



Lightweights on the Haute Route

In late spring 2006 the Alps had a deep cover of snow, so I made last minute application to my (pregnant) wife Eadaoin for permission to take her Irish brother Brian on the Haute Route in May. Brian swayed his wife to let him go to keep me company. The ruse worked and a plan was hatched. With two weeks notice, we beasted ourselves with some last minute training, jetted back to Liverpool and Dublin to tie up some business commitments and rendezvoused back in Cham to pack our bags. This was going to be a light and fast expedition. Well, light for sure.

It's extraordinary that this stunning ski mountaineering route from Chamonix to Zermatt was first pioneered as a summer walking route in 1861, and not skied until 1903. There are several variations to the route; the shorter and easiest being the five day so called Haute Route Express via Verbier. This route is broken up by a lengthy taxi ride between Champex to the Verbier lifts in Switzerland. Our route, arguably the more natural and elegant way, though longer and more technically demanding, takes seven days and goes via the fantastic Great St. Bernard Monastery. This route crosses a few roads which gives the option to stay in hotels for two of the six nights on the trail. Hotels allow you to eat well, stock up on lunch food, rest better at lower elevations, shower and shave and to wash socks and underpants. After all, this was supposed to be a holiday, right Brian?

Admittedly a team of two is sub-optimal for this adventure from a self-rescue and gear sharing point of view. A minimum of three or four is better. To succeed (and enjoy ourselves) our style was to travel light, and with nothing more than I'd take for a technical, committing day tour (aside from more maps). I used The North Face Off Chute 22 litre sack and Brian's bag was 25 litres. Even when stripped down to a single base layer, I could squeeze my jackets into my bag. An axe, shovel handle and 30m 8mm ski rope were neatly cinched to the outside. I hate looking like a Christmas tree. I had no changes of clothing, socks or undies. Though short on creature comforts, there was no compromising safety and we carried a two-man survival shelter, spare eyewear and gloves, GPS, all the relevant 1:25,000 scale maps, cameras, mobiles phones and The North Face Redpoint Optimus hooded Primaloft jackets for an emergency bivy layer. My Paclite Gore-tex shell from The North



Face Flight Series range was all I'd need for a wind shell. The Flight Series motto is "Further, faster" and we aimed to test that.

You can tell other skier's nationalities from the size of their rucksacks and certain pieces of kit. Germans, Kiwis and Brits have the largest sacks, stuffed with fresh clothes and massive flasks. Don't they realise they are out skiing, not hiking? The French have the smallest sacks but the worst dress sense. The Scandinavians have the most impractically long ice axes. The trick is to start with a small rucksack. If you have a large volume 'sack you will fill it up with things you "might need". Remember, even if you get caught out and have to bivy, the aim is to survive, not to be comfortable. Yvon Chouinard wrote "if you carry bivouac gear, you will bivouac! Touché Yvon!

Day 1: Grands Montets - Trient Refuge
Last night we fussed with kit to shave more weight, packed and got to bed at 2 am. We still managed to rock up at the Grands Montets car park in good time to catch the first lift to the top station (3280m). The day's main climb - the Col du Chardonnet (3323m) is directly across the valley and above the Argentiere Glacier. It looks steep because it is and it's an 800m climb from the glacier to the col. Many parties start out from the Argentiere Refuge (2771m) but that adds cost, another day and another sleepless night. Guides like to start here because if they don't

know their clients already, they get to see them ski down from the Grands Montets, and can send them back to Chamonix the next morning if they've overrated their ability.

There's good reason to dread the first big ski descent on day one of a week long ski tour, especially if you've never trained as much as you intended (and if you've just arrived on Easyjet you're not ski fit or acclimatised in any case). And if you're British, you're carrying a 60 litre sack, with a week's worth of food, long thick ropes (x 2), a full rock rack, an iPod and a good book. It's also early in the day and the off piste snow is normally chopped up frozen crud.

We watched another pair of wannabe Haute Routers studying their map as they looked across the valley. Finally, they asked us to point out the Col du Chardonnet! We never saw them again. We dipped under the rope and took a high traverse line right, through foot-deep fresh snow and past house sized ice towers that collapsed and killed someone a few days before. Oh, the luck of the Irish. The descent over the Col du Chardonnet is the most technical on the route and involves a steep, icy abseil. From here, it's a further hour up and over the Col Fenetre de Salena and a long cruise to the hut. That night we shared the refuge with only four noisy bag rustling Germans.



Day 2: Trient Refuge - La Fouly

A short climb due south of the refuge brings you to the Col de Pline and the most beautiful 100m long wind scoop. An initial steep, narrow descent broadens into a wide basin that sweeps down to rejoin the main glacier below the Col du Chardonnet. There's no need to backtrack over the Fenetre de Salena to get here (as O'Connor suggests - see References below). The descent is fast, cold and lonely, with no one else on the route. The surface was solid, smooth wind pack. We quickly transitioned to skins for the final steep climb to the Col de la Grand Lui (3690m). We didn't stop once and by 10.30 we were perched on the bergschrund. The final climb on crampons is 100m long and 35-40 degrees steep. It's often icy but today the snow was deep and the boot pack was secure. I thought we'd easily be in la Fouly by midday.

The monster 2100m descent starts well in good conditions but already it's sunny and hot and the lower we dropped, the faster the snow deteriorated into thick, knee twisting slush. We have time on our side so we take care and pick our way down the last 1000m to the village and Andre Bernard Gross's hotel by 2pm. Andre is a legend, not necessarily because of his record as a Swiss guide and ski instructor but because he, err, wears make up, women's blouses and high heels. Notably too, Andre is the son of a member of the Swiss 1952 Everest expedition that nearly made it up first ahead of Tenzing and Hillary. A year ago, in Lukla, Nepal I had met

Raymond Lambert Jr., son of Raymond Lambert on that same '52 team. Amazing! Brian played the Everest card for me and Andre rolled out the red carpet; free beers and the promise of a 5 km ride up the road the next day to save us the walk to the snow line!

Day 3: La Fouly - Bourg St. Pierre

Andre dropped us off where the road ended and the fog began. Twice now I've made the 1100m climb to the Col Fenetre de Ferret in the clouds. We followed a vague track on instinct and made one check of our position by GPS to be sure. We climbed out of the cloud just as we reached the col and 400m below could make out the para-avalanche tunnel and road leading to the 10th century Great St. Bernard Hospice. It's possible to overnight here (early reservations essential especially on weekends and Easter) but that makes it a short day. Unfortunately the dogs are only kept here in summer but otherwise, not surprisingly, this is a serene place to stop for a bit of culture, a chant if you're so inclined and a complimentary jug of sweet tea, before skiing down the long and winding road to the car park at Bourg St. Bernard and hitching a lift to the Hotel Vieux Moulin in Bourg St. Pierre. Bourg was once overrun by Napoleon's army who camped up and demanded to be fed and watered by the village. They did a runner and didn't settle their bill. Recently, the French government have installed a plaque acknowledging Bourg's "hospitality".

Between us we carried:

- Survival shelter
- GPS - spare batteries
- Compass
- 1:25,000 maps / short pencil
- 30m 8mm rope
- 3 mobile phones!
- Spare sun glasses
- First aid kit / blister kit
- Food (minimal)
- Repair kit: ski wax, emergency skin glue, duct tape, wire, binding screws, skin silicone

We each carried:

- Crevasse rescue hardware / ice screws
- Head torch (one tiny Black Diamond model only good enough for finding the loo at night and one powerful Petzel for night navigation)
- Whistle
- Digital cameras and spare batteries
- Ice axe
- Leatherman
- Petzl Moser Vasak 10 point crampons & ski crampons
- Skins
- 2 pairs of gloves
- Woolly hat / sun hat
- Goggles
- Shovel, probe and avalanche transceiver
- Sun cream

Day 4: Bourg St. Pierre - Valsorey Hut

This day involves lots of walking initially, then skinning but not one bit of downhill skiing to reach the hut 1400m above! It's best to get an early start whilst it's cool and just get your head down and crack on.

Day 5: Valsorey Hut - Chanrion Hut

The Valsorey hut (3030m) lies 600m below the intimidating Plateau de Couloir (3664m), which in icy conditions, is best climbed in crampons from the outset. Brian, he later told me, had a restless night, worrying about the day ahead. He even tried to put someone else's boots on in the morning by mistake. Brian confessed that he did manage to get over the psychological barrier of the climb after he'd climbed it! After the relentless uphill slog the previous day, today's treat is the 1400m long, moderately angled sweeping descent down the Glacier Mt. Durand, before the final short skin up to the Chanrion hut. We caught up with our new pals Tim and Caroline from the Valsorey hut on the col and teamed up for the descent. The conditions were excellent; a soft smooth layer of snow on solid crust.

Once over the plateau and Col Sonadon, it's tempting to feel that you've broken the back of the Haute Route, but far from it. These first five days have been a mere warm up; two long committing days still lie ahead.

Day 6: Chanrion Hut - Vignettes Hut

There are two options from the Chanrion hut (3462m) to get to the Vignettes hut (3160m). The faster, easier and shorter route is via the Glacier d'Otemma. This is a sensible option in marginal weather but it misses out the summit of Pigne d'Arrola (3796m) so we went the other way; via the Glacier du Brenay, parallel to the Otemma. There's a nasty icefall halfway up which is bypassed by taking a very high traverse line right, over a col. From here you can drop down right to rejoin the Otemma glacier, but we snuck around to the left to climb a vague rocky col which brought us back, high above the Brenay icefall. Brian had his first rock climbing lesson on the broken rocks of the Col de Portons in ski boots with skis strapped to his back!

From the summit of "the Pigne", reached on skins (or if you have the cash by heli drop), the end game is in sight - the Matterhorn, which looms over Zermatt. Some 600m below, the massive Vignettes hut straddles a rock ridge, but the scale is so vast that the building blends in with its surroundings and is only visible from up close. The hut is rammed with skiers who have converged on this refuge from all directions with one thing in mind - to reach Zermatt and tick the box.



Day 7: Vignettes Hut - Zermatt

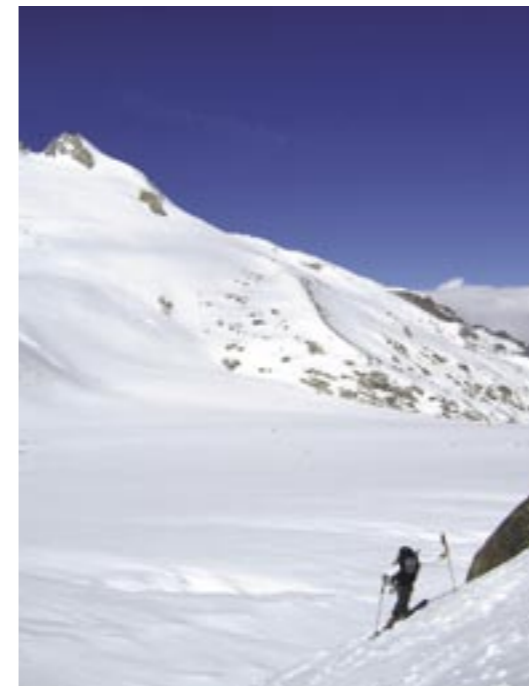
This ranks as one of the best ski mountaineering days ever devised. It extends more than the entire width of the Swiss 1:25,000 Matterhorn map, crosses three cols over seven glaciers and stretches 24km in length. Combined with 750m of ascent and 2400 of descent, this is a day of Ironman proportions and is justifiably given a guide book time of 8-11 hours.

We were first out the hut at 6.15, now officially a team of four for added security. Several guides warned us of very soft snow bridges on the final descent below the Col de Valpelline and I wanted to be off the glacier and singing the Sound of Music in the sunny meadows above Zermatt in good time. We reached the col at 11.03 and picked our way safely down in good snow conditions and I relaxed enough to give Caroline a ski lesson. The snow ran out below the north face of the Matterhorn where we demolished every last morsel of remaining food. I have skied all the way to the bus stop in central Zermatt in early April but in May we weren't so lucky. During the 5 km hike down a tarmac road to the nearest lift, Brian and I both picked up the first blisters of the trip. What a pair of lightweights. ❄️

Author's final note

The Haute Route is a serious ski mountaineering undertaking. You need to be properly equipped, a decent off piste skier and know how to negotiate crevassed, glaciated terrain, in bad weather. There are a few opportunities to bail out if the weather deteriorates but each daily leg is challenging enough, let alone seven big mountain days linked together. Many do not complete the route on their first attempt due to bad weather, poor conditions, lack of stamina, ability or a combination thereof. I have friends who've snowboarded the route but it's very, very hard work and you'll need to carry snowshoes. The route is done in reverse and I shall be petitioning for permission to do that some day. You can carry on from Zermatt to Saas Fee along the Italian High Level Route crossing Monte Rosa. It's a higher route mainly above 4000m with more technical mountaineering along the way and is equally fantastic.

References: Bill O'Connor's excellent Cicerone Guide Alpine Ski Mountaineering Vol.1: Western Alps is all you need for a detailed route description, hut phone numbers etc. but you'll still need to spend a load of cash on all the maps. No disrespect intended, but Peter Cliff's classic book The Haute Route is out of date and often inaccurate. For guided trips check out www.mountaintracks.co.uk or www.chamex.com. The Eagle Ski Club also runs trips for members (www.eagleskiclub.org.uk).



Hydration: Water is heavy and carrying lots of it slows you down. Think like a camel and drink loads in the morning and only carry half a litre on short days, especially if it's cloudy and no more than one litre on bigger days or if the sun is blazing. Leave early when it's cool, move efficiently and get to your destination in good time without any long rest stops. Aim to drink most of your supply before you finish any ascent and all of it before reaching the day's destination. I carried two 50cl plastic Coke bottles for versatility. They are indestructible, weigh nothing and can be squeezed into the corner of your sack, unlike water bladders which I loath for ski touring. They always leak and don't allow you to really squish everything into your sack without splitting the bladder.

Crampons, axes, skis and boots: For a while I used aluminium tools (even to the summit of Everest!) but they are useless if you really need them in anger when it's steep and icy. I now favour a 53cm Grivel Air Tech Evolution axe which has a slightly curved lightweight shaft but a forged head and Charlet Moser crampons. This trip was a good excuse to retire my much loved Rossignol B2s and to buy Ski-Trab Free Randos. They are light and deliver very good off piste performance. You need proper ski mountaineering boots with a Vibram sole for this trip. Normal ski boots don't cut it if there's any amount of walking involved. The new ski crampons that stayed attached to Fritschi Diamir bindings and flick down when needed are worth considering.

Skin care: Look after both your body skin and your ski skins. High altitude, reflected sun will fry and dehydrate you very quickly. Dry your ski skins slowly at night. Never put them on freshly waxed skis. Throughout the day, if you're using your skins again, keep them warm in your jacket.

Top Tips

- Get acclimatised and be ski fit so you can travel fast
- Pack light – just one person in your party who is carrying too much will slow everyone down!
- For emergencies, think survival, not comfort. The Alps are not Scotland – nobody ventures out in foul weather! Leave yourself a day or two spare for contingencies.
- Don't carry gallons of water
- Be out the hut early and keep moving – the mountains get more dangerous in the afternoon sun
- Don't lose height unless you're totally sure you need to
- Not everyone you will meet knows what they are doing or where they are going! Be careful who you follow.
- Nap in the afternoons to catch up on sleep lost at night when the bunk rooms are full and noisy. In any case, carry ear plugs.
- Be nice to everyone you meet, especially professional guides and the hut guardians. You never know when you'll need their help or advice.



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