

Courmayeur – Champex – Chamonix (CCC) Report

30-31 Aug 2019

Allan Grant

I was looking forward to doing this my third UTMB series race and my 19th ultra. To say I was 'looking forward' was perhaps an overstatement as the CCC in 2017 felt the toughest I have done. For me it has something to do with the autonomy involved. Friends and family can follow from afar but you basically have to handle any situation on your own. There is virtually no flat running - the gradients are steep upwards and often too steep downwards to go fast. Finally, for a sea level dweller prolonged exertion at 2,000+m makes for a constant gasping for breath, dizziness and a cognitive fuzziness. Anyhow enough excuses. Having more time this year Elisabeth and I arrived 5 days before as I thought I could acclimatise at least a bit.



Inspiring view from our chalet of the Aiguille du Midi (3,842m) – did not photoshop colours, they were real!

Training in the 3 months previously had gone well, the backbone of which was going up and down mountains in the Lake District and in Scotland. Mid week runs up and down Ben Lomond in the early evenings with a friend I felt were especially effective. I had also done the 'Highland Fling' (85km) in April which although involving less climbing is a very good build up to the race.

Since first coming to Chamonix for the UTMB in 2012 I am aware of the increasing commercialisation of these races. Putting that aside there is still something very inspiring about being here. Nowhere else are there so many long-distance runners together. Nobody asks why you are doing this. No explanations needed, everyone gets it. You feel normal walking the streets here. Whilst in town I met Marco Olmo, the 70 year old legendary Italian runner who, among many other achievements, won the UTMB outright in 2006 & 2007 at the incredible age of 58 & 59! He was only beaten by a man less than half his age in 2008. He seems to defy every age convention in athletics. Made me feel a youngster!

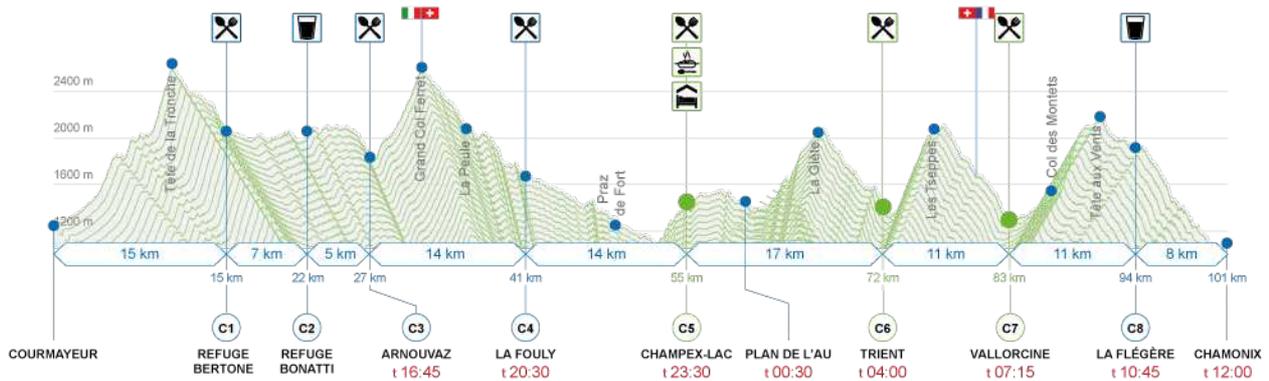


Elisabeth's sister Marita and brother-in-law Lasse again came to Chamonix in their camper van from Sweden. For Elisabeth to have company while I was away would be good.



A mixed media abstract of Aiguille du Midi by Elisabeth →





Route Profile - 6,156m ascent and 6,358m descent

	Inter Distance	Cumul Distance	Altitude	Cumul D+	Cumul D-	Fastest	Slowest	Time barriers
Courmayeur	0,0	0,0	1220	0	0	30-09:00	30-09:30	
Tête de la Tronche	9,2	9,2	2584	1429	100	30-10:11	30-12:38	
C1 Refuge Bertone	4,3	13,5	1991	1448	712	30-10:31	30-13:36	
C2 Refuge Bonatti	7,4	20,9	2025	1742	960	30-11:09	30-15:15	
C3 Arnouvaz	5,1	26,1	1769	1879	1318	30-11:36	30-16:17	16:30
Grand Col Ferret	2,2	30,7	2537	2625	1335	30-12:18	30-18:01	
La Peule	3,6	34,3	2071	2636	1802	30-12:35	30-18:42	
C4 La Fouly	6,1	40,2	1592	2705	2339	30-13:03	30-19:49	20:15
Praz de Fort	8,5	48,5	1151	2754	2856	30-13:35	30-21:12	
C6 Champex-Lac	5,8	54,3	1470	3297	3050	30-14:18	30-23:00	23:15
Plan de l'Au	4,8	59,1	1330	3444	3325	30-14:44	31-00:06	00:15
La Glèze	6,5	65,7	1884	4259	3607	30-15:41	31-02:34	
C8 Trient	5,0	70,6	1300	4349	4279	30-16:07	31-03:39	04:00
Les Tséppes	5,1	74,0	2065	5019	4316	30-16:47	31-05:21	
C7 Vallorcine	5,8	81,2	1270	5186	5127	30-17:30	31-07:10	07:15
Col des Montets	3,7	84,8	1461	5386	5161	30-17:52	31-08:00	
La Tête aux vents	1,9	88,9	2130	6067	5183	30-18:37	31-09:53	
C8 La Flégère	2,9	91,8	1860	6102	5481	30-18:54	31-10:29	10:45
Chamonix	7,9	99,2	1035	6156	6358	30-19:30	31-12:00	12:00

Checkpoints and time barriers



I got registered on the Wednesday afternoon. The less last-minute stresses the better. There is a rigour to the organisation. Managing 8,500 runners from 80+ countries in 7 races through 3 countries and 5,000 volunteers in unpredictable mountain weather is a mega logistical challenge. I passed their mandatory equipment

list and my bag and I were tagged with the timing chips. A good environmental touch was that there were no disposables used. You take your own cup, spoon and bowl.

3D View of route

(marked in green)



Apart from short trip into town Thursday was spent relaxing around chalet and I did remaining packing. Plenty nervous energy role playing in my mind various scenarios from previously.

And so to Friday morning. Got up at 0500 and a normal breakfast of porridge and toast. I was using the

organisation's race buses to take me to Italy through the Mont Blanc tunnel. My bus stop was conveniently only 500m away. Elisabeth saw me off. On the bus sat beside a fellow from Hong Kong. Mainly running chit chat as felt enquiring about current situation there wouldn't be wise.

Arrived in Courmayeur in good time and tried to stay off my feet as much as possible. A slight distraction was a marshal berating me for Brexit and that next year I would have to run in the UK! Despite agreeing with many of her sentiments there is a time for political discussions and it was not the time.

A little bit about my strategy. My watch has only about 18 hours of usage if GPS switched on all the time so wouldn't record whole race. There was a charge point at one of the checkpoints but decided against using. The less to think about the better. I decided instead to use GPS in beginning for 3-4 hours to first timing gate. Mainly to keep an eye on my heart rate in order to stay below 150bpm as well as my initial speed. Then I would switch off and put on again for last 18km, this time for pace checking. Being back of pack I knew I would never be too far ahead of timing gates so needed to know how fast to go. As it turned out on occasions I was so near being timed out it was also used for pacing at shorter, critical segments.

I left in the third and last wave of runners and about 0931 was off through the narrow streets of the town to the fanfare of the locals and supporters. I would have till noon Saturday to get to my destination.

Traffic jams



We were soon starting the steep climb up the Aosta valley which would lead to Tete de la Trenche. Initially the path was quite broad but when it changed to a single file there was a huge bunch up of runners, much like a motorway changing from 3 lanes to 1. Stuck for about 20 mins. just shuffling along. I had anticipated that the first 3-4 hours I would be in a train of runners where you could not choose the pace. Just had to go with the flow but nevertheless it is difficult in beginning when you are energetic.



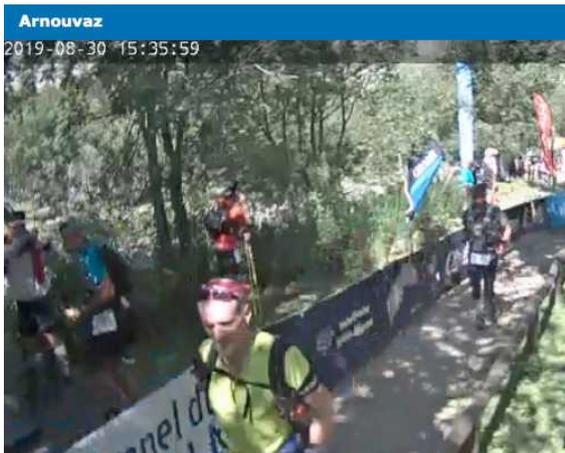
It was hot and unlike previous times it remained so, indeed muggy most of the time. This was even at night so cold weather gear carried was not needed. Gasping for air and dealing with the heat would go together. After about 3 hours climbing I reached Tete de la Trenche which was followed by a pleasantly runnable 4km downhill to Refuge Bertone. It was nice passing a number of people as my strengths seem more on the downhills so try to take advantage when I can.



Refuge Bertone had somewhat of a party atmosphere and I partook briefly of the food and drink on offer. The local cheeses and salamis were not my thing but the bananas and oranges were so it was pleasant to partake of that as well as coke. From experience I knew that you had to savour and be grateful for any pleasant experience as a comfort for

whatever lay ahead. I generally find checkpoints stressful as I have this ideal notion of get nourished, rested, take on more fluids, change any clothing and be altogether refreshed for the next bit. All in a matter of minutes! For me it is seldom the case. As the hours pass and timing is more critical your judgement gets more clouded. I just want to get out and away ASAP which is not always the best.

A relatively flat part of the course lay ahead to Refuge Bonati so it was good to pass a few more folks. My predominant need was fluids - this was always welcome and was eagerly anticipated at each checkpoint. I really enjoyed the carbonated water. No nutritional value but greatly appreciated when thirst becomes obsessive.



Next stop would be Arnouvaz and the first timing point of the day. If I did not leave there by 1630 I would be timed out of the race. I got there with 54 mins to spare so was very welcome. Ahead lay another high point of the race, the Grand col Ferret, a mountain pass where you enter Switzerland.

The continuing heat, lungs craving for air and dehydration was very fatiguing and knew I had to manage this. Upon reaching the Grand col Ferret after about 2.5 hours I decided to ask if I could rest for 10 mins in medic tent. I knew that grabbing rest, however brief, would be my only way to beat the growing fatigue in the hours to come.

After lying down the peace was quickly broken by arrival of a helicopter. Turned out the guy beside me was in a bad way and was being evacuated. It was time to go and negotiate almost 20km downhill with far fewer runners around. I knew it was risky to have lost time by resting but did feel refreshed. In fact it was nice passing a number of people.

My memories are a bit unclear off the La Peule and La Fouly checkpoints except I did make the timing point at La Fouly with 34 mins to spare. I was still in the game, but not by much! After La Fouly it was time to don headtorch. I had opted for a torch that had batteries at back of head. Other all night runs I find that a bobbing light with the battery weight at front of head has contributed to dizziness and visual problems. It worked well this time and was pleased that this was correct gear choice.



It had now been over 12 hours since start and as night fell I knew this was where everything became more challenging. Weariness, stomach distress, lack of oxygen, time problems, more visual concentration and just the dark all come together. For quite a few hours on the ascents I had adopted moving for maybe 10 mins and then just stopping to catch my breath and rest a minute or two. However it was all wearing me down. After the slow climb uphill to Champex I felt mentally and physically spent. It was to be the nadir of my race.



There was no desire to eat or drink, I was 45 mins slower than my 2017 race time and had only 31 mins before being timed out. Slumped on the table with no desire to eat or drink my only thought was wait for the gate to close.

In my exhaustion decided to call Elisabeth back in Chamonix as to what she thought. I knew she wouldn't appreciate me calling at 11pm in the state I was in. Her response was threefold. I had been here before,

many were praying for me and that I should ask a medic what they thought. The first reason was true, the second was comforting but seemed a bit selfish of me to depend on the prayers of others when it was my choice to suffer in this way. However, see also my postscript about prayer. The third encouragement to seek medical advice seemed sensible despite my increasingly frazzled mind.

It was to be my decision to continue or not and I should own it. So off I went to a medic. She took my blood pressure and said it was fine. Then took my blood sugar from my thumb which she said was surprisingly high. Another test on my ear in which she said it was fine. Her verdict, I was suffering from exhaustion. She did not seem to infer this was a reason to stop which I was hoping. In fact she reminded me there was little time left before I needed to leave! Again, regrettably to my mind, it was to be my decision. It didn't seem fair as a guy beside me had decided to quit and she had told him it was good to listen to your body!

The clock was ticking and there was 2 mins left before they closed the exit gate. Never had I been so close. This sense of urgency caused me to man up and attempt to go to next point as I would likely be timed out. At least the matter would be out of my hands.

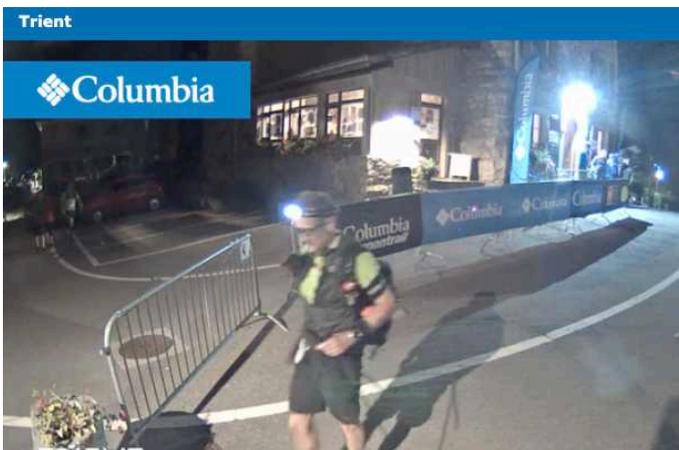
And so I was off again, only focussed in the moment and the assurance of being surrounded by love. Made a quick call to Elisabeth to tell her the news. I had an hour to Plan De L'au and next timing point. If I made it fine but if not it was for others to decide. At least I was not on my own.

Important life lesson, always take ownership of decisions, especially life enhancing ones. Banish self-pity and focus on what you can do about a situation. You would think at 63 I would know this but I am a slow learner. In my distress I took comfort from pondering what was most precious in life. Family and friends who love you. The simple pleasures in life, like eating and drinking with others. Thankful to God for Elisabeth with whom I've shared life with for 35 years and who had just given profound advice. More prosaically my constant thirst was causing me to obsess over the sensation of drinking pure orange juice or a cold beer and which tasted better!

You may think that in getting slower and slower I would fall behind everyone else. In fact everyone around me was having their own struggles. During 2nd half of race there was probably a group of about 50 of us who, over the piece, were going at exactly the same pace. Due to language issues we did not say much but there were a lot of Hong Kong and Chinese people in my group I could communicate with. Only a little as we were all concentrating our energies elsewhere. A pattern emerged where I would slump for a minute or so on a rock and others would silently troop past. Then 5 mins later I would pass the same group now slumped. It was just as well it was a humid night as such a strategy would not have been best in the cold.

An odd thing occurred during the night, I seemed to lose my voice. Whether it was the dry air or something else I found myself passing people giving a squeaky 'excuse me, excusez moi'. Never happened before and voice didn't properly return till almost a day after race.

I made it to Plan De L'Au which was basically just a group of marshalls ready to close the path at 0015. At least I was through with about 7 mins to spare. It would be another 3 hours 45 mins before next timing which was a great relief mentally. I knew there were 3 mountain ascents and descents left to Chamonix. La Giete, the next checkpoint, lay at top of a 550m ascent and I arrived in fairly good shape. I even contemplated taking some of the tepid soup on offer. As I proffered my cup I had this sudden feeling I was going to vomit. I managed to dash to the door which was fortunately only a metre away and spent the next 5 mins retching. Nobody batted an eyelid. It is moreconcerting if you did it at table which I heard also happens. I had been here before and knew that I would now eat little. Fluids were all that was left to ingest. Was quite philosophical about it as I had managed 12-14 hours before on the move with nothing but sipping water.

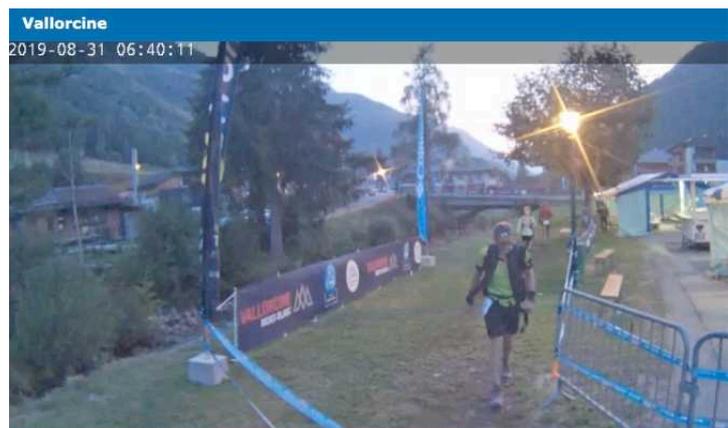


Descending to Trient the good news was I had now gained 35 mins ahead of timing gate. It was thus with a lighter heart that I started the slog up to Les Tsieppes. I was amazed that even in the middle of the night there were many enthusiastic supporters. The checkpoints also got noisier. Indeed Trient even had a DJ belting out music with lyrics telling people to get a move on.

Simple pleasures were left. I loved the fizzy water on offer at checkpoints - it was the only thing I could hold down. No nutritional or calorific value but maximum psychological effect. The night continued to be very muggy and we passed through several Swiss hamlets which had water troughs and great for cooling.

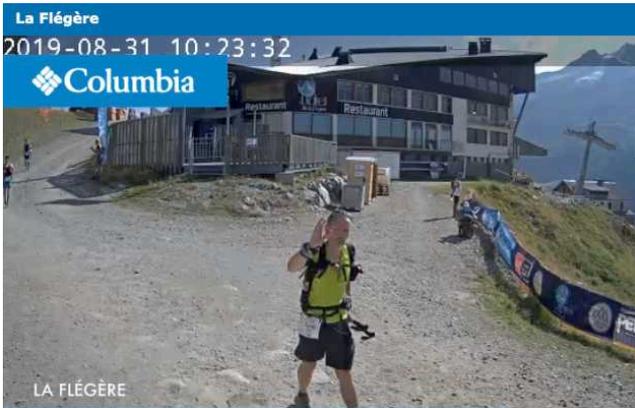
The night had been long and I was looking forward to the first signs of daylight that would welcome entry into France in the long descent to Vallorcine from Les Tsieppes.

Leaving Vallorcine along the gradually ascending valley floor in early morning light was a mental and sensory relief. It was time to switch on my GPS watch to record progress over the last 18km. This was important as I was only 35 minutes



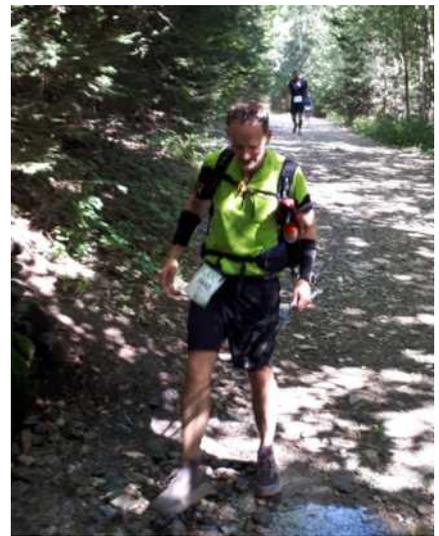
ahead of timer and needed to check my pace. There was only one ascent and descent left. In 2017 weather was too cold to ascend La Tete aux Vents. Then organisers had changed route to a double half ascent which at the time I thought was particularly cruel. However this time I realised just how tough it was to the top. The initial ascent up to Col des Montets and the second last timing point was gentle belying what was to come. Then it was on to the steep zig-zag slopes up to La Tete aux Vents in the increasing morning heat.

My travelling companions and I resorted again to our strategy of some minutes climbing and then stopping for air before getting too dizzy. There were several false summits and the main sounds heard were the visceral groans from those ahead discovering further tops.



Eventually we reached the summit and began a long descent over mainly very rocky ground to La Flégère, the ski lift station, and the last timing point. The checkpoint tent atmosphere was as you would expect quite jovial, at least with the volunteers! For runners a sense of urgency. A few cups of fizzy water, a brief sit down and I was out the door. There was 7.9km left and all downhill.

As previously Elisabeth met me in the forest just outside the town. A welcome sight. As she has said on other occasions I had a shell-shocked appearance and an inability to think straight. Add to this the innovation of a squeaky voice and it otherwise would be quite comical. After a few hundred metres she left me to take a short cut into town.



I continued on for the last km through the town with many well-wishers lining the streets. Marita and Lasse were there at the last 30m waving Scottish and Swedish flags.





I had made it. 26 hours 4 minutes and 5 seconds. 3 minutes 33 secs. slower than 2017!

Participants starting: 2,132

Number of finishers: 1,578

Total withdrawals: 554



I came in 1,446th overall out of 1,578 finishers (2,132 started),

In the 60-69 age category I was 19th out of 46 starters and 2nd out of 3 British finishers.

Many thanks to all reading this for your encouragement, support and sponsorship.

Allan Grant

8th Sept 2019

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121 vs 1,2*

As with previous runs I am raising funds for Starfish Asia which do such a great work helping poor children of Christian families in Pakistan get an education. The project is to provide science lab equipment for at least 2 schools. My fund-raising page is open to end of Sept 2019 at uk.virginmoneygiving.com/Grant

Postscript

The Protestant church in Chamonix town centre organised their own 'ultra' event during the UTMB races – an Ultra Pray Mont Blanc! This was an all-night prayer time in a tent in Col de Montets from 8pm Friday till 9am Saturday as runners came through during the night. It was encouraging to meet members and hear of this initiative.



MANDATORY EQUIPMENT- TAKEN ON RACE
Rucksack
Mobile phone - with LiveRun
External phone battery
Mug +bowl + spoon/fork
Water- 1l min (2 x 0.5l Tailwind)
2 torches with spare batteries for each
Recommendation : 200 lumens or more for the main torch
Survival blanket (1.40m x 2m)
Whistle
Self adhesive elasticated bandage (min 100 cm x 6 cm)
Water and windproof seamed shell jacket
Base layer leggings
2 or 3 buffs
Warm second layer - min 180g (M) -H/H
Merino wool hat
Warm and water-proof gloves
Waterproof over trousers
Driving Licence (ID)
Thin gloves
Fleece (Proteus vest)
Sports glasses
Knife w/ scissors
Arm warmers
GPS watch
Hand wash & wipes
Zip T-shirt (Salomon?)
Poles
2XU compression shorts
Socks
Nike shorts
Tailwind sticks (6-8)
40 Euro cash
Pickle juice (small bottles)
Cut off times/CPs/ route profile
Insurance papers
Hoka trail shoes
Emergency food -800kcal (2 gels + 2 energy bars + dates/oats /honey mixture)

