





# JMCS 2019 Contents

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# Remembering Dave Amos

## Stewart Bauchop and David Small

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### **Stewart Bauchop writes:**

For those of us who climbed with him Dave Amos will be remembered for his laid back approach and a cool head, whatever the situation. Quiet by nature, but with a sharp wit in understatement, Dave excelled in the drama of Winter and would inspire confidence when most would be talking retreat. Stories of all night drives through closed roads, strung out leads on thin Nevis ice and seemingly effortless progress in marginal conditions, all dispatched without incident and retold with a wry smile. In Winter Dave's style of climbing was just as his character, laid back and gentle – seemingly effortless with the occasional wild scart of a crampon revealing just how delicate the climbing might be.

I climbed on and off with Dave over 20 years and whilst never allowed to skip a lead I did feel very much the apprentice. We worked our way through the mid grade classics, oftentimes in Glencoe, and on to the bigger routes on Ben Nevis and further afield. Zero gully in a storm, the Wand

Dave above Observatory Gully in 2012 (photo David Small)



collapsing in a thaw, Fluted Buttress verglassed and buried under powder, and many straightforward days just enjoying being out.

My earliest encounter with Dave's ability to kick it up a gear would be around the back of the millennium, off route on a climb called the Sphinx in Stob Coire nam Beith. We had lost the line and climbed ourselves into a cul-de-sac high up on the cliff where we were faced with a 4 metre wall, an impasse, daubed with thin smears of bullet hard water ice. With the sun going down and the Aggie Ridge lit up in alpenglow all very scenic but with the prospect of a long cold night in store. Facing benightment or a long retreat in the dark Dave opted to make a desperate lead edging up the wall on tips, even apologizing for hooking an old peg halfway up but ultimately leading us through.

Lots of folk will have their own stories climbing with Dave Amos, maybe further afield in the Alps or America but for me his spirit will be blowing in the spindrift, quietly whispering encouragement around the Winter corries.

#### **David Small adds:**

Dave was active climbing and walking in all seasons, at home and abroad, with many different companions who will all have their particular memories of him. For me, he was the best winter climber that I have ever been out with. Mixed or ice, it didn't matter which, he just got on and climbed it. Well into his sixties (and only now, getting there myself, do I realise how remarkable it was) he went up the hill like a train, not needing walking poles to add uphill impetus, and would still be bare handed when I was on my second pair of gloves. I would happily do routes with him knowing that I was relying on him to lead the crux – he was the built-in safety margin.

But his physical gifts are not what I recall most clearly about him. It is invidious to rate companions, but he was among the best for me, and I know lots of people feel the same way. For such a quiet guy, not at all a party animal, never putting himself or his abilities to the fore, he was constantly in demand as a climbing partner. The reason was not only his climbing ability but his modest, generous, resilient, utterly dependable character. What you saw was what there was, right

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to his very core.

Of course, there were mishaps along the way, which Dave overcame unflappably.

He tended to shed a crampon from time to time; he ruefully confessed to me that he once had had to hop up ten metres of the crux of Rubicon Wall (on the lead, of course). There was the International Meet when he and his overseas companion got lost in hideous conditions in the Cairngorms and spent a night in a trench in the snow – although he was back on grade



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*it was accompanied  
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Dave on the Orion Face (photo Stewart Bauchop)



V's on the Ben a couple of days after the helicopter lifted them from Strath Nethy. There was the time with me on the Ben when he went off route on Caledonia and put in an epic lead on desperately thin ice, with never a wobble, to reach safety – I seconded and wobbled all the way. He also had an on/off relationship with cars – one ended up in someone's front garden after he fell asleep driving home in the early hours on return from a sun rock trip, and another was written off in a collision with a taxi as he crossed

Edinburgh to come to pick me up in the early morning, en route for Creag Meagaidh.

On the day of the taxi incident we were very delayed in getting away, having to wait for insurance and garage arrangements to fall into place, but we got there in the end and climbed the Last Post in wonderful conditions with the mountain to ourselves. We walked off the plateau together in the gloaming and, inspired by exhilaration from the climb and our overcoming of

adversity, coupled with the beauty of the fading purple to the east and the glowing embers to the west, I said to him something along the lines of how I knew that my intense experience of the pleasure of this moment would rapidly fade, and how I wished I could bottle and preserve it. I can't remember exactly what he said in reply, but it was accompanied by that characteristic shy grin of his, expressing agreement, appreciation, fellowship and contentment. Oh Dave, how I wish I could have bottled that too.



Near the Col de Voza with a UTMB walker ahead

## The Tour du Mont Blanc Bryan Rynne

Although I have been on several climbing trips this year, for a change I thought that I would write a brief account of a walking trip - the Tour du Mont Blanc, which I did in early September this year.

As most people will know, I have done a lot of walking in Scotland (Munros etc., etc.), but in recent years I have also regularly been going walking in

Europe, mainly Switzerland but also various other places. You might of course ask, 'apart from the sunshine, idyllic alpine pastures containing restaurants selling cream cake and beer, easy access to spectacular high-altitude tracks containing very little blanket bog or scree slopes, what exactly does Switzerland have that Scotland doesn't?', but let's leave this question aside.

After many trips involving a staying in a single hotel and walking up most of the nearby paths, this year I finally decided to do a moving on trip (I used to do lots of moving on cycling trips, but never a walking one). Specifically, the well-known Tour du Mont Blanc. This was something I had thought about for years, but never got my act together to do. However, I am now only working 80% time, so effectively have 9 extra





First view of Italy from the Col de Seigne

holiday weeks to use up, there seemed no reason to procrastinate any further. Also, I wanted to regain some of the fitness that I have lost over the last few years, for various reasons.

However, I had no intention of slogging along carrying a tent, sleeping bag and dinner jacket on my back. The intention, at my current mature stage of life, was to do this via what is called, slightly pejoratively, 'credit card tourism' in the cycling world. To wit, I intended to throw money (and time) at this and stay in luxury hotels (no huts, let alone tents!) and a man was going to carry my heavy bag for me (or a woman, I am not prejudiced - I didn't care who carried my bag for me).

Furthermore, having organised a multitude of cycling, walking and climbing trips, I was even going to outsource organising this trip. Specifically, instead of poring over maps and scouring the internet, evening after evening, trying to figure out a route, and find hotels on it at suitable points, and then figure out how to get someone to carry my bag for me, I was going to let someone else do the whole lot for me - apart from the walking of course!

With this in mind a quick search on the internet revealed a multitude of companies prepared to organise this, for varying amounts of money. Being a bit obsessive, I intended to walk every

inch of the full path, including the high-altitude variants. I did not intend to muck around with the bus transfers, or cable cars etc., that many of these companies use to make things easier for their clients. The idea was to do the whole thing properly, or not bother. Unfortunately, this meant that I couldn't just click on a website button and flash my credit card, I had to actually communicate with someone.

I had never heard of most of the companies I found on my google search, but I had heard of Exodus, and their website appeared to say that they could organise exactly what I wanted so I proceeded to get in touch with them. Unfortunately, they

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*Omitting huts and buses meant that there would be two days of about 20 miles, 1500 metres ascent*

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The Val Veni

were useless - absolutely useless! After several weeks of haggling over minutiae, with a succession of people (no two consecutive emails from them ever came from the same person), they finally revealed that the reason they knew absolutely nothing about the trip was that they do not organise it themselves but outsource it to an 'agent' in Chamonix. Furthermore, although they knew nothing about it, or maybe because they knew nothing about it, from their office armchairs in the badlands of Cheshire they felt that it would far too dangerous to let me head off on my own into the remote,

untamed wilderness above Chamonix, even via a cable car. 'Something might happen to me' they cried. Probably what they really meant to say was 'something might happen to me, and I might try to blame them'.

So, back to square one. After some more searching, I happened to finally hit on an outfit called Cloud 9. They were excellent. Emma, the person who appeared to be running the show, had in fact led parties on the route dozens of times, and knew it in detail. When I specified no huts, buses or cable cars she knew exactly how to do it, and

tweaked their normal itinerary to achieve this. She even included some hints on fallback options if I couldn't manage any of the long days - omitting huts and buses meant that there would be two days of about 20 miles, 1500 metres ascent, which would have been trifling 20 years ago, but did feel a bit daunting nowadays. Of course, I airily waved aside any such doubts as to my abilities. Indeed, I pointed out to her that I had done all the Grahams, which I thought would impress her, but she seemed to feel that the Alps might be somewhat more challenging (at this point I wondered if I should read the manual,





On the balcony route to Courmayeur

but decided not to - what could go wrong?).

There was also no quibbling about needing anyone else with me - 'every man for himself' seemed fine by them, especially as it would only be me. So, I signed up for their 'self-guided Tour du Mont Blanc' package. I assured Emma that I could still navigate round the Cairngorm plateau in a whiteout, with a map and compass, so I could easily self-guide myself round the Tour du Mont Blanc, but I also asked her to send me her gpx files...

Some basic details of the walk

There are a multitude of variants 'permissible' on the route, at various points. I consistently picked the more masochistic (longer or higher) variants, so overall the route I did ended up as 121 miles and 14,700m ascent, as measured by my gps app. The famous Ultra Trail du Mont Blanc (UTMB) fell running race does it in about 110 miles. My route took me 10 days of walking (the winner of the UTMB does it in about 20 hours!).

Emma had decided that I would start in Les Houches (south of Chamonix), and would go round in an anti-clockwise direction, which apparently is what

most people do. So, from Les Houches the route heads roughly south west then swings round the south side of the Mont Blanc massif and heads north eastwards, crossing from France into Italy at the Col des Seignes, then passing through Courmayeur, and then into Switzerland at the Col du Grand Ferret. It then swings round north and west, via Champex back into France to Argentiere and then along the north west flank of the Chamonix valley back to Les Houches.

I walked every inch of the route, with no buses or cable cars, although I did descend the Planpraz cable car for a



Looking back along the Val Veni

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*I brought a supply of Sainsburys biscuits with me since I foresaw that it would not be possible to source these in the forbidden zone south east of Mont Blanc*

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night in Chamonix and returned back up to resume at the same spot the following morning.

I did something similar between Cheserys and Argentiere, but had to walk down and back up there (I am not a big fan of Argentiere, but it is more fun than sleeping under a bush in Cheserys).

The weather was mostly very good, so I didn't need to carry the paraphernalia that would be required for a summer's day out in Scotland. A lightweight jacket and a spare thermal sufficed, together with a water bottle and a

300g packet of Sainsburys chocolate digestive biscuits (there exists at least one doctor who feels that this constitutes a fully balanced hill-walking diet, so long as it is supplemented with cream cake and beer in the evening). I brought a supply of Sainsburys biscuits with me since I foresaw that it would not be possible to source these in the forbidden zone south east of Mont Blanc. This was about the extent of my pre-trip planning. For the rest of the trip I was in Emma's hands.

In fact, Emma proved more than capable of sorting me out. Everything

went to plan perfectly. Excellent, luxury hotels - in many of them I found myself thinking 'this is very nice, but I am glad I don't know what it is costing me'. My overnight bag was transported between hotels each day - I simply left it at the appointed spot in the hotel in the morning and it invariably arrived at the next hotel before I did.

The paths were all excellent (no blanket-bog and very little scree), so I walked in lightweight approach shoes. I did have proper boots, and a multitude of bad weather gear, in my overnight bag, but it remained there the whole





Looking back to Col de Seigne

trip. I averaged 12 miles and 1500 metres of ascent each day, but this felt relatively easy on such good paths. Even the long days were OK, although I took most of the ascents at a fairly slow plod - until I get acclimatised I feel the altitude at 2500 metres.

Of course, the paths were also well-signposted, but I navigated using a gps app on my phone and OSM maps. These are something like google maps, but they are high quality, and you can use them offline - so, actually,

they are nothing like google maps. To avoid embarrassing questions if I did have to get rescued, I carried a map and compass to ensure that I could demonstrate to my rescuers that I was fully equipped (and I figured that I could mollify them by offering them some quality chocolate biscuits that they could not get locally). But I never actually used these, except for a quick look at the map in the evening to ensure that I was fully prepared for all eventualities the next day (or occasionally, I have to admit, I looked

at it to figure out what I had just done that day...).

As already mentioned, I did this in early September and had fantastic weather almost all the way round. Sunny, about 25 degrees, with little wind, until the final two days between Argentiere and Les Houches, which were cool and misty, but even then I didn't get rained on. So, I missed the views over Chamonix, but I have seen them lots of times, so if I had to miss anything that was it. Obviously, I chose the dates for





## Approaching the Fenetre d'Arpette

what seemed likely to be a good time of the year, but I don't know if this was particularly lucky or to be expected.

Given how well organised it was, the moving on aspect was great - continually changing scenery from one day to the next. I also found that since things were not getting wet or muddy I wasn't even unpacking or packing up much stuff, so getting myself in and out of the hotels was less bother than it might sound - a lot less bother than messing around in a hut, or putting up a tent.

Given my good fortune with the weather, I felt that this was a fantastic trip, and well worth doing for anyone that likes walking. The views were superb. The best was probably along the Val Veni valley between France and Switzerland via Italy, with the Grands Jorasses rising up on the left, but it was all good.

If anyone is interested in doing this walk I have the maps and a guide (in pristine condition), and gpx files of the route that I recorded which I can let you have.

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Cloud-covered Cuillin from Elgol

## Hiding from the Storms: a Weathery Week of Highland Climbing

Danny Carden

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The forecast was not ideal.

Northerly gales, low pressure and those horrible green-coloured rain clouds, tracking at speed down the north-west coast.

The classic MWIS phrase of “all mobility tortuous” was ringing in my ears as we cowered behind a small

boulder, trying to uncoil the static line without anything, or anyone, getting blown into the North Sea.

Roping up for the walk to a sea cliff was a first for me. But there was no way either Joe or I was going anywhere near Destitution Point - a hammerhead peninsula at Neist Point near Dunvegan – without something

to stop us being swept away inside the next saltwater tornadoes to barrel over the crag.

We did a strange abseil-shuffle on our bums down the gentle grassy slope towards a clifftop stake, with the sound of wet-coat-hood-slapping-face drowning out our nervous giggling. Once on the rope, it wasn't quite





as bad as expected, but there were certainly no queues for routes that day. Or on any day during our eight days in the Highlands.

It would be reasonable to ask, given the forecast, why we'd ended up on Skye? And why we were at Neist Point; a barren, exposed promontory that juts into the Lower Minch?

With a new wee boy at home at my house, and one imminent at Joe's, you must seize every opportunity. The rest of the British Isles was looking even worse. Going to Skye is always exciting. And besides, the gales might help blow the rain horizontally across the top of the south-facing faces, while we lapped up the sunshine below...

It rained at some point on every one of our eight days away. It wasn't particularly June-like. But in the main, our blind optimism paid off.

Despite continual gales, and a fair bit of drizzle, we climbed on five of our six days on the island. Once we'd finally had our fill of being smashed about on Skye, we enjoyed a brilliant 48 hours in lovely, forgotten Strathconon.

## Suidhe Biorach

We started with two memorable days on the quartz sandstone of Suidhe Biorach near Elgol, while watching tall, dark clouds emptying over the distant Cuillin. The guidebook's advice about it being a potential wet weather escape plan proved correct, with about two-thirds of the routes dry enough to climb.

Suidhe Biorach is an interesting and unusual crag that is definitely worth sampling - particularly if you like your routes in the low Extremes, well protected and often soft for the grade.

It is unrelentingly steep, but somehow quite friendly due to its deep breaks and pockets – which on our visit were all filled with rainwater. From afar, its west-facing bits looked coated in green lichen, but the holds were generally clean and it didn't affect the climbing much.

The classic arete of Veritas Splendour E2/3 5c was probably the pick of the routes we did, but even the one-star lines such as Tree Route E1 5b were fine, pumpy outings. Hairy Mary



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*Just when we thought it couldn't get windier, the northerlies strengthened again on our third morning at Neist.*

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In among the car parts and sheep carcasses at California Dreaming, Neist

offered a quality jug-haul through the steepness at the amenable grade of (tough and intimidating) VS 4c.

Joe had a half-hearted blast up the photogenic overhanging E4 5c arete, Mother's Pride, before his burning biceps and sudden – and purely-coincidental – dodgy belly at the first big roof forced a rapid evacuation.

We could see the clag gradually swirling down the southern slopes of Sgurr Alasdair. Our grand plans for Coire Lagan enchainments and blissful

sunset bivvying would need shelved.

### **Neist**

Again guidebook wet weather tips proved helpful, with Neist Point's fins and terraces offering a range of aspects and styles that at least gave us a bit of optimism in the face of a pretty dismal forecast.

We spent three days there, hiding from the incessant wind and drizzle as best we could. We visited the showpiece Financial Sector as well as

the eerily-named Destitution Point and Poverty Point; moody spots with an atmosphere that belies their relatively modest size.

Highlights included Wall Street E2, Wish You Were Here E2/3, Giro Day E2 and True Colours E2. All offered physical, well-protected challenges.

Joe gave it absolutely everything in a bareknuckle brawl with the soaring, four-star E4 6a crack line of Fight Club, before it landed a knock-out blow in the final round – just when it looked



Joe on Phobos at Glenmarksie

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*Just when we thought it couldn't get windier, the northerlies strengthened again on our third morning at Neist*

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like he was winning. After a quick shake-out he cruised the final metre to safety. It was more straightforward to second, but my bruised fists and the bunch of gear still attached to the rope at my waist as I topped out was testament to me also finding it no push-over.

Just when we thought it couldn't get windier, the northerlies strengthened again on our third morning at Neist. Morale was low as we sat in my shaking parked car, with onshore

gales depositing salty rain on the windscreen. We carefully opened the doors and bundled down the short slope to an esoteric sector called The Fin, which allegedly boasted a three-star E1 called California Dreaming in a very sheltered, narrow gully. I abseiled first into the dark, dripping slot, soon moving out of earshot of Joe waiting in the gales above.

The unmistakable sweet smell of dead sheep emanated from below, steadily

increasing as 40 metres of rope passed through my belay plate.

I paused about half-way down to take stock of the stench, which would have been unbearable on a hot, still day. I freed the tangled rope ends and gingerly dropped them on to the thick mat of ex-sheep and jettisoned motor vehicles that lined the gully floor, in varying stages of decomposition. This was clearly a place where things go to die.





Fortunately, in among the rotting horns, carcasses and chassis were occasional loose boulders, which provided useful stepping stones to the base of our route; our escape. California Dreaming, indeed. "Rope's free, Joe!"

The route was almost an afterthought after such a sensory overload. But it was actually a complete gem, offering 35 steep, mostly-dry metres of rewarding finger and hand jamming. Every move took us a few inches further from having to step foot in that gully again.

After five days of climbing, including three at Neist, it was time for a change of scene, and our first wash. The forecast looked even worse, with constant heavy rain added in to the unappealing mix, so we treated ourselves to a room in the Portree Youth Hostel – which made a welcome change from my car boot.

That night we looked forward to not spending another morning crawling along the road from Dunvegan to Neist in a queue of hundreds of tourists completing our respective motorised pilgrimages to the lighthouse car park.

The word is undoubtedly out about Neist's photogenic beauty – and I hope that locals' patience, roads and increasingly toilet-paper-riddled bogs survive the welcome influx of tourists, climbers and wallets.

### **The Cuillin**

Keen to make the most of our time off, we opted for a gentle, wet jaunt up Marsco.

However, as we walked a few miles up Glen Sligachan, the clouds suddenly parted. The wind dropped. The Black Cuillin's toothy summits emerged into view with a flourish.

The unfamiliar feeling of sunshine on our faces prompted a rash change of plan. We swung 90 degrees off the path, waded the river and took a direct, unconventional route towards the south-east ridge of Sgurr nan Gilleann.

An hour later, we were halfway up an unnamed and unfrequented east-facing coire, once again surrounded by rain and clag. The wind made a disturbing roar as it ripped over the shrouded ridge above.



Strong gales at Destitution Point, Neist.

During a wet lunch spent hunched against the rocky banks of a small burn, we decided we should at least 'have a look' at the south-east ridge. Our curiosity was rewarded. After some nervy grass/stream scrambling, we reached the 'Tourist Path' a few metres beneath the ridgeline, which offered a surprisingly benign scramble to the summit.

We returned slowly to the Sligachan, with regular pauses to gaze at the gallons of water tanking down every

inch of rock on Pinnacle Ridge.

It was genuinely one of my favourite days in the hills, although my camera enjoyed it less; breaking after one too many shots of the oozing hillside

After drying ourselves in the jet-powered hand dryers in the Sligachan Hotel's swanky loos, we'd a chance meeting with JMCS committee members Helen and John, who were on an SMC dinner. Their party looked conspicuously dry and clean.

Formidable first ascensionist Lord John Mackenzie was there, and we took the opportunity to quiz him about whether some of the crags he developed in Strathconon may be dry. He didn't think they could be as wet as Skye, so off we drove.

### **Strathconon**

I confess to feeling a bit tired as we walked the Gleann Mèinich track towards the shining west buttress of Creag Ghlas, the jewel in the crown of





Sun on Elgol, cloud on Cuillin

Strathconon climbing. My gammy hip was playing up, not aided by the final steep heather bash to the crag.

It was entirely worth it. We'd a brilliant day; barely believing our luck as we enjoyed a grandstand view of shower after shower blowing narrowly past, leaving the crag's smooth schist glistening in the sun.

Creag Ghlas deserves more love, especially as it's so easy to give the routes a quick broddle when abseiling.

We climbed Victory Crack E3 (Joe's lead), Hall of Mirrors E2, Chameleon E2, Moon Safari E2 and Spoils of War E1. All could get three stars at a lesser venue. We left them all heather-free, clean and ready for you. Get to it!

The holiday drew to close with a quick hit to Glenmarksie Crag. We both led two more of Lord Mackenzie's fine routes: Phobos E2 and Deimos E3. The latter was my first E3 lead since my boy was born - and the perfect way to bring a memorable trip to a close.

Gambles on bad forecasts often don't pay off. I've spent more than my fair share of days in recent years using bouldering pads as umbrellas, abbing off wet slings and hearing icicles tinkle down thawing cliffs.

So I think it was okay that we allowed ourselves a bit of smug self-satisfaction as we drove south, happily ticking off routes in the guidebook and making over-ambitious plans our next week away together, whenever that may be.



## Alpine Holiday David Small

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I flew out to Geneva on 3 July and on getting off the plane was just about floored by the heat. The Alps had been enduring an abnormally hot spell and when I met up with Bruce in Chamonix he said that it had been even hotter over the last few days.

Fortunately the forecast was for the heat to fall back to normal temperatures, but the bad news was that the meteo looked seriously unsettled. We hoped to make the best of it by putting a little distance between ourselves and Mont Blanc, so the next morning, which was fine, we drove round into Switzerland and up the Val Ferret to take the track for the Cabane de Saleina.

The approach to this hut includes 1300 metres of ascent if, like us, you respect the notices asking you not to trim 200 metres off by driving to the very end of the road. The walk in might have been a respectable day's exercise in and of itself, especially for a first day, but we aimed to break the journey by doing a 5c bolted multi pitch climb which crossed the path a bit less than half way up. We fought our way to the foot of the crag in a jungle of vegetation and found something bolted which seemed to correspond to our topo. For a popular route the vegetation was suspiciously untrodden, but we could see no alternative. Bruce then set off on some slabs which had probably been under the glacier for

centuries, until maybe 50 years ago, and still retained their glacial polish.

All credit to Bruce for persevering to the first belay – I definitely would have packed it in after two or three bolts. I could not believe that what we were climbing was 5c, but hoped that the grading was set for those accustomed to glacial polish rather than rough Trilleachan granite. I then set off on the second pitch which was steep and meant to be easier. After a fight to the first bolt and a quick look at what was coming I announced my wish to resign and get off this route asap. Bruce had a look and agreed. We abbed off with that acute sense of abject unworthiness which goes with defeat





The view from the loo at the Cabane de Saleina

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*After a fight to the first bolt and a quick look at what was coming I announced my wish to resign and get off this route asap*

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on the first route of a trip. (Later in the trip we found a different topo for the crag and realised that we had been sent to the foot of a 6b+ by mistake – another lesson in trusting what you can see around you and not trying too hard to make it fit what the guidebook is telling you.)

The rest of the hut walk was a real slog in the heat of the day, but fortunately the hospitality of the volunteer guardians of the Saleina hut is first rate and we were greeted on arrival with a mug of tea each, on the house. Frustration at our lack of

success earlier in the day then spurred us to further exertions before dinner on the one or two pitch climbs on the bolted crag next to the hut. The routes were well marked, the crag got the evening sun and the rock seemed perfect granite UNTIL, as Bruce was leading a route, a clatter and shout from above alerted me to the fact that a big rock had come loose and was heading my way. I suppose I should have looked up to see where it was going, but in fact I cowered in as close to the rock as I could, closed my eyes and waited to see what was going to happen – would I be hit or not? A

huge bang just behind me and that characteristic smell of granite hitting granite made me realise that I'd had a very lucky escape. If I had had nine lives beforehand I only had eight now. The rope had been badly hit on the ground near where I had been standing and the strands of the core were exposed, but since they were not actually cut we hoped it would be ok to use for the next couple of days.

Just east of the Cabane de Saleina are the Grand and the Petit Clocher des Planeureuses, two big pointy bits of rock about 2800m high. They are fine

## Bruce in the bergschrund below Legends of the Fall



peaks which would be famous if they were located anywhere other than the Mont Blanc range, in which they tend to be overshadowed by bigger and more renowned peaks. However, both have good bolted multi pitch routes which, at least during the week, are never busy. We didn't see anyone else during the two days we spend climbing on the Grand Clocher. The Spigolo Ouest (D, 5c) is a good introduction – not sustained and taking you to the top of the mountain, from where you can scramble and walk off back to the starting point. On our second day on the Grand Clocher, we climbed various sections of two routes (Grand Matinee and Fee Plane Heureuse, both 5b/c) abbing down between them. Bruce is very keen on walk offs rather than abseils, which he regards as fraught with opportunities for things to go wrong, whereas I like to think I am more relaxed about letting the rope, rather than one's feet and knees, take the strain of descent. However, a couple of incidents later in the trip made me realise that Bruce may have a point.

After a return to Chamonix to buy a new rope our next destination was the Cabane de l'A Neuve (2735m) reached

from the Swiss village of La Fouly in the Val Ferret. We got wet on the walk in to the hut – a mere 1100 metres of ascent this time – but the gardienne again welcomed us with tea, although she became slightly less welcoming when we confessed that we did not have sheet sleeping bags with us. Our goal here was Legends of the Fall, an eight pitch 5b route that starts just above the hut. The first pitch is the hardest and steepest, straight up from the bergschrund, although there are several other good pitches too and if you want well bolted mountain rock in a quiet and beautiful Alpine setting I would thoroughly recommend it.

We had to abseil down, but taking a different line to that of ascent, and came to a point where the guidebook indicated a scramble to find the next station. We looked for it in the obvious places but could see nothing, so we began to look in less obvious, in fact, unrealistic, places. I was traversing a steepish wall, still tied in to the rope but unbelayed, when a handhold came away and I felt my balance tip backwards. I yelped in alarm before grabbing something more solid. A fall there would have been fatal (I was now down to seven lives) and it would





## Gearing up below La Beresina

have been entirely my own fault for being so silly – access to ab stations is never that dangerous – and casual about protecting myself. We were again being deceived by a misleading topo, and eventually found the bolts again by ignoring the topo and just looking in places that made sense given what was around us – a lesson we should have learned on day 1.

Our next rope incident occurred on the Aiguille de Cabane, above the Orny Hut near Champex. We had got

soaked the evening before on the crag above the hut – our only really serious encounter with rain – but most of our stuff had dried out in the hut's large drying room. Back to normal sunny weather in the morning and we climbed Tichodrome, a 5c on the usual impeccable Swiss granite, and were aiming to ab down and climb the neighbouring route before descending to return to Chamonix. One pitch down the ropes pulled a little way before jamming solid. There followed the usual prolonged argument and

uncertainty about what to do. At length I climbed back up the rock and the ropes, with my belay device threaded to protect me, and sorted things out. Abseiling had lost its charm, even for me, so we took the option of going up to the voie normale and scrambling down. Back at the hut we renewed our acquaintance with Sandy Allan, traverser of the Mazeno Ridge, who was there with a client. If you didn't know of his achievements you wouldn't find out about them from him – he is very modest and is more interested in what

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*There was a feeling of seriousness as we geared up; the weather had turned cold, grey and windy and I put on everything I had with me*

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Slabs above the Val Veni

you are doing than in telling you about himself.

The best route of the holiday was next – La Beresina 5c D+ above the Dalmazzi Hut in Italy. This is a real mountain route. Most of it is reasonably well bolted, although some cams are essential on key pitches. There was a feeling of seriousness as we geared up; the weather had turned cold, grey and windy and I put on everything I had with me. Bruce had left some clothes in the hut, not thinking he'd need them, and in fact

thought he'd be too cold to continue at one point, but he rallied superbly to tackle the climbing crux, the hanging corner that is obvious from the approach. I got the abseiling crux, the hanging corner in descent with other folk climbing up and attached to the belay station. After another night in the hut the weather was still too cold for comfort en haute, so we opted to go down to the valley and climb on the slabs which are about 20 minutes' walk north from where the path to the Dalmazzi hut crosses the river. This was a good choice as it was warm, the

scenery was beautiful and the crag was much quieter than the mountain.

The weather was now set fair, but it was Departure Sunday. We squeezed in one last route – La Fee des Druides 5c near L'Aiguillette d'Argentiere – and rapidly sorted our kit in the sun before heading for Geneva and the plane back to the realities of everyday existence. Oh well, at least you don't shed your nine lives sitting in the office at quite the same rate as you do in the mountains.



That thing you didn't know and therefore couldn't plan for is most likely the one that'll be you're undoing. Sounds obvious. But it's that omission that's going to bring into play the other discrepancies. The other layers of safety that you peeled away and discarded as superfluous, or treated as an acceptable risk. This is being blindfold in a garden of discarded rakes. This gives you the story that everyone likes to read, but nobody wants to write; the epic.

I've stood in judgement of other people's misfortune. Who can honestly say they haven't? Although I join the ranks of the great and good; Steve House – lost a boot halfway up a Canadian big wall winter climb, Lynne Hill falling from a route after failing to tie in properly, Stephen Venables falling 100 meters after an anchor failing. The list is long. But, this was mine and Bruce's turn to get it wrong.

Firstly, I must apologise to David and Gwilym. But for our little adventure, the week would have been feted as a total success. The climbing was fantastic, we all got along really well and I think everybody had a really good time.

This is also part of the problem. When everything is going so well, becoming familiar with the luxury of bolted belays and secure chains to tie into, familiarity creeps in. The European Alps in winter can be a very harsh environment and even though I'd experienced the temperature drop off when the sun dipped behind the valley, it was all too easy to forget in the midday sun. If I'm honest, it felt like a day at the crag, nothing more serious.

On the 18th of January 2019, our 2nd last day, the rotation was that I'd climb with Bruce. Having led a difficult pitch on Chandelle del Leuvre WI-4 the previous day, I felt the Fumina d' Money route that we chose further up the valley would be an enjoyable day, with little difficulty at what the guidebook said was WI-3.

Arriving at the base of the route, more of a broad cascade up which a number of paths can be taken, we were both struck by the drop in temperature in this side valley which sees practically no direct sunlight. The route also didn't seem that long, although this was a deception of perspective. At the top I could see a curious spout of water





Fuimana di Money WI-3

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*At the top I could see a curious spout of water – something I’d never seen before.*

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– something I’d never seen before. I stared at this for a moment, but having no reference to past experience, didn’t really think more of it.

The climbing, although not as vertical as we’d both done earlier in the week, was tiring. The ice, which was almost freakishly smooth, was extremely dense and brittle, more than I’d encountered all week, because of the lower temperature.

Getting good penetration with the tools proved challenging, I found chipping a hole with a few strokes was more effective than a hard swing

which invariably caused the surface to explode, exposing another layer that promised the same result if I didn’t change my approach. I got the hot aches on the first pitch, probably due to a combination of my over gripping brought on by the fear of attempting to climb a glass wall and the intense cold in the depths of the valley.

The bulk of the route, pitches 2 and 3 went much better, now used to the sensation of climbing the hard grey ice, which as we rose gave way a little to more featured and slightly easier to navigate ground, axes and crampons finding accommodating convexities of

relative security. We were beginning to flow. The movement was good, the rope work and handovers slick, a week’s worth of repetition making simple tasks instinctive, without the need for communication.

At pitch 4 we belayed at a couple of linked pegs, stood at one end of a long, slightly inclined ledge of ice. The obvious line led up through the path of the water spout I’d seen at the base of the route. The ice under foot had a slightly slushy feel from the constant dowsing of fresh water. It’s still now one of the strangest features I’ve seen. It was not a constant stream, but a



pulse, as the flow underneath gained enough pressure to push through this one last gap, a water feature in B&Q somehow installed in the mountains.

I elected to traverse right to a steeper pillar of ice, out of range of the spout, mainly to stay dry, but also in hope of better ice. Wet ice is soft, and when it's steep, it doesn't feel too secure either. Trying to find a way up the pillar, my feet were kicking at points that sometimes fell to nothing forcing me to adjust my balance in favour of another prospective point, hanging on axe placements that were causing me similar stress. Around halfway up I managed to get a solid foot wholly into a recess giving some relief to my aching calf muscles which the near constant front pointing had seriously tested. A decent axe above me, feeling reasonably stable I resolved to place a screw, the last being about 4 meters below me. I tried to clear away the worst of the mush, but even so the soft ice clogged up the screw. I wasn't really in a position to clear the tube, so I re-racked and switched over to a steel one which supposedly doesn't suffer as badly from this as aluminium. I eventually got it to start but as it turned easily in the hole I knew all I'd found was an air pocket and I'd need

to start again. Thankfully the second try was a success, with the slush giving way to a solid dry core falling from the rear of the screw telling me I was anchored into what was probably the best placement on offer. The majority of my weight now on my arms as the angle of the ice steepened urged me not to waste time, although this upper section was drier, offering more reassuring placements, I tried to calm my nerves and keep it together. Thankfully it was only a couple of meters until the angle kicked back and I'd get some respite. I pulled over onto the much hoped for easier ground. I only had two screws left, having placed more than I remembered. I looked around for a fixed belay, but couldn't see one, so rather than climb on into something I couldn't reverse I used the final two screws to set a belay and bring Bruce up.

It was good to see Bruce come over the edge of the steep ice. We chatted briefly about the pitch, both in high spirits about overcoming a difficult piece of climbing safely, with the end of the route literally just in front of us. Bruce pointed out an anchor that I'd somehow missed above us on the rock and we got ready for Bruce to set off. As Bruce approached the anchor he

shouted down there was a better looking anchor slightly left and we agreed to move to this. It didn't take long to reach Bruce at the top, we had been so close and the ground fairly straight forward, I think he'd only placed a single screw.

This was the top. For WI 3, it had felt tough. I like climbing with Bruce. Beside his company which I enjoy, he's a tenacious wee bastard, very resilient and to see his smile at the belay confirmed this had not been an easy tick.

Conversation turned to the descent and we started to set the ropes up. My gloves were wet from the last pitch. I'd waited to change into my last set, hoping to keep them dry for the descent and walk out. The ropes were a little stiff, but they were dry treated and as I descended the frost sprayed off as it worked through the belay plate. We descended quickly nearer to the water spout to the next belay point. I went first, threading the next belay station and signalling Bruce to come down.

With Bruce secured to the anchor beside me, we started to pull the rope. Nothing. Harder pulling. Jumping up and down pulling. We looked at each other with the sort of dumb horror of a comedy film. Bruce suggested that, because we'd

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*This was now starting to feel more serious, without an easy solution to hand. At this point we discussed our options.*

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come down and around to one side of the open corner that the top of the climb funnelled into, it might be worth moving out from the belay to pull the ropes in a more direct line. I moved back along the mushy ledge, attached to the rope with a couple of prusiks, and belayed from below. I set a couple of screws at my feet and clipped into them. More jumping up and down. I tried setting up a prusik and foot-loop on the rope for more leverage but the ropes were slick with the slush pumped from the water spout and prusik wouldn't grip. I tried to climb the rope and the same slush clogged up the

prusiks jamming them in place. This was now starting to feel more serious, without an easy solution to hand. At this point we discussed our options.

Bruce was in favour of going back up and sorting the ropes. I suggested cutting the rope and making do with what we had, sacrificing screws and using abolokovs to get down. The risk of another jam and the consequence of being caught deep in the gully without a phone signal was enough to convince me going up was the better option.

Bruce tied into the ends and I belayed

him out to me. This was going to be a bit more route 1 than the last time with Bruce motoring up through the spray cone of the water spout. By this point the ropes were a mess. Even with the dry treatment, the constant spray in freezing conditions was causing major problems. In the end I had to take Bruce off belay as the rope would no longer feed. I wrapped the rope round my body in an attempt to provide some security, but - with no gear in - this was probably no more than feeding the rope, which now looked more like a candle, a wick surrounded by an easy inch of ice. As Bruce ascended I



became aware of the rope moving away from me. I realised that if Bruce was tied on the ends we had and I'd been belaying him, I was no longer attached to the rope myself. Panicked I shouted up for Bruce to stop, I reached down to tie an overhand knot and clipped in. Now that I was linked directly, I had to start climbing too. I unclipped from the screws that had anchored me into this point, and started to move. Even though the direct route wasn't as steep as our initial ascent it wasn't really ground I'd have felt comfortable soloing, much less simu-soloing, our only true point of contact was the other end of the rope still rigged for abseil at the top anchor. I was pretty scared at this point, either of us making a mistake now would at least be a serious injury and probably worse. The loop of frozen rope was now accumulating below me, creating considerable weight and adding to my general alarm. I began to gather the rope in front of me as I climbed, trying to dump the frozen mess in front of me and climb another step the effort being less than dragging it, the fear of it becoming too heavy and causing me to fall was a real possibility. From above Bruce shouted he was clipped in to the anchor, which brought a small amount of relief, knowing that a slip was not going to rip

us both off the mountain. By the time I reached Bruce I was exhausted and wet into the bargain. I was secure. As the tension faded I felt totally wrecked but glad of the respite.

The ropes were at this point beyond useless. I'd never seen this happen to a rope. I read about frozen ropes and experienced a bit of stiffness on Scottish winter climbs, but nothing like this, where the rope was like a solid bar and that was the best of it. Large sections were encased in thick ice. I was at a loss. At this point out other foibles were forming an orderly queue to punish us. I'd left my bag at the bottom of the route, this included my head torch and knife. I had carried spare gloves in my jacket and a small stuff bag on my harness. Bruce was also lamenting the map he'd left in the car. Funnily enough, even though I knew the situation was serious, there wasn't any hysterics. Bruce recalled that he thought the cliffs now below us receded to easier ground towards the top of the valley. We agreed that although this would probably take a few hours and was our best option. The light was now failing and Bruce headed off to try and find higher ground with the hope of viewing a way off before it went. I would untie and attempt to

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*The carabiner attaching me to the rope was frozen shut, as were the zips in my jacket*

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salvage some of the rope. I now started to appreciate some of the finer points of our predicament. The carabiner attaching me to the rope was frozen shut, as were the zips in my jacket. After years of being treated to the paranoia of how easy it is to cut a climbing rope accidentally, I was experiencing real difficulty doing it on purpose. Rubbing it over a reasonably sharp rock hardly scratched it, as did hitting it with my axe and rubbing it along the sharp point of my pick.

At some point, Bruce shouted down that he thought he saw a way off via the top of the valley. How long had passed, I wasn't sure, I was engrossed with mounting frustration at my meagre attempts to free myself. Bruce seemed



to want to head off there and then, not realising that I couldn't move. After a couple of minutes back and forward he came down to me, and got his knife out. This knife, its blade is probably no longer than an inch, absorbed my entire focus. I held it hand to hand, terrified of the implications and added complication its loss would bring to the situation. It cut through the rope, the small effort required totally at odds with my feeling of elation. Bruce was experiencing similar problems with frozen fastenings, then cut the webbing to get into his bag.

It was dark now, and Bruce had switched on our one head torch. The night was thankfully clear and without a breath of wind. In the moon-lit valley, larger dark outcrops and cliffs were easily discernable against the winter snow. I think it was around this point that we phoned David and Gwilym and told them of our predicament and plan. We kept it short, in the knowledge that battery power was another commodity not to be squandered.

The going was far from easy, I was struggling through deep drifts of snow, still tired from the exertion of the last piece of climbing. I seemed to exit one drift just to step into another. As I was clearing the last of these, I became

acutely aware of silence. I couldn't see Bruce or even the light from the head torch anywhere. This was a bad development. I had no idea what had happened to him. This was the only time through this entire episode where I think I was truly scared. I started to shout in the hope I'd get an answer, but there was only silence. I resisted the urge to start running to try to catch him up, I hadn't seen which direction he'd gone, I'd been so involved with wading through the drifts. I reasoned staying put and continuing to shout was all I had, and hope that Bruce would retrace his steps. It felt like I'd screamed myself hoarse, although it probably wasn't that long at all, before I saw the reflection of the head torch moving back towards me and heard Bruce shout.

Bruce didn't seem too keen for attempting the walk up the valley now. I wasn't sure what he'd seen, but his focus had now shifted to a set of footprints we'd seen leading the other way, back down into the valley. We reasoned they possibly led down the path to the valley floor from the Money bivouac, which was above us somewhere. The other hope was we could possibly walk along as far as Patri, a climb that was made up of a series of steps which could be walked



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*We decided it was time to phone for help. We moved back to a large snowfield we'd previously moved through, reasoning this would make us easier to see*

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around and hopefully gain the valley floor that way. We started to walk, Bruce in front with me holding on to the remains of the rope that Bruce was dragging from his harness, maybe about 10m on each rope that might still be useful if a short abseil was required. The ground was fairly easy, with a few awkward steps and although we sometimes lost the trail, we kept managing to find it in the torch light.

Our mood lifted a little, although I think we were both aware of the ever present drop of the cliffs below the

snow field we were traversing. Our trail eventually led us to a short drop, maybe 10 meters high above a lower snowfield. We debated the possibility of abbing down, quite a committing choice, one I think we both knew would be difficult to reverse in our tired state and dubious of continued problems the rope may have posed. I was also certain we were at the top of another route called Acheronte which we'd both done earlier in the week and below this first fall was a much longer pitch that we couldn't possibly descend with what we had. We chatted a bit, we'd exhausted our options. A hoped for route down through the cliffs was proving impossible to find without some kind of guide that a map would have provided and my lack of torch was making movement difficult for both of us. We decided it was time to phone for help. We moved back to a large snowfield we'd previously moved through, reasoning this would make us easier to see and rescue if a helicopter could be brought in.

We phoned David and Gwilym and to tell them of our intention. Between our own phone calls David had been talking to a guide friend of his, Graeme Etle, who was working in Cogne, and I think it was the consensus that we'd done what we could with what we had and it

was time to get help. Bruce phoned the emergency services. Neither of us speak any Italian, much past ciao and grazie. The conversation was difficult, the operator doing her best to understand two stupid Scotsmen stuck on a hill somewhere above Cogne. Where were we? We gave our position as above Acheronte, reasoning that the local rescue would have an understanding of this location, in lieu of a map it was all we had anyway. She took our number promising to call back with a translator. It was now incredibly cold. From previous late finishes, returning to the car after the sun had gone down, we were aware the temperature could easily be 10C below. I was hugging Bruce to me in an effort to keep warm, telling him to put his hands inside my jacket and under my arms while we waited for the return call.

The major drawback of a touchscreen phone is that it required him to remove his gloves to operate it, and his hands - already cold from the wet gloves - were suffering terribly because of this. We discussed our predicament, lamenting bad choices and frustration at not knowing what was happening at the other end, time dragging by at a tortuously slow pace. I remembered I had some stupid GPS location app on my phone, which I now used. This gave us



## Fuimana di Money WI-3 Waterspout

a small lift, we had an exact location we could give them now, a small positive against our legion of mistakes. Talking with the rescue services when the called back was difficult. The language barrier was, indeed, a barrier. We were pretty sure they'd got all the information, but uncertainty was definitely heightened by our situation.

I'd took a screenshot of the GPS coordinates and sent them to Gwilym, who assured me through his own conversation with the operator, that they had indeed got it.

We now knew our situation for the first time in a few hours. There would be no helicopter. The rescue party would be assembling and reaching us on foot. It was now around midnight and I was certain it would be around 3 hours until they reached us. Having taken off our wet gloves to operate our phones, they had frozen solid, the fingers twisted and impossible to get our hands back in. I did the best I could, making a half fist in the palm of the glove with the remaining fingers. I managed to force the zips enough on my jacket pockets, putting my hands inside seeking to

retain what warmth I could. I'd shared the last of my food, a Snickers bar, sometime during the phone calls. Bruce switched off the head torch, reasoning we'd need the dwindling battery power to guide in the rescue party when they arrived. With everything we could do now complete, we proceeded to walk a small circuit to keep warm. We didn't say much, pretty much everything that could be said had been spoken hours previously. I was knackered both physically and mentally and for the most part happy to be alone with my thoughts, wanting to switch off and



trudge the furrow we had created and will the time to pass quickly. We watched as the car lights sped up the valley far below us. It had been over an hour since the final phone call, and we were cold. I only felt a bit of discomfort, but I was aware Bruce appeared to be suffering much more than I was. I'd managed to keep my silk liner gloves on, even when using my phone, and get my hands in my pockets while we waited. Bruce also has bad circulation in his extremities and the cold was starting to really hurt him now. We watched as more lights joined the first down below us, the small pin pricks of head torches now visible as people moved around. We turned on the head torch again and I passed my hand in front of the beam to replicate a flashing pattern, neither of us having the desire to remove our gloves and fiddle with the settings on the light. The flash was eventually returned. We continued for a couple of minutes, before turning off the lamp again. It was near the end of its battery and we agreed it would probably be required one more time as our rescuers came close.

More waiting we watched as the lights moved up the hillside, disappearing but each time growing closer, continuing

our own circuit, back and forth in a now well-worn path, at least now knowing that things were probably going to be alright.

My phone rang. The leading lights of the rescue party were now close, at the start of a horizontal break running along a cliff on our skyline, maybe a kilometre away. Bruno asked if I could see his light, which he flashed and if we could come to him.

There was no recrimination. Maybe our own humiliation and repeated protestations of gratefulness were affirmation enough. Maybe our appearance, which I'd not really contemplated until given the stark contrast between ourselves and our rescuers was sufficient to convince them we'd already learned our lesson, or just perhaps they've witnessed it so many times, it's sadly no longer remarkable. In the pooled light of all the torches, I could now see that almost every outside surface of our clothing was thick with frozen ice of the water that had drenched us hours ago. From the photos being taken and the general tone of the conversation, it sounded like they didn't see this too often either. It took a pair of pliers to free the frozen screw gate from my

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*We watched as more lights joined the first down below us, the small pin pricks of head torches now visible as people moved around.*

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belay loop, the sling I had larks footed had to be cut, thick ice holding it fast in place. We were given warm drinks, walking poles to aid the descent, fresh gloves and tied onto ropes to start down.

The route finding was difficult, a couple of times the team had to stop and check their own line. In parts the route was steep with sharp turns onto narrow ledges above high cliffs. I knew then that we'd have had no chance of finding this way down and that, for all our mistakes, calling for help had been inevitable.

At the bottom Bruce was taken into the

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*I take away from this the feeling of debt I owe others*

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ambulance. I could see now that by comparison, I'd somehow gotten off much more lightly than he had. There was a lot of concern over his hands. I had a bit of a nip on one finger, but that was it. I didn't even get in the ambulance. I was taken back in the truck with the rescue team, relatively I'd come through this untouched.

We stopped off at Cogne at 3am, dropping off our gear, the mountain rescue returning things they'd carried down on our behalf. The police took some details. In the apartment, David and Gwilym were waiting. I doubt they'd had much sleep. David didn't say anything, he just came over and gave me a big hug. My ice coating had now completely thawed and I made some bullshit excuse about being not wanting to get him wet, but the truth was, this was the closest I came to losing

it all night. That gesture of concern and welcome. Simple human contact, expressing relief at our safe return. I've not had the chance to thank David for that, but in all the things that happened that night, it's curiously one of my most vivid memories. It was exactly what I'd needed at that moment and I'm eternally grateful for it.

We both were taken to hospital in Aosta. Bruce's hands and feet were seriously hurt with frost bite and he needed to stay in the hospital for another week while he recovered. I was discharged that morning with minor frostbite in one finger which was only troubling insofar as giving a small insight into what Bruce was going through. I sat with Bruce that morning, feeling no small measure of guilt for our comparable situations. Bruce subdued, the doctors at this point very uncommitted to commenting on the extent of his injuries, lest they had to give him bad news further down the line.

The last night in Cogne was a quiet affair, David and Gwilym had graciously walked up the valley and collected my bag from the bottom of Fumina di Money and retrieved an ice screw that I'd dropped. The mess of discarded rope at the top the only marker of what had taken place. We packed Bruce's things, some to take to the hospital and some

that I agreed I'd take home for him.

Everyone was kind, understanding. I was having an uneasy, albeit small sample of what survivor guilt was like. I kept this to myself, again the guilt of coming through the entire event practically unscathed only compounding my feeling that I was unworthy of sympathy.

Dropping off Bruce's gear to his wife Gillian, I felt terrible that I should be there while Bruce was stuck in Italy and she was now preparing to fly out and be with him. God knows what it feels like when your mate isn't coming back. I hope I never know, I think it would be unbearable.

I'm sure everybody will draw their own conclusions somewhere between damning and sympathy. I made mistakes, conscious decisions that made an unforeseen situation worse. I would say in our defence that we dealt with it as best we could, maintained communication, didn't lose our heads and ultimately, survived. I take away from this the feeling of debt I owe others, the Italian rescue team, David, Gwilym, our families and friends for the effect my mistakes have on them, but thankful that I'm able to hope that I'll do better next time.



## Val di Mello and the North East Face of the Piz Badile Roo Finlayson

I hadn't actually heard of the Cassin Route on the NE face of the Piz Badile before Michael said it was on his dream-route list. 'Blasphemy!' I hear you say. 'How could you not have heard of one of the six famous north faces of the Alps?!' Honestly, I'm not sure.

In my defence, I had heard of the really big ones: The Eiger, Grandes Jorasses and the Matterhorn and always thought of them as the big 3 (AKA the trilogy). Further, the majority of my

mountaineering, and therefore also the focus of my reading and planning, has been in the greater ranges.

After reading up on it, it sounded big but very doable: a rock route with no pitch harder than 6a+ or HVS 5a (or TD alpine grade for those who care or can translate these things). Just lots of it - 19 pitches of it to be precise (if you go the right way...) topping off at about 3,300m, whilst wearing a backpack.

I had wanted to visit Val di Mello for some time due to it being known as the 'Yosemite of Europe' - a granite paradise in an otherwise rather chossy mountain range. Given its relative proximity to Bregaglia did make it an obvious choice, particularly if the weather was too poor for the higher stuff.

### **Milan to Mello to Switzerland:**

The Italian Lakes are beautiful if rather busy and expensive and they make





an excellent stop off point on the way to Val di Mello from Milan. I think it's about a 2 hour drive including some fairly windy mountain road driving. Having tracked the weather it was clear that the best of it was at the very start of the trip, so if we wanted to do the Cassin route we would just need to get on with it. I made the hut booking and we left the next morning for Switzerland (1.5hr drive).

### **Cassin Route on the NE Face of Piz Badile:**

I was dismayed to find on the website that the walk in had changed markedly. Instead of circa 3hrs it was now nearer to 6. I think a very large landslide had occurred sometime over the last year and had taken half the mountain with it.

Annoying yes but not enough to put those off who want to do it and we all know what the word 'classic' does to the popularity of routes. 'Do you still want to do it Michael?' 'Yes' 'OK let's just get on it then'.

So after a 5.5hr schlep to the hut we were greeted by very friendly hut

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*I think a very large landslide had occurred sometime over the last year and had taken half the mountain with it.*

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hosts with perfect English (I love Swiss huts). We got some sleep until 4.30am the next morning when we awoke for breakfast and the start of the ascent. It takes about 2hrs to get to the base of the climbing.

Upon arrival, it was clear that we would be stuck behind a number of parties despite leaving reasonably early, moving quickly, a much longer walk-in and it being a random Monday in July. 'Classic...'

A very friendly but relatively inexperienced Czech couple let us past but we soon bumped up against a

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*This didn't feel right. After testing part of the next pitch, which traversed way off to the left, I knew we had gone wrong.*

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German and an Italian couple. All was going well until Michael pulled a block off about the size of a grapefruit which went whizzing by my head and he tested his gear which thankfully held after a fall of about 5m.

I came up that pitch after him (pitch 5/6 maybe) to find out how chossy it had been. This didn't feel right. After testing part of the next pitch, which traversed way off to the left, I knew we had gone wrong. We had been duped into going the wrong way by

'relative locals' who didn't know the way.

We left them to it and abseiled back over to the Czech couple who had figured it out and were now heading up what looked to be the right way. Those bolts were tough to find and they had done well despite their lack of experience, leaving the rest of us looking foolish.

The rest of the route went smoother but, given we were stuck behind a number of parties, we didn't make the summit ridge until 6pm. Our plan was to abseil/scramble down the very long Nordkandt (North Ridge) before dark so we could collect our stuff from the hut and pick up the car the next day. Unfortunately, like most parties trying to do this, we underestimated the time it would take to get up there behind a crowd and also the time to come down that very long ridge. The abseils are a faff (just not steep enough) and it's very very long.

So after a relatively uneventful but long decent we found ourselves still on the ridge, in the dark, at about 10pm. We couldn't quite tell which glacier we needed to aim for nor the safest way

Mike abseiling the Nordkant







down to it with just our head torches, therefore the decision was made to 'bivi' for the night.

We didn't have any bivi gear as we weren't planning on spending the night out, so we basically had to sleep rough on the ground. I found a few patches of ground and scraped out the rocks. I put on every item of clothing and pulled my rucksack up over my knees.

It wasn't much fun. Didn't sleep a

lot but did do a lot of shivering and rocking back and forth. We were pretty glad to see first light at about 5am and get moving down the ridge again. On the bright side, we arrived at the hut in time for some breakfast and they didn't charge us for dinner or the beds (I love Swiss huts!)

In retrospect, I think we did most things right in the circumstances. We should have left earlier to make sure we were first. We shouldn't have followed

the Italians and Germans but we were right to spot the error and reverse it. We made the right call to sleep on the ridge and wait for first light.

Worth it? Maybe but not totally sure. We could have spent those days climbing some big more technical stuff in Mello, not having such a ridiculous walk in and not having to sleep rough. But it's 'a classic'. Given it was on his tick list, I think Michael is a bit more positive on the whole thing.





Ideally what you would do is have someone drop you in Switzerland with limited gear, stay at the hut for the night, climbing the route with all your gear, descend into Italy, stay in the hut there and then walk down to Val di Mello the next day. Still a faff and long but marginally better than our faff.

### **Val di Mello:**

What a wonderful place! It has everything from world class bouldering

(hence Melloblocco the international annual bouldering competition) to big multipitch trad routes on perfect granite, with some decent single pitch sport routes thrown in for good measure.

I wouldn't however recommend July as the month to go. The weather was just too unsettled, resulting in thunderstorms every afternoon, thus limiting us to half day trips even when we left early. It's also a time when

it's mega busy and you can't drive your car right up the valley (we did anyway).

Despite this a lot of rock was climbed, albeit generally shorter stuff. We got Kundalini done one morning, the classic 10 pitch HVS/E1. It was very good indeed - loads of variety and interesting positions. We also did quite a lot of sport on Sasso Remenno, the 'largest boulder in the world'.





Other than that it was a matter of bouldering in the morning and early afternoon followed by some swimming in the river (very agreeable) before heading back when it inevitably thunder-stormed in the afternoons. Quite a nice way to spend a holiday really.

So when is best to go? We had originally planned on going in May but then Patrick warned us off as it would probably be too cold (it sits at about 1,000m). As we found, mid-late July was too unsettled, so I would guess June or September would be best? Not sure but that's what I'd aim for next time.

Keen to go back? Absolutely. There's a few ridiculous looking climbs that need to be ticked off if possible. Luna Nascente (9 pitches at E1/E2), Oceano Irrazionale (14 pitches at E3/E4) and Transqualidiana (21 pitches at E4/E5). Maybe next year, all going very well...





## Paradiso Revisited Sandy Sharp

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This article describes a trip to the Gran Paradiso region of Italy at the start of September 2019. I hope you might be inspired to visit the area yourself and also learn a little about one of the true characters of the climbing world - sadly no longer with us.

I first visited the Rifugio Pontese hut in 2009 as a guest of John Temple - who held, his 75th birthday there. It

is situated high above a dam on the southeastern side of the Gran Paradiso and is just over an hour's drive from Turin airport. There is a mini cable car to transport bags to the hut - but you do have to walk there from the dam head - about a 40-minute walk involving a few hundred metres of ascent. On my first visit we were not aware of the trolley and carried our bags. The baggage trolley has

a weight restriction and cannot take people so the walk is unavoidable - it would be a scary ride as it barely exceeds walking pace and travels mostly above the dam waters. The hut is in a wonderful situation overlooking the dammed Lago Telessio at an altitude of 2200m.

This trip was long intended to be John's 85th birthday celebration but



Rif Pontese from the climbing practice slabs

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*The hut is surrounded, on three sides, by mountains but also offers extensive cragging options for the tired or lazy.*

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Unfortunately John died earlier in the year. Various of his friends got together, loosely centred on the Alpine Club and the SMC, and decided the event should go ahead. I had known John from climbing as a member of the East Grinstead Climbing Club and I was travelling with Derek Buckle and Steve Humphries - also sometime climbing partners of John.

Amongst John's many talents was a knack for discovery and exploration and around the turn of the century

he 'discovered' Refugio Pontese with Hugh Alexander. Although, of course, the area was not new it was a secret known mainly to a select group of Italian alpinists. Following John and Hugh's initial visit there has been a team of UK climbers and mountaineers most summers, often on club meets organised by John. The hut has an excellent custodian, Mara, who leads a small team - most of whom speak very good English. The hut has electric power and even internet access. The meals Mara serves are truly excellent

and feature fresh produce. The hut is surrounded, on three sides, by mountains but also offers extensive cragging options for the tired or lazy.

On my previous visit I climbed to the summit of the Tribolazione (3300m) on the Malvassora route, involving 300m of roped climbing, mostly of grade French 4 and 5 on bolts supplemented with trad gear and requiring an abseil descent - a long day.

John was a real character and



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*The highlight of the trip was a celebration of John which saw about 20+ folk gather for a party on the Saturday night.*

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invariably had a twinkle in his eye. In his younger days, when teaching Geography in Kenya, he played a significant part in the rescue of a badly injured Austrian climber from high on Mount Kenya. The Austrian had many broken bones and was unable to move, having fallen when descending from the summit. There was no formal mountain rescue on Mount Kenya at the time and John, and others, went to the aid of the stranded climber.

John, being the strongest, carried the climber a significant way down the

mountain until they were met by an Austrian mountain rescue team who had been flown out to Kenya.

The equipment the MR team brought allowed the more technical ground of the descent to be covered quickly. The injured climber was on the mountain for several days before reaching safety and the rescue was widely reported. Reinhold Messner made a film about the incident and interviewed John in the film. The film, *Still Alive*, is sometimes available on the BMC website. On his most recent visit to

Mount Kenya John was welcomed like royalty on the mountain.

The highlight of the trip was a celebration of John which saw about 20+ folk gather for a party on the Saturday night. The manager of the dam travelled up to the hut to provide musical entertainment and was ably supported by an SMC contingent. Over the next few days the numbers at the hut gradually diminished as parties returned to the UK or went elsewhere.

Our trip was a week long and towards



Valsoera dam with abandoned ski station in background

the end we realised we hadn't had any big days or true adventures. To rectify this we planned a trip to a neighbouring valley, over a high col (the Bocc. di Valsoera at 2683m) , where there was an unmanned hut, the Rifugio Pocchiola overlooking Lago di Valsoera, with several long rock faces in the vicinity.

This valley also had a dam but was much more remote. Given the journey to get to the hut and the time it would take to complete the route,

an overnight stay would be required. Steve had attempted a long trad route on Mount Destrera on a previous visit but was unfortunately forced to retreat due to bad weather - this route was our objective. Four of us, Derek, Steve, myself and Richard Nadin, made it to the start of the route after an uneventful walk over the col and a night spent in the basic, but splendidly situated, hut. The evening was spent preparing a fresh pasta supper and exploring the area around the hut. Close by there was an abandoned ski

station still containing a largely intact cable car but no cable, the remoteness presumably making it uneconomic to remove the infrastructure - the place felt like a set for Scooby Doo.

Our chosen route was the Locatelli on Mount Destrera-a 300m route with climbing up to French 5c- and we climbed as two ropes with two climbers on each rope. An early start and completion of the short (40 minute) approach saw us making slow, but steady, progress but we were



aware that the weather was closing in.

Route finding was a challenge on the big rock face despite two of the party having either completed, or largely completed, the route previously.

I suppose we missed the relative simplicity of following a line of bolts, as on our other routes. Just as the weather broke we arrived at the last pitch. A brief hailstorm prompted a hurried debate on options and ended with Steve leading the difficult last pitch to the summit. We had briefly considered an abseil retreat, but the logistics would have been very difficult from that height.

The ascent had taken a lot longer than we had expected and we had to get back to the Pontese that night as some of our party were flying out of Turin the following morning. We returned to the Rifugio Pocchiola to collect our sleeping bags etc and we started the return to the Pontese about 6pm, just as the hail really got started. In theory the walk out should have taken about 2 hours, but the hail, ably supported by thunder and lightning, meant we ended up taking

well over 3 hours with head torches required for the final hour or two. The hail was laying like snow to a depth of several inches at the col and we were all very pleased to see the lights of the Pontese to guide us down. In total a 14-hour day that definitely made up for our lack of adventurous route choices earlier in the week.

The weather event was unseasonal and hopefully won't put you off visiting the area. The shepherd, who keeps herds of cows and sheep in the valley behind the Pontese, and who is normally a good guide to the end of summer weather, had yet to take his animals down to the low pastures. I look forward to returning to attempt a bolted route that covers the largely same ground as the Locatelli with a very uncompromising direct line involves some French 6c pitches. Hopefully the wait till my next visit to Pontese will be shorter than the previous 10 year gap.

Thanks to Derek and Steve for being my climbing companions on this trip – picture credits belong to them.

