



Mushing on the Mont Blanc

By Kevin Bonnaud

This month, a group of sled dogs will trek an almost 1000 km trail across the French Alps during the 13th edition of La Grande Odysee Savoie Mont Blanc, the only sled dog race held in high altitude.



Daniel Juillaguet has not missed a single one of these races since they started in 2005. Sportsman and dog lover, the 49-year old physiotherapist discovered his passion for this unconventional outdoor activity during a biking trip to Norway. "There, I met a musher and his dogs on the road," he recalls. "What I like above all is that during the race, the dogs and I share the effort. I run with them, help and encourage them with my voice," he told hiEurope.

A sports competition

Sled dogs have been used as a means

of transportation for centuries, until the introduction of snowmobiles in the early 20th century. That is when races started and the dogs became world class athletes. About 40 European mushers with 14 dogs each are expected to participate in the La Grande Odysee Savoie Mont Blanc this year. The athletes, like the dogs, must be in good physical condition to compete in this race. Not only do they have to deal with a change in altitude of up to 20,000 m, they also have to camp in the open with their dogs. This year, one stage ends at a 2000 m high bivouac close to the Mount Cenis Lake, in the Haute-Maurienne Vanoise massif. "At this polar base, the mushers will take care of their dogs, feed them without any help and sleep in a tent, even if the temperature is 20 degrees below zero," says Henry Kam, founder and manager of the race.

The man and his dogs

At the finish line, which is reached roughly two weeks after the start, the time difference between teams can be as short as under one minute. It's the relationship between the musher and his dogs that makes all the difference in the race, organizers say, much more than the average speed or the participants' resistance to the cold. This harmony between man and animal requires a lot of work beforehand. Daniel Juillaguet spends at least six hours a day with his twenty Alaskan Huskies, a breed of dogs that can

run fast and for a long time, perfect for a race like La Grande Odysee. Training sessions for Juillaguet's dogs average a 50 km trail. "These dogs are receptive, fast, and obedient and they are able to anticipate. My dogs know me like no other. Our relation needs to be strengthened all the time, especially with the lead dogs," the French musher says.

A popular event

During the race, many festivities are held in the stage towns, which include Megeve and La Plagne. Apart from the real La Grande Odysee, there are also sled dog races for children and performances in the departure areas. Yearly the event draws between 70 000 and 90 000 visitors. "It's an emotional and authentic spectacle. These are people who run after their sleds and speak to their dogs. It's also another way to discover the magnificent Alpine landscapes," Henry Kam told hiEurope.

TIPS

The 13th edition of La Grande Odysee Savoie Mont Blanc, starts on January 8th and lasts for 11 days. For more information about the race, visit the website: www.grandeodysee.com/en

To visit the Mont Blanc region: www.montblancnaturalresort.com