

Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB)

by Helen Pritchard



Start of the UTMB in Chamonix town centre.

Photo MaindruPhoto

Where to begin? That's why I have waited over two months to share my experience, thinking about where do I begin? Probably the Moot Hall Keswick at 7:43am on Sunday 26th May 2010. I finished my Bob Graham Round and the idea formed that led me to be standing in the dark and rain in Chamonix on Friday 26th August with 2,350 other wet runners. You had to have five points to enter so in the previous September I had survived the Bullock Smithy to gain my extra points. I had recce'd the Bullock Smithy route and was expecting lots of road-running but only finished the 56 miles with the determination that I wanted to have the required points to try and get an entry in the UTMB. I entered in the January and waited to hear what direction my year would go in. Part of me secretly hoped I wouldn't get a place, but at least I had tried; but then I really wanted a place. Needless to say I did get a place so my year took shape.

I had great plans, but life, as usual, got in the way so I just did my best and it was with this attitude that I found myself standing in the rain – soaked and frozen before we had even left the warm lights of Chamonix. The streets were lined with thousands of spectators, blaring music from

some film or other, cheering, shouting, enormous excitement, and me standing there feeling completely out of place and intimidated by hundreds of unbelievable looking fit blokes (I guess there are some advantages to starting an event with only 8% women). If I had known that only 43% would complete, and that I would be in that percentage, how would I have felt? The event had been delayed from a 6:30pm start to 11:30pm due to the splendid days of settled weather having broken that afternoon. New snow was forecast on the passes so I had packed extra woolly knickers. After what seemed forever I heard the starting horn and slowly we inched forwards. The music blared through the drumming of the rain on my hood. I think the music was to inspire and motivate us as we left our comforts behind, but 'death dirge' sprang to mind as I tried not to slip on the lethal cobbled streets leaving the town centre. How embarrassing if I slipped on a kerb edge before even crossing the start line.

Soon we were lights snaking our way through woodland to Les Houches (1,012m, 8km). I quickly learnt a nifty move. Every few minutes the snake would slow as runners separated to pass boulders on the path and, wait for this, the same thing happened if there was a puddle. Yes that's correct – a puddle! These tough, fit blokes are about to run over 160km in the rain and sleet and snow, over two nights, and they stepped around puddles. My feet were wet before we even started. If theirs weren't then they should patent and sell the secret they have. So I thoroughly enjoyed splashing everyone as I ran straight through the puddles and overtook them. You don't need to understand a language to understand that the splashes weren't appreciated. So I splashed more.



Helen (right) and Colleen (left) before the starting gun. Photo Rae Pritchard

One of the overwhelming parts of the entire event was the amazing support along the way. Day and night people stood cheering and ringing cow bells, and particularly towards the end the cheering and encouraging calls rose as they realised it was a girl passing by. On the second night out we were passing through one village, quietly as it was the early hours, and I came around a corner to find an entire family who had set out some drinks for runners in their front garden. I was actually struggling with a stone in my shoe at this point and had done so for a couple of miles. The thought of sitting in the wet grass and actually daring to remove my shoe and sock was enough to make me just continue on. Even the granny was still up and, with a toothless smile from under her patchwork blankets, she muttered words of encouragement. I did think that really I could have done with her rocker to rest in to remove my boulder. However I somehow left with just a cup of tea (no offence but the French really can't make a brew) in a plastic cup which I then found several hours later in my hood (luckily empty) and some strange biscuit thing. It didn't look like it contained meat so I ate it. Tiredness does strange things to you.



Wet section through the first night. MaindruPhoto

The first climb went well in some ways. The weather had deteriorated as we left the valley and I could hear the drumming of thunder in the distance. I reassured myself that the lightning that now illuminated the valley would strike one of my fellow-runners first as I'm short, and for once I felt this was an advantage. Actually it was really exciting and the anxiety I had had at the beginning was replaced by the feeling that I was just starting a real experience that would stay with me forever and make me feel so alive. A slippery mudslide slithered me into my first experience of a control with support. I had read what food and drinks would be provided but it was still good fun to check out the trays and bottles. I collected some bread and cheese and headed into the night. The course was marked by several million luminous markers, maybe a slight exaggeration but let's just say that for someone who is used to carrying a map and compass for an eight-mile race in the UK, running through three countries without my compass for comfort was just bizarre. When unpacking my rucksack after the event I actually found my compass at the bottom of an outside pocket but I did have no map and was momentarily cross that I had carried the extra weight from the compass. Obviously cost me several hours!

The next climb was hard. It was the death hour of 4am. I was so cold even though I had all my clothes on. There was a support point half-way up the climb and the noodle soup was perfect. There was a huge open fire and lots of bedraggled runners putting on extra clothes and trying to warm up. This is one of the moments that will stay with me. As I looked down the pass there was a string of fairy lights through the valley and through the sleet ahead of me I could see lights that just looked to be floating up to the Col de Bonhomme (2,443m, 45km). Daylight was just starting to take a sneaky peek into the darkness and I counted my steps as I made steady progress up to the col. People were stopping to take photographs as pink filled the distant sky but the wind picked up and stung me through my many layers. I had in my mind... just wait for sunrise and you'll feel better. I felt reassured as my fellow-runners also appeared cold and all were breathing hard. All heads down and just one foot in front of the other.

At registration we had handed over 10 euros and Rae's mobile phone number and the plan was that Rae would receive over 30 texts to check my progress as he sat dry and warm in cafés in Chamonix. He had received the first few texts then nothing. Later he told me that he had woken on the Saturday morning, seen the fresh snow on the mountains and thought I had succumbed to the weather conditions and was sat on a bus returning to Chamonix. Not so, but I do often struggle with getting cold so a fair guess. He texted my Mum at midday to see if she was following it on the Internet and was quickly reassured that even if I was sat on a bus returning to Chamonix my wrist with the electronic tag was now travelling through Italy.

As the daylight crept up on me the weather stayed the same. The descent to Les Chapieux (1,549m, 50km) was steady but slippery. Underfoot it reminded me of running in North Wales – sort of clay with a shale slate acting like ballbearings. It was here that I realised how serious

the other runners were. Usually in a long-distance event there is a certain degree of banter; usually based on either insulting your fellow sufferers or ridiculing yourself. No one spoke! Even pairs running together ran in silence. I once was told to shut-up in a shorter race but in a long event if you can't hold a conversation you're running too fast in my humble opinion. I still can't decide why everyone was so serious – maybe because we were called 'athletes' at the start? The others had no sense of humour? What, all 2,300? Surrounded by runners I felt really lonely at this point so thought about my two friends that I run with, Geraldine and Rachel, and wished they were running with me. If they had been I still wouldn't have been talking as I usually can't get a word in edgeways. I missed them.



Helen (right) and Colleen in better conditions.

Photo MaindruPhoto

Crossing the Col de la Seigne (2,516m, 60km) was amazing. You climb and climb and climb then cross this long plateau stumbling along what looked like frozen deep Land Rover tracks. I had to laugh at myself even considering a Land Rover would be driven up here. Squinting into the distance there was a cubic goldfish bowl of huge proportions. About three metres tall and three metres square. It had to be the coolest mountain rescue refuge I had ever seen and as I passed, through the sleet, I could see lots of runners inside desperately rooting through bags for extra clothing; using teeth to undo zips as hands were unforgiving of the cold. I was still wearing everything I had and was frozen. The last few minutes of the climb were fabulous. I had stopped trying to talk to anyone and felt so focused. It's as though the colours get brighter, sounds crisper. You're aware of what's under your feet and falling silently around you. I did feel pitched against the mountain and the weather. I loved it. Also think I must have been at least slightly hypoxic, but nevertheless I loved it.

I always monitor the volume of water I have left, as I have learnt by past experience the price of running out of the clear stuff, and was puzzled as to why my super home-made water system was empty. I had searched high and low for a water system that fits into my rucksack, worked for me and most importantly didn't cost the extortionate amounts that some companies charge for what is essentially a tube. It really doesn't matter how it is marketed – it's a tube! I had 'acquired' some tubing from a medical source, used an old valve mouthpiece and found a cordial bottle with the thread that matched. I was delighted with the result so why wasn't it working now? Only at the next station did I see that the tube and most of the bottles contents were completely frozen. No wonder my toes were cold. The water defrosted before my toes did.

I got my electronic chip read and started the long descent into Courmayeur. The course dropped steeply to a checkpoint with food. Here they checked you had a mobile phone before you could continue. I did have a mobile phone and just kept quiet that the 'automatic search' bit wasn't working, so even though the phone looked the business in its waterproof see-through pouch on a string, it was actually completely useless except to swap in exchange for a lift home. I did think 'Oh, what do the organisers know about the weather that we don't, if they are checking we have phones?' I still don't know, as the weather was starting to improve at this point. The wind had dropped and my waterproof was about to be put away. The tarmac road lasted for ages: climbing gradually so you feel you should be running but your legs don't quite agree. I had a lovely chat with a fellow from Kendal and an American girl who I did quite a lot of the second night section with.

We dropped into Courmayeur (1,200m, 78km) mid-afternoon, as the sun started to shine. Again hundreds lined the streets. This was the first hot-food station, and bags handed over at the start arrived like magic. Inside I had a change of shoes, lots of clothes and extra snacks. It was comforting to look into my bag and pull out familiar items when my surroundings were so unfamiliar. The ski-centre was used, with the hall full of runners doing



Head down for the last climb.

Photo MaindrupPhoto

anything from taking showers (why?); saying hello to their families; eating pasta; changing into dry clothes; to examining and comparing blisters in all sorts of places, and often several of the listed activities all at the same time, when mobile phones started beeping. Mine didn't beep but quickly I was told that the course had been changed to accommodate the bad weather. Three miles had been added and 250m climb. I just continued eating my pasta and checked my toes. I left Courmayeur at 2:34pm in the sunshine.

I found the climb up to Refuge Bonatti (2,010m, 90km) the hardest of the whole round. The road section was OK but as I started climbing through the forest I felt awful. Completely drained of energy and I had to concentrate on counting my steps. I was more breathless than I should have been and my head was swimmy. I was really puzzled as to why I felt so

awful. Previously demons would have set in and a voice would have been saying 'not even half-way round and struggling, not even half-way round and struggling.' But experience kicked-in and negative thoughts were replaced by 'what can I do to change it? Bad patches never last for the ever and even if they do you'll just finish, waiting for the bad patch to improve!' As the climb left the forest I took action and put on an extra layer even though I didn't feel cold. I sat on the grassy side of the mountain and just looked at the view thinking how lucky I was to be there. I didn't think my blood-sugar level should be low as I had eaten pasta in Courmayeur, but I ate something anyway. That was the key! My blood-sugar level had dropped, so after some oat cakes I was quickly back on form. At the refuge several medics were present, and I wasn't the only runner who had struggled; there was a queue of people withdrawing from the race. I just think they should have eaten some oat cakes and hoped for the best. You don't give up. You get to the next checkpoint and see how you are. Then you don't give up. You get to the next checkpoint and see how you are. Then you don't give up. You get...

The evening was beautiful. I was running often with the American lady who also thought most of the other runners were far too serious. The wind dropped as we ran, traversing around the mountains gently descending into Arnava (1,769m, 95km). It was hard to get my head around the fact that I hadn't even been away from Chamonix for 24 hours but experienced so much and I was only just over half-way. It was dusk as we dropped into Arnava and the light was just magic. As we left the support station the organisers insisted that we wear waterproof tops as they said it was windy. When we entered the support tent there was no wind, but between a drink of cola, eating my body-weight in cake and making yet another cheese sandwich to have on the way the wind had certainly picked up. It was a long steady climb to La Peule (2,071m, 102 km). We climbed into the second night and I remember thinking that things were going well and I was enjoying the company of my new American friend. We struggled route-finding on several occasions over the next few hours as the top was claggy and it really doesn't matter how luminous your marked strip is in the clag! I felt at home in the clag, wind and slight drizzle. Good old Bleaklow. Several times we bumped into other runners in similar predicaments. I think we went wrong as it took forever to reach the support station at La Fouly (1,598m, 110km). I remember starting to feel really sleepy about two kilometres from the station. I fell behind the few I was running with and must have fallen asleep a couple of times as I came to with a jolt as I quickly corrected myself from falling over. On the last occasion it was walking into a huge bush that woke me from my slumber. The drops of water on my face from the leaves were a real wake-up call. After forcing myself to eat something I felt much better and quite refreshed after my seconds of sleep. There were areas of the tents where blankets were provided, and several lumps under grey blankets snored gently. I didn't even consider lying down for a sleep. Maybe I would have felt better but this wasn't the time to try something new. My concentration may be



Final run in, Chamonix town centre.

Photo MaindruPhoto

refreshed with even a few minutes sleep, but my legs would more likely be stiff than refreshed if I let them think they could rest. The second night passed surprisingly quickly in good company. I was gently aware that I was on personally uncharted ground. I had been awake for 48 hours, been running for 31 hours, covered 130km and was still quite cheery. I was so pleased to have got so far and happily pootled along. Nothing hurt; I just had tired legs.

The route had been changed around Bovine (1,987m, 133km) so there was an extra climb. The darkness gradually lifted as we started the tarmac road towards Bovine. There were two local yokels sat in the middle of the tarmac. One offered me his spliff as I passed, his friend offering his beer bottle. I declined as that would certainly have been the end of the road for me. I separated from my American friend mid-morning as her knee was hurting and she told me to go ahead. As I had slowed for a few hours I felt superb as I climbed before descending into Vallorcine (1,260m 149km). I could overtake several runners on the woodland descent and, yes, I was working hard, but to my astonishment I felt great. Before descending into Vallorcine you leave the forest high on the mountainside and in front of you lies Chamonix way in the distance along the valley, and the finish.

It was at this point that I felt it was time to push myself, as I had some left in the system but was ready to finish. The sun was putting in an

appearance and for the first time I felt hot and bothered. Rae met me in Vallorcine and said 'see you in four hours in Chamonix'. I just thought 'no way four hours. I'm ready to finish. See you in two.' There was 21km left and 260m so after more cake, cola and a kiss I ran. I ran as fast as I could and then I ran faster. Every time I wanted to walk I just thought 'you've done it Helen; just a bit further. Run.' It worked and I started my run through the supporter-lined streets in Chamonix two hours later. I found it quite embarrassing running to the finish with hundreds of people clapping and cheering but I had finished in 40hrs – 25th lady overall, 16th in my category and 456th overall (the bit I'm most pleased about!) On the finish line I cried because I no longer had to 'hold it together'. I felt more drained emotionally than physically, as endurance events test and challenge your mind more than your legs.

Even now I can't believe I finished and I'm surprised and delighted with my time and position. The whole experience will stay with me forever. When I finished I thought 170km was just too far to cover at once and never again. Now? I could be persuaded to enter another 100-mile-plus event but not the UTMB. When something was such an experience I would never try and repeat it. Anyway, there are several other ludicrously long routes I just might one day find myself on the start line of.