette, there as fondue, there with potatoes as a tartiflette. We each had such a surfeit of cheese that we literally could not give it away — though we did try.

The longer, in fact, that the promised views failed to materialize, the more it seemed as though we and everyone we met on the trail were overcompensating with the febrile distribution of cheese (and sometimes chocolate), as a symbol of our broad collective commitment to a shared vision of a good, indulgent, rewarding holiday — one whose privations were more incidental than constitutive. When we did, from time to time, see the clouds part to spill sunshine onto the rushing, clouded-sapphire rivulets of glacial runoff down the ravine from the Col des Fours, or the uncloaked vista of Italy's Val Veny spread out before us like a rumpled baize at the base of long rubbled moraines, we knew how to celebrate commensurately.

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