

Alpine Summer Expedition Report



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The Objective

To climb as many 4000m peaks as possible from the UIAA list of 82 within a single season.

The Team:

Tim (medical student, aged 20): Background in International Competition orienteering, mountain marathons and hill running. Alpine expeditions to The Swiss Alps, The Stubai and Zillertal Alps in Austria and the Dolomites. Extensive summer and winter climbing within the U.K including Cuillin ridge traverse (April 2012), Winter routes up to grade IV and Trad climbing up to E2. Ski mountaineering both In Scotland and the Dolomites.

Anna (medical student, aged 23): Background in competition climbing, (won several Scottish Tooling Series events, competed in ice climbing world cup, won three Scottish university climbing comps). Alpine style expeditions to the Swiss Alps, the Dolomites and the Atlas Mountains. Scottish Winter Climbing up to grade IV, and ski mountaineering. Trad climbing up to E4 in Scotland, Lofoten, Tatra Mountains, dolomites.

Summary:

We climbed 38 peaks over 4000m, including the 12 highest. Tough snow conditions in June meant that we actually climbed 34 of these peaks in July alone. Instead, June gave us the opportunity to climb via ferratas and multi-pitch rock climbs in Italy, ski-mountaineer in the Saastal Valley, and learn some lessons with a couple of unsuccessful summit attempts!

Preparation:

No permits were required for any of the areas visited.

Our main reference was the Alpine Clubs "4000m peaks of the Alps" guidebook, as well as Martin Moran's book "Alps 4000m" to help us plan possible link-ups.

We took with us maps to cover the main approaches to all the 4000m mountains.

We both joined the "Austrian Alpine Club" in order to receive reciprocal rights for hut discounts in all countries, as well as rescue insurance.

Personal Aims:

To improve our all round competence in alpine skills, by climbing a wide variety of peaks in varying conditions.

After difficult conditions in June, we established the modified goal of climbing the ten highest peaks plus the Matterhorn.

Trip Report:

04/06/13
: Piz
Bernina

After two long days of driving, we arrived at "Campo Moro" around 11pm, which was to be our starting point for the walk in to Piz Bernina. We had decided to approach from the South because the guidebook suggested it was a shorter walk in and the maps suggested it was



mostly on rocky terrain. But this was not so! We set off in high spirits under a hot sun, and after only an hour we hit the snowline! We fought our way through wet knee deep snow, breaking trail and sweating off all our suncream. It looked like no one else had been here recently. It took us six gruelling hours to reach the Marinelli hut, which was only supposed to take three hours, and decided to stop there for the night. The hut was not yet open for summer, so after digging the door out from a metre of snow, we took advantage of the winter room. We spent the afternoon sitting out enjoying the sun, sat on top of the picnic tables since the benches were buried beneath snow.

The next morning we continued up towards the Marco e Rosa hut. Again, we were fighting our way through knee deep snow and it was completely energy zapping! The last part of the route up to the hut involved a Via Ferrata, but from afar it looked as if it was largely buried in snow, and the sight of melted ice/rock hurtling down the face it was on confirmed our decision to avoid it. Instead we went up a steep couloir, then traversed round to the top section of the via ferrata. We roped up and moved together on the last section, clipping into the wire that was visible above the snow. The wire finished right at the entrance to the front door of the winter hut. At 3609m, the hut is only 440m from the summit of Piz Bernina. However, from the hut we could see most of the summit ridge, and it looked heavily laden with snow. It was a very difficult decision to make, considering the massive effort we had made to get this far, but we decided that so much snow on the ridge meant that this would be a very different experience to the PD+ it gets as a rock ridge in summer. The next morning we made an early start, and descended the via ferrata using a mixture of methods including pitching and abseiling. We enjoyed about an hour of walking on firm early morning snow, before it turned back into the slush we were familiar with! Throughout the three days we had seen and heard quite a lot of small avalanches from high up peaks but they always seemed to be very far away. However, it was with concern that we discovered several runs of avalanched snow breaking the path of our footsteps from when we had walked in three days ago. Arriving back at the car after a ten hour day, we decided that we should go somewhere else for a couple of weeks. We were wanting to link together a lot of the 4000er peaks, and it seemed a little pointless to go and pick off a few of the peaks that would be do-able with this amount of snow, when we would end up very close to them again before long. So after much contemplation, we decided to drive to Cortina and have some fun in the Dolomites.

07/06/13: *The Dolomites*

There seemed to be a lot of snow around here as well but we had noticed whilst driving over that Cinque Torre looked quite bare, so we went and climbed a route on one of the towers, called "Via Delle Guide". We enjoyed some hailstones on the first pitch, and abseiling off the top we found ourselves in a snow filled gully! The next day we climbed an enjoyable via ferrata on Col de Bois, next to the popular Falzarego towers.



Both days it had rained heavily from about 11am onwards, and when it continued to rain overnight and all of the next day we decided to head into Cortina to find an internet cafe to check out the forecast and consider alternative ideas. We happened to check the forecast for Arco, and the week long string of "sun sun sun" icons was pretty much irresistible! Five hours later we found ourselves in Riva del Garda.



10/06/13: Arco

Dropping height from the Dolomites and finding ourselves in the sunny and hot climate that surrounds lago di garda, we knew we had come to the right place! We sent a message to some friends from home who were on holiday in Arco and they invited us to join them on a via feratta they were doing the next day. It involved 1200m of ascent, picking its way up an improbable looking rock face, with a surreal top out in grassy meadows. It was a brilliant day out! They very kindly gave us several suggestions of multipitch climbs to do, as well as another via feratta, which ended up forming our ticklist for the next few days. We did three multipitch climbs of length 200-250m, (Helena, Aphrodite, Le strane volle di Amelie), and a superb via feratta which wound its way up a gorge to Drena Castle just outside Dro. Alongside this, we have had a great time relaxing in the sunshine, swimming in rivers and wandering around Arco and Riva eating ice cream!



18/06/13: Bishorn

Upon leaving Arco, we decided it was vital to get at least one mountain ticked! We decided that Bishorn would be a guaranteed success as there is a grade "facile" snow plod to the summit. We left the car at 4am (in shorts and t-shirts!) and arrived at the Tracuit hut mid morning in the blazing sunshine. We were grateful for our early start because we met some people who walked in later in the day when the snow was soft, and it took them nine hours! It turns out that they had



knocked down the old hut and were in the process of building a new one, meaning the hut was not open and the winter room was a pile of rubble! And so we had essentially arrived at a rather chaotic construction site. It took a bit of persuasion to organise a space for the night, as originally they had asked us to go back down to Zinal. But kindly they let us stay, and so we got some sleep and set off for the summit at 2am. We arrived on the summit just in time to watch a spectacular sunrise across the Alps.

21/06/13: Strahlhorn



We arrived in Saas Grund in the heavy rain, and the next day's forecast promised us thunder and lightning! So we resigned ourselves to a day of sitting in the car reading books, and also made a trip to the local boulder wall. Once the weather had settled, we took the Felskinn lift and skied to the Britannia hut. On arrival we learned that it was their opening day for the summer season, and we were their very first guests! We enjoyed a leisurely day of playing cards and board games, as the hut slowly filled up. We left the hut at 4am the next morning, on skis, and it was really quite scary! It was dark, with mist so thick that you could only see another headtorch within a couple of metres, and the skiing was a steep descent from the hut. We skied up the Allalingsletscher, following the ski tracks of a party who were a little ahead, who we knew were also heading for Strahlhorn. It was very disorientating in the thick mist, and it became apparent that the other party had headed off route. We broke off from their tracks, and eventually saw a walking party ahead. For the next hour or so, we skied up alongside their footsteps, until, to our great dismay, we saw them heading back towards us!! It was snowing quite heavily by this point, and their guide had decided to call it a day and head back to the hut. We continued on until just below the Alderpass (3789m), and deciding the weather was increasingly dismal, decided to turn round ourselves too. Skiing down the glacier was absolutely great, especially since so much fresh snow had fallen over the past few hours! The skiing totally made up for the fact that we hadn't made the summit, and so we returned to the valley in high spirits, and keen to make more use of our skis!

23/06/13: Saastal Day Trips



The next day we had a go at skiing up Allalinhorn. It must have got a lot colder overnight, because the snow was completely solid! So we ditched our skis and walked to the top, enjoying some fantastic views from the summit. The next day we made a quick ascent of Weissmies from the morning lift to Hohsaas, reaching the summit within 2hrs and were back down at the lift by midday. The next morning we took the same lift up to Hohsaas and this time turned in the direction of Lagginhorn. Again, we made a fairly speedy ascent reaching the summit within 2h35. As it had been snowing most of the morning, we went to check the weather reports in Saas Grund. It looked like we were in for two days of heavy rain (snow up high), and then a dramatic temperature rise from 6' to 20' in the valley practically overnight, with the freezing level rising to above the summits. So, not attracted by the idea of soft fresh snow, we decided that we should spend the next few days rock climbing in the valley!



29/06/13: Saastal and Mattertal rock climbing



We first chose to do a rock climb called Brandgraben which climbs up a rocky ridge next to a waterfall just outside Saas Almagell. It was very nice, with a few interesting moves! We then visited a crag in the Zermatt valley called "Medji", which got 5 stars in the guidebook, and WOW it was worth every star!! It was mostly crack climbing, with routes varying between one and three pitches. And it wasn't even polished! Possibly the best crag i have ever been to! Finally, we visited a crag close to Visp to climb a route which was dubbed to be one of the most classic in the Oberwallis area, called Verschneidung. The route climbed up the corner of a large limestone wall, and topped out on the hillside, before a (rather difficult!) abseil descent. It was brilliant to get in a view days of rock climbing, especially at such high quality venues!

04/07/13: Barre D'Ecrins

The walk up to the Ecrins hut was very enjoyable with spectacular scenery around the Glacier Blanc and clear sunny skies. When we arrived at the hut, there was only one other man there, but by early evening it was filled with over a hundred people; it was the first time we had stayed in a busy hut and the atmosphere was great.



We left the hut around 3am the following morning and after overtaking a couple of parties found ourselves leading a winding train of headtorches up the glacier. It was quite spectacular looking back and seeing all the lights leading away from the hut. We arrived at the Breche Lory, the Col between Barre D'Ecrins and the subsidiary summit Dome de Neige. We first walked up Dome de Neige, and then returned to the Col.



The start of the rock ridge to the summit of Ecrins looked rather intimidating; it seemed like a set of footprints led to a scary looking rock wall and then just stopped! Were we supposed to climb that?! It turned out to just be a case of getting on with it, and the climbing wasn't nearly as serious as it had looked. The ridge was great, with an interesting mixture of rocky and snowy sections. The sun was up by the time we reached the summit at 7.45am.



06/07/13: Grand Paradiso



Later the following day we drove North into Italy, and headed to Pont in the Grand Paradiso National Park. The drive took a bit longer than expected, and we didn't arrive until 8.30pm! We hadn't booked spaces in the hut, and since it was a Saturday night we decided it was best not to turn up near 11pm without a booking; and so we decided this was the perfect opportunity for our first bivi! We set off up the approach path, which was rather steep and unrelenting, but it all passed in a bit of a sleepy daze and just as darkness was falling the hut came into view. We took advantage of a nicely built bivi spot just beneath the hut, with some flat dry ground surrounded by a little stone wall. The night sky was clear and filled with a million stars; it was stunning!

We awoke at around 4am, and set off in pursuit of the many other glowing lights that were already forming a trail from the hut. It was a bit of a relentless snow plod, but this was more than compensated for by the stunning view that unfolded before us as the rising sun illuminated hundreds of mountains to the north. We were among the first to arrive below the summit rocks, and scrambling past a few parties who were roping up, we arrived at the Madonna summit, once again finding ourselves to be the first people on top of the mountain. We abseiled off the rocky buttress, and decided to visit the other summit about 100m away, because we couldn't remember which one was supposed to be higher! By the time we had visited both summits and began to descend it looked like absolute chaos up at the summits; there must have been at least fifty people, now queuing to take their turn at ascending the final ridge. We were very relieved not to be caught among it, and happily descending the snow slopes which were now catching the morning sun.



08/07/13: Nadelgrat



The next couple of days had a rather strange looking forecast; sunshine in the mornings and lightning in the afternoons. We did not really know what to make of this, but since the first day of this forecast was holding out well, with a clear night and blue-sky morning, we decided to head up to the Mischabel hut and make the most of the good spells! The hut sits high up at 3340m, with a very enjoyable approach involving a via ferrata up the final rocky ridge. Arriving around midday, we waited in anticipation of the afternoon storm, but it never came! This was a great confidence boost, and we decided that we should make an early 2am start and attempt the Nadelgrat; a circular ridge route that includes four peaks over 4000m: Dirruhorn, Hohbarghorn, Stecknadelhorn and Nadelhorn.



As we set out up the Hohbalmgletscher neither of us were feeling too well! I don't think it was the altitude, because we had spent a lot of time up high recently; in fact it was more likely to be the fact we had been filling our bottles with the "not drinking water" water from huts; lesson learned! We made very slow progress, and by the time we made it onto the rocky ridge, we were a couple of hours behind schedule. We left our bags at the col and made an ascent of Dirruhorn, which is usually done as a short detour before returning to the col. Again this took us almost double the guidebook time as we moved very slowly with dizzy heads, and Tim confirmed his status of "unwell" by bringing up his breakfast!

We continued along the ridge and arrived at the summit of Hohbarghorn. From here, the fastest way back to the hut is to complete the ridge circuit, and this carried a rather scary feeling of commitment, compounded by the fact we hadn't seen anyone else all day.



We continued along the ridge, finally reaching the summit of Stecknadelhorn. After descending to the col, the guidebook suggested that "tired parties" could avoid the rocky ridge to the summit of Nadelhorn, instead traversing around the mountain and arriving at the snowy north-east ridge. Well we decided that definitely applied to us! Reaching the north-east ridge, we summoned up the energy to plod up to the summit, and were completely delighted and exhausted to have achieved our goal. But the day was not over yet, as we still had to descend over 2500m on foot! As we arrived back at the Mischabelle hut, we found ourselves engulfed by mist and the first raindrops began to fall. We rewarded ourselves with a glass of coke at the hut, before descending the via ferrata in pouring rain. However, as we arrived back in Saas Fee with aching knees, the skies miraculously cleared and the sun came out to say "well done"!.

11/07/13 Monte Rosa



The sun was shining brightly as we got onto the "Klein Matterhorn Glacier Paradise Lift" in Zermatt. From the top station, it was just a two hour walk to the Rossi e Volante bivouac hut, and since the hut sits at 3750m, we were glad to have had several days of acclimatization! We arrived as guests #11 and #12, to a hut that only has ten mattresses! But our companions for the night were friendly and happily made us a space, although it was very crowded in the tiny tin hut with twelve rucksacks, one bench, and lots of pans of boiling water perched in precarious positions!

Day 1: Breithorn and Pollux

There are five summits to Breithorn on the UIAA list, and an early start saw us on top of the first - Roccia Nera, long before sunrise. Traversing westwards, we made our way over the "East Twin" and the "West Twin", which involved some interesting scrambling and a couple of abseils. The guidebook had suggested a 50m rope was required for one of the abseils, but we had decided to risk it with our 35m rope because it seemed a lot extra to carry for four days, and thankfully it was absolutely fine.



As we reached the col between the West Twin and the Central Summit, it was still very cold and the sun had only just started to come up. The ridge looked a bit daunting to tackle with cold fingers, and with a quick glance at the map we decided it would be quicker and more pleasant to descend back down to the glacier shelf and climb back up the other side, thus avoiding the ridge. This decision paid off, and we had reached the Central Summit by about 8am, and continued along the snowy ridge to the West Summit. As we descended, we passed lots of parties who were making their way up the mountain from the Klein Matterhorn lift.

We passed underneath the bivouac hut and headed in the direction of Pollux. From afar, it looked like a very long rocky ridge, but this was deceptive, as there was actually a long snow gully tucked in behind the ridge which we followed most of the way up the mountain. The final 50m or so is a steep rock climb, made much easier by some fixed ropes which we decided to tackle via feratta style. A final snow plod leads to the summit.

We were back at the bivouac hut by about 1pm where we spent another night; this time alone!

Day 2: Castor and Liskamm

We awoke to another clear morning, and set off at a brisk pace to reach the summit of Castor as the sun came up. From the top of Castor, we were able to see over to Liskamm, which would be our second objective for the day. Liskamm is a huge mountain, composed of two summits (East and West) separated by a 1km ridge. This was to be one of our most technical climb within the Monta Rosa Circuit, with the ascent, traverse, and descent all receiving grade "AD". At times, the exposure on the knife edge ridge was quite breathtaking, and it was an exhilarating experience!



We arrived at the Giordani Bivouac hut around 12.30pm - much earlier than we had expected - but much to our dismay the hut was already full for that night! However, our companions - three French and three Italian - agreed that we could sleep downstairs in the kitchen and spared us a few blankets and a mattress, so in the end it was not too bad at all!



Day 3: Pyramid Vincent, Punta Giordani, Schwarzhorn, Ludwigshöhe, Parrotspitze and Signalkuppe

This was to be our shortest and easiest day within the circuit, despite the rather large looking list of peaks above! Pyramid Vincent was a mere thirty minute walk from our bivouac hut, and its subsidiary peak Punta Giordani took deceptively long to reach via the descent of a tricky rock ridge. We then returned to the summit of Pyramid Vincent, this time via a steep snow/ice face to avoid the ridge, and passed back underneath the bivouac hut. It was only around 8am by this point, and it looked like all the spaces in the hut had already been bagged for that night - crazy!

The second half of the day involved walking up to the summit of Signalkuppe, via three detours to summit all its subsidiary peaks. From afar this looked like it would take no time at all, but it was actually quite a tiring and a bit demoralizing having to go up and down so much! Eventually we arrived on top of Signalkuppe, which at 4556m was the highest peak we had been to so far. At the top of the mountain sits the Margherita Hut, which is the highest hut in Europe and, impressively, was built over 100 years ago in 1893. At such a height, it was not surprising to see several posters hung around the hut providing information on Acute Mountain Sickness! And clearly this location comes with a premium; we were rather taken aback by the 126 euros it would have cost us for half pension, so instead tucked into our instant mashed potato, but managed to fork out 12 euros for two cans of coke!!

Day 4: Zumsteinspitze, Dufourspitze and Nordend

Our final day, Zumsteinspitze is a subsidiary peak which is traversed on the way up Dufourspitze. The ridge up Dufourspitze receives an AD grade, but I think we met it in pretty easy conditions because there was a lot of solid snow bulking out the rocky sections. It was a very enjoyable climb, with a brilliant section of grade III climbing up a rocky slab. I think we need to sharpen our crampons at some point, because we have done an awful lot



of rock scrambling wearing them! The summit of Dufourspitze sits at 4634m and is the highest mountain in Switzerland, and second only to Mont Blanc within Europe. Despite this impressive status, the mountain seems to remain humble amongst its surroundings, as the Monte Rosa group contains 6 of the 10 highest Alpine peaks.

The descent from the North side of Dufourspitze is facilitated by a series of fixed ropes; again we used a via ferrata technique and looped our slings around the rope. It was quite chaotic passing other parties and I can't imagine what it would be like on a busy weekend day! This lead down to a col, with a short ridge climb to reach the summit of Nordend, which had an unexpectedly spicy rock scramble to the top! It was a wonderful feeling to be stood on top of the 18th and final peak of the Monte Rosa circuit. We wondered how many parties complete the whole circuit, with all the peaks, each season and decided it couldn't be all that many. We were elated, and had been incredibly fortunate with the weather and conditions which had been absolutely perfect every single day.



The descent took absolutely forever, with a final killer 300m ascent to reach the Rotenboden rail station. I have never been so overjoyed to get on a train before! It carried us comfortably back down the valley to Zermatt.

19/07/13: Dom



The first two days that we had planned to walk up Dom we awoke to thunder and lightning, and so it was third time lucky that we packed up our things and set off up to the Dom hut. We thought we would be feeling really fit after our time in the Monta Rosa group and our three rest days, but in fact the 1500m ascent up to the Dom hut felt like a total nightmare! There was a good atmosphere at the hut, because everybody was planning to ascend Dom, and so there was a feeling of a shared goal. We set off at 2am the next morning as part of a long chain of headtorches winding our way up the glacier and onto the side of the mountain. Tim and I were both feeling strangely sleepy, almost dozing off as we walked! Dom was challenging in a different sort of way to the other mountains we have climbed; it was technically easy but very long - in fact it has the greatest vertical ascent of all the 4000ers, (3100m!) since its starting point is at the bottom of the valley. And so with no difficulties to keep the mind occupied, all you could focus on was *step...step...step...* and it was so tiring! But eventually we found ourselves on the summit where we were rewarded with stunning views. Looking over to the South, we could see the Matterhorn standing proud and it didn't look like there was much snow on the ridge; we got quite excited by the idea of climbing it and agreed that we would phone the Hornli Hut to find out about conditions as soon as we got down.

21/07/13: Matterhorn

After a relatively late start we packed the bags with the rest of the food we had brought from the UK. After 8 weeks it had almost run out. We parked the car in a layby above Tasch and caught the train up to Zermatt. The climb to the Hornli hut starts from the Schwarze lift station and so having unburdened ourselves of 49 CHF each we set off on the short hut walk. Clearly as a mountain climber above Zermatt you become an instant celebrity, there were endless cheery greetings as the stream of tourists saw the ice axes adorning our rucksacks. After arriving at the hut we cooked our pasta and custard and then to bed with a great deal of anticipation for the following day. We awoke at 0330 and entered the dining room to a rush of people. The atmosphere was different to anywhere we had yet been with many people eating breakfast with their ropes already coiled around their shoulders. The first moves of the climb are equipped with a fixed rope and as we moved across the snow patch at the bottom we joined a queue of around 15 people so setting the scene for the day.

As we moved up the ridge and through the Mosely slabs the climb felt more like a race to join the queue at the start of the next climbing section. Finally clearing the queues above the emergency bivouac hut we put on our crampons and started climbing up the fixed ropes. Having been deposited onto the summit ice field we climbed in zig zags using the fixed stakes as running belays up onto the summit crest. The top was a little awkward with insufficient space for the ten people or so who all wanted to be there at once and so we caught a few summit photos and then started on the equally long route down.

Descending the summit icefield there was a degree of objective danger from ice blocks falling from the parties above, after Anna had been hit in the face we were a little worried about looking upwards. The descent went faster than expected with only a single abseil just beneath the bivouac hut and we reached the Hornli hut around 1330.





23/07/13: Weisshorn



Having spent the night at the campsite in Tasch we made the decision to walk up to the Weisshorn hut. On our way up to the hut, we met a couple who had just descended from the summit. They were surprised to hear that we were planning the Weisshorn, because *the weather tomorrow is not good, and there is nobody else at the hut!* This made us nervous, and on our arrival at the hut, the warden also advised us that *the weather is bad*. Confused, because the forecast we had seen was good, we decided it must be some strange hut rumour! The next morning, we set off at 2am and followed the footprints across the snowy glacier. They lead to an improbable looking section of a rock band, and despite our best efforts we ended up a little off route and got a bit of a soaking from a waterfall!

Back on route we continued up the glacier shelf and onto a subsidiary rock ridge. I think we had both noticed the lack of stars in the usually clear night sky, and the heavy blanket of clouds that was suppressing the now rising sun. And then it started snowing. But despite this, it still took a lot of strength to actually voice the issue with one another... *maybe the weather is bad!* And so with heavy hearts, we began to descend.

Back at the hut, we felt very frustrated, and battled with a strong desire to just descend to the valley however after a few hours rest and a bite to eat we decided that we should stay another night. Reassuringly, there were ten other people now staying at the hut who all planned to climb Weisshorn the next day. For the first time during our trip, we enjoyed the luxury of a hut dinner (since we had only brought for one night), and even got 'seconds' of all courses!

The following morning, we returned to our high point and continued up the subsidiary ridge to join the East Ridge which leads to the summit. The climbing was enjoyable, and we moved together quickly making fast progress towards the final snowy ridge.



The last 400m of height is on snow, and unfortunately for us there were no tracks through the knee deep powder. Progress was slow and tiring, but before long, the guide and client behind caught up with us, and the guide kindly broke trail for the rest of the way to the summit rocks! It was very misty as the sun was coming up, which created a beautiful orange glow; it felt eerie and magical and allowed for some great photos.



We had climbed the mountain pretty fast, arriving back at the hut by midday and so we continued our descent to the valley. We drove back down the valley to Stalden, and turned up the Saastal valley to spend a night at the campsite-with-a-pool in Saas Grund.

26/07/13: Taschhorn



The next morning our alarm woke us up at 6am, but feeling totally exhausted we decided that we deserved a couple more hours sleep! After taking the lift and train up to the “Metro Allalin” station, we found ourselves paying for the extra snooze as we trudged up the soggy snow slope that had been softened by the morning sun.

The ascent of Taschhorn involves climbing a long rock ridge that rises from the Mischabeljoch, where there is a bivouac hut. Today’s goal was to reach the bivouac hut, re-ticking the peak Alphubel en-route which we had climbed the previous year. As we climbed the steep snowy slope towards the summit of Alphubel, an avalanche started from up high, and a whole section of the hill slid away a mere 5m away from us. It was quite surreal to see the slope moving as if it were a river. We continued with haste to the summit, from where you

can see a load of the Zermatt mountains including the Matterhorn. We recalled having stood here a year ago, thinking *we should climb that one day!* It was pretty cool to look over and know that we had achieved that particular goal!

We descended a rocky band on the east side of Alphubel to reach the hut. For some reason we had decided to take an inordinate amount of food with us, and spent an enjoyable afternoon eating and playing cards! Although, ever-looming outside the window was the sight of the beginning of the ridge of Taschhorn which looked like a terrifying pile of choss!



Two other pairs had joined us at the hut and were also planning to attempt Taschhorn. With an early start, we set off up the ridge under a wonderfully starry sky. Tim led the way and somehow managed to stick to the "path" - it was always a bit surprising, and reassuring, when we came across a cairn - *oh, this is the right way!!* There were quite a few snowy sections on the ridge which we found a bit scary. The snow was very soft, and it took care to tell which bits were corniced and which lay on solid ground, and there was always a huge drop below! I think the particular snow conditions made the route a bit more difficult than usual. In the photo below you can just make out the footsteps along the right hand side of the sharp snowy ridge.



But soon we found ourselves at the steeper summit rocky section (which was also pretty loose and chossy!), and eventually, on the summit! The mist disappeared for long enough to allow us a couple of brilliant summit shots with a bright blue sky.



Back at the bivouac hut, we now had to decide which way to descend. We could either go back up Alphubel and down the other side, or straight down from the hut, which the guidebook says is *not recommended in descent*, due to its complexity. Since it looked like there were some footsteps going straight down, we opted for the latter option. At first it all went very well, but then the footsteps disappeared and we found ourselves stuck at the bottom of the glacier, which was very crevassed with big drops down onto the lower slopes. After what felt like forever, (with a bit of retracing footsteps back uphill, jumping over crevasses, and belaying down particularly icy sections), we eventually escaped the dodgy ground and made it down to the lift station. Despite having made such a meal of it, we were still well within the guidebook's timing -as if it had allocated a whole load of extra time for getting lost and were saying *I told you that would happen!*

30/07/13: Mont Blanc, Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, Mont Maudit and Mont Blanc du Tacul



It was the first time either of us had been to Chamonix, and the vibe was very different to anywhere else we had been. For starters, there were a lot more English speaking people around (in Switzerland we hardly met any climbers from the UK), and the town had much more of a *climbers* feel to it, with an impressive collection of gear shops. After three very enjoyable rest days, we packed our bags and took an afternoon lift up to Aiguille de Midi.

We had taken a tent with us and descending to the col du midi it looked like we were joining several other tents for the night ahead. There was a lot of fresh snow, perhaps as much as 30cm, but as there had been a day of good weather since the storm we were able to take advantage of fairly well established tracks. After digging out a snow pit we soon had our tent pitched with stunning views across the Mont Blanc Massif.



The following morning we made a fairly late start, setting off at about 6am just as the sun was rising. After a couple of hours of walking, there was a tricky section leading up to the Col du Mont Maudit, involving steep powder snow with an icy base underneath. Once over the col, it became incredibly windy! It was an icy, cutting wind and as we zig-zagged up towards the summit of Mont Blanc, it alternated between being a side-wind, and one that was full on in your face. Eventually we reached the summit, and sought refuge from the wind by dropping over the far side of the ridge. Here it was still and peaceful, and as we caught back our breath we felt delighted to be on top of Europe's highest peak. It also represented the completion of our "top ten highest" list, and this gave us a great deal of satisfaction.





We walked over the far side to reach the subsidiary peak of “Mont Blanc de Courmayeur”, and then returned to the top of Mont Blanc, to meet a fresh set of people on the summit.

In descent, we retraced our steps until shortly before the summit of Mont Maudit. We climbed to the summit via an icy/snowy slope, and descended rocks on the far side to return to the col.



We finished the day with a final short detour to gain the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul, which had a rather exciting icy section at the top, and involved a bit of axe swinging! From the summit, we got a fantastic view of all the tops we had climbed that day.



The following morning we took the first lift back down to Chamonix. Even though Mont Blanc presented no great technical difficulty, its status gives it an air of distinction and it was certainly a perfect finale to what has been an incredible trip. Having achieved our modified goal of climbing the ten highest peaks, and with a total of 38 summits we are proud of our efforts and fully inspired for many adventures to come!

Still smiling!!



Summary: Skills and lessons learnt

Having returned from our trip and after a chance to reflect it seems strange to think that the vast majority of skills we have developed have very little relation to climbing. Things like tolerance and patience; both with the weather and climbing conditions as well as each other seem to have improved!

Clearly as well as the above our alpine climbing abilities have progressed a great deal. We have become more comfortable on snow, rock and mixed terrain allowing for less stressful and increasingly rapid progress as the trip went on. Interpreting the weather and snow condition was also a learning point for us. We are now more confident in deciding when it is appropriate to turn back and how to go about making these decisions.

More than anything though we are also full of ideas and inspiration for the coming seasons, perhaps with a more technical aspect after our thorough grounding in classical alpinism.

Accounts: See attached.

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Acknowledgments: With thanks to Alpkit, MCofS, sportscotland and the Julie Tullis Memorial Award