

Sophie decides to look away from the mountain challenge that lies ahead. We'd do the same!

CHALLENGE ALPINE COAST TO COAST



# SEVEN SUMMIT SPECIAL

In a world first, Sophie Radcliffe cycled through Europe's seven Alpine countries, pausing to climb each of their highest peaks on the way. In just 32 days her total ascent was equivalent to almost nine times the height of Everest. Here's Sophie's exclusive account of her Alpine Coast to Coast

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Sophie gets that 'on top of the world' feeling



Soul-destroying switchbacks made for exhausting ascents



All wrapped up against -18 degree summit temperatures



Sophie takes time out to reflect on life



The gleeful exhilaration of a high speed descent



IT'S DAY 31 of my Alpine Coast to Coast expedition, and I'm cycling downhill from a little village called Grivola to the Aosta valley in the Italian Alps. Despite barely needing to turn the pedals, I know it won't take long to cycle the 30km descent from Gran Paradiso, the final mountain on this challenge. Hunched over my handlebars, I lean into the curve of the road as it twists and carves its way down the valley. Every minute of struggle I'd felt on the way up this climb three days ago was worth it for the phenomenal feeling of freedom, happiness and power that's taking over my body right now. I'm struggling to take in all the emotions and realise tears are streaming down my face. It could be the rush of the wind making my eyes water, or perhaps it's the fact that my dream of completing the Alpine Coast to Coast is within reach. Very close reach. All that surrounds me - the river that runs from the glaciers, the trees, villages and people tending to their gardens - fly past me. On the ascent, I'd had the time to get to know them all, to use them as distractions as I inched my way up, to think about each person going about their day as I passed. There's no time for that now, I have just 370km to cycle before I arrive at the coast of Monaco and complete my mission.

The Alpine Coast to Coast was a self-devised expedition to climb the highest mountains in the eight Alpine countries and cycle between them. Starting on the Italian Coast, I cycled through Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Lichtenstein, Switzerland, France, Italy and Monaco, taking 32 days. I completed the cycling sections on my own, covering an average of 150km per day over many of the most iconic and challenging high mountain passes in the Alps. My husband, Charley, supported me throughout and was my climbing partner for the mountains. I covered 1,669km by bike, 141km on foot and climbed 45,530 metres of ascent, almost nine times the height of Mount Everest. Adventure used to be something I did once a year, grew to something I did once every few months and is now something I aim for in everyday life. Driven by the desire to explore who I am and what I'm capable of, I set upon this challenge to ask myself, 'Can I do this?' and to prove that the answer is always 'Yes'. "What do you think about when you cycle?" Charley would often ask me when we met at the end of each day. "Everything, anything and a lot about why I'm doing this," I'd answer. I'd think about the countries I cycled through, loving how I could really get a feel for them whilst on a bike. I'd try to make sense of the road signs and envisage how they would be pronounced in Slovak,

Italian or German. I'd think about food, which snacks I had with me and when I could eat my next one. I'd think about the campsite we woke up in that morning, how my legs felt and whether I felt stronger than the day before. I saved listening to music for the days when I really needed the motivation, the days when I felt utterly broken, exhausted and devoid of drive. One day stands out as being particularly challenging. I woke up in Germany feeling like I'd left my joie de vivre on the summit of "It was 18 degrees below freezing with fast winds and weather closing in" Zugspitze, the country's highest peak. Faced with a 230km cycle from Garmisch, across the border into Austria, back into Germany and then back into Austria before cycling the length of Lichtenstein and finishing 14 hours later, in a place called Bad Ragaz in Switzerland, there were tears and a lot of self-analysis. I got there in the end, but having woken up on the wrong side of our soggy tent, I had decided it was not going to be my day, and thereby increased the size of the mountain I had to climb. On the other hand, there were days when no matter what the challenge, it didn't phase me.

In Austria, when our two-hour gentle hike to the mountain hut turned into a five-hour epic in the rain; in Slovenia, when I left our food in the car and we had nothing to eat on our climb; or when we were so cold on the summit of Duforspitze in Switzerland that my lips turned blue. These challenges would rear up in front of us yet I would catch myself smiling. Deep down I loved it all. I loved the inescapable fact that it was going to hurt and that the only way to the beer at the end was to get on with it. I learnt that everything passes with time and that we are all capable of more than we believe. The Alpine Coast to Coast was the first time that Charley and I lived entirely in the present. Those 32 days were bursting at the seams with life. All the rivers we bathed in, roads cycled, mountains climbed, Alpine sunsets and sunrises that stopped us dead in our tracks, campsites, dinners cooked in the open air, beers drunk in the tent, chocolate bars eaten and new countries travelled through. The times when Charley made decisions I didn't want to make, such as turning around half-way up our first attempt on Mont Blanc. The way I drew strength from his strength when I felt less than the person I wanted to be. These are the reasons why I can't stop adventuring. Of the summits we scaled, Mont Blanc was the toughest physically to climb. On the first of two days we walked up from the valley bottom to the Tête Rousse hut at 3,167m, in six hours. We stayed the night in the mountain hut and were in

bed by 7pm for a 1:30am start. We ate breakfast by the light of our headtorches, talking quietly about what lay ahead. Our first challenge was crossing the Grand Couloir, notoriously sketchy with dangerous rock fall. It was still dark by the time we arrived at the Goûter Hut at 4am. From there it was a snow slog, a full on endurance challenge of digging deep at altitude. As we passed by the Vallot Hut, more like an emergency bivvy hut, the sun came up and illuminated the world around us. A moment to keep forever. We could see the summit from there, but it would be another two hours and 500 metres of ascent before we arrived there. On the summit at 4,810m, I could feel the raw emotion in everyone around me. A mix of the immense feeling of achievement with anxiety about the descent. It was 18 degrees below freezing, with fast winds and we could see the weather closing in thick and fast. From the summit back to the train which could take us to the valley bottom, it was 7 hours of descent. I often think the descent is the hardest part, you are tired, stepping down is tough on your joints, and it feels utterly relentless. The most technically challenging of our climbs was Grossglockner, the highest mountain in Austria at 3,798m. We opted for a classic alpine ridge, the Stüdlgrat. It was one of our favourite climbs due to the challenge of the route but also because the Stüdlhütte was absolutely amazing, the best alpine hut we've ever stayed in, mainly due to the quality and volume of the food! >>

<b>ALPINE COAST TO COAST IN NUMBERS</b>
<b>32</b> days taken (including four rest days)
<b>1,669</b> Kilometres cycled from Trieste, Italy to Monaco
<b>141</b> Kilometres on foot
<b>45,530</b> Metres of ascent during the entire expedition
<b>21</b> Number of rainy days
<b>87</b> Beers drunk!

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Coast reached and the final 'mountain' summit climbed in Monaco

Standing on the summit of Triglav at 2,864m the highest mountain in Slovenia, was incredible. It was our first summit and the views were stupendous. As the mountain is situated on the edge of the Alps, we took a few moments to sit and take it all in. As we could see were the rest of the Alps, and the remainder of our journey.

Once down from the mountain, we would normally spend the night in a local campsite before I'd get back on my bike the following day and cycle to the next country, and the next mountain. I would pedal until the road ended and became a trail, then I'd put my bike into the car, change clothes and head up the mountain. I took four rest days during the 32-days, and spent them sleeping, eating, blogging and writing postcards. My first rest day proved to be my favourite, having been on the go for six days. I woke at 5am to pouring rain on our tent and immediately decided we were going to a hotel. The only one nearby was a 5 star spa hotel so we lucked out. There was one of those hotel buffet breakfasts that has everything you could possibly wish for - I think I had six courses!

I loved the cycling sections between the mountains and enjoyed the time on my own to look into my mind and see what was going on, to understand myself better. Some of the mountains I cycled up took me hours. In Switzerland I rode up the Grand Saint Bernard pass. It's 25km long and finishes at the col at 2,469m. Weaving up that high

Alpine road, switchback after switchback, I had to get off my bike and lie down in the grass at one point. Crazy to think how many of the mountains that I cycled over are higher than Ben Nevis. The scale of the Alps is mind-blowing. I just reminded myself to take baby steps and keep those legs spinning, in the end I'd get there. The greater the challenge of the mountain pass, the greater my sense of achievement at the top and the longer the descent. The 35kms down from the Col Grand Saint Bernard into Aosta, Italy was a thrilling reward for my uphill effort.

Despite the kilometres cycled and climbed, ***"Crazy to think many of the mountains I cycled over are higher than Ben Nevis"***

I'm convinced that the only thing adventure has to be, is what it means to you. Being at one with nature, creating new experiences that challenge you is all that matters. Whatever your goals, limitations and constraints, don't be put off by what you feel you can't do, focus on what you can do. Today is your day, go plan your adventure.

■ Sophie was supported by Haglows and Adidas, which provided her mountain and cycling kit. Sophie is creating a film about the Alpine Coast to Coast; until then you can watch the trailer on YouTube.

## SOPHIE'S ROUTE

Starting in Italy, Sophie passed through Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, France, Italy and Monaco



### STAGES

Distance (km)/Ascent (m)

- 1 CYCLE** Trieste, Italy to Triglav, Slovenia  
145km/1,590m  
**CLIMB** Triglav  
24.7km/2,186m
- 2 CYCLE** Triglav to Grossglockner, Austria  
192km/2,295m  
**Climb** Grossglockner  
27km/2,382m
- 3 CYCLE** Grossglockner to Zugspitze, Germany  
255km/3,285m  
**CLIMB** Zugspitze  
9.9km/2,337m
- 4 CYCLE** Zugspitze to Grauspitz, Liechtenstein  
210km/1119m  
**Climb** Grauspitz  
17.35km/2,424m
- 5 CYCLE** Grauspitz to Dufourspitze, Switzerland  
234km/4,207m  
**CLIMB** Dufourspitze  
26.9km/4,634m
- 6 CYCLE** Dufourspitze to Mont Blanc, France  
119.5km/1,733m  
**1ST ATTEMPT** Mont Blanc  
16km/3,351m  
**CLIMB** Mont Blanc  
231km/2,926m
- 7 CYCLE** Mont Blanc to Gran Paradiso, Italy  
151km/3,852m  
**CLIMB** Gran Paradiso  
19km/2,026m
- 8 CYCLE** Gran Paradiso to Monaco  
3631km/487m