

The Alps in summer time are fantastic, blue skies, snow capped mountains cool fresh air a welcome change from our so called 'BBQ summer' back in the UK. Myself and 5 mates were in Chamonix for a week of high mountain adventure culminating in the ascent of Mont Blanc, the highest peak in Western Europe, all 4810m of her!

It was a guided trip, with a great team from McNab Alpine, guys with years of experience so we were in safe hands.

Our week started with ice axe and crampon practice on the famous Mer de Glace, this huge Glacier carves its way down the valley parallel with Chamonix, an awesome spectacle of nature, solid ice with huge crevices that can be hundreds of metres deep.

A 3 day expedition followed, out into the Mountains and vast glaciers at the Argentiere end of the valley. This was a fantastic part of the trip, the main aim was to acclimatise ourselves for our main ascent, the air obviously gets thinner the higher you get and our bodies needed to get use to this change.

The Alps are dotted with huts which are great places to stay, you can get hot food, even a beer. Our first stay was the Albert Premier perched at around 3000m, the sun was out and the view was great. To add to the experience we were in the presence of mountain royalty, on the terrace was Sir Chris Bonington, we had a great chat with him and found out he was climbing Mont Blanc that week also, maybe we'd meet him later in the week?

The following two days meant early starts, crossing the surrounding glaciers and peaks, the sun rising with the deepest orange glow, occasionally the glaciers would crack and rumble beneath us as they slowly moved creating another crevasse ready to swallow you up.

After abseiling into Switzerland, and another night in a hut our guides took us back to the Chalet to prepare for the next days challenge...Mont Blanc.

Unfortunately due to a fitness and experience issue one of our team had to drop out, the ascent would not be possible for him, 5 of us remained, would we all make it? Statistically 1 in 3 people only manage the summit, it wasn't looking good

Our summit day started with beautiful blue skies, bad weather was expected later in the day so we had to get moving fast, Mont Blanc claims many lives each year, a combination of high altitude and bad weather are deadly.

The Aiguille de Midi cable car took us to our start point of 3800m, the cable car station is perched high on the edge of the Mont Blanc Massif, an awesome feat of engineering.

At this point things just became a blur adrenaline kicked in as we geared up with harnesses and crampons. We were split into 3 groups with our guides, things then got very serious as we had to descend from the cable station down to the relative safety of the plateau beneath. The Aiguille aëte is an icy ridge; barely 2ft wide, there is no room for hesitation or error, to the right is a 300m drop to the plateau to the left a 3000m sheer drop down to Chamonix! we headed down the ridge slowly and carefully, we were roped together, but one slip would have been very serious indeed, on the plateau everyone sighed with relief realising what we'd just done.

The route we were to take is named the 'trois monts', we had to take in Mont Blanc Tacul, Mont Maudit and then Finally Mont Blanc. We sat and looked ahead at our route, tiny antlike figures could be seen zigzagging up through the snow fields ahead of us, the distances looked vast and a majority of the gradient was extremely steep, this was going to be tough. We were already feeling the effects of the altitude, waves of nausea and light headedness made it seem an even harder task.

We started to move off in our groups, at this kind of height if you try and tear off you feel it immediately, the thinner air makes you breath heavily, your legs and arms are like lead, you just have to plod.

The first peak of Tacul was hard, the sun was beating down, and I had a constant thirst, the air

was dry and it was hard to catch your breath, we'd estimated a 6hr slog to the summit and then a 3hr hike to reach our overnight hut. Mont Blanc Tacul took 2hrs to summit, my mate Rob who I was partnered with was struggling, he felt sick and the altitude had sapped him. We stopped to fuel up with jelly babies and choc, the rest of the guys had to carry on.

This left a gap between us, we wouldn't summit as a group, we didn't mind we just wanted to make it. The slog up the next section of Mont Maudit was even steeper, huge seracs of ice and snow hung over the track, we passed the occasional mountaineer on their way down from the summit, one of them seemed familiar...yes it was Chris Bonington again, this guy is in his mid 70's he looked fresh as a daisy after just summiting, that's what a life of mountaineering does for you! He offered us words of encouragement which we're a real boost. I'd started to flag by this point and just didn't think I'd make it, but Sir Chris had added that vital ingredient.

To get over Mount Maudit a 60m near vertical ice gully needs to be negotiated, our guide went ahead to set ropes up, we sat and waited enjoying the rest and the views. The Alps lay beneath us we were at around 4400m, we could see the Eiger and the Matterhorn in the distance and Chamonix was a speck below us.

We we're instructed to start climbing the gully, it made a change from the slog as we we're both concentrating on not slipping. The top of the ridge revealed the route to the summit, long straight forward zig-zag to the top, no scary, ridges or gulleys just head down and plod.

We could see the rest of our group in front, the gap between them had opened up, all 3 teams of us would summit separately. We set off on the last 400m of ascent, this was the hardest part, the summit seemed so close but it took a good 2hrs to reach from the ice gully. My head was pounding, my chest was heaving and my limbs were like deadweight's..... Finally at 3.15pm on Tuesday 1st September 2009 I summited Mont Blanc with my mate Rob and guide Andy, it was a very emotional moment and we all hugged to congratulate each other, for a brief moment we were the highest people in Western Europe, it was an amazing feeling. The tiredness and fatigue ebbed away as we took in the views, there was nothing but mountains below us, the scale is hard to appreciate, I can't think of the words to describe that spectacle, it wouldn't do it justice.

Clouds were coming in, evidence of the bad weather predicted, we need to get moving and quickly, we started our descent along the Bosses ridge, the wind had picked up and the cloud closed in dark and brooding, electrical storms are common in the alps we needed to get lower and fast. Our guide picked up the pace, we we're both shattered by this point but it was no place to be tired, the trudge down seems a blur, all I could think of was a big steak, beer and bed, but that was a way off yet.

It took us 3 hrs to descend to our refuge for the night, The Gouter hut. This is the busiest hut in the Alps which means it's the dirtiest and smelliest but we didn't care it was safe and warm. We were all reunited as a group, a very emotional time, we had all made the summit, we we're very happy but totally shattered.

We headed down the mountain the following morning, a vicious storm had raged outside all night, new snow had fallen, we had been very lucky with the weather; I wouldn't have liked to have been out in that. We finally reached the valley and real safety, we'd had the most amazing week and achieved our goal, it was a fantastic experience and we'll have it with us for the rest of our lives.

We all agreed it was the toughest thing we've done, Mont Blanc is an awesome mountain, its beauty and spectacle shield the fact it is dangerous and deadly, without our guides we'd never had attempted it, like all mountains it demands respect, but with respect comes rewards and adventure.

