

# Overview: Grand Balcon Nord

*Being NW facing, the 'balcon' can hold snow into July, and at the end of the summer may be very icy in the mornings before the sun hits the trail. Please check with us if you have concerns.*

This is a classic circuit which leads across a beautiful, high route above treeline and underneath the towering Chamonix 'Aiguilles', or needles. The route climbs up to the Refuge Plan de l'Aiguille before traversing to Montenvers, which has a commanding view over the Mer de Glace glacier and the 'other side' of the Aiguilles. It is also possible to use the Aiguille du Midi tram or Montenvers train to avoid either the ascent or descent.

0km

## Chamonix

🍴 FOOD 💧 WATER 🚻 BATHROOM 🚶 TRANSIT ELEVATION 1030m

Start at the bottom of the Aiguille du Midi Tram station. This tram goes up to 3842m in two stages, and has the highest vertical ascent of any tram in the world. The Aiguille du Midi is the second biggest tourist attraction in France, after the Eiffel Tower. (It is possible to take the first tram, up to the Plan de l'Aiguille station, and drop 100m to join the route at the Refuge Plan de l'Aiguille.)

Take the small road running along the left of the tram station, heading in the same direction as the tram cables and through a tunnel into the Grépon parking lot. Continue straight across the lot to a footpath signed Plan de l'Aiguille, where your 1200m ascent to the refuge starts on steep zig-zags through lush forest vegetation. As you come to junctions, follow signs to Plan de l'Aiguille and continue uphill.

1km

## Path Junction

ELEVATION 1231m

At this junction, turn left, following signs to Alpages de Blaitière — though we are not ending there.

At the next junction take the path signed Plan de l'Aiguille and continue up as the Larch trees thin out and Silver Birch, Mountain Ash and Alder start to appear. Alder is the small tree with bendy branches — this allows it to flex if an avalanche passes over it, then spring back up unscathed. Soon, if you look up, you will see three of the Chamonix Aiguilles — Charmoz, Grépon and Blaitière from left to right.

As you ascend above the treeline the path becomes rockier. From here you can see the Aiguilles Rouges on the opposite side of the Chamonix Valley, including Brévent with its tram perched atop the rocky pinnacle.

### A summer pilgrimage

The high meadows in this area, known as 'Alpages' are the summer residences of herds of cows and sheep. The traditional practice of Transhumance (or known as 'Poya' in the Chamonix valley) sees farmers moving their herds up to the high meadows around May, where they enjoy the plentiful fresh grass until they are brought back to the valley at the end of September. Farmers stay in stone huts in the Alps over the summer, from which they can check on their animals.



4.9km

## Refuge Plan de l'Aiguille

🍴 FOOD 💧 WATER 🚻 BATHROOM 🚶 TRANSIT ELEVATION 2020m

(This is where you will join the route if you took the cable car up from Chamonix.) You will now see the peaks of the Aiguille du Plan and Aiguille du Midi — with the tram running up to it — high above you. This Refuge is renowned for its excellent food, including many fresh local specialities such as Cheese "Croutes" (or "Crusty Bread") and "Tarte Myrtille" (or blueberry tart) so it is worth dropping in to savour a bite to eat or just a drink on the terrace overlooking the valley.

Follow signs to Montenvers Mer de Glace on a rolling traverse of hard-packed dirt, crossing a few rocky sections and waterfalls tumbling down from the Aiguilles.

8.1km

## Junction to Le Signal

ELEVATION 2080m

The Grand Balcon forks here — take the path to Le Signal up a several short steep zig-zags. Rounding the corner at the top of the zig-zags, you finish today's climb with a more gentle ascent allowing you to check out the view across the border with Switzerland, including the impressive Emosson dam.

9.2km

## Le Signal

ELEVATION 2193m

This is the high-point of the run. You can see the Mer de Glace glacier and Les Drus — the spikiest of the aiguilles — looming in front of you, right across the glacier. Chocards, the black birds with yellow beaks and orange legs will gather around hoping to find some crumbs left from picnics. These birds are impressively adapted to high elevation, living between 2000 – 4000m, and nesting higher than any other bird. They have even been sighted at around 8000m on Mount Everest!

Follow the sign down to Montenvers Mer de Glace and within a few meters you'll see the Grand Hotel du Montnvers, to which you are heading. The trail then brings you above the Mer de Glace glacier. This section is fairly technical, so stick to the main path and avoid cutting corners. As you arrive, you will pass information panels about the history of Montnvers. Bear right to follow the train track around to Montnvers.

### Glacier on the move

This is named after the Scottish Scientist James David Forbes who, throughout his extensive travels in the Alps, studied the Mer de Glace in the 1840s. He measured and mapped the glacier and noticed the curved dirt bands throughout its length; all of which enabled him to prove that glaciers are constantly moving, in the same way as a river.



10.7km

## Montenvers

FOOD WATER BATHROOM TRANSIT ELEVATION 1910m

This is the top of the trainline up from Chamonix, so you can get the train down if you want to avoid the descent. There is also a shop, café, restaurant and crystal museum. From here you can visit the ice cave in the glacier — you can walk all the way down, about 300m vertical, or get the cable car part-way down (ticket required, available at the top of the cable car). Then continue on the ever-increasing number of steps down to the ice cave.

Return back to the Grand Hotel du Montnvers. Pass by the Glaciorium, taking a look inside to learn about glaciers if you like, and take the trail turning sharp right down to Chamonix and Le Caillet. Stay on the main track and take the left at any junctions, signed Le Caillet. Beware of any trains or getting oil on your trail running shoes when you cross the Montnvers railway line!

12.6km

## Le Caillet

FOOD WATER BATHROOM TRANSIT ELEVATION 1610m

This chalet is beautifully perched with a great view from the terrace overlooking the Chamonix valley. The family running this buvette specializes in providing local, organic produce. Toilets are available for customers to use. As you continue down to Chamonix, most of the remaining descent is less steep and technical, allowing you to pick up the pace. You'll pop out onto the Planards ski run and follow it down, at times alongside the Summer Luge and underneath the chairlift. Pass through a car park at the bottom and follow the road down to base of the Montnvers train track.

15.9km

## Chamonix

FOOD WATER BATHROOM TRANSIT ELEVATION 1030m

From here you can take the pedestrian bridge into Chamonix or continue straight on to the Aiguille du Midi.



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