

## **The Alps 2008**

Noel Walsh and his brother John and I set out for Rosslare in Noel's car on 23<sup>rd</sup> June last. We reached Cherbourg next day and made our way to the Pointe du Hoc where a battalion of American Rangers stormed the cliffs to take a battery position from the Germans on D-Day, 1944.

From there we drove to Auxerre and spent the night in a modest hotel. Next day we travelled on to Chamonix and we arrived in Les Molliasses campsite about mid-afternoon. This was to be home for the next three and a half weeks.

The following morning we walked into Chamonix and went in search of the climbing crag at Lac Galliard which was about 20 minutes walk south of the town. This is an extensive crag situated close to the road and equipped with bolts, abseil chains and descent ladders with grades from 3c (V Diff) and upwards. Noel and I got talking to some Brits who were familiar with the crag. They suggested we get a guidebook from a nearby kiosk and before long we were in action. We got six routes done before we were overcome by the heat and the need for rehydration therapy. One downside of this crag is that it gets the full brunt of the midday sun and another is that it is so convenient to the town that it becomes quite crowded, especially in the late afternoons after the sun has moved around to the southwest.

On other days we climbed at Les Chavets, a small but quiet crag near Les Houches and another up the valley near Vallorcine. The Les Chavets crag was similar to Lac Galliard in rock and grades and also near the road. The crag at Vallorcine was a ten minute walk from a campsite near Le Buet. It is a granite crag with Multipitch climbs. Steeper than the others, it provides good climbing in a fine situation and does not get the sun until late morning. We climbed on both these crags twice. (We later discovered that there is a map of France - No, 909 - which gives the location of all bolted crags in France).

On the Saturday we took the train to Montenvers and Noel and I set off to the Mer de Glace to do some ice climbing in the crevasses. Having descended the 240 rungs of the ladders bolted to the steep sides of the valley, we arrived on the surface of the glacier. Here we kitted out and went in search of suitable crevasses but to our disappointment we found none that were ideal. It seems that the glacier has melted to such an extent that where large crevasses were abundant several years ago there are virtually none in that part of the glacier. However we did get some practice in on some small crevasses and this stood us in good stead by testing our gear and techniques for later enterprises.

On the Monday Mick Leddy came up from Brides les Bains and we set off to climb the Index, a rock route that goes up to 2595 m. We took the telerifique from Les Praz to La Flagere and then a telesiege to Index station. We climbed up towards the foot of the Index, crossing snow patches and scree and found the going tough at that altitude. We gained a ramp and climbed to the start of the route proper. Here we geared up and waited until two parties ahead of us got going on the route. I remembered from a previous visit that the first pitch was tricky, but I was unable to master it in boots, so Mick led this first pitch and led through on the second. After that the route gave views over the steep sides and while the climbing was relatively straightforward with bolts for protection, the altitude and exposure added to the feelings of insecurity. Crowding on the belays and three on the rope sometimes necessitated placing gear for improvised belays and some parties climbed past us to create further bottlenecks ahead. Eventually the summit was reached and it was time to descend. First we had to descend to an abseil point below the summit by way of a small groove. Then we rigged the abseil and set off down for 60 metres. Here we had the choice of a further abseil to the bottom of the gully or a traverse across a small breche

and a short climb up the wall opposite. However we spied a second abseil anchor nearby and used it to descend into the gully. By now the last cable cars had departed and we were faced with a long trudge back to Les Praz down steep tracks in humid conditions. It was great to get back to the car at Les Praz and back to the campsite where John, our base camp manager, had dinner waiting for us.

Two wet days led to feelings of cabin fever so a shopping trip to Sallanches twenty km down the valley was proposed. The Carrefour hypermarket proved to be an Aladdin's cave, but we spied two gear shops on the way down and these had to be explored. The first, Au Vieux Campeur, had every bit of gear you could possibly think of and some more besides and most of the prices were unbelievably low. A harness I paid €72 for in a certain Dublin store was selling for €45! So if you are going to Chamonix by car, stop off in Sallanche to get the gear you need! The second was a tent store - Quechua. We had noticed many tents in the campsite were of this brand. They had an amazing array of tents and accessories and gear and clothing as well. Some of the tents were self-erecting – just pop them out of their folds and up they go. All you need to do then is to peg them down. They are a bit bendy in the wind, but they do pop up again. Of course, it is a bit of a Chinese puzzle to pack them again.

We planned to go to the Petite Verte next, but the telerifique was not running so we decided to walk from Argentiere to La Flagere on the west side of the valley. The trail led up the side of the hill and yielded excellent views of Mt Blanc and the Chamonix Aiguilles as we climbed higher. Acclimatisation was improving and we decided to ascend to the Lac Blanc along the well sign-posted system of trails. Many people take cable cars up to a high point and walk the trails. We met young and old, black and white, some well equipped and some not so. We saw ibex and chamois and alpine choughs and kestrels. By the time we got to the Lac Blanc, altitude was taking its toll. The walk back to Flagere was steep and tiring, but fortunately the return tickets unused from our outing to the Index were still valid and we travelled down in relative comfort.

Eventually we got to go to the Petite Verte. The three of us took the telerifique in two stages to the Col des Grandes Montets, to emerge above the snowline. The Petite Aiguille Verte lay opposite with a snow-covered glacier between us and it. Noel and I descended the steps to the col and roped up for the walk up the glacier to the bergshrund. We picked out a possible line to climb up the steep snow face above the 'shrund and made our way up. The glacier was covered under a thick blanket of snow so any crevasses were hidden, and today we did not want to end up in any of them. We got to the bergshrund and found a place where we could cross and proceeded to climb. The slope was quite steep – about 70° – and the snow was fairly yielding, but we moved together until we reached the crest of the ridge and then turned towards the summit. The snow was quite unconsolidated and we had to pass beside rocky buttresses in steep steps. Parties were coming down against us and the sun was coming on the snow so we decided to retreat and get back onto the glacier at a lower point on the ridge. However, when we got to that point we found that there was still a hairy descent to the glacier which I down climbed on a rope from above. The lower section was vertical and on hard ice and finished on the lip of the bergshrund. Here I belayed from an insitu Abolikov while Noel down climbed to join me. We then made our way over to a view point above the Argentiere glacier where we had lunch. From there we returned to the telerifique station and went down to the mid station where we met John who had been walking the trails at this level. We descended to Argentiere and repaired to the Office, a pub/restaurant, for rehydration therapy.

We had planned to go up to the Aiguille du Midi and do the Cosmiques Arête, but the weather was uncertain so we decided to leave a day earlier and head over the Col de la Forclaz into

Martigny and on to Taesch via Visp. There is a new 4 km tunnel from outside Visp to close to Stalden which made life a bit easier. We arrived in Taesch at 4pm only to find that Adi no longer runs the campsite there. We settled in and chatted to some Brits who confirmed that there was a lot of fresh snow on the hills. We retired to the Pizzeria for our meal, but Paidrigin was no longer there. There were mainly Portuguese staff, otherwise little had changed from our last visit in 05. However a new railway station and multi-storey carpark have been built. Zermatt is a traffic-free town (except for essential vehicles, battery-operated mini-buses and horse-drawn carriages) so people park in Taesch and take the train to Zermatt. The Zermatt shuttle leaves every 20 minutes throughout the day and through the night at weekends.

The unsettled weather followed us to Taesch, but we got up to Zermatt to do the sight-seeing bit and look at the gear shops – all very dear, especially after Sallanche!

Noel and I headed up to Zermatt on an early shuttle and had breakfast in Darioli's before heading up to the Klein Matterhorn (3883 m) by telerifque. We headed out onto the glacier and kitted up and were on our way to the Breithorn by 9.35. At 4165 m, the Breithorn is very easily accessible from the Klein Matterhorn and is probably the most climbed 4000 m peak in the Alps, if not the world. Heavy snow covered the glacier (and any crevasses) but we made our ascent without incident, if not without much panting and resting every 20 or 30 paces. As we reached the summit we heard a loud roar which I thought must be an avalanche, but it turned out to be a Swiss military jet! An intermittent wind sent showers of spindrift down our necks and up our sleeves, so we dropped into the lee of the summit for pictures and refreshments. Back at the Kl Matterhorn, we watched as three helicopters delivered buckets of aggregate to the building site right beside the access tunnel to the lifts. The skill of the pilots was to be admired as they sped in, avoiding a nearby crane, positioned the buckets above the heap already delivered and as soon as the load was released they were off again, all in a matter of seconds. We went up to the viewing platform at the top of the Kl Matterhorn to view the surrounding peaks – Mt Blanc in France, the Grand Paradiso in Italy, and even the Eiger and the Jungfrau in the Bernese Oberland. And so back down to Zermatt for goulash and pasta and beer.

We went up to Taeschalp en route to the Taesch hut, but when John drove off in the car we realised he had gone off with a pair of boots in the car and there was no phone coverage! However we continued up to the Taesch hut which was nearing the completion of a fine extension. Gone is the matrasse laager and now there are rooms with eight separate bunk beds in each. We had a good evening meal with a couple of beers – the beers were probably a mistake at that altitude. Sleep eluded us for much of the night and in the morning a mist hung over the area. We headed down the path and walked back to Taesch. I would have liked to do Alphubel, which we did not finish the last time we were, but such is life!

On the Friday, we were again in Zermatt, this time heading up on the Gornergrat railway. Noel and I disembarked at Riffelalp in search of a via ferrata which we read about, but lack of directions lead us to try for some climbing at Rotenboten instead. Eventually we got there, but again, the absence of precise knowledge of how to access the routes meant we were too late to tackle the face, so we wandered back to Riffelalp and took the train back to Zermatt. Meanwhile, John continued on to Gornergrat station and mingled with the tourists at the highest point of the railway. However we enjoyed our stroll with excellent views of the Grenzgleicher and the Monte Rosa group.

On the Saturday, Noel and I headed to the climbing crag at Resti. We found the schist to be as challenging as we did last time and the spacing of the bolts a bit too far for our liking. The climb on the extreme left of the crag had more bolts probably in view of the fact that there was a very

long drop off into the raging torrent below. This route was climbed and pleased with this and not wanting to run any risks at the end of the trip we called it a day and headed to Zermatt for one last bout of retail therapy.

Next day we headed back to France, via Thonon les Bains on the south shore of Lake Geneva and on to Clermont Ferrand. Next day we drove up to Tours which left us well placed for the last hop to Cherbourg and home. We arrived back on July 23<sup>rd</sup>