

DESTINATIONS

ACTIVE & ADVENTURE | MONT BLANC



OLIVER CARR, HIKING GUIDE, G ADVENTURES

INTERVIEW BY Laura French

Q. How did you get into being a hiking guide?

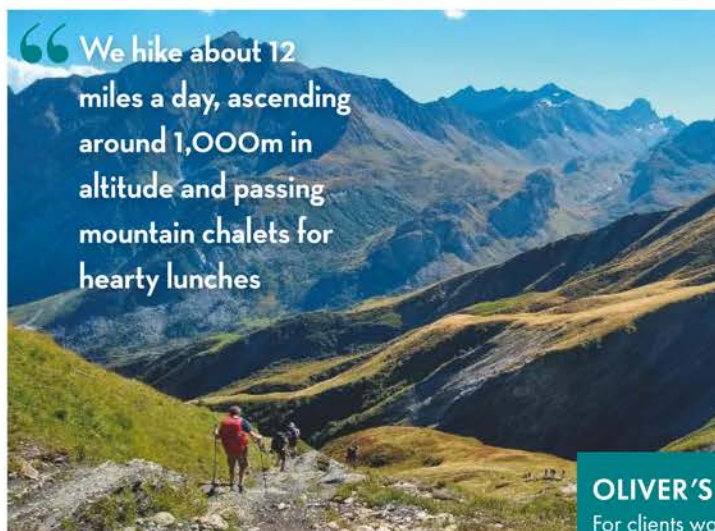
A. I grew up on a farm in the English countryside and was always out and about, mountain biking in the Welsh hills or exploring the Shropshire forests. After many summer trips to the Alps, I started doing ski seasons, and that led me to train with the International Mountain Leader scheme. I saw this as the ultimate way to be outside and to share my passion with others, so I joined G Adventures as a hiking guide five years ago.

Q. You work in the Mont Blanc region – what's special about this area in particular?

A. Being on the border of Switzerland and Italy, there's an amazing mix of cultures and cuisines. Some parts can feel southern European, but then you turn a corner and are greeted by a local farmer or a dairy cow wandering through an Alpine meadow. It's an adventure lover's paradise; the Mont Blanc Massif has a rich history of mountaineering, hiking and off-piste skiing, and now you can find almost any sport you can think of here.

Q. What do guests do and see on the trips you lead there?

A. We hike about 12 miles a day, ascending around 1,000m in altitude and passing mountain chalets for hearty lunches. We stay in mountain refuges (basic B&Bs) and hotels with traditional local meals every evening. After eight hours on the mountain, travellers have earned their dinner and they won't go hungry. We also have



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a day off in the Italian town of Courmayeur, where we stay in a nice hotel with pizzerias and gelaterias right on the doorstep.

Q. Mont Blanc was the first G Adventures trip to restart after lockdown – how have trips changed due to the pandemic?

A. I guided one of G Adventures' first trips post-lockdown and it was great to be back on the road, but things did feel different. We were required to wear masks, use hand sanitiser and physically distance, although that isn't too hard to do when you're in the mountains. Some of the accommodation we use had put caps on numbers, but the fact we already operate with very small groups made this easier. Going through some of the countries was strange. Northern Italy had, of course, been hit hard so the protocols there were very

strict, while in Switzerland it was more relaxed. But everyone in the group was really respectful of the local regulations and the new safety policies. All chief experience officers (G Adventures guides) were also given training before the trips started, which was really useful.

Q. What types of travellers do you normally get on the tours, and did this differ on the post-lockdown trip?

A. Groups vary in terms of trekking experience, but guests do need a good level of fitness. In terms of age, we get a real mix – everything from 18 to 70. Normally at least half in the group are solo travellers, and we also get families, friends and couples, from all over the world. On



OLIVER'S TOP TIP

For clients wanting extra reassurance, G Adventures' new Mont Blanc Explorer – Plus tour is part of the Travel with Confidence collection and offers extra physical distancing, cheaper solo rooms, private transport and smaller group sizes.

the post-lockdown trip I led, everyone was European and had planned to do a trip farther afield but decided to stay closer to home due to the coronavirus.

Q. What's the most challenging part of your job?

A. Extreme weather conditions are difficult and maintaining group morale. Keeping warm when it's cold, starting earlier in the morning on a hot day and planning lots of stops so people don't overheat at altitude – these are all parts of the job.

Q. And finally, what's your favourite place and where would you most like to travel?

A. The Mont Blanc Massif is one of my all-time favourite areas, but I also love the neighbouring Aosta Valley in Italy and the southern French Alps. In terms of where else I'd like to go, it's my dream to visit Lebanon or Kashmir in India. **TW**