



# Glaciers for beginners

Want to spice up your hillwalking without getting too extreme? **Simon Birch** tries a six-day introduction to Alpine trekking in Switzerland's Bernese Oberland



Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch. The rhythmic sound of our crampons biting into frozen snow is the only noise to break the silence as we slowly make our way up the glacier. It's early morning, there's not so much as a whisper of wind and the mid-August sun is rising into a cloudless sky, shining down on what's turning out to be a perfect mountain day.

As we gain height, more and more jagged mountains reveal themselves until the entire horizon is littered with snow-capped peaks floating above the early morning mist. Awesome. We're in the middle of the Swiss Alps and halfway through a spectacular six-day, 80km, high-level trek across the remote mountains and glaciers of the Swiss Bernese Oberland.

The plan is for our seven-strong team to bag six peaks higher than 3,000m. While most of these mountains are ringed by glaciers they're all classed as trekking peaks, meaning that they're technically easy so you don't need any previous mountaineering experience to tick them off. So if you're an up-for-it hillwalker wanting to raise your game and get a taste of alpine mountaineering, this trek has your name written all over it in neon flashing lights.

The action kicked off at the cable car station at the Col du Pillon, perched above the small ski resort of Les Diablerets. We emerged from the cable car into dazzling morning sunshine and an altogether different place to that which we'd left just minutes ago. Gone were the soft, green meadows

Who's writing



Freelance journalist **Simon Birch** writes about a range of environmental and ethical issues. He's also a self-confessed outdoor obsessive and is always on the lookout for his next big mountain adventure. Simon's based in Manchester which is brilliantly placed for many of the UK's top outdoor adventure destinations: there's the Peak District on his doorstep and north Wales and the Lakes just a short train ride away. See [www.simonbirch.net](http://www.simonbirch.net).

and cutesy farmhouses. In their place was a cooler, harsher, monochrome world of snow, ice and bare rock. Welcome to the land of the alpine mountaineer.

Before we could enter this potentially dangerous world we had to have a crash-course in basic mountaineering skills. For this we were led by Kathy, our mountain guide, to a snowfield on the edge of the Glacier de Tsanfleuron that we would have to cross to reach our first peak of the trek, just a few kilometres ahead.

Our first lesson was to learn to walk with crampons strapped to our boots. The second and more tricky lesson involved learning how to move as a team while all roped up together. This is the standard mountaineering procedure for walking over glaciers, the idea being that if one of the team were unlucky enough to fall into a crevasse then the combined weight of everyone else on the rope would stop them from falling too far down and they'd be able to be hauled out.

With everyone lined up in a row, Kathy moved down the line clipping her rope into our harnesses via a karabiner, a procedure that was repeated throughout the trek. "You'll need to move at a pace that keeps the rope in front of you slack enough so that it just gently brushes the snow," she said, as we started to move off.

This was far harder than it sounded. If you walked too fast then you'd tug on the harness of the person behind, too slow and you risked snagging your crampons on the slack rope in front of you. But despite a few slips and trips we eventually bagged our first peak, the 3,209m Summit des Les Diablerets, where we were rewarded with the first of many staggering views.

Centre-stage were the monster-sized mountains that reared up to our south. Among these 4,000m-plus giants were some of the biggest and most attention-seeking mountains in Europe: Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn and Monte Rosa. For the next five days these beauties were to become a familiar sight, but one that we would never tire of gawping at.

Finally, after we'd all virtually filled our memory cards with photos, we headed off the summit towards the Cabane Prarochet, the first hut of the trek. Always cosy, always dramatically positioned and, crucially, always



Alpine meadow: on the way to the Gelten Hut

Photo: Kathy Murphy



Brrr! Cooling off in a chilly glacial tarn

Photo: Peter Curran



Photo: Peter Curran

Alpine trekking for first-timers: climbing the Wildhorn (3,248m)

there to serve you a post-walk beer, the five alpine huts that we stayed in were a real highlight of the trek. Sitting just below the glacier and with a cracking view of the surrounding mountains, the Cabane Prarochet was no exception.

The bad news was that there'd be no lie-in at this or any other hut as every morning we'd be up at six or, brace yourselves, even earlier. But all our daft o'clock starts were worth it as being up and out on the mountain just as the sun was rising was magical and something that I wouldn't want to have missed.

The sun was obligingly peeking out from behind the mountains when we left the hut the next morning for the 3,035m Arpelistock. While we ➤

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## 5 MORE... ALPINE TREKS FOR BEGINNERS

### Tour of Mont Blanc

Easily one of the best and most exciting treks in the world, the 170km long Tour of Mont Blanc winds its way around the

High above Chamonix



highest mountain in the Alps, crossing the French, Swiss and Italian borders in the process. Another great thing is that you don't have to worry about navigation, as the trail is well signposted.

### Chamonix to Zermatt

The 180km Chamonix to Zermatt Haute Route is more challenging than the Tour of Mont Blanc as its passes are higher and the walking is tougher. But if you're up to it, you'll be rewarded by walking among the highest and most dramatic mountains in the French and Swiss Alps. Plus the more rugged terrain helps to keep the crowds away.

### Tour of the Jungfrau

This 12-day tour takes place in the shadow of the Eiger, the Jungfrau and the Monch, three of the most iconic mountains in the Swiss Alps. With no major obstacles and spectacular views, it is fast becoming a classic alpine trek for beginners. The downside is that it can get busy so avoid the peak trekking season of August.

### Tour of the Queryas

The relatively untouched Queryas region, tucked away in the southeast corner of the Alps, is virtually unknown to British trekkers. The 186km Tour of the Queryas is perfect for trekking beginners as there's not as much climbing compared to other alpine treks, and its more southerly location means that there's more chance of good weather.

### Tour of the Vanoise

Taking around 12 days, the 150km hut-to-hut tour of the Vanoise national park is a great introduction to trekking in the French Alps. The Vanoise is acknowledged as being one of the best and most exciting parts of the French Alps and has everything from soaring peaks and glaciers to lakes, waterfalls and flower-filled meadows.

wouldn't be crossing any glaciers that second day, Kathy warned that we faced a punishing climb.

As predicted, slogging up the loose, shaley track on the way up to the summit was sweaty, hard work, but it could have been worse: at least it wasn't raining. The sun shone all day, so when we reached the summit we were rewarded with another sensational view. This time our focus was north to where the Alps finally spluttered out and I could just about make out a low line of hills in the distant north west that were the Swiss Jura.

As stunning as all our views were, they did come at the price of sweat and hard labour. Most days we climbed around 1,000m – that's more than the height of Scafell Pike with the

same again in descent – plus we were carrying fully laden backpacks. The upside was that none of the walking was technically difficult. The only section that registered on the dodgy scale came towards the end of day three as we slogged up to the 2,886m Col des Audannes, a tiny notch in the rock that was perched precariously at the top of an impossibly steep ridge.

The dodgy section involved a 200m traverse across a steep and exposed slope. There were fixed ropes to help calm your nerves, but these 'fixed ropes' were fixed to posts that came out in our hands. Hilarious. We were then faced with three ladders bolted to the rock and finally we had to haul ourselves up the last section with the help of a rope. You wouldn't want to ▶



Shale slog: climbing the Arette d'Arpille, Mont Blanc in the background

Photo: Peter Curran



Photo: Kathy Murphy

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Photo: Peter Curran

Above: Valley vista: the group had great views all week

Left: Scary crossing below the Widtrubel glacier



Roped up: the team learnt glacier trekking skills

Photo: Peter Curran

to rise and as we slowly climbed the glacier we were treated to a spectacular dawn over the Alps.

From the summit we had another stunning view, which for the first time included the most notorious mountain in the Swiss Alps: the Eiger. We were also able to make out the Wildstrubel hut that we'd be staying in that night which – yikes – looked a long way away.

“Time to move it folks,” said Kathy, hurrying us off the summit as there were still many hours of walking ahead of us. After retrieving our packs and putting away our crampons, we began the long walk to the hut which, at almost 2,800m, was the highest of the trek.

With another dazzling summer's day, vast, sweeping views and near empty trails, the walk turned out to be one of the most enjoyable of the trip and wasn't the forced march that we'd been fearing. There was even enough time to schedule in an optional dip in an icy mountain tarn. And it just kept getting better, with our final big day in the mountains turning out to be the most exciting and dramatic.

The day's wow factor kicked in shortly after we left the hut and climbed down a short way to begin the four kilometre traverse across the surreal Glacier de la Plaine Morte. The 'plain of death' was a huge, high-altitude lake of glacial ice entirely ➤

do the hokey cokey there, but if you kept your head together and moved confidently it was really great fun.

After the excitement of reaching the col it was an easy stroll down the mountain for a well-earned beer and cake at the Cabane des Audannes, our hut for the night, which marked the halfway point of the trek. Then there was more excitement the next day when we had to be up at five for what was billed as the toughest day of the trek. This would involve us walking over 17km and climbing 1,200m, including an ascent of the 3,247m Wildhorn, the biggest mountain on the trip.

It was dark and the stars were still shining when we slipped out of the hut, so we had to use our headtorches as we began the long climb. After a short section of easy scrambling we reached the edge of the glacier where we dumped our packs and roped up, before starting an easy climb to the summit. By now the sun was starting

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Photo: Kathy Murphy

surrounded by mountains and unlike anything that any of us had ever seen before. At the far end of the glacier we had a short, sharp, crampon-free climb up to the summit of the 3,242m Wildstrubel, then a short descent before roping up for a last, sweaty climb to the neighbouring 3,242m Mittlerer Gipfel. This was our final peak of the trek with our last magnificent, and by now familiar, view of the surrounding mountains.

The way off the summit was a fitting finale as the route involved walking down the entire length of the Wildstrubel glacier, dodging its



crevasses until the glacier finally gave up and petered out in a morass of moraines and melting ice in the valley below. Having got our breath back at the foot of the glacier it was a short walk down the valley where we paused to watch a family of chamois teetering about on the surrounding cliffs, before continuing on to the Lammeren hut. As this was our last night in the mountains before tomorrow's easy downhill walk and cable car descent to Kandersteg and civilisation, I asked the team for their feedback on the trek.

"It was harder than I expected," confessed Howard, an alpine trekking veteran. "You were always on the go and there wasn't much time for resting up."

Sarah agreed with Howard and gave this advice to anyone thinking of doing the trek: "Just get really fit beforehand. And if you think you're fit, then just get fitter!"

But did they enjoy it despite this?

"I wanted to spice up my hillwalking and push myself which is something that I've definitely done," replied Sarah with a smile. "It's been tough but worth all the effort as I've had a great time." I couldn't agree more. **AT**

## LET'S GO

Want to do what Simon did? Here's how you can...

### Get there

Wanting to minimise my carbon emissions I took the train to the Swiss Alps. The journey from London's St Pancras station to Plan Morier in Switzerland, where our group met, took just under 10 hours and I even arrived in time for an early evening beer. Book earlier enough and you can get a return ticket for £137. For more info visit [www.voyages-sncf.com](http://www.voyages-sncf.com).

If you want to fly, take your pick of the flights from the UK to Geneva. There's then a two and a half hour train journey from the airport to Plan Morier ([www.sbb.ch](http://www.sbb.ch)). Carbon offsetting your flight will cost £10 with [www.atmosfair.de](http://www.atmosfair.de).

### Where to sleep

We had two nights in simple but comfortable hotels in Plan Morier and Kandersteg at the start and end of the trek. The other five nights were spent in mountain huts. Sleeping is in mixed dorms where space is usually at a premium. Consequently things can get pretty stuffy and noisy, especially if there's a snoring heffalump in the group, so don't forget your earplugs. Bedding and pillows are supplied but bring your own sheet sleeping bag – silk's lightest and best.

### Food and drink

The alpine huts have a long history in cooking up carb-heavy dinners to fuel even the most adventurous alpine mountaineers, so you won't go hungry. Officially the water available at the huts isn't fit for drinking. You can buy 'marching tea,' a weak, insipid brew that you drink cold from your water bottle. I didn't take to this so instead I filled up with boiled water, which cost about £1.50. Bottled mineral water costs a hefty £7 for a 1.5-litre bottle. But keeping hydrated is essential on the trek, so if you feel you need to drink then just pay.

### Tour operators

I was on KE Adventure's Bernese Oberland Haute Route – West trek. It's an eight-day trip (six days of trekking) that costs £1,195, not including transport to Switzerland. See [www.keadventure.com](http://www.keadventure.com).

### Daily costs

All accommodation, a continental-style breakfast and hefty dinner are covered in the cost of the trek. You'll have to fork out for lunches though, and it's a good idea to bring your own trail snacks and energy bars. Plus you'll want to splurge on the essential beer and cake whenever you arrive at a hut in the afternoon, which will cost around £10. But remember that you're on holiday and, more importantly, you'll have earned it. I spent just under £100 for the week.

### Trekking independently

This trek ventures into rugged mountainous terrain. Footpaths and signs are few and far between and on most days you'll be crossing glaciers. Only consider doing the trek yourself if your navigation is spot-on and you're experienced in crevasse rescue techniques. The best time for the trek is in July and August.

### Maps and further reading

The trek is covered by the Swisstopo Gstaad Adelboden (5009) 1:50 000 map, available for £18.95 from [www.stanfords.co.uk](http://www.stanfords.co.uk). There's more information on walking in the Bernese Oberland in *The Bernese Alps: A Walkers's Guide*, £15.95 from [www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)

### Fitness and experience

If you haven't used an ice axe and crampons before it's good idea to go on a winter mountaineering skills weekend before you go – we all felt we'd have struggled without some prior experience of them. A good level of fitness is also necessary: the trek averages six to eight hours' walking a day with lots of ascent.

### What to take

Keeping weight down is essential so try and choose lightweight kit. As well as a change of clothes that I travelled in, which was driven to the hotel at the end of the trek, I took the following, carried in Lowe Alpine's Alpine Attack 45:55 rucksack.

Equipment: walking pole fitted with snow basket; crampon-compatible walking boots; crampons fitted with anti-balling plates; crampon bag; walking ice axe; climbing harness; screwgate karabiner. KE Adventure Travel can rent you this kit if necessary.

Clothes: two pair of hiking socks; two pairs of lightweight socks (no need to carry spare footwear as hut shoes are provided); trekking trousers; lightweight trousers for hut; one pair of shorts; two long-sleeved thermal base-layers; one short-sleeved thermal base-layer; long john thermal base-layer (not worn); gilet; fleece; lightweight down jacket; waterproof jacket (Mountain Equipment's Morpheus is perfect); waterproof trousers; gaiters; waterproof hat; spare hat; Buff; sunhat; thin base layer gloves; thicker gloves; underwear.

Accessories: silk sleeping sheet; three dry bags; travel towel; J cloth for body washing; SPF 50 sunscreen and sunscreen for lips; toiletries; small first aid kit; emergency foil survival bag; ear plugs (BioEars available from Boots are best); sunglasses; camera; headtorch and spare batteries; Swiss Army knife; energy bars and a water bottle.