

Courmayeur – Champex – Chamonix (CCC) Report 1-2 Sept 2017

Allan Grant

Almost a week has passed and need to get my thoughts together before the memories dim. Once again I was embarking on an odyssey with the help of Elisabeth. Arrived Chamonix, France on Weds 30th August and stayed a few km out of town in Les Bossons where the accommodation was cheaper at an old style chalet. It was great to also have Marita, Elisabeth's sister and Lasse her husband meet us. They had been touring in their camper van and had made a special detour to be with us for the 5 days. I was so grateful as it meant Elisabeth did not have to be on her own while I was away. They also were with us for evening meals in the chalet.



On Thursday main task was to get 'bagged and tagged' at registration. Very impressed by the rigour of their checks. Upon ID submission the computer then printed out 4 random pieces of obligatory equipment I had to produce. One item was 2 head torches with spare batteries for both. It seemed over the top but was to prove significant, more of that later. A concern for me had been how I was going to get to the pickup point on Friday morning for bus to Courmayeur as it was about 3.5km from our accommodation. I had been offered a bike but it meant Elisabeth running beside me to take bike back. An extra early morning pre-race effort neither of us relished. I was fortunately able to reschedule to get a bus from Les Bossons with other CCC runners that was going straight to Courmayeur.

It is difficult to describe the buzz of a small town such as Chamonix with about 8,000 runners from 80+ countries for the week of the 5 UTMB series races plus supporters. The French advertise it as 'The World Summit of Trail Running' and it's difficult to argue with that. There is also a lot of tension in the air. Many were going to be stretched beyond what they had previously known physically and mentally over coming days. In 2012 I had done the UTMB (shortened due to bad weather) and I was excited to be back and take part again in this iconic race series, this time doing the CCC.

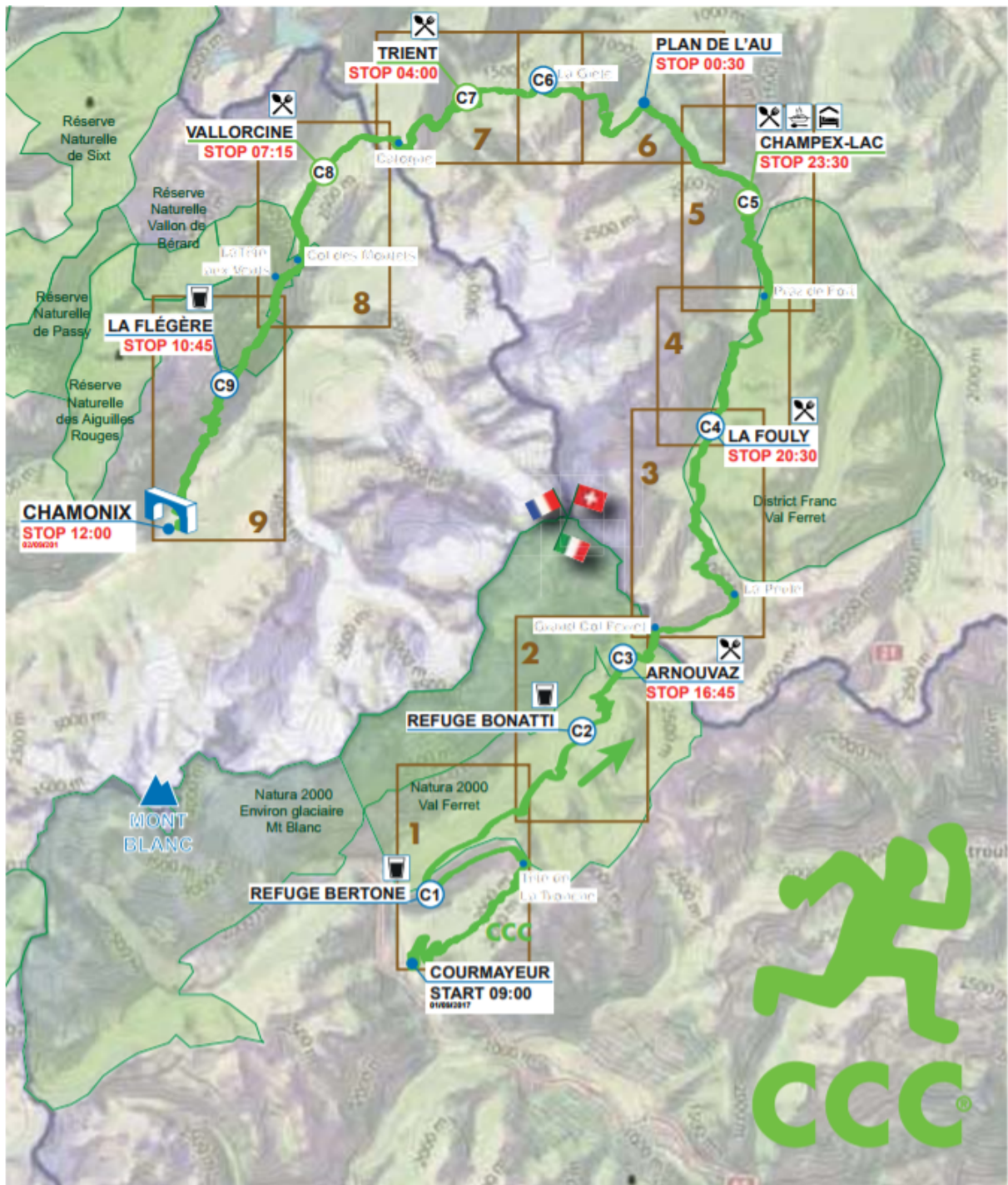
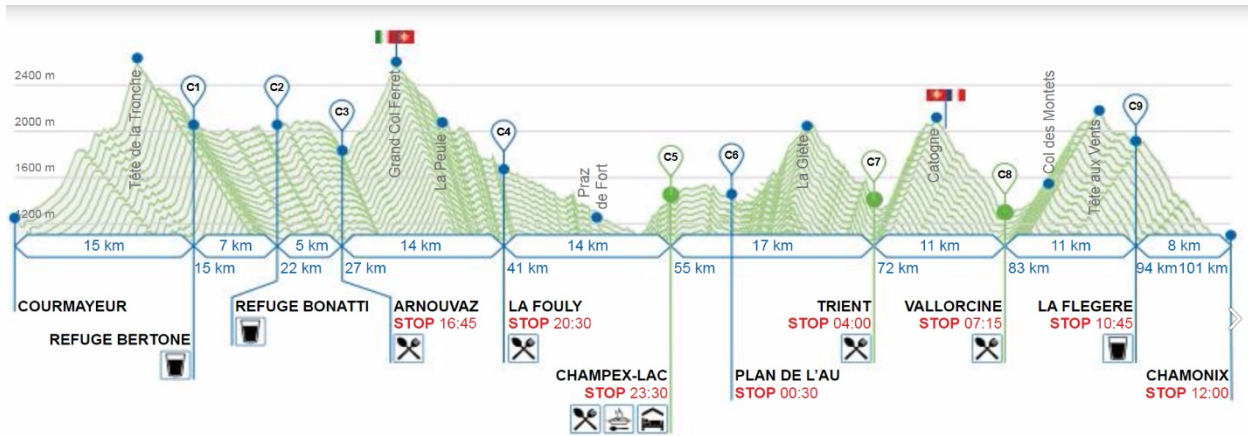
The CCC – route and stats.

The CCC is a 101km route which starts in Courmayeur, Italy, heading north into Switzerland and then west and south into France before ending in Chamonix in a horseshoe shaped route round the massif of Europe's highest mountain, Mt. Blanc. It is about 60% of the complete circuit of Mt. Blanc. With 6,100m of ascent and 6,280m descent it was the climbs and downhills that would sap your strength more than the distance. During the race there were latest times you had to leave checkpoints, otherwise you would be withdrawn from race. There was a max. 26 hours 30 mins to complete.

For the number crunchers some stats.

Number of participants starting: **2155** Of whom **364** were females

Number of finishers: **1742** Of whom **260** were females: Total number of withdrawals: **413**



	Inter Distance	Cumul Distance	Altitude	Cumul D+	Cumul D-	Plus rapide Fastest	Plus lent Slowest	Barrière horaire Time barrier				
	COURMAYEUR	0,0	0,0	1220	0	0	01-09:00	01-09:30				
	TÊTE DE LA TRONCHE	10,4	10,4	2584	1435	97	01-10:25	01-12:58				
C1	REFUGE BERTONE	4,3	14,7	1991	1460	700	01-10:44	01-13:55				WC
C2	REFUGE BONATTI	7,4	22,1	2025	1746	941	01-11:25	01-15:34				WC
C3	ARNOUVAZ	5,1	27,3	1769	1851	1275	01-11:53	01-16:31	16:45			WC
	REFUGE ELENA	2,4	29,6	2061	2142	1290	01-12:13	01-17:18				WC
	GRAND COL FERRET	2,2	31,8	2537	2605	1290	01-12:41	01-18:22				
	LA PEULE	3,6	35,4	2071	2605	1733	01-12:56	01-18:55				
C4	LA FOULY	6,1	41,5	1592	2803	2413	01-13:28	01-20:10	20:30			WC
	PRAZ DE FORT	8,5	50,0	1151	2913	2962	01-14:06	01-21:39				
C5	CHAMPEX-LAC	5,8	55,8	1470	3370	3103	01-14:48	01-23:16	23:30			WC
C6	PLAN DE L'AU	4,8	60,6	1330	3454	3315	01-15:14	02-00:18	0:30			
	LA GIETE	6,5	67,1	1884	4220	3539	01-16:13	02-02:43				
C7	TRIENT	5,0	72,1	1300	4296	4203	01-16:39	02-03:42	4:00			WC
	CATOGNE	5,1	77,2	2065	5122	4298	01-17:35	02-06:00				
C8	VALLORCINE	5,8	83,0	1270	5132	5078	01-18:03	02-07:01	7:15			WC
	COL DES MONTETS	3,7	86,7	1461	5329	5078	01-18:30	02-08:01				
	LA REMUAZ	2,1	88,8	2014	5880	5078	01-19:06	02-09:21				
	LA TETE AUX VENTS	1,9	90,7	2130	5995	5089	01-19:21	02-09:54				
C9	LA FLEGERE	2,9	93,6	1860	6005	5352	01-19:42	02-10:41	10:45			WC
	CHAMONIX	7,9	101,5	1035	6104	6280	01-20:15	02-12:00	12:00			WC

And so to my story...

During Thursday received texts that route was not confirmed until weather conditions were assessed. We were told it was going to be very cold at height and wind chill would make it worse. In the end there was little change to the route, just said that we would not ascend to Tete au Vents but instead ascend by a circuitous route to the last checkpoint at La Flegere.

And so Friday morning arrived. Rising at 0515, I shared breakfast with a fellow CCC runner, Boni. He had motored up from Cordova, Spain with his father. He said this summer he had been training in 50 degrees C in the evenings and was concerned about the cold. He had spent the day before buying warm clothes. In the end he sadly found the cold too much and did not finish.

Waiting for bus in Les Bossons got chatting to a brother and sister from Switzerland who were running. He had bought her entry into CCC as a 50th birthday present! Also chatted with a few other Scottish runners who had experience on the West Highland Way.

Little stressors started to play on my mind. The bus wasn't coming on time and in the end arrived 25 mins late. The Swiss fellow said that a few years ago they had to run to start line in Courmayeur due to delays in Mt. Blanc tunnel. At last bus came and we entered the Mt. Blanc tunnel on a cold, damp, cloudy morning. 12 km later we were through the tunnel and arrived to bright, sunny blue skies and the towering peaks that surround Courmayeur. Amazing how the mountain range affects the weather systems.

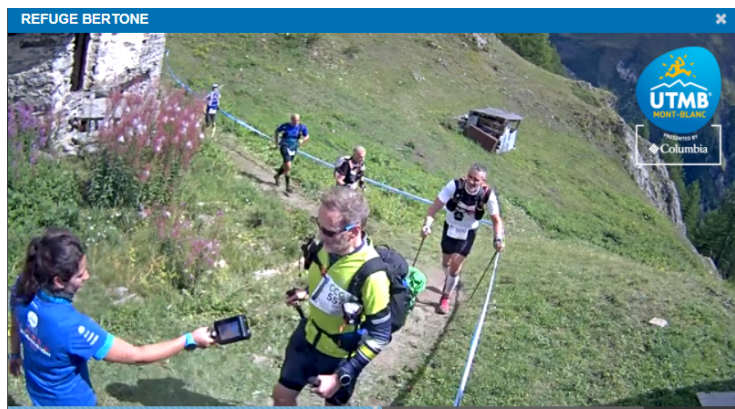
Straight to the start line but need not have worried about the time. My start time was to be in the last of 3 groups, at 0930. With the 26 hrs 30 mins. time limit this meant the latest I could get to Chamonix would be 12 noon on the Saturday. The race bib nos. are based on your results in qualifying races, not on the time you think you will do. My bib no. was 5577. I was surprised just how accurate this was. The people you were with were largely with you for the duration and had similar bib nos. Majority of us had running poles. Lightweight sticks which really helped give both stability and support for the knees and quads on the ups and downs. Only hazard at times was that you had to ensure you were not poking your poles into someone ahead or behind you.

Soon we were off through the twisty, sunlit streets of this Italian town and then on to the trail for the solid climb up to Tete de la Tronche. It was mainly a continuous steep zig zag

up steep grassy slopes. At one point we passed a woman with a clipboard and a man intently looking at our feet. They were taking a poll of what footwear brands we were using. Each to his own.

As it was the beginning on small trails there was a continuous dense train of runners in front and behind with little opportunity to go at your own pace. The main hazard seemed to be falling stones from runners above. Every 10-15 mins you would hear a cacophony of frantic shouting in multiple languages which I guess was saying 'watch out, get out of the way'. No one seemed to have got hurt.

Weather was pleasant, indeed a bit hot. It was a solid climb for 3 hours to the summit at Tete de la Tronche (2584m). I was beginning to feel the effects of altitude as despite a relatively low heart rate I was breathing very fast and starting to feel light headed. I had made a mental note in preparation that as I would not be acclimatised I needed to go 'easy' on myself and make sure that I breathed hard and indeed stopped if light headed. There is about 25% less oxygen in the air per mouthful at 2,500m.



There then followed a nice, quite gentle descent to Refuge Bertone where there was plenty of drinks on offer. Through the Alps there is a network of these refuges which are a kind of mountain hut/ chalet providing overnight shelter/ accommodation should you need it. I grabbed some coke, refilled my water bottles and mixed in some Tailwind powder. Also took on some of

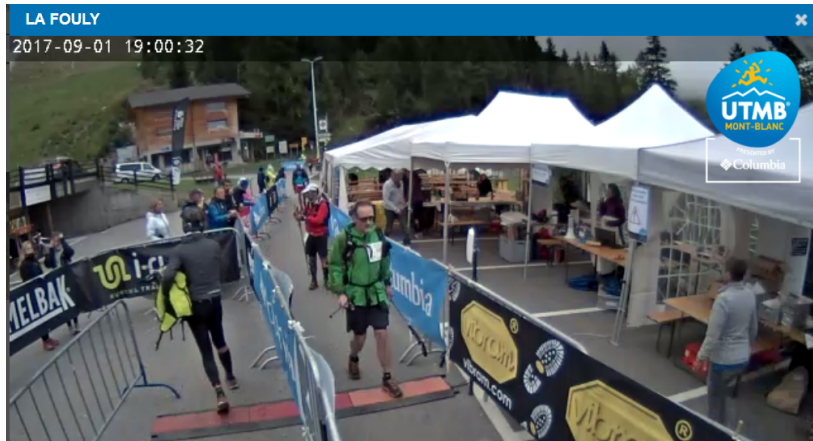
the food on offer. There was a variety of cut up fruits, sausage, salami, cheeses, tea, coffee, coke and water. This fair varied little on future stops. A few of the larger stations also had noodle soup or pasta. Every few hours I took a mouthful of pickle juice I was carrying as a preventative for leg cramps. This worked and got no cramps. As in 2012 I was very impressed by the enthusiasm of the volunteers. It also had a family feel to it with young children eagerly serving food. This was the set up at nearly all checkpoints.

It was now the afternoon and the main challenge was to get to Arnouvaz (via Refuge Bonatti) which you had to leave by 1645. My memories of this section are poor except I made it there with about an hour to spare. Good, but you didn't want to hang around too much. I tried to keep to about 8-10 mins at each checkpoint and generally found them quite frenetic experiences especially in the latter stages. During this time you had to implement any clothing and kit changes, food and drink intake etc. All this in a progressively weary state meant they were not really restful times. Often I felt better leaving than arriving.



A few of the smaller, interim stations I just went straight through without stopping. At Arnouvaz I put on my long leggings and layered up my torso to 4 layers. They were continually warning of the cold and not to layer up outside. It felt good to be prepared.

There now followed a tough climb up to Grand col Ferret on the Italian/ Swiss border. Every now and then it was good to take in the stunning views of the Mt. Blanc massif which towered over you. As the day moved on the weather started to get damper and visibility less so it was nice to remind yourself of the beautiful surroundings when you could see them.

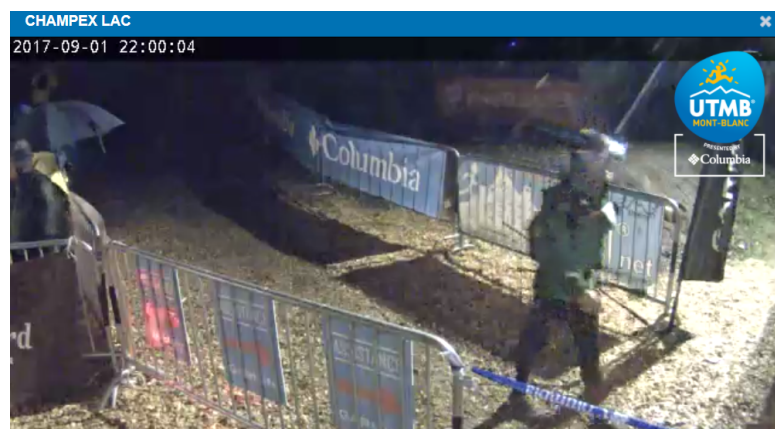


Getting to La Fouly about 7pm dusk was not far away. We were not allowed to leave without head torches on. For several km afterwards we left the trails and were mostly on quiet country roads undulating through Swiss villages. Fatigue was now beginning to take a grip on my body and

remember enviously looking at families enjoying evening meals as we passed their chalets.

Apart from the fatigue I was now experiencing a common symptom for me on endurance races. Once again nausea was an issue and I was eating very little. Even thinking of eating was making me feel sick. One potentially embarrassing moment occurred going through one village when a family set up a roadside table offering us tea and coffee. I grabbed a coffee and after one gulp my stomach convulsed. It took a huge effort not to spew all over their table. I quickly mumbled my thanks and moved on. Mentally I was now concerned about my lack of calorie intake. I knew from previous races that once I felt sick it didn't disappear. However I also knew from experience you can travel long distances on water and coke. Despite my plan to avail myself of what food there was I sensed this was not going to be really possible any longer.

About 10pm I arrived at Champex Lac which was a major station and at 55km just past the halfway stage, distance wise. Despite my physical issues I was encouraged that I had now built up about 90 mins. lead on the cut off time. I was extremely weary and apart from my lacklustre attempts



at eating and drinking I slumped on the table for a few mins. rest. The large marquee was extremely noisy and volunteers seemed in high spirits and cheery in contrast to runners who all seemed to have hollow and distressed looks. It seemed best to get out as soon as possible. About 2 steps out of the tent I vomited, the first of 3 occasions. Those spectating seemed oblivious to this. At least I had not messed up in the tent. My main thought was do I return to tent and speak to a medic or do I just move on? I chose the latter. Just needed

to ensure I get some fluids in even if I could only stomach water. After a while I felt marginally better. However the physical and mental load was incessant. As it approached midnight I 'comforted' myself that the remainder of the race amounted to three mountain climbs and ascents. However it did little to provide relief and seemed an impossible task to complete.

Various stressors added to drain my attention to anything but the immediate. My torch started to go dim and though I had 2 spare sets of batteries and an extra head torch I rather foolishly just decided to do nothing about it until the light went out completely. Then a feverish search in my rucksack in the pitch dark on the mountainside. Got the battery but couldn't figure out which way to fit in so had to wait till another runner came by and use their light. Lesson learned you might think, not so. It was a long night and I needed another battery set changed some hours later in very similar circumstances again needing another runner's help.

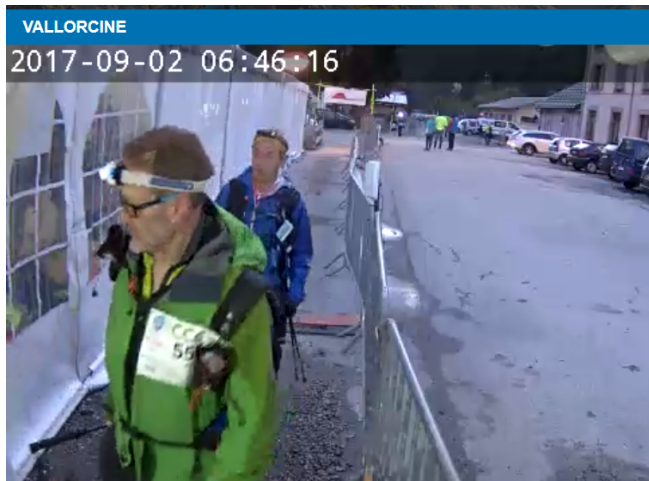
A word about fellow runners. Due to the many nationalities and languages there was not an awful lot of talking. Combine this with the fact that everyone is panting hard with the effort of the climbs and then needs to concentrate hard on the faster descents meant there was little chatter. However it was not a lonely experience as there is a kind of solidarity in suffering similar experiences in close proximity to others for many hours together. As mentioned earlier there was an almost uncanny calibration of abilities which meant I was seeing the same people with similar bib nos. to me appear and disappear for much of the last half of the race. Encouragement was received through a 'ca va?', an 'okay' or even a grunt from your companions passing by as you leaned exhausted on your poles gasping for breath.

In order to deal with the fatigue and gasping for air I adopted a strategy of 4 mins moving and 1 minute stop to lower HR and recover from dizziness. It worked to a degree but was feeling increasingly sorry for myself. I decided at Plan De L'Au or Giete (cannot remember which) that I would lie down for a bit. I asked the medic if I could sleep for 10 mins and he bundled me into an adjacent farm building that was like an oven, took my outer clothes off and wrapped me in a space blanket beside a space heater for 10 mins of dozing. It was a risky strategy as the clock was ticking and I was only about an hour ahead of timing gates. He duly got me up after 10 mins. I still felt bone weary but seemed a bit more mentally alert. This was a false impression as I set off into the night only to realise I had left my poles and had to return and retrieve. I think shortly thereafter I had another foolish episode with the need to change batteries.

The muddy conditions were getting worse and the so called mountain trail shoes were so caked in mud I was getting no traction. During the night I fell 2 or 3 times in the mud and once heavily. Again little stressors crowded into my mind and I became worried about the cut on my wrist as couldn't get the mud out of it.

The mental and physical stress between stations were starting to get to me as I knew you could not stop in the damp and cold. One very selfish thought occurred. If I threw myself by the wayside companions would then have to get help. I savoured the thought of a helicopter coming to take me away. What a bizarre thought. Mercifully I desisted but in my hallucinatory state they seemed rational alternatives.

I also began asking God for relief. There did not seem any answer but the need to endure. From past such night runs I knew that my whole perspective would change once daylight came. After Trient I eagerly looked for signs of light in the sky and believed that arrival in



Vallorcine would be an encouragement. It was a steep climb to Catogne but it also meant entering France. Daylight indeed lifted my spirits.

"For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."
Psalm 30 vs 5

I was also familiar with Vallorcine. Elisabeth and I had hiked in the Chamonix valley previously so this helped. However

no one wanted to linger at the checkpoint and indeed one marshall wanted us to get a move on. I thought I had reasonable margin of time but realised that the route change on the final climb meant I would not know exactly how much distance was left till the last checkpoint. So set off from Vallorcine along the pleasant, slight incline of the valley floor with others cheered by the light of day and no rain. Got chatting with a number of Japanese, Chinese and a Korean. These guys had come a long way to do this race and they were absolutely determined to make it.

After road crossing at Col De Montets we started the proper last ascent of the route. It felt good. One last sting in the tail was that we were not ascending to Tete au Vents due to weather. Sounded good, but instead the route took us halfway up and then we went down again nearly to valley floor before ascending again. At times it was quite technical with a lot of clambering. At last we reached that longed for last checkpoint at the ski lift at La Flegere. Greeted by a very cheery and bubbly medic whose repeated mantra was '*only 8km left and it's all downhill*'. I was going to savour this lovely finale to an epic run.



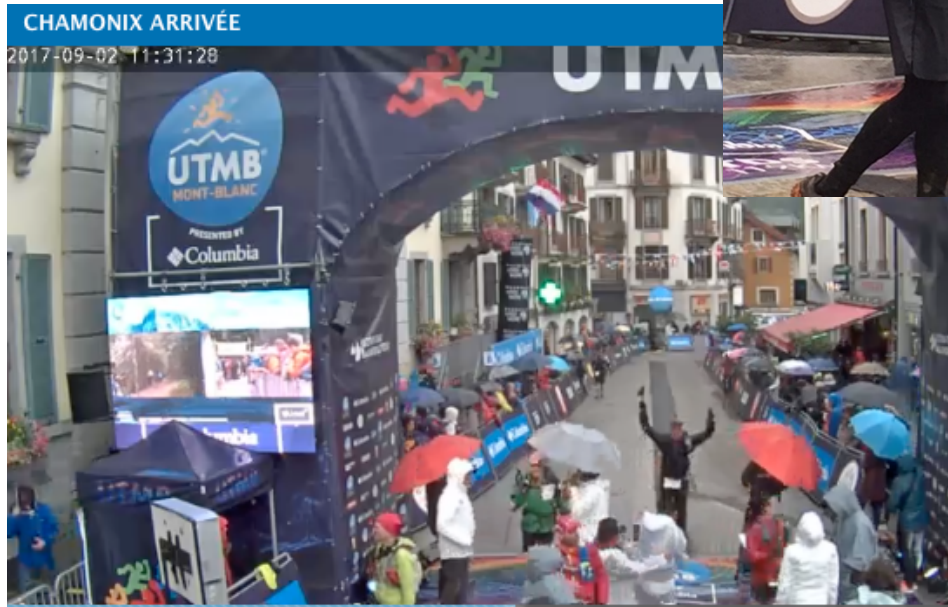
I reckoned I had about 30 mins in hand but was not going to fritter it away so set off. The cold, damp and rainy conditions meant nothing now. We were going to make it. About 2km from Chamonix town I was greeted by the very welcome sight of Elisabeth. She had so positioned herself at other races. She accompanied me for a bit before taking a short cut through town to the finish. We

runners had about 1km of streets through the town centre to engage with wonderful, supportive people willing you on.

And then on to the final 100 metres. Having for many hours anticipated the end it seemed to come all too quickly. A moment to savour!



Greeting Elisabeth on approaching Chamonix



One participant described the experience as 'brutally satisfying' which was probably close to how I felt. The finishing pics show me a bit shell-shocked. Both the mind and body are a bit numb. It will take a while to feel normal.

In my age ranking (60-69) there were 41 starters, 19 finishers and I came in 15th. From the UK there were 2 in my age bracket (I came in second!!). I was pleased with that.

Status	Rank	Rank V3 H	Last timing point	Race time	Speed
Finisher	1618	15	Sat. 11:31 Chamonix Arrivée	26:00:32	3,85 km/h

Elisabeth could also relax as she had been in high alert since the start. For runner supporters of such races it is also very much an endurance experience. She has faithfully stood by me each time and her support psychologically and practically started many months beforehand.

The day after the race (Sunday afternoon) was the prize giving for the top runners and we sat watching on the steps in front of St Michel church. With the church behind and the massive cathedral of the Mt. Blanc massif towering in front it seemed we were sandwiched between two silent but potent displays of God's love, power and presence.

Thankful for the strength He gave.

Allan Grant

8th Sept 2017

As with my earlier run on the West Highland Way this summer I am raising funds for Starfish Asia which do such a great work helping poor children of Christian families in Pakistan get an education. My fund-raising page is open for donations to end of Sept 2017 uk.virginmoneygiving.com/agrant

Thereafter the charity website is <http://starfishasia.com/>