# Know Your Stuff

# The Tour of Mont Blanc and its flora

The Tour of Mont Blanc is, perhaps, one of Europe's most famous and iconic long distance circular paths. It's approximately 170 kilometres long and has 10 kilometres of ascent/descent. It passes through three countries – Switzerland, Italy and France and affords all walkers some of the most spectacular Alpine views. The highest points of the trail are the Col des Fours in France and the Fenetre d'Arpette in Switzerland, both at an altitude of 2,665 metres.

Mountain walking experience is required as the climbs and the weather can be punishing. Even so, the route is accessible for fit walkers who are used to mountain conditions. We took four days to complete the Tour though many take it at a more leisurely pace and allow themselves a ten to twelve days to get round the circuit. We chose to stay in huts along the way to reduce what we carried but many people choose to walk the circuit, in either direction, self-sufficiently. Others choose to have their luggage transported on to their accommodation, by advanced vehicle or by mule, and there are fully supported expeditions.

The tour can also be an excellent journey for its natural history. The Mont Blanc massif is comprised mainly of granite with metamorphic gneiss and schists with their requisite floral displays showing a preference for nutrient poor soils. The deeply carved, glacial valleys surrounding the massif follow geological boundaries where sedimentary rocks, such as limestone, present a richer and more varied range of plants. The Tour follows from valley bottom to alpine passes allowing you to journey through a series of altitudinal plant zones again adding to the variety of plant species you will come across.

Here is a selection of plants observed in mid-August last summer, several having interesting historical and medicinal references too.

**Bavarian Gentian** – *Gentiana bavarica*

The name Gentain is a tribute to the 2nd century BC Illyrian king Gentius who first discovered its virtues as a treatment against the plague. The Great yellow Gentian is the best-known family member for its use in treating malaria and who's bitter roots are used by Italians to flavour the spirit grappa! Bavarian Gentian prefer damp soils, spring-fed and can be found up to an altitude of 3600m. Its solitary five-pedalled upright flowers have a brilliant deep blue colour with a white centre.

**Alpine Toadflax** – *Linaria alpina*

An unmistakable plant with lilac flowerheads and bright orange centres. It flowers late into summer to an altitude of 3800m. Its leaves are bluish rosettes firmly anchored to mobile screes and other unstable rocky places. It prefers calcium-rich areas guiding you to the geology of the area.

**Globe-headed Rampion** – *Phyteuma hemisphaericum*

A member of the Bellflower family with violet-blue flowers. The flower head is claw-like in appearance and forms a distinctive, globular head. It flowers from July to August on rocky crevices and stony grassland up to an altitude of 3000m. Rampions were attributed with aphrodisiac properties in ancient times!

**Rosebay Willowherb** – *Epilobium angustifolium*

An elegant plant with tall flower spikes growing upto 2m tall. It's also known as fireweed due to it colonising after a fire or in recently felled wooded areas. It also offered hope due to it sprouting amid bombed ruins across Europe during World War II. Its young leaves are edible and are used to make tea in the Caucasus. It is a common site up to an altitude of 2000m.

**Alpine Avens** – *Geum montanum*

A plant with a rosette of pinnate (feathery) leaves and golden yellow flowers. This image shows a flower in bloom along with the distinctive, feathery fruits of a former flower. Alpine Avens likes nutrient-poor meadows and pastures and can be found growing upto 2800m.

**Round-leaved Pennycress** – *Thlaspi cepaeifolium*

A member of the Cabbage family, this well adapted plant is a pioneer on mobile screes. It forms clumps of eye-catching lilac blooms flowering through until September up to an altitude of 3000m. The green leaves are rich in vitamin C and can be eaten raw. The name *Thlaspi* comes from the Greek 'to crush', a reference to the leaves being ground to create a poultice.

**Alpine Forget-me-not** – *Myosotis alpestris*

These pretty azure flowers have a stunning yellow eye and belong to this low-growing plant found on stony ground and in damp meadows. The short hairy leaves gave the plant its name *Myosotis*, 'mouse ear'. It flowers from June to August up to an altitude of 2800m on nutrient-rich soils.

**Starwort Mouse-ear** – *Cerastium cerastioides*

A ground-hugging, mat-forming plant with fleshy and glossy oval leaves. The five white petals have faint green veins. It likes nutrient-rich sites with long snow-cover and is common on damp, spring-fed flushes and rocky places. It flowers from July to August and up to an altitude of 2800m.

**Alpine Moon Daisy** – *Leucanthemopsis alpina*

This daisy forms eye-catching splashes of white and yellow on otherwise bare, stony ground. It flowers upto an altitude of 3400m around snow patches and also on moraines and short grassy areas.

**Bearded Bellflower** – *Campanula barbata*

This pale blue Bellfower is easily recognisable due to its dense cover of fine, bristly hairs covering the flowers. The flowers are seen on long stalks, nodding in a gentle breeze. The plant grows widely on nutrient poor soils in meadows and stony ground up to an altitude of 3000m.

**Purple Gentian** – *Gentiana purpurea*

A distinctive plant with reddish-purple flowers which have dark purple spots. The flowers grow in clusters up the stem above ribbed and pointy leaves. They prefer acid soils and can be seen flowering until October in meadows and open woods up to 2500m.

**Mignonette-leaved Bittercress** – *Cardamine resedifolia*

This little alpine plant can be distinguished from other Bittercresses by its usually, spoon-shaped leaves. It also has upper leaves with 3-7 lobes. This delicate plant with white flowers can be seen in damp, rocky places on nutrient and base-free soils up to an altitude of 3200m. It is a stress-tolerant plant and can be found growing on rocks with high concentrations of heavy metals, especially Nickel.