

BOOK IT NOW

Master
Mont
Blanc

Perched precariously on a ridge near the summit of Mont Blanc, the simply furnished Cosmiques Hut offers climbers some respite from the biting wind before their final push. After a few hours' fitful sleep in tiered beds, you will be awoken by the 'guardian' of the hut at 1am precisely, and must leave within half an hour to take advantage of the hardened snow. If the conditions are right, you'll be turning off your head torches and reaching the 4,810 metres ceiling of Western Europe just as dawn breaks. It takes an inordinate amount of effort to get that far, but with the right training, anything is possible.

WHAT IT'S LIKE

You don't need altitude or crampon experience to attempt an ascent of Mont Blanc, but armchair dreamers should not apply for this week-long, intensive course, based in Chamonix. Excellent fitness, stamina and determination are a must.

You'll spend the first two days learning glacier skills and ice-climbing techniques on the Mer de Glace ('Sea of Ice') on some of the Alps' most famous mountains such as the Dru, the Grand Jorasses, and the Aiguille de la Republique. Your guides will teach you both French



Finally, Mike Ashley found somewhere safe to drink

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and British techniques for using ice axes, before taking you up the glacier to steeper ice, where they'll set up a number of ropes for climbing. They'll also demonstrate how to cut steps, place ice screws and make anchors in the ice. Then, just when you're utterly exhausted from clinging to a wet, frigid wall, you'll be ferried back to Chamonix for an evening class of alpine ropework, fall factors, knots, anchors and equipment.

By days three and four, you'll be climbing at altitude to encourage the acclimatisation process. The exact choice of routes will be made by the

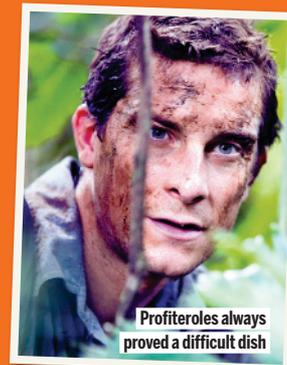
guides according to weather conditions, common objectives include ascents of the mighty Gran Paradiso (4,061 metres) or Mont Blanc du Tacul (4,248 metres). Your evening session will focus on crevasse rescue skills, which you'll want to pay particular attention to. Remember that 'hardened snow' mentioned earlier? It forms snow bridges over the perilously steep crevasses and if they crumble... well, you'll be thankful of your training, put it that way.

After breakfast on day five, the guides will check your rucksack – at

altitude, every saved gram counts – and lead you on the steep, six-hour climb to the Cosmiques Hut. After a three-course dinner, cooked by your guardian, you'll be briefed on plans for the following day and exact details of what to carry. Naturally, an early night is recommended – your wake-up call will be 1am, without fail. Whether you choose to don your head torch for that final assault is up to you.

NEED TO KNOW

The week-long course by Icicle Guides costs £1,199 including guiding, cable cars, huts and instruction (0845-0589 878; icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk)



Profiteroles always proved a difficult dish

Bear Grylls:
survival expert

The youngest Briton to climb Everest and all-round man's man gives us his top tips for an assault on Mont Blanc. "I know this region very well, having lived and worked over there for a winter season," says Grylls.

- 1. Pack sun cream for your lips** It's the one part of the body people always forget about, and the sun reflects straight back off the ice.
- 2. Take two pairs of sunnies** The number of sunglasses people drop and lose is unbelievable and you'll go blind without them, so always take spares. Also, don't forget to pick up an extra pair of thin gloves and put them in your pocket.
- 3. Invest in a Leatherman tool** It's useful for dealing with unruly ice axes and crampons.
- 4. Stick with your guide** The weather can vary hugely in different parts of the valley and the local experts will be able to steer you out of danger – you don't need to be high to die.
- 5. Don't neglect your bottom half** Invest in some good-quality winter-lined trousers or even salopettes (quilted skiing trousers with shoulder straps).

To win exclusive Craghoppers gear, log on to ShortList.com; beargryllsstore.com

CRAGHOPPERS' BEAR GRYLLS KIT We've heard that glaciers and mountain tops can get a bit nippy. Dress wisely



Bear Down
Bodywarmer, £90



Bear Down
Jacket, £120



Bear Winter-lined
Trousers, £60



Bear Lite
Jacket, £175