

Expedition Report 2016

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Mont Blanc Massif



The following is a short account of our successful expedition to the French Alps this summer, culminating in a summit attempt of Mont Blanc itself (4810m).

Our expedition had three aims; to gain mountaineering experience and to climb some of the classic alpine summits, to progress in our French language skills, and to learn more about the mountain medicine and expedition medicine communities and careers.

Alpine climbing is a difficult thing to explain. It is a sport that is not really appreciated by anyone but other climbers. It draws on the basic elements of rock climbing, classic mountaineering, and fitness. Few mountain locations worldwide invite this sport, but the French alps with its year round high altitude ski lifts, close proximity to civilization, mountain hut system, and helicopter rescue teams make this modern fast-and-light approach to mountaineering a possibility. Most of the alpine peaks during our trip took the following format; preparing and eating food, starting to hike at midday, aiming to reach the evening's camp or hut by sunset. A large alpine dinner in the company of Italian, Swiss, or French climbers, along with plenty of cheap wine to drink and an early nights sleep. Day two is summit day, and usually begins with an 'alpine start'; 3am alarm clocks, followed by a glacier crossing in the night lit by a small train of head torches, before reaching the base of the climb by sunrise. The summit should be reached by midday to allow return down to a safer part of the mountain by early afternoon, as late afternoon is associated with melting ice and bad weather rolling in.

During our 17-day trip we climbed 10 mountains, which we were really pleased with. For us this trip was a huge step, and one to remember for the rest of our lives. Two years of preparation have gone into the skills and experience and it was well worth it - there is a true and simple pleasure in spending the evening in the company of friends around a map planning the next mountain to climb. Indeed the one thing forcing us to stop climbing was exhaustion or inclement weather! Throughout the course of the expedition we only had 3 days of bad weather - almost unheard of in the Alps.

Throughout the days at camp and the days on the mountains, the end goal was always kept in mind. At 4810m, Mont Blanc is not nearly one of the highest mountains in the world, though by comparison to its European counterparts makes it a difficult mountain to fully acclimatize for (there are hundreds of mountains in the Alps over 3000m, but only a handful over 4000m).

Summit day saw us setting our alarm clocks for 00:45 and set off into the night high over Chamonix, settling into the steady train of head torches navigating their way between crevasses in the dark. We made good time, passing many of the slower moving parties so that we had a good chance to climb clean ice by the time sunrise hit. This we did, and made our way onto the summit plateau for 08:30am. Hugs and photos allowed a short break before the hellish decent of 3500 meters left our knees battered down at the train station 16 hours after we had set off, 17:30pm. We collapsed into a hearty meal and slept better than we ever have done!



It's worth mentioning that central to this trip was the socializing with other climbers, skiers, hikers, and village dwellers in the Chamonix valley. Never have I ever felt so European as on this trip, tied onto a rope with friends from all around the continent. Paradoxically it was this same day we heard the result of the EU referendum, and Britain's decision to leave. I feel this trip reinforced my views that the UK should have remained a part of this union, not for the economical arguments but those in which internationalism and cohesion should be fully embraced.

French language was never a subject I enjoyed at school, and is something I have come to regret more and more each year. It was with great pleasure then that I was introduced to a very fiery 8-year-old French girl on the campsite one morning keen to school me in French. Her father was British, and ran the campsite with his French wife. Her mother was also particularly feisty, and refused to entertain conversation with me unless I sweated under a poor French vocabulary. So my French slowly improved. Conversations with folk in town, and other climbers were helpful. Now back at term time in London I can converse on a basic level with my French friends and have picked up some useful phrases!

I am incredibly grateful for the support of the QM Expeditions Fund. Without the assistance I would have not been able to afford the equipment needed for the trip. The Alps and Mont Blanc will always be a special place to me after this once in a lifetime trip.