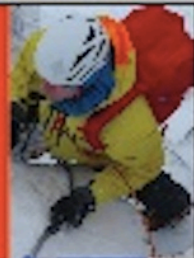


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# Trek & Mountain

The leading magazine for **trekkers** and **mountaineers**

## Climb the EIGER

Our guide to Britain's  
greatest backpacking  
adventure p30

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legendary alpinist  
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# RIDGE TO HEAVEN

It's every mountaineer's dream to climb the Eiger, and the Mittellegi Ridge is a fantastic – and attainable – route to the top of the Alps' most infamous peak, says Icicle Mountaineering's **Kingsley Jones**...

WORDS: KINGSLEY JONES PICTURES: KINGSLEY JONES, ROBIN BEADLE, JAMES THACKER, WILL HARRIS

On the snowy ridge to the summit of the Eiger







→ In-situ ropes speed up progress



→ Ascending the fixed lines above the hut

**E**iger! Just hearing the name of this iconic mountain raises the heart rate. A kaleidoscope of images, memories and history flickers through my mind: Ueli Steck running up the north face, the Jungfrauoch railway gallery windows in the lower wall, the body of Toni Kurz dangling on a rope, and the clouds that bubble up within the north face creating a weather system of their own. The Eiger is a mountain that is hard to climb, due to the weight of history and legend on your shoulders. The names of the pioneers seem to have gained a slightly higher plinth in the annals of mountaineering history than from other mountains: Hinterstoisser, Almer, Heckmair, Barrington, Harlin, Bonington, and Harrer.

Books have been written, films have been shot, and even Olympic medals have been awarded, about the Eiger. Perhaps it reached the consciousness of the public due to the well documented, and highly visible, unfolding of the dramas of the first ascents and accidents on the north face, from the hotel and train at Kleine Scheidegg. On most mountains the epics, accidents and triumphs, are hidden from the public gaze. Not so for the Eiger, where each drama was played out in a glare of publicity due to its visibility. This was far before the era of social media, but all the more compelling as clickbait.

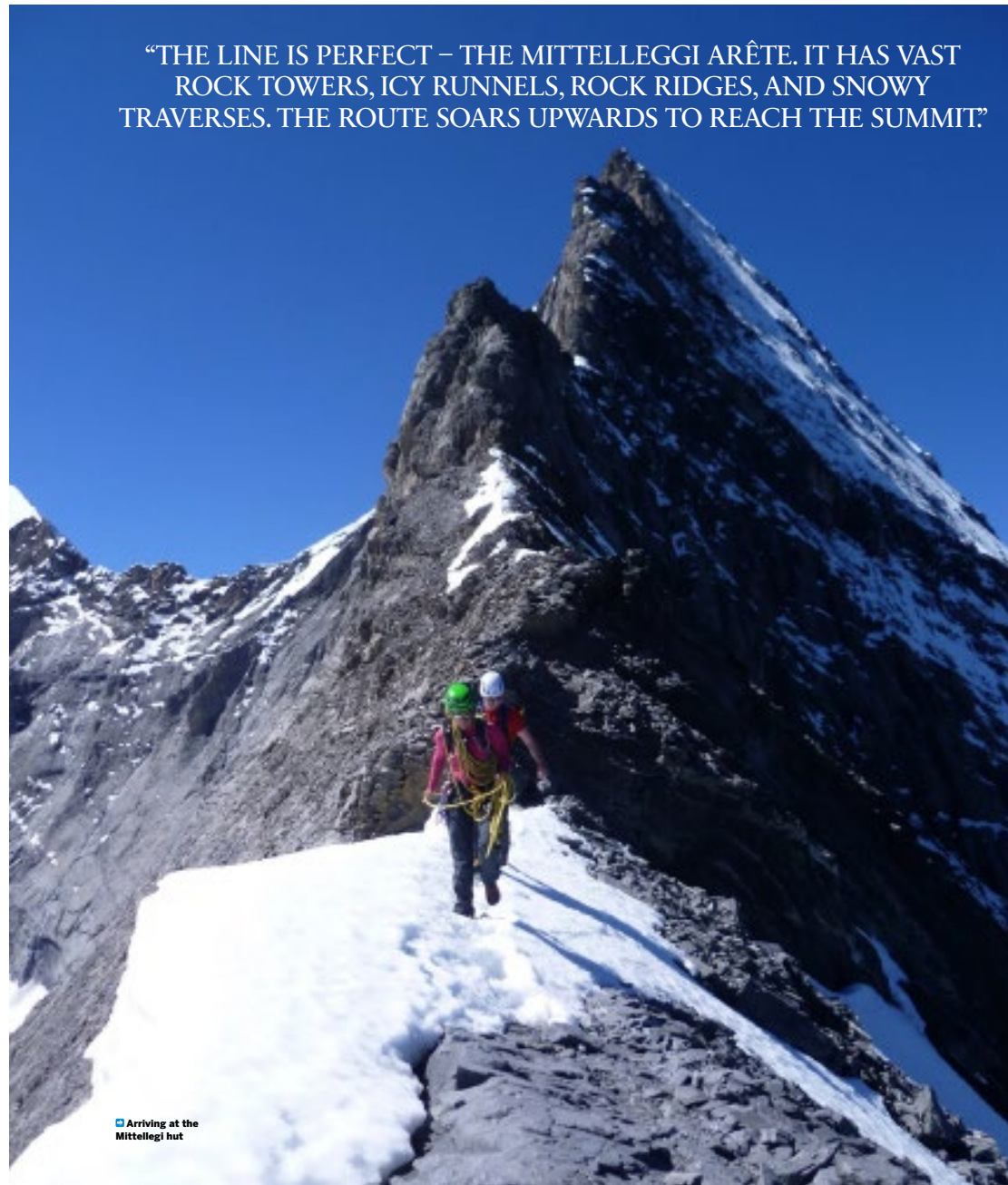
As a teenager, I remember camping below the north face above Grindelwald one day. We'd arrived in the pouring rain, with the cloud low down, and no visibility. The next day dawned dry and beautiful, and I woke early. Unzipping the tent door, I looked out directly onto the north face of the Eiger. To this day I vividly remember zipping the door straight back up, and retreating back into my tent. I shook slightly; the view had been so awe inspiring, so real, so tangible. It took a minute to pluck the courage up to take another peek. It was time to get used to it, as we were due to be climbing the Lauper route, starting the next day.

### The north face

When you gaze at the north face, the left-hand skyline follows what looks like an impossibly steep stark fin of rock all the way to the summit. The line is perfect – the Mittellegi Arête. It has vast rock towers, icy runnels, rock ridges, and snowy traverses. The route soars upwards to reach the summit. It's a perfect route, following a clear line up the mountain. What makes it appeal to many climbers is two fold – despite all its history, the Eiger is just below the magic 4,000m contour, so is less busy than many surrounding peaks such as the Finsteraarhorn or Jungfrau, and a few of the most awkward parts of the Mittellegi Arête have fixed ropes to facilitate progress.

These two factors appeal to the misanthrope in me, in that I want to escape the crowds of many alpine peaks, but what about the fixed ropes on

“THE LINE IS PERFECT – THE MITTELEGGI ARÊTE. IT HAS VAST ROCK TOWERS, ICY RUNNELS, ROCK RIDGES, AND SNOWY TRAVERSES. THE ROUTE SOARS UPWARDS TO REACH THE SUMMIT.”



→ Arriving at the Mittellegi hut



## “...ICE, ROCK, SNOW, ABSEILING, TRAVERSING, DOWN-CLIMBING, MOVING TOGETHER, PITCHING, AND MORE.”

➔ the most technical sections? Well, it all helps, and when catching mountain railways, and staying in mountain huts, the clean ethics have long sailed out of the window. There’s something more than just the line of the Mittellegi that appeals, which many routes don’t, and I’ve long struggled to pinpoint what it is, but it was always right there in front of me – adventure. Unlike many routes that are slogs or blindingly obvious, the Mittellegi offers twists and turns, route finding decisions, and constantly changing styles and types of climbing – ice, rock, snow, abseiling, traversing, down-climbing, moving together, pitching, and more. It’s a true smorgasbord of alpinism.

The route was first climbed less than 100 years ago, back in 1921 by a Japanese visitor called Yuko Maki, with local Grindelwald guides and porters. One of the assistants was even the local school teacher, Samuel Brawand, who had been teaching German to Maki. After the first ascent, it was Maki who helped finance the building of the first Mittellegi hut perched on the ridge, from which climbers could make their ascents. It’s been replaced and ➔



➔ Eiger summit views towards the Mönch



➔ Dawn start from the Mittellegi hut



“CLIMBERS GET OUT AT EISMEER STATION, AND YOU WALK THROUGH A DARK TUNNEL TO REACH A WOODEN DOOR. OPEN IT, AND SUNLIGHT FLOODS IN.”

On the gendarme at sunrise

re-built several times since, but the ethics and simplicity of the original hut still prevail. I watch the glinting brown eyes of Corinna Maisano, the current Mittellegi hut guardian, as she scans the reservation book for our booking as we arrive. The page is a mass of bookings, cancellations changes, and alterations. It might as well be in a secret code, but Corinna knows exactly who is due. The weather changes rapidly on this mountain, as she well knows, and climbing plans bubble up and pop as often as the clouds. Flexibility is key.

The climb takes two days, of which the first is relatively short to access the hut, and the next day is very long, especially if you are catching the train down and driving back to your base. On the first day you catch the famous mountain railway up to Kleine Scheidegg, and then up towards Jungfrauoch. It's this upper section where the train ascends through rocky tunnels carved out behind the north face of the Eiger. A miracle of engineering, without which ascents of any peaks in this area would be extremely rare. While ascending through the tunnels, the train makes two stops, so that visitors can get out and walk down side tunnels to gallery windows opening out of the mountain remain. These originally were built to empty rock debris out of, rather than to transport it down the tunnel to Grindelwald, but as well as serving to give the tourists jaw dropping views down the mountain faces, they also have doors which give climbers access to the mountain faces.

On the north face there is a separate door from the main gallery, called the Stollenloch, and on the southeast face of the mountain is the Eismeer station, once the upper terminus of the train before finances permitted for it to be extended to Jungfrauoch. Climbers get out at Eismeer station, and you walk through a dark tunnel to reach a wooden door. Open it, and sunlight floods in. It's a door in the side of the mountain, with the Eigerletscher below. The views are stunning, and there's no warm up. You are straight into the mountains. The approach to the Mittellegi hut takes about two hours for competent teams, but with the Eiger being the Eiger, the hut approach is no easy dawdle up easy trails.

### The long way up

Roping up even before you leave the Eismeer station, you head out and down onto the glacier, which is fairly broken and open, so good glacier travel skills are required. Then the difficulties start, as you identify where the route up to the hut leads the glacier. Due to global warming, it's often quite tricky to cross onto the rock from the ice, and there's three pitches of some of the most technically demanding climbing of the whole route, so don't worry too much if you struggle a little on this section. There are some bolts, but the technical grade of the climbing is about 5.7, and you're in big boots, so it's a little spicy. After the three pitches, the rock becomes easier, and you can move together, before soon arriving at the spectacularly located Mittellegi hut on the narrow rocky crest of the ridge. The hut actually overhangs slightly on either side, a warning of what's to come the following day.

The hut sleeps about 30 people, and everyone stays on a half board basis, with the guardian cooking the evening meal. After dinner, you decide which

Eismeer station window

Even the Eiger does traffic jams

Glacier approach below Mittellegi hut



XXXXXXXXXXXX  
XXXXXXXXXXXX



“THE INITIAL SECTION OF THE RIDGE IS NARROW BUT ALMOST FLAT, SO YOU MAKE QUICK PROGRESS...”

→ set off time you require the next day, with the ideal being around 4am, then it's time to head for bed as there's an early start in the morning. Be wary not to be one of the last groups setting off from the hut, as there's always a risk of rockfall on this ice shattered limestone route, and you don't want to be caught in any crowding at some of the technical bottlenecks. In the morning, you have breakfast, and quickly rope up and get off out of the hut door. The initial section of the ridge is narrow but almost flat, so you make quick progress, before the main ridge rears up ahead of you.

Even on this first part of the ascent, there are some fixed lines, fitted by the guides of Grindelwald to facilitate their clients progress up the route. Perhaps there's a blurred line between Swiss efficiency and client enjoyment in some of the rope fitting on this route, but it does serve the purpose to help get teams established on the route, and hopefully spread out, which improves the safety for everyone on the mountain. By starting just an hour before sunrise, the initial easy section is soon passed, and in the first glimmers of light, you can negotiate the more →

→ Mittellegi hut terrace and ridge





## “YOU CAN STOP ON THE SUMMIT, AND TAKE IN THE 360 DEGREE VIEWS, SURROUNDED BY ALPINE GIANTS..”

tricky climbing ahead. With the light, comes the views, and off to your right, you look down into the icy void of the north face with Grindelwald far below. It always hits you here, the stature and gravitas of the mountain. The exposure is phenomenal, but in total there are several hundred feet of fixed rope on the route, a thick 4cm cord, anchored into the rock at fairly regular intervals. Despite the sections of fixed lines, there's no getting away from those drop-offs below your feet, but as you progress up the ridge, you get accustomed to them.

The line of the Mittellegi Arête is disrupted by the massive gendarme (rock pillar) of the Grosser Törn (3,692m), which you generally reach as the first rays of sun spread across the horizon behind you. After passing this tower, you are forced right onto the north slopes of the mountain, which is often icy. The weather and conditions often change, so sometimes this route can be climbed almost completely in big boots, and other times crampons are required almost from the outset. Obviously, this makes a big difference to climbers, but you should always be prepared for both, and never be too time pressured to put on crampons, even for a short icy section. It's the Eiger after all.

It typically takes around four hours to reach the summit, and the upper section of the route follows a fantastic snow ridge along the upper crest of the north face. The exposure is spectacular, but technically it is not difficult, though good footwork is required. As you make your final footsteps to the summit, the icy exit slopes of the north face 1938 route come up to join the Mittellegi Arête, so you really are following the footsteps of the giants. You can stop on the summit, and take in the 360 degree views, surrounded by alpine giants, with the Mönch and Jungfrau dominating the view ahead. Well, that was the easy bit. Now the long descent down the south ridge starts, and there are some far more technical sections to cross, though many rock steps can be easily passed by abseiling. Also, due to the aspect of the south ridge, it is generally ice free, and has much less risks of rock fall, so is objectively safer.

### Race against time

However, the clock is ticking, and in the back of your mind you need to remember that the risks of afternoon convection storms bubbling up is greater, so it's important to keep your wits about you and to keep moving. Near the foot of the south ridge is the Mönchsloch hut, from which it is a short walk across the glacier to reach Jungfraujoch, from which you take the train back down to Grindelwald. If you lose too much time on the descent, ring ahead and stay an extra night in the Mönchsloch hut. Typically, the whole traverse takes climbers up to about twelve hours in total, so it is a long and tiring day. You can always spot the Mittellegi Arête climbers on the

## 9 Other Great Alpine Ridges

Your appetite for ridges is whetted? We've picked out nine other great alpine ridges that will offer challenge, excitement and amazing views

### 1 Hörnli Ridge, Matterhorn, Bernese Oberland

In alpine climbing, there are few routes more lusted after than the Matterhorn's Hörnli ridge, leading to one of the world's most desirable mountains. The Hörnli has a reputation for overcrowding, which can give an ascent an occasionally frantic feel, but the payoff for putting up with the hoards is the chance to stand on top of a truly iconic peak.

### 2 The Cuillin Traverse, Skye

While not in the Alps, we couldn't give a run down of great ridges without including the traverse of Skye's Cuillin Ridge. On a truly alpine scale, it packs a vast amount of quality scrambling and climbing into its 12km length, and with over 3,000m of ascent included in a successful traverse, it requires just as much

effort as similar routes found further afield.

### 3 West ridge of the Salbitschijen

The Salbit is a rock climbing paradise, offering world class alpine-scale granite at a moderate altitude, and all without the need to step onto a glacier. While the massive Westgrat, or west ridge, with its 36 pitches up to E2, is the areas proudest line, the more moderately challenging Sudgrat is also a mega classic, with a handily-bolted (and easily cheated) crux pitch coming in at around HVS in difficulty.

### 4 North Ridge of the Piz Badile, Bregaglia

The Piz Badile is home to one of the six classic north faces of the Alps, but it is the bounding North Ridge, bounding the right side of the face,

which is the mountains most aesthetic line. A 700m high sweep of perfect granite, it offers fantastic rock climbing at a very achievable standard, leading to an impressive summit.

### 5 Peuterey Integrale, Mont Blanc, Mont Blanc Massif

The biggest ridge in the Alps, and a route of Himalayan scale, the Peuterey Integrale cuts an impressive line through the huge, complex south face of western Europe's highest mountain. Much of the difficulties are on good granite, but with tricky abseils, sections of loose rock, and steep snow slopes leading to the mountain's summit, it is a truly alpine adventure.

### 6 Traverse of Domes du Miages, Mont Blanc

From the Conscrits hut,

the full traverse of the Domes du Miages is a brilliant climb in the Mont Blanc massif. The approach is a long glacier ascent, followed by a beautiful snow ridge over the multiple summits, followed by a final often mixed section for the final summit, before descending straight down to the hut at the end of the ridge. The approach to the hut is long, so this route requires two full days to complete, and your fitness should be quite high.

### 7 Arête des Cosmiques, Aiguille du Midi

If you want to choose one route that has it all, choose the Cosmiques Arête. It can easily be done in a day from the Aiguille du Midi cable car, and it finishes back at the cable car station,

so there's no awkward descents to worry about. This route is a great mixed route, also involving an abseil, a tricky rock pitch, and hundreds of metres of mixed climbing along snow covered red Chamonix granite. The most dangerous section is the rickety ladder to the cable car station viewing platform at the end!

### 8 Liskamm traverse, Monte Rosa

There are few snow ridges as delicate or beautiful as the traverse of Liskamm in the Monte Rosa massif. This route can be climbed from either direction, but most frequently it is climbed from east to west. Good crampon footwork is essential, as the ridge involves several kilometres of climbing at over 4,000m, often with double edged cornices

to negotiate delicately. Generally, three days are required, one to ascend to a hut, the next for the route to the Sella hut, and descending the third day.

### 9 Mönch SE ridge, Oberland

This route is a grade

easier than the others on this list, but merits inclusion for two reasons. Firstly it is in the Oberland, so it's a perfect warm up route before the Eiger. The ridge starts a few minutes from the Mönchsloch hut, and involves rock to UIAA

grade II, and snow and ice to 45 degrees. Secondly, despite its more modest grade, the route is exposed, and conditions can vary massively from day to day – you need to be especially aware on the upper snow ridge, as it can be corniced.



On the south east ridge of the Mönch

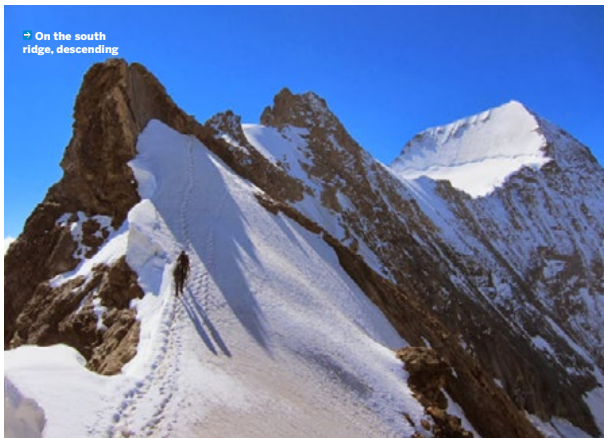


On the Matterhorn's Hörnli ridge



Salbitschijen south ridge





“TO CLIMB THIS AMAZING ROUTE IS AS CLOSE AS MANY OF US WILL EVER COME TO THE FEELINGS OF BEING IN SPACE. YOU ARE COMPLETELY ENVELOPED IN WHERE YOU ARE, AND WHAT YOU ARE DOING...”

train. They are the ones that are staring glassy eyed into space, or falling asleep with their heads resting on their rucksacks.

As the Voyager 1 space probe left our solar system in 1990, Carl Sagan ordered the space craft to turn around and look back at Earth, a pale blue dot 4 billion miles away. He wrote, “Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.” – Carl Sagan, Pale Blue Dot, 1994. Sagan was writing about the infinite stature of the Earth within the universe, but when I read this beautiful quote, it’s about the Eiger Mittellegi Arête to me. We are the lonely specks on the giant all encompassing mountain. There’s no possibility for self-importance, or delusions of grandeur. We are but ants on the face of a giant.

To climb this amazing route is as close as many of us will ever come to the feelings of being in space. You are completely enveloped in where you are, and what you are doing, but there is no shaking that feeling of complete insignificance on this route. To me that’s the attraction of it. We live in a world where we are distracted, connected, and yet lonely. When climbing the Mittellegi you feel exposed yet absorbed, alone yet engaged, scared yet challenged, and as nothing yet happy. There’s not many routes in the world, let alone the Alps, that can give you these raw emotions. It’s a mountain that makes you feel so very alive.

### Final thoughts

To climb the Eiger in the huge traverse of the Mittellegi Arête and south ridge, is actually a feasible challenge for competent alpinists, and it is surprisingly accessible. Most climbers are guided on this route, and many successful ascents are made by those with just a few weeks alpine experience. A good solid background in scrambling is an essential skill for anyone considering this route, but the main advice is not to be put off by the history, by the stature of the mountain, or by those who haven’t climbed it. It’s a dream, but not for dreamers. Do your preparation well, and you can enjoy it. The route is an absolute classic, and it’s a huge achievement to climb it. [T.M.](#)

## THE KNOWLEDGE

EIGER MITTELEGGI RIDGE: What you need to know before you go



### WHEN TO GO

The best time of year is typically from early July until mid September each year. Similar to the Matterhorn, this route needs time to melt the spring snows, and fresh snow during the summer effectively closes the route for a few days. It’s a small climbing season of only about ten weeks a year when this route is possible.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Fly to Geneva airport, and take the train to Interlaken then Grindelwald. You can use the local mountains to acclimatise and train for your ascent. Another popular choice is to travel from Geneva to Chamonix, and to base your training days there, due to the great

infrastructure of cable cars and mountain huts, and to drive/train to Grindelwald for your ascent.

### WHERE TO STAY

The climb starts from the Mittellegi hut, and the number for the guardian is +41 33 853 03 66. Staying half board costs 75 CHF per person, and reservations must be made at the hut before ascending to it, as if the hut is full, you will have no option but to return to the Eismeer station. There are hostels and campsites in the valley bases, as well as hotels to suit all budgets.

### HOW HARD

Alpine grade D (Difficile) is for the Mittellegi, and AD for the descent

route. This compares to AD for the Hörnli ridge of the Matterhorn. Unlike the latter, there is no return traffic on the Eiger, as climbers descend the south ridge or sometimes west flank, so this means that there is less rope tangling and people to negotiate, making the routes feel a similar grade. There’s no doubting that the Mittellegi is a longer route though, with a few more technical sections, and the ability to climb 5.7 (UK 4b VS) in big boots is a must. Higher on the mountain there is extensive sections of grade V rock, which may need to be climbed wearing crampons, so a good level of mixed alpine climbing experience, and good footwork is required. Ability to

cope with exposure is a huge prerequisite for this route, and a good physical level to keep moving over this terrain at a steady speed.

### WHO TO GO WITH

Icicle Mountaineering (the authors of this article) offer a week-long itinerary to acclimatise and train you before an ascent of the Eiger Mittellegi: [www.icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk/eiger](http://www.icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk/eiger) The company is based in Windermere in the English Lake District, and has been operating this trip for nearly 20 years, as well as a wide range of alpine courses and ascents. You can arrange a visit to go and speak with one of the team, who has climbed this route, if you are uncertain

about its suitability, or if you want advice about training and equipment.

### USEFUL BOOKS, MAPS & WEBSITES

Free online mapping of Switzerland: [map.schweizmobil.ch](http://map.schweizmobil.ch) For paper maps, the 1:50,000 for the Eiger region is number 5004 Berner Oberland, or 1:25,000 is Swisstopo 1229 Grindelwald. For the tourist information: [grindelwald.swiss](http://grindelwald.swiss). Mountain rescue REGA: [www.rega.ch](http://www.rega.ch). For webcams of the area: [www.bergfex.com/jungfrau-grindelwald-wengen/webcams](http://www.bergfex.com/jungfrau-grindelwald-wengen/webcams) and for weather forecasts: [www.meteocentrale.ch/en/europe/switzerland/weather-grindelwald/details/S069038](http://www.meteocentrale.ch/en/europe/switzerland/weather-grindelwald/details/S069038)