



Icicle articles - 'Mont Blanc'

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At 4,810m/15,775ft Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in the Alps and in the European Union. Although claims have been made that its summit stands within Italian territory, French and Swiss maps locate it in France.

I reached the summit early on 24 June 2010 after climbing via the Goûter route with Ervin Veluc, a professional guide, in the second of two weeks' alpine training with Icicle Mountaineering in Chamonix. Ten other Icicle clients went for the summit on the same day, and all reached the top.

The route we took starts at the Nid d'Aigle, at the head of the Mont Blanc tramway (2,372m). From there it makes its way up to the Tête Rousse hut at 3,167m, where Ervin and I had a bowl of soup for lunch, and shortly afterwards crosses the Grand Couloir, a gully a hundred metres or so in width which is notorious for rockfall. Guides encourage minimising the risk by a swift traverse, though the terrain is steep and a fixed safety rope installed some time ago is no longer within reach. As it happened, on the day I climbed the risk was lower than normal because temperatures had been uncommonly low for the time of year, the snowline was low and loose rock was held more firmly in place than usual. Nonetheless, Ervin was keen not to waste time in getting across.

After crossing the couloir the route continues with a scramble over mixed rock and snow up the ridge to the Goûter hut, perched at the top of the ridge at 3,817m. This part of the climb is quite steep, and fixed ropes are in place in the trickier sections on the approach to the hut. The photo on the home page was taken just below them.

Once the hut is reached the scrambling is over, and the only other "hands-on" work comes when continuing from the hut via a short but steep ice tunnel. What remains from here is a snow trek to the summit a whole kilometre higher. The route gradually steepens until the Goûter Dome is reached, at 4,400m, where the summit comes into view for the first time. It then descends to a saddle before rising to the Vallot Hut (a metal emergency shelter) and then continuing steeply up and down Les Bosses, two narrow-ridged humps which have to be negotiated on the way to the final ridge to the summit. The descent sections of the route mean that the total ascent required from the Goûter hut to the summit is somewhat more than 1,000m.

On reaching the Goûter hut some climbers push straight on to the summit and return to the hut to sleep, one motive being to reduce the risk of altitude sickness by following the adage "climb high, sleep low". However most climbers rest at the hut on the way up and begin their summit push at around 2am. This worked well for me as I was already well acclimatised, suffered no ill effects on the way up, and enjoyed the advantage the next morning of moving on snow which was relatively cold and firm.

First light came when Ervin and I reached the Goûter Dome, and though it was tempting to take a short break, this is an exposed area and better shelter was available in and around the Vallot Hut. We spent a little time in the hut taking refreshment and putting on extra layers in preparation for the freezing temperatures in store for us. (We were held up a little as I struggled to get the thumbs of my gloved hands into the thumbs of my big Himalayan gauntlets. I learnt that this is a common problem – another of those things that is easy down in the valley but can prove much harder at altitude.)

Happily the weather was as benign as predicted – no lower than around -10C at the top, and only a light wind. Nonetheless the chill was sufficient for my goggles to prove useful. (As I wear glasses, I suffer sometimes from cold wind swirling behind them, and I was glad of the time spent finding goggles that would fit snugly over them without pressing them painfully against my face.)

People who have never been to 15,000ft may find it hard to imagine just how hard it is to put one foot in front of the other, let alone climb; let alone up narrow ridges requiring concentration and balance as well as the will to keep going; and let alone keep this up for hours at a time.

Over the last hour or two it was possible to sustain only a painfully slow pace, but warm encouragement came from ecstatic climbers on their way down, and I reached the top with Ervin at 8.45am having left the Goûter hut nearly six hours earlier. The sky was largely cloudless and the views in all directions were fabulous. After some photography and filming we began the long descent all the way back down to the Nid d'Aigle and the tramway back down to the valley.

Climbing Mt Blanc was not only an unforgettable experience but also drove home some important truths.

From the outset the Icicle staff stressed that stamina on Mt Blanc counts for far more than technical ability or experience, and they impressed on us the importance of preparing for the climb with a fitness regime similar to marathon training. With fresh snow underfoot to make the going heavier, we were told that we'd burn between ten and fifteen thousand calories in our two days on the mountain. Most if not all of us agreed afterwards that it had been the hardest thing we'd ever done, and certainly in the last couple of hours to the top I was mighty glad of all the training I'd done.

The role of luck was demonstrated by an improvement in the weather from the week before. Most of the other ten climbers in my group were attending a one-week course focused on Mt Blanc. Those attending the same course the previous week (while I was climbing Gran Paradiso) were unable to make the ascent due to unfavourable weather conditions and heavy deposits of fresh snow. They included a group of Australians who had come a long way to encounter such a disappointment. One of them managed to extend her stay, and on my way up I was cheered to see her coming down after reaching the summit. The others were a great bunch of guys who took in their stride the fact that no one ever conquers a mountain – you get to the top only if and when it allows you to do so.

The importance of acclimatisation was evident. Though all eleven of us reached the summit, some of those who were in Chamonix for only one week had problems with appetite and sleep at the Goûter hut, and clearly they would have found it easier if (like me) they had had the opportunity of more time to acclimatise. Others in their place might not have got there at all. A contributory factor was that the weather was predicted to deteriorate again at the end of the week, and the climb was brought forward a day to catch the best weather window, thereby shortening time for acclimatisation. Anyone proposing to climb Mt Blanc would do well to consider a weekend acclimatisation programme, or better still one of the other courses in the week before.

There was also a grim reminder that mountains are never to be underestimated. Mt Blanc has the reputation of being the world's most dangerous mountain, mainly because so many people set out to climb it, many of whom are not adequately equipped or experienced. Here's a link to an article describing the [dangers](#) in more detail. We were warned of various objective risks including avalanche, rockfall, crevasse risks, and unpredicted weather changes, quite apart from individual risks such as susceptibility to altitude sickness. For reasons of this kind, some 300 people die on the massif each year. I was shocked to learn, after getting down, why Ervin and I had seen a helicopter circling over Les Bosses while we were on our way up. Just an hour ahead of us, two British climbers had fallen from the ridge and lost their lives.

These are just some of the reasons why I have been left in no doubt that it is a great advantage – and for the less experienced quite essential – to undertake a venture of this kind under professional guidance. Among other things Icicle were constantly monitoring like hawks all the available weather data, and got us up during the ideal weather window. The importance of this may be gauged from the fact that the day before I got up grown men were huddled in the Vallot hut crying of cold, and the day after it was too windy to venture onto Les Bosses.

Another important consideration is that the Goûter hut gets booked up well in advance. Independent climbers with a booking on a firm date may well find, when the time comes, that weather conditions are less than ideal, that the booking cannot be changed, and that they are confronted with a choice between disappointment and potential danger. Icicle were able to juggle arrangements with the hut so that beds were available for us when needed.

I am not being paid to say this, but I cannot recommend too highly the expertise and commitment shown by Kingsley, Sarah, and the guides working with them. Here's a link to details of [Icicle's Mont Blanc Summit course](#).