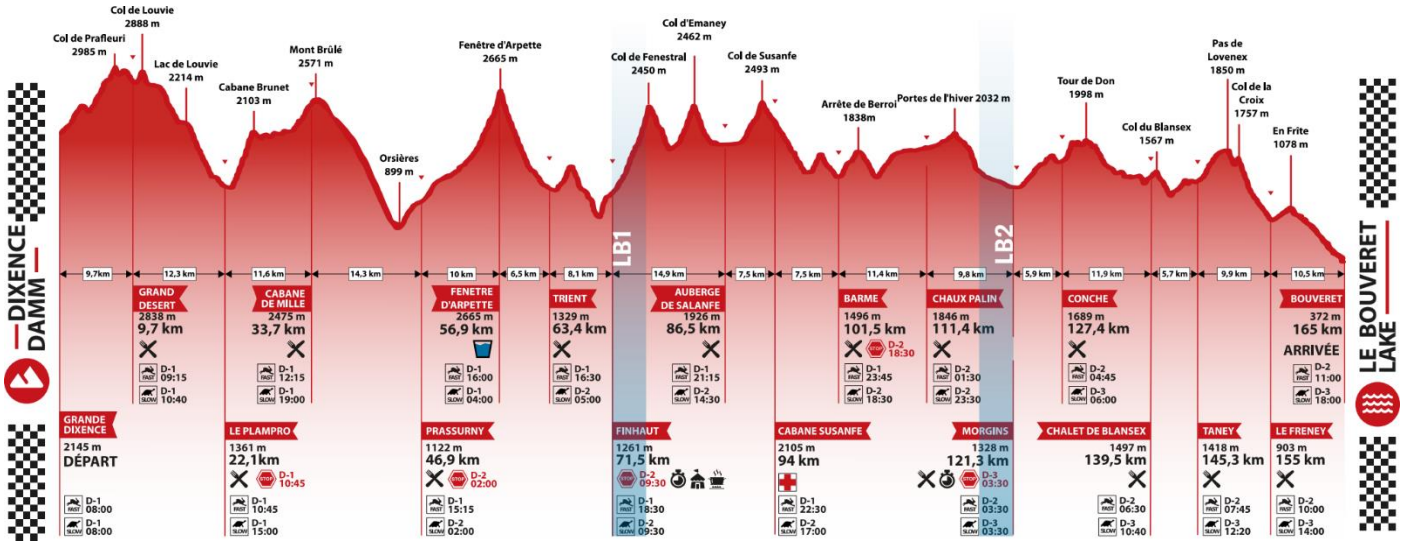
Swiss Peaks 2022
Duncan Potts

Impressions of a crazy, slightly psychedelic and truly epic 170km journey across the Swiss Alps.
1st to 3rd September 2022. 11,500m of ascent and 13,260m descent (so technically a downhill race!)



Legs 1 and 2: Grand Dixence to Le Plampro (22km)



The start at Grand Dixence with Rich Ellis. A minor "rave" was in progress.

2000 metres up to a dam in a coach at 7.30am on a road designed for a smart car. Memories of the ending to the Italian job strike fear into me at every bend. It is a relief to finally get to the brutalist hotel under Grand Dixence. Surprisingly plush interiors lend themselves well to the final preparations for a 170km race across some of the most amazing scenery Switzerland has to offer and eventually, hopefully, down to La Bouvert at Lake Geneva.

'Encore une fois' reverberates the inflatable arch as a smoke machine pumps out dramatic clouds and we are off at a pace unrepresentative of the distance ahead. The lead pack turn left up the hill towards the start of the 360km race before manically turning back when realising their error, as if 30 seconds will make a difference in a race over this distance.

A buzzy drone stalks us up over the Grand Desert which is so ice free that crampons have been dropped from the kit list. It is so different from anywhere I have ever been: lunar with hints of tundra. The man in front sports a climbing helmet... does he know something we don't? As we catch up with him he asks us to run fast past a camera to create an energetic elitism we don't really have. He is very funny and full of energy. We do it and feel lifted.

We descend to Lake de Louvie on small threads of paths disproportionate to the vast valley. They leap around over stubborn rocks before slackening like hammocks. For several hours the route is only down as snow-capped peaks rise ahead and my thighs burn with the effort and the sun. Richard Ellis recognises this is too much on too little training, especially with so much more to come and encourages me to push on. We hug and separate, both moving down at different paces to Le Pampro where a group of smiley, elderly volunteers feed and water us. The race is 4 hours old and already it feels we have seen so much.



Crossing the Grand Desert (taken by another runner; we are in the middle. Rich has the yellow rucksack).

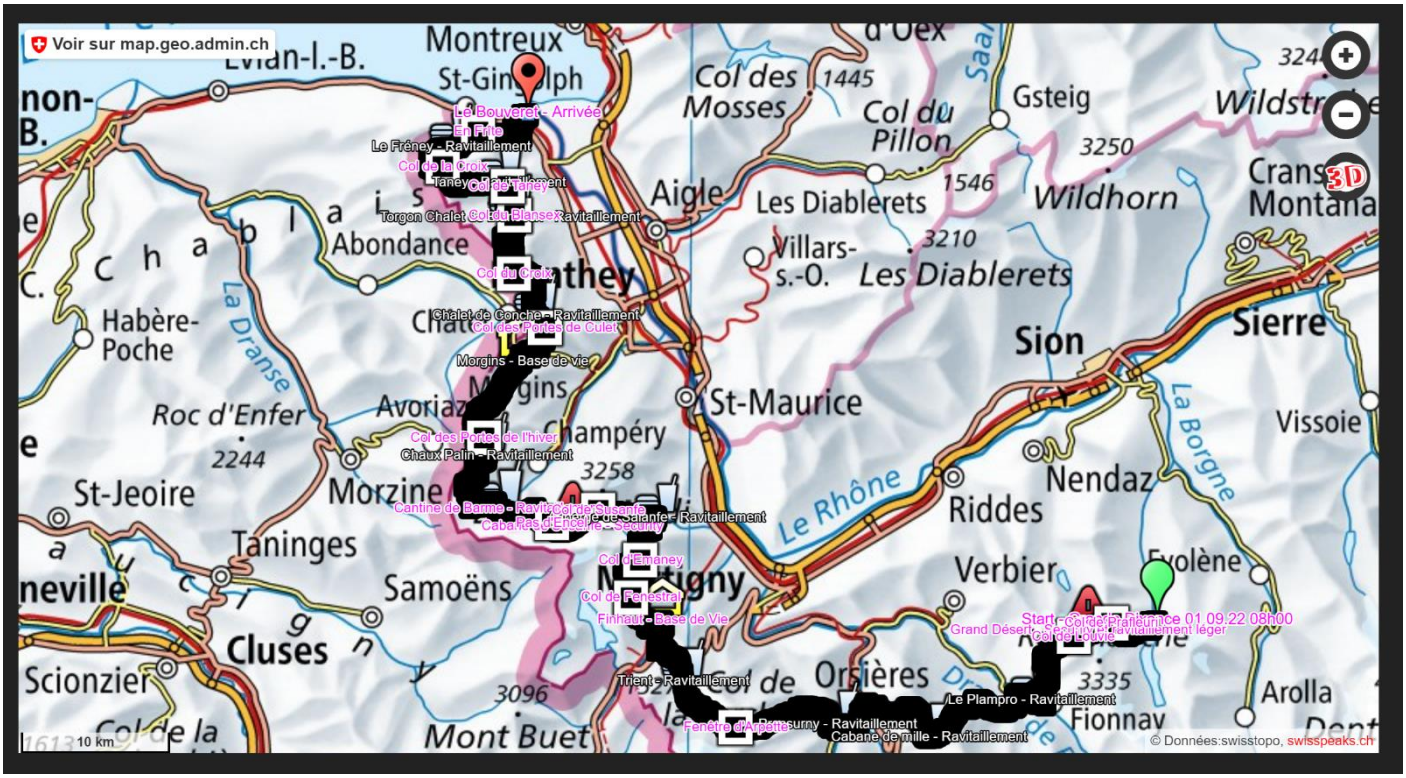
Legs 3 and 4: Le Plampro to Prassunry (48km)

Scottish Sarah was held together with blue knee tape and ready to register early. We met her at the end in La Bouvert (where official stuff was done the day before) and she was eager but apprehensive, possibly older than us and excited about the challenge. She'd taken on tough routes around Monte Rosa but never this long and as we ate pizza with her the day before she talked of enjoying it and seeing if she could finish. We all ate as if this would be the last sit-down meal for a while.

At the top of Mont Brule she looked strong. Certainly a lot stronger than I felt. The climb from Le Plampro to Cabane Brunet had been a deceptive monster. An easy fall down a smooth road had led to a steep trail cloaked in trees rising endlessly in the midday heat. In fact without water from Cabane Brunet I would have struggled to get much further. A road acted as a balcony route offered some respite, but the course to the top through bell-laden clanging cows seemed unexpectedly long. Most people seemed to find it pretty tough as offers I made to let people pass largely fell on deaf ears. At the top I drank glass after glass of water with gas whilst popping painkillers to easy the forthcoming extended descent. The checkpoint support crew looked in my eyes and asked if I was OK with meaning. I said yes. I think I meant it. Thankfully experience has taught me it takes a few big climbs and descents for the body to adapt on runs like this and I believed I'd feel better later if not now. Sarah looked to have adapted already and for the first time I saw a steel in her eyes, probably from years of orienteering that made me think she'd go far. Maybe all the way. The question was, would I? A 1700 metre drop might help me find out.

So down towards Orsieres along ridges, around field edges, down forestry roads and finally steeply on dust tracks to local roads winding around farms and villages. We passed through the least official but most enthusiastic checkpoint on the whole route ran by 6 local children promoting sausages, juice and the best tasting nectarines I've ever had. The UTMB beauty spot of Champex Lac came into view on the other side of the valley, blue blue waters sitting in a hanging valley, just as the shadows of the day started to grow long. A tour of Orsieres, with bottles dipped frequently in water foundations, arched us upwards to the launch pad of Prassunry to get ready for an assault on the Fentre d'Areptte. A narrow street in an Alpine hamlet hosted the checkpoint providing soup with enormous croutons and salty cheese. A friend, Scot had said the next section was a real highlight with a brutal climb and a never-ending descent to Trient but he'd done it in the day as a walk earlier in the summer and I was now 48km in and reaching into my bag for my head torch.

Ironically, in a very strange twist, one of Scott's friends was close behind me... none other than Scottish Sarah who knew his family knew through orienteering circles. What are the chances of a person you meet in the Swiss mountains being friends with someone who works in the next room to you at school? As the coke took time to settle in my stomach I marched upwards for a 3 hour climb, alone on the trail but never in spirit.



Legs 5 and 6: Prassunry to Trient (64km)

The Thursday night steep road stomp immediately induced cramp on the way to Champex Lac and I'd not thought this one through. Nothing massively salty on board so I'm into chocolate and coke supplies quickly to try anything to feel better. It actually works but then I'm worried about enough liquids and take a risk on filling up from a fast-following mineral full alpine river. I've done this before admittedly from a much slower, dirtier stream and spent days in bed enthusiastically evacuating. I do have a filter but don't think to swap it on to the other bottle in the moment and then spend 4 hours wondering if rumblings are coming.

Sometimes the harder sections are more motivating. I leave Prassunry at 630pm and aim to reach the Fentre d'Areptte at 930pm recognising that according to the map the gradient is similar to a BMX half pipe; steep then steeper, then steepest. The terrain equally becomes more rugged culminating in a full-on vertical rock scramble lit my luminous flags and spray paint. However this all seems darkly exciting. After all as I keep telling myself when will I be here again? I could be anywhere else but what might I miss out on?

The man in front suggests it might not be quite as romantic as I think saying at one point "I'm afraid you've got my arse to look at for the next 2½ hours. This actually ends up being true as the field really does settle down and there is no overtaking all the way to the top. A night runner bounces down in the other direction full of praise and encouragement, "Just 15 minutes to go, 20 max." The top is craggy and wild and feels like a significant moment. There is unexpectedly no water but a feisty path that slows everyone whose trainers have minimal grip but for me it feels fantastic to be going down with different muscles suddenly being called upon. I start to overtake people and move steadily on what I have been told is a section that "goes on a on".

It does. Gloriously so. For the first time there are tiny streams high up flowing enough to fill up bottles. There are wooden steps bolted in the cliff with ropes and chains to hold are to. There is an ominous sound to the left like a jet engine firing for mile after mile; presumably a river rampaging downwards just out of sight. Race officials move up the path with anxious faces checking my number the moving on as if someone is in trouble behind me. Eventually after over 4 miles the path levels with information posters every few under metres about what looks like charity work around the world offering a hint that we are almost back to civilisation. I feel strong and keep moving at a good pace looking forward to what I mistakenly thought would be the Lifebase. Instead I enter a small marquee around 11.15pm in Trient and joyfully eat Raclette with potatoes, onions and gherkins. I make a mental note that after nearly 5 hours between checkpoints that nutrition and hydration are going to be crucial in this race. With that in mind I create a little pouch in my pack for Swiss chocolate, fill it up and head off under the stars and into day 2.

Leg 7: Trient to Finhaut (72km)

An interlude.

Not much to see here surely? A bump then a dip to life base 1. Easy easy easy!

Instead we get an intriguing incredibly knotty forest path in the pitch black leading to a view across to Finhaut checkpoint probably a mile away. So far so good... Then at a veteran from previous years who has done the full 360km race (yes, I'm doing the half distance!) casually says, "not far now, only down to the canyon then up again... less than an hour maybe?" I suddenly think what kind of mile takes an hour?

It turns out a mile with a near vertical fractured staircase up a cliff with steps that match no kind of normal cadence. Dirt and roots are set to sabotage every step and go up and up so far I'm glad it's dark. If you look closely at the profile this is the steepest part of the route. A definite stairway to hell. My sticks creek, my calves burn and I can feel blisters forming.

The veteran then drops the bombshell... "remember the Fentre d'Areptte? You haven't seen nothing yet! The next section is a brutal climb where it is hard to see the path followed by the most technical descent ever followed by a similar size climb." It is too much to take in... I should be excited but I'm a little intimidated. One slow step at a time!

Leg 8: Finhaut to the Auberge Salanfe (87km)

So on to the section I've been warned about. I definitely get a sick thrill thinking about what is to come. Knowing it might be too much takes the pressure off in a funny kind of way.

A zig zag shrouded in foliage starts steep and stays steep. There is a moment about 30 minutes in where the stars above appear to be moving erratically in the night sky. They dart left then right way above with alarming synchrony. Realising they are runners perhaps a mile ahead takes my breath away. I don't think I have seen something appear so far above. It looks gloriously endless. I take a moment, take a gel and vomit. Strangely I feel better for it, especially compared to those crouched or asleep at the side of the path. It stays a hard trek but doesn't get harder.

The descent is my favourite run ever. Luminous boulders marked with flags and spray arrows take a ridiculous route across the moon. To me it is like coming off rockier parts of Scafell Pike and I feel at home. I take at least 15 positions quickly whilst others inch along; a slip here could be fatal admittedly... but my trainers feel grippy and bouncy. I am so pleased it is not wet. It is great fun.

The last 3 hours have been so intense it has felt like a full day out in the hills but the second climb is almost as exciting: a diagonal scar cutting up to the col d'Emaney that looks epic. I meet an apologetic man wedged into the path half way up. In perfunctory English he simply says, "sleep" and pointing at his phone, "alarm to wake 15 minutes." I check he is OK and stride around him. The col surprisingly comes up in under an hour where two men stand on top staring and frozen. I assume they are taking in the panorama but instead they indicate towards a small detail just in front of them. Two baby ibex sit looking out at the same view pretending to command the landscape and look completely unbothered by us. We are passing through their world. Far below the dam at the edge of Lac Salanfe leads to the next checkpoint beckoning us on. This leg will be hard to beat but next leg will have a really good go at doing just that.

Leg 9: Auberge Salanfe to Barme (102km)

The steps come slowly now. The morning is ageing and warming. A path rises from Lac Salanfe but a route to the next valley never emerges. The path dissolves into shattered, at times vertical rock linked with chains and ropes than swirl upwards. It is thrilling and nerve racking. A runner skips by and then I realise it is actually a race photographer looking for the most outrageously dramatic shots. The Col de Susanfe eventually arrives and is completely barren, almost volcanic in appearance but serves as a relief to the end of a truly technical section. No one could have run up to here.



Up to the Col de Susanfe (taken from the Swiss Peaks Website)

A gentler runnable descent to the Cabine Susanfe is massively frustrating. My legs are trashed and no end of talking to them makes a difference. I once called my left leg "do do" and my right leg "ron ron" but even chanting each would make no difference at this point. When you are having a temporary sense of humour failure "do do ron ron, do do ron ron" wouldn't be funny. The only strange thing is that I am still overtaking people; it seems their legs are even more far gone than mine.

The map tells me the next section across the Pas d'Encel is very dangerous which is the last thing you want on numbed legs. It is fenced off on one side, consists of small ridges moving along with the path which feel highly polished and even has a marshal sat near it to check you are safe. In total it is no more than 100 metres but it is all thriller, no filler. A wonderful view to Champery makes it even harder to concentrate. Again no-one overtakes during this section.

An unexpected (by me!) climb over to Barme brings past the first of the 100km runners. They are skipping along rapidly and it is an honour to see such athletes. At the checkpoint their food is laid out by a crew with every option ready to go quickly for a fast get away. I on the other hand sit gratefully and watch as a storm lifts both marquees into the air. Eight people hold onto the poles grimly attempting to keep everything in place as we try and work out if the race has been postponed, which we were told it would be in the event of bad weather. For the first time I feel cold and thoughts momentarily snake through my mind that this is too much and a more comfortable world is out there. In the indecision an English runner next to me simply turns to staff and says "I quit; how do I get back?". This has the impact of galvanising me and fully waterproofed, slightly shivery I squeak out into the wind and rain.

Leg 10 and 11: Barme to Morgins (123 km)

Charlie from Belgium has a handlebar moustache and teaches me French swear words whist pulverising my legs. The fact he's brave enough to touch me and my associated smell never mind massage me says alot about him. I am at life base 2 in Morgins at 7pm (35 hours into the race) and being remade. I've new kit, a full meal and perhaps belatedly anti-chaffing cream. More importantly I sing "It's Friday again!" to Gemma back home via the free WiFi, get a complimentary massage and successfully visit the toilet. I'm happier, lighter, cleaner and my legs are mine once more. On leaving the checkpoint to run across a football field I thank one of the checkpoint staff so enthusiastically we embrace like brothers. For the first time I feel this is possible. The only thing I neglect to have is any sleep which might make things interesting later on.

So back to the storm at Barme over 20km earlier. The rain had been so torrential and cold as to force me to wear waterproof trousers for the second time ever in a race. Thankfully within 10 minutes it passed and I felt so hot everything could come off again. Note to self: find a buy a breathable waterproof jacket to avoid becoming a boil in the bag I'm well insulated enough. From here the race became a bog-standard trail run for several hours with hills rather than mountains, even sections of minor road and for the first time progress was relatively rapid. At times mud and damp rocks slowed things a little but the Kilometres ticked by quickly and the views whilst not as dramatic opened up a little.

A tremendous bacon and cheese toasted butty marked the start of what should have been a really quick section over past the Col des Portes d'Hiver and down a river for about 6km to Morgins. However my legs had no bounce left and lots of people passed by (mainly 100km runners but not exclusively) and I was left playing mental games: run for a minute walk for a minute but just keep moving forward. On even slightly fresher legs I could have made up lots of time here and normally these kind of prolonged descents are a strength of mine but for 45 minutes I looked like I was riding a horse that wasn't there. I just kept thinking back to my race mantras: 1) Be patient any progress is good! 2) Enjoy it! and crucially at this moment 3) It

doesn’t always get more painful; legs have a weird way of coming back to life. Thankfully I persevered and Charlie from Belgium was just around the corner waiting to resurrect my quadriceps in advance of the final third. The other main motivator of course was looking forward to what was to come and especially the first sighting of Lake Geneva indicating the start of the end which would surely appear overnight.

Leg 12 and 13: Morgins to Chalet Blansex (141 km)

A winding road rose up from Morgins then became a track and then a road and then a track and it never got too hard. It just became a little fuzzy. The night was creeping in and the world was making less sense.

I 'd last been to bed on Wednesday night and Saturday was closing in and my personal software was glitching. Small things were taking on slightly different shapes than they actually were and rocks were appearing to move ever so slightly for no reason. Headlamps of other runners came from nowhere and cast shadows that didn't seem to match their sources. It was all mildly amusing but a sign of stranger things to come.

At Conche a lady just cackled and said the next checkpoint is a long way away and up there, pointing at an apparent string of fairy lights (actually runners) stretching steeply up. The climb was almost without a path, as if scrubland had been ploughed by an enormous tractor leaving half trails all the way up. It was also much quicker than it looked and lead to several other peaks more like medium sized Lakeland fells than Swiss Peaks that were all over and done with in 10 or 15 minute blocks but still carried a feeling of danger. Lights from the valley to the right side heavily hinted at a civilisation leading onwards towards Lake Geneva both increasingly close yet still indistinct in the far distance.

Lightening lit up the sky to the left and rain jackets went on and as the route became both orienteering and disorientating: moving with no real pattern and creating a feeling of déjà vu. I thought I was lost but I wasn't. Helping a French lady made me realise I did know where I was. The rain caused paths to slide and careering around a hill became more of a challenge for the right foot than the left as a result, with poles becoming essential to anchor everything down. The next checkpoint refused to appear and in the meantime things got weird.

Very small families hid in bushes. Repeatedly they hid and sometimes stood in front of rocks appearing half camouflaged and demented. Stones smiled and laughed like craggy emojis underfoot. Eventually a giant Tyrannosaurus Rex arched over the road. It had to be a tree so need to worry. Then it leaned out further... those arms are branches so no sweat. Then its mouth opened and widened as if to consume the runner in front. I moved forward and prepared to shout out a warming and suddenly I saw it really was a tree. I chuckled and realised I would have to be careful as I was no longer running in just the physical world. My brain was providing intriguing entertainment. A giant purple head just below the Col du Blansex guided me to the next checkpoint and much needed coca cola. Rich had kindly driven out to meet me here but missed me by 10 minutes due to an erratic tracker. I'm not sure I would have recognised him. I talked to anyone to bring things back to reality.

Leg 14: Chalet Blansex to Taney (147 km)

There was a suspiciously small and easy climb to the Col du Blansex and then a long, reasonable trail descent before we went back up a smiliar amount.

And that's all I've got. No elaborate descriptions, no fascinating conversations just blackness.

It's not that the memories have faded with time, it's that it was around 1am and I'd retreated inwards. To fight the hallucinations I'd employed my big motivators. Time thinking about family members and friends no longer here, one's that would love to be doing this but couldn't and about how each one inspires me. At other times I delved into a pick of mix of their best qualities: my mum’s drive, my dad's calmness under pressure, Anne's way of thinking a problem through until it's sorted, my brother’s positivity, my wife's competitive fire, Jude and Olivia's energy and all the grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins magical qualities. A few minutes with each in tow and I was further on and a little brighter. The answers are usually out there if you look hard enough. I had a team working with me.

The dawn was still far off and the hallucinations still occasionally flickered but generally abated. A big climb was coming to the Pas de Lovenex and the Col de la Croix with a technical 800 metre descent to follow and a storm was brewing as sat feeling the chill in the air at Taney.

Leg 15: Taney to Le Freney (157 km)

The penultimate leg. I'd been misinformed or misheard (who knows?) that the last leg provided a sting in the tail. It turns they or I was wrong and this was the sting, which was nice to find out when I did get to the final checkpoint but at the time made me question what else could be trickier than this. I found myself concentrating more in this 4 hour block than at any point in the race.

The rain was wrapped around us now and sounds dominated. The click of running poles scratching against rock, cow bells always somewhere else in another valley and the thrashing of relentless rain on plastic. As we climbed higher roads appeared at unexpected heights, perhaps 1700 metres up and the back night sky hinted that at some point the day would follow. Two cols passed in quick succession, the Pas de Lovenex and the Col de la Croix as bright yellow toads speckled the path presumably drawn by the moisture. By now we all ran in fits and starts: 5 minutes of feeling like our old selves then a few minutes of trudge. There was lots of mutual encouragement mixed with see you in a few minutes.

Coming of the Col de la Croix down to le Freney would have been a cracking descent, certainly on fresh legs, definitely in the day but even a few hours earlier before the rain. The path darted back and forth across patches of scree via muddy chutes that curved left and right but were now the consistency of gravy. Every corner pulled legs in directions they didn't want to go, threatened to break poles and tested patience. After each bend there would be a tip toe across small slippery stones before another corner that felt like walking on ice. Everyone slowed to a new style of running, particularly at precipitous edges were we knew the mud might take us down towards the checkpoint with rapid finality. Feet forward and flat, small steps and for the most part and poles away, we stuck to the middle of the track and plodded on as confidently as possible. It felt like we had invented a new form of movement. Time slowed and the sun rose and with each step the mountain threats diminished and our bodies woke again with unusual freshness for our third day en route.

At le Freney others ran on knowing the finish was relatively close whilst I sat for 15 minutes thinking there was one more challenge ahead and so ate undercooked rice and fish, drank coffee and talked to the congratulatory checkpoint crew. They told me I'd done it now and would be in La Bouvert for second breakfast in less than a couple of hours. Unsure if to fully believe them or I felt a little giddy and allowed myself a little chuckle before kissing my Skiddaw shaped wedding ring and setting off for one last time.

Leg 16: Le Freney to La Bouvert (170 km)

A chattathon ensued. I chatted non-stop to the runner next to me. He was a top bloke but I would have talked to a scone. I was caffeinated and excited. Over that there hill (and for once it was a hill) was a buddy, a beer and a big burger for breakfast. Plus a big pontoon in the middle of glorious Lake Geneva with a red inflatable finishing arch.

I convinced myself there was another summit which I looked for several miles but there wasn't just a small col called En Frite. The path occasionally looked like smeared lipstick dripping slowly off the hill, the mud trying to suck me downwards, but for the most part it was soft and runnable and weirdly I ran. And ran and ran. As if the previous 8 hours had never happened. As if my quads had never been numb. It really doesn't always get worse... my legs simply came back to life. I passed other runners bent over inching along in discomfort and offered encouragement. Some took it. Others didn't. But onwards... The lake pulled us all towards it whilst the trail tried to savour what was left of the race by moving us slowly down in a lingering zig zag, but by this stage it was all good.

I hit town and got that unusual energy you get from a small but passionate crowd. Past the station, across the park, around the registration tent and along the pontoon whilst French Swiss locals and other runners clapped us on whilst sipping coffee and eating croissants. I felt like Usain Bolt but I looked like a death zombie one at least with a little bit of final spark left in him. A group of older ladies applauded enthusiastically as I

said non-sensically I only did it for the beer and they laughed sympathetically. I ran out of land and through the finish.

It was all very understated. A timing chip was cut off and there was a rudimentary glance to see I was healthy. No well dones, no high fives. Then it hit me the finish was nothing. This had been an epic journey, a truly fantastic adventure and by crossing every peak, dropping down every valley and rolling alongside every river we had received all the rewards we would every need. The whole route was now etched into my psyche and one day soon I'd be compelled to write it all down and relive it and share it so then I could experience it all over again.



Beer and Satisfaction. Quickly followed by a burger and sleep. At around 10am.