

California Mountaineering Club

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Six Weeks in Chamonix

By Sam Page

Chamonix is a busy tourist-laden village on the French side of the Mont Blanc Massif in the Alps. It is also a historic, international, all-around mountaineering destination. From mid-June through early August of this past summer my tent was pitched in the village at the accommodating Ile des Barrats campground, while Jim and I climbed (at least partially) twenty classic (and not so classic) alpine rock routes. When the weather cooperates and you are not preoccupied with drying out the sodden contents of your flooded tent for instance, it is possible to do a tremendous amount of alpine climbing in the Massif. Such efficiency is made possible by the elaborate network of gondolas, trains, and refuges festooning the range. However, in July and August this network gets extremely congested, turning the most accessible of Gaston Rebuffat's "100 finest routes" into chaotic, crowded, tangled messes. If you like to hit the ground running (literally), you'll love the daily "race to the base." If not, you can look forward to long waits at the base, sometimes on unnervingly steep snow slopes or inside unstable bergschrunds, while as many as twenty people start up before you and while others climb up and over you and everyone else. If you don't mind simul-climbing over and around numerous parties, however, then none of this may cramp your style.

Though we climbed all rock routes, most of them required approaches over heavily crevassed glaciers, ascents and descents of steep snow fields and couloirs, and, most unpredictably of all, bergschrund crossings. The bergschrund to which I am referring, also known as a rimaye or moat, is the yawning gap between the rock face and the glacier. There is never anything boring about it though. Crossing the schrund typically requires one to tiptoe from a 40 degree, hard snow slope, across an ever-thinning tongue of snow over the black, spooky abyss, and then to bridge way out and lunge desperately onto thin, unprotected moves on the rock face in snow-encrusted boots. On one particularly memorable and tenuous crossing below the First Pointe des Nantillons, Jim dropped his ice axe into the schrund after successfully leading across it. Later, after I had made a tortuous lead to get us onto the route proper using aid and a tension traverse, he dropped his helmet into the schrund. This was one of the routes we climbed only partially.

We did get some fantastic rock climbing in, though. Tops on my list was the Cordier Pillar on the Grand Charmoz. This route takes a striking line up a central 2000 foot buttress on one of the most beautiful of the Chamonix Aiguilles. After a nasty schrund crossing, we deposited our ice axes, crampons, and mountain boots on a ledge and started rock climbing. The first 1300 feet involved fairly sustained climbing up to 5.9/10, which we climbed by periodically pulling on things and stepping in slings (French free climbing). There were quite a few pitons in place with two-piton belay anchors established every 120 feet or so. Such *in situ* protection is typical on the classic rock climbs, many of which are equipped with two-bolt anchors for 40-50 meter rappels. The

final headwall involved some very steep and exposed 5.9 climbing with aid in a scary white-out, including one horribly long and fairly runout 60 meter pitch, with no possibility of belays in the last half. At around 7pm, only two pitches from the top, we were turned back by a seemingly unprotectable and very difficult offwidth section. This may have been a blessing in disguise, as we were able to rappel our line of ascent mostly in the light, making only the last two rappels in the dark. To our dismay, our ropes snagged on the second pull, still high on the buttress, requiring me to ascend 100 feet up a dripping wet chimney to free them. Luckily, this was our only snag, and we were back at our tent on the glacier by 11pm. Arriving at our camp parched and famished, we were distressed to discover that we were out of fuel. Adding to the agitation, Jim exhumed from the snow what to his horror had the texture and dimensions of a human appendage, only to realize it was a gargantuan sausage. Multiplying the confusion, the owners of the sausage who had heretofore remained undetected in their boulder-shaped tent, recognized my voice from a few weeks back at the Argentiere Refuge and were calling out my name in the dark.

Another great climb was the Vaucher Route on the Aiguille du Peigne. This climb is approached from the Plan de l'Aiguille telepherique station in about an hour via a trail and a moderately steep glacier. While Jim was making yet another nervewracking schrund crossing, I watched in mild amusement as the team who had blazed up behind us on the glacier and was racing to gear up before us dropped a boot. The boot slid immediately out of reach and bounced with mocking playfulness down the glacier until it disappeared in a crevasse. Having dispensed with our competitors, albeit unwittingly, we could relax and enjoy the route: or so we thought. The Vaucher route involves 400 meters of very sustained rock climbing up to 5.10a with some aid here and there on very solid, well protected granite. Midway up the route, I was gripped and runout in a grassy, dirty lieback crack when, to my surprise, Keith Richards emerged from the chimney pitch below. With his long dangling earring and wild black hair, he looked like he had climbed right out of a Stones' video (not "Masters of Stone"). Actually, it wasn't Keith after all, but his identical twin who happened to be an arrogant and stylish French climbing guide. Keith pointed me further off route, allowing him and his client to pass us. After a desperate down climb, sure I was going to take a whipper, I traversed onto the actual route and into an offwidth chimney. Very tired at this point, I was horrified to find that the walls of the chimney were smeared with feces and there was a large turd on a key handhold. After lots of cursing, I pulled onto the ledge above and set up a belay. After four more long, hard pitches, we topped out and began the 10 or so rappels into an eerie, eerie whiteout. Barely missing the last telepherique down, we were forced to endure the 3000 foot, knee jarring descent in our mountain boots. This wouldn't be the last time we made that trudge.

The Mont Blanc Massif is, well, massive. One could, and many do, spend a lifetime climbing there. On the other side of the valley are the tamer Aiguilles Rouges, offering many splendid rock routes at a lower elevation and without the gigantic glaciers. Either way, you can wake up at 6am, grab a few fresh pastries at a boulangerie, hop on the telepherique and be at the base of a long alpine rock route by 8am. Alternatively, you can slog up (or down) to one of the many fantastic refuges across crevassed glaciers and along a *via ferrata* (iron way) and base there for several days. Though hardcore traditionalists may bristle at the thought, thanks to the telepheriques, the approach to the

Argentiere Refuge is downhill *both ways*. More conveniently, by staying in the huts you can shave your morning approach time down to as little as 5 minutes. Another advantage to staying in the huts is the nightly all you can eat feast, which can include such culinary surprises as scrambled eggs *flambe* (scrambled eggs, doused in bourbon, and lit ablaze before you know what the hell is going on). We had the (mis)fortune of experiencing this alarming delicacy twice.

There are numerous climbing guides for the region that are worth looking at. I recommend comparing and contrasting them. First, there is Rebuffat's coffee table size guide which provides a singular overview and history of the Massif with fabulous photos, but often outdated route and gear specifics. Second, for the rock routes, try Michel Piola's guides, which are divided into several volumes and provide some of the most up to date topos and route descriptions. Third, Lindsay Griffin's pocket size guides provide helpful photos, topos, and descriptions, but lack important detail. Finally, *Climbing* and *Rock and Ice* have published some very informative articles in the last few years (see especially Dave Pagel's titillating "Chamonix Diary" in *Climbing* No. 200, February 2001).