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Trail running above  
the Mer de Glace



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# Trail Running in the Alps

There's no better place to go running than in the Alps, but where should you go and what skills do you need? **Kingsley Jones** offers up some advice...

WORDS & PICTURES: KINGSLEY JONES

**C**ontrary to first impressions, trail running isn't the preserve of the uber-fit, and is increasingly attractive to those who want to move fast and light in the mountains. I'm going to break the first rule of trail running club, and tell you the great 'secret' that on some of the steeper climbs, even the elite runners actually walk! Yes, even the world famous, record breaking, Kilian Jornet has been spotted speed walking on some ascents. So why am I divulging this secret to you? It's to explore how to get into the sport of trail running, to shatter some of the pre-conceptions, and to share the benefits of this type of training for other mountain sports ranging from trekking to mountaineering.

## RUNNING MAN

Let's first go back a few thousand years, before the effects of modern living and diet had damaged our health so much. In fact as humans we are all born runners, with our Neolithic forefathers being persistence hunters who chased prey slowly and steadily until the animal was exhausted and could be

killed. Trail running is quite literally in our genes, in a current era where many waistlines are challenging our jeans.

Many people are finding that when training in a gym or on a treadmill for their mountain adventures, it is expensive and easy to lose your mojo. The attraction of trail running is that the constantly changing landscape keeps us motivated, and the cross training effects of the rough mountain ground helps build joint strength, and reduce the risk of injury, as well as improve our efficiency of movement and agility in the mountains.

Trail running is a sport that comes naturally to us, it requires very little equipment, improves our health, and hugely benefits us mentally too. For those who already run, trail running is a natural progression to seek the next challenge, be it in terms of distance or on tougher terrain, and the mountains provide the most extreme medium in which to practice our sport.

At the pinnacle of this, elite runners have run up famous alpine peaks including Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn, at fantastic speeds compared to the rest of us mortals. What attracts many to this fascinating sport is that

you move fast and unencumbered, compared to the average trekker or climber, and that opens up new horizons to what you can achieve.

Gone are the preconceptions of mountain runners as wild mountain men with overly short shorts and wild beards. You are as likely to be overtaken by a woman in the latest technical compression fabrics with lightweight poles and a minimalist running backpack. Trail running as a sport has come a long way in the last 20 years, and it is more inclusive, more accessible, and more enjoyable than ever before.

## PREPARE WELL

Before you start out, it's worth making sure that you have enough kit with you in terms of both safety, and the rapidly changing weather conditions in the mountains. It's worth investing in a decent pair of trail running shoes. Compared to road shoes, these have a more aggressive tread, a rock plate in the sole to stop your feet bruising on rough ground, and a toe box to reduce the amount of blackened toe nails. Oh yes, forget the L'Oreal foot model contract – if you ever



On 'Vertical K' in Chamonix



Running past the Glacier du Tour

## MASTERCLASS



Trail running in Italian  
Val Ferret

take up trail running, you've got to forget that as a future career!

When running in the mountains, it's worth taking a running pack to carry the essential safety gear. A running back is typically up to 12L volume, and fits very well to avoid movement and chaffing. In it you should carry some water, a rain jacket, extra layer, survival blanket, whistle, phone, head torch, hat, gloves, first aid kit, snacks, map and compass. These are pretty standard obligatory kit for any trail running race, and even on the days when it looks sunny, in the Alps especially, the afternoon convection storms can quickly bubble up and catch you in a downpour.

Another consideration for trail running is the effect of the altitude, and runners need to allow sufficient time to acclimatise. Generally a couple of easier runs at the start of the week, before you plan on any major exertion above

2,500m, is a good idea. The likely side effects of mild altitude sickness include nausea, headaches, loss of appetite, and excess fatigue. If you can distinguish those from the usual melee of feelings during a training run, you're a better judge than me. The key is therefore to be progressive with your trail running ambitions during training or on a holiday.

To enjoy alpine trail running you don't have to be superhumanly fit. You need to be in good condition for running, but to be determined and highly adaptable. Adapt your output to the terrain, and the length of your run. Some of the best trail runners aren't the fittest or the fastest, but those with the most tricks up their sleeves, who save energy wherever possible. Remember that laziness and efficiency are the same thing re-marketed!

Trekkers will know that their secret weapon is their walking poles, and while runners still

jokingly refer to them as 'cheat sticks', they know their worth. On long distance trail races, such as the Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc, over 95% of runners carry poles. The efficient use of poles, either walking or running, can decrease the load on your legs by up to 30%, and who wouldn't want that benefit on a mountain? There are many running specific poles now, such as the Black Diamond Z-poles, or the innovative award-winning ProTrailerOriginal's by A2-16.

### STAY SAFE

While it's easy for a walker to think of mountain runners as reckless (and dangerous?) for windmilling down mountains at breakneck speeds, there are remarkably few injuries caused by trail running. The ankle strength built up by trail running, as well as the increases in balance, and neat footwork, reduce the risks significantly, and these



Runner on the Mont de la Saxe ridge

benefits are really useful for other mountain sports that the reader may enjoy, such as mountaineering, rock climbing, or mountain biking. Trail running makes you move very efficiently in the mountains, and when you learn to relax and trust your reflexes, even long descents become a flowing rhythm, not step after step of impact and pain.

Safety is always a key consideration, and if you are trail running in Chamonix, the mecca of European mountain sports, there is generally very good phone reception around

the massif, in event of needing to call mountain rescue. It's good practice to always run with a friend, so you have some backup in case of an emergency. Navigation on the trails is fairly straightforward, due to the amount of signage in the Alps, so navigators who fear the cloudy days in the UK hills, will find alpine trail running navigation a doddle. It's still worth taking a map in case plans change.

Always check the weather forecast when setting out trail running, and don't be afraid to adapt. Snow patches can linger well into the

summer season, especially this year with the late spring snows, and so your ability to cope with (or turn around) this is a real judgment call. There are trail runs at all levels, to suit everyone from a complete beginner, to an experienced trail runner looking to venture to some alpine summits, so the choice of run is critical. I have selected a few of my favourite runs in Chamonix and the Mont Blanc massif for you, to cater for different levels of experience and aspirations of trail runners.



Topping out on the Chamonix Vertical KM



Running to the Col de Salenton

## MASTERCLASS

## TOP 5 ROUTES IN CHAMONIX

If you're visiting the Chamonix Mont Blanc area, here are five great running routes to try

### RUN 1 – MER DE GLACE (France) 15.3km, +1,260m, 4h30

If you only run one route in the Chamonix valley, make sure it's this one. Start near the Montenvers train station, and run up through the Le Planards ski slopes, along the 'James Bond' ski track out from the Vallée Blanche. In the summer it's snow (and skier) free, and you zigzag upwards through the trees to reach the edge of the Mer de Glace next to its snout, at the charming Les Mottets buvette. Here you turn right and thread your way up through the moraines, keeping left at the junction, to arrive just below the upper Montenvers station 1,913m. The view ahead to the Mer de Glace and the Grandes Jorasses at its head are breathtaking. Run up to the train station, then ascend further towards Le Signal. This is the high point of the run, and the view of the 1km high west face of Les Drus across the glacier, is quite something! After taking photos, and catching your breath, run across the balcony trail to the Plan d'Aiguille. This undulating path offers very aerial views down into Chamonix, and across to the Aiguilles Rouges. When you reach the mountain hut on the Plan, turn right and follow the trail steeply down to the car park behind the Aiguille du Midi cable car. This descent drops the height of Ben Nevis, but only takes about 45 minutes!

### RUN 2 – MONT DE LA SAXE (Italy) 17km, +1,095m, 3h30

Take the bus from Courmayeur to the village of Planpincieux in the Italian Val Ferret, where you start running up the valley until you see a small chapel next to the road, and turn off right to cross the river and run up the 4x4 track on the far side. Follow this until you see a turn-off on the left to the Rifugio Bertone. Here there is a wonderful single track trail which ascends through alpages and forests, before emerging on a hillside at an orientation table just above the Bertone hut. Here you turn left and run steeply up the ridge. The gradient eases after about 10 minutes, and you emerge onto the broad ridge of the Mont de la Saxe. Revel in the views of the south faces of Mont Blanc and the Grandes Morasses, as you follow the ridgeline past Testa Bernarda, and over the Tête de la Tronche. This is a good spot for a snack, before the trail plunges steeply down to the Col Sapin. Turn left and run down into the Armina valley, following the faint track to the right of the river. When you reach the

end of the valley, turn left and run past an abandoned farm, then across a footbridge, to follow a path that contours around the hillside to bring you back to your original ascent track. At the 4x4 track, turn right and follow your initial route back to Planpincieux.

### RUN 3 – LA JONCTION (France) 12.5km, +1,530m, 3h45

From the village of Les Bossons, run up the road towards the ski jump, and then turn off left onto the path signposted to Les Pyramides and La Jonction. This trail threads its way up through the trees to reach a small cafe perched precariously above the stunning Bossons glacier icefall. Follow the path upwards, up a series of zigzags, and you criss-cross the two sides of the mountain, before reaching a rockier section where you encounter several sections protected by chains and metal foot steps in the rock. Ascend these, following the yellow dots of paint on the rocks to guide you, and you eventually reach two huge boulders, under which Balmat and Paccard slept during their first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786. Spare a thought for them as you run the lung-busting last few metres to arrive at La Jonction. This rock spur splits the Bossons glacier in two, and you feel perched in the mountains, with the Aiguille du Midi seemingly close enough to touch. Enjoy the view and proximity of Mont Blanc just above you, before returning by the same route to the valley floor. This run is physically tough, but hugely rewarding.

### RUN 4 – CHAMONIX VERTICAL KM (France) 3.8km, +1,000m, 1h

Start in front of the Chamonix town hall, and run to the left of the church and straight up the road to the Brevent cable car station. This street seems steep, but what lies ahead gets steeper every step you take. Run along the track to the left of the cable car, and when it turns to the right and passes below the cables, a small track heads off left. The endless zigzags of the initial section of the vertical kilometre gain roughly half the height before you traverse right over loose scree, and then move back left to regain the ridgeline after 700m of ascent. Here you encounter sections of cables, rock steps, and ladders to follow the left side of the ridge crest, directly beneath the Planpraz lift station, with the cable car bubbles passing directly over your head. On the steep pitches, you can look between your feet, and

see Chamonix far below. Just before the station the gradient eases, before you run through a couple of terraces of the lift station to reach the jeep track beyond. Follow it to the left and up to a paraglider take off area, which marks the end of your 1,000m odyssey.

### RUN 5 – ULTRA TRAIL DU MONT BLANC (France, Italy, Switzerland) 168km, +9,618m, 40h

Many people walk the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB), but the record for running stands at nearly 20 hours in the annual Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc race, which attracts thousands of runners from all around the world to attempt to run it in less than 45 hours. Only half succeed, despite tough pre-entry criteria, so it's a tough challenge – the equivalent of four back-to-back marathons, with a height gain greater than Everest from sea level. For those not up for the challenge of this mammoth endurance-fest, I recommend splitting the route into four stages, overnighting in a mountain hut or hotel in Les Contamines, Courmayeur and Champex-Lac. This still leaves four big days of running, but you can recover well each night, and just run in the daylight. As far as the exact route, you can opt to either follow the classic TMB trekkers route or the UTMB route which follows a slightly different route via St Gervais, and it cuts out some of the Aiguilles Rouges, to allow the run to start and finish in Chamonix itself, rather than Les Houches.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

The key to enjoying trail running is the sense of freedom that it gives us as you move light and quickly through the mountains. You get to appreciate the beauty of nature as you can focus on the landscape more, liberated from a heavy rucksack and boots. Trail running can improve your appreciation of the mountains, and aside of the physical well-being that it obviously gives, the mental nourishment and rejuvenation of trail running is phenomenal.

It's no small wonder that trail running is now the beating heart of the sporting calendar in the Alps, and that valleys such as Chamonix are declaring themselves the 'Vallée du Trail' – you really don't need a translation for that one! Indeed the tourist office declared that there are now more summer visitors to the Chamonix valley than in winter. Trail running has not just arrived in a big way – it is here to stay. Happy running! ■ T&M



Traversing from  
Emosson to Loriaz



## GET THE BOOK

Inspired to take things further?



All of the routes in this article are covered in far more detail in the author's book 'Trail Running – Chamonix and the Mont Blanc Region', which is available on

Amazon, or direct from the publisher Cicerone Press ([www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)). Author signed copies are available from the Icicle Windermere store or online.

<https://shop.icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk>