

## **Trip Report: The Mont Blanc Alpine Adventure**

**Date:** 28th June-5th July 2003

**Group:** Jim G (leafer) Doris (Colin Christie), Horace (Tony Quinn), Orangina Jim (Jim Walker), Phil Green, Andy Green, Bob Capes (base camp manager) Gillian Grant (UK transport manager)

**Route:** The Gouter Ridge to the summit of Mont Blanc

**Total Distance:** See below

**Total Ascent:** See below

**Weather:** See below

This was the first Alpine expedition of **Bunbury Unlimited Mountaineers**. The objective was to scale the highest peak in the Alps, **Mont Blanc 4808m**.

This is a personal diary of events as they unfolded and are not necessarily the views of all the participants!

### **Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> June**

Bunbury and a 7am start, Gillian kindly agreed to act as our chauffeur to and from Manchester Airport. Gillian dropped us off at Terminal 3. Inside total chaos has broken out due to a baggage-handling problem. Jim Grant's British Airways Gold Card comes in useful, as we jump to the front of the queue ahead of 100's of disgruntled plebs.

We land at Geneva Airport and as arranged the ATS driver is there to collect us, a big Aussie bloke with a sense of humour (except about Rugby), he telephones ahead for the man to meet us at the Chamonix apartment. The apartment is excellent, right in the middle of Chamonix and next door to an English Pub!

Andy and Phil arrive at the apartment and we then go out for a few beers at the Queen Vic followed by a shopping trip to the Supermarket, followed by a few more beers, early night, ish.

Orangina Jim and Bob see the Chamonix Marathon event scheduled for Monday and both decide to enter the half marathon, subject to the over 50's medical!

### **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> June**

A designated acclimatisation day for Jim G, Doris, Horace, Andy and Phil. Andy collects us in his car and takes us to the Grand Montet Telepherique in Argentiere (which only opened this weekend for the summer season!) Rope and crampon work on the slopes down to the Argentiere Glacier, very hot! Followed by more rope and crampon work on the steep icy slopes up to the Petite Aiguille Verte.

Phil decides to dive off on the descent to test Doris's braking technique. Doris fails miserably to arrest Phil's fall and they both slither to a halt without taking the full squad into oblivion. See a big rock fall from the Aiguille Verte ridge (dislodged by some Horace) it very nearly creams two climbers falling right between them.

Witnessed another huge trundle/avalanche of rock and ice go thundering down the Coutourier Couloir. Return via Telepherique to Argentiere and back to Chamonix.

Orangina Jim has won his class in the half marathon (over 60's?). We go to the awards ceremony, which lasts for hours, Orangina Jim collects tacky French plastic trophy.

Have loads of beers and Orangina's and a nice meal.

### **Monday 30<sup>th</sup> June**

A major acclimatisation day planned at the Cosmiques Hut for the full squad. Walk from the apartment to the Aiguille du Midi Telepherique. Weather is starting to get a bit iffy, high winds forecast above 4000m. Airy Telepherique ride to the Aiguille du Midi. Walk through to tunnel entrance that leads to the descent down the ice ridge to the Valle Blanche. Jim G slips over on ice patch with crampons in hand and stabs himself, lots of blood frightens Japanese tourists and rest of squad. Roped up and geared up we then descend the ice ridge with Jim G in lead and Andy as anchor man, very narrow in places with odd crevasse and some very icy bits, whole squad cope well apart from Horace whose crampon comes off!! Reach the Valle Blanche and then traverse under the South Face of the Midi (lots of rock climbers) and the Epron du Cosmiques to the Cosmiques Hut.

Hut is like a 5 star hotel where we drink chocolate and rest/acclimatise for the rest of the day/night. The weather is deteriorating with wind and cloud. Doris comes down with the lurgy, food poisoning caused by crème brulee? Boiling hot/headache/coughing lumps etc. etc.

The state of the ascent routes up Mont Blanc du Tacul and Mont Maudit are alarming with a number of huge crevasses and seracs that look very difficult in ascent and probably impossible in descent. Andy and I decide that this route (our preferred route!) is not viable for our group.

Time for a rethink.

### **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> July**

The following morning the weather has finally gone bad. Very windy and cloudy with persistent rain/sleet/snow. Nobody makes a move (including guides) to go up any routes. People drift out all heading back to the Midi

Telepherique. Doris is still dying. Orangina Jim/Phil/Andy go out for a flog to have a look at the crevasses and seracs on Mont Blanc du Tacul. Rest of us sit around in hut reading and resting.

Orangina Jim/Phil/Andy return suitably scared.

We re-ascend the icy ridge in poor weather back to the Aiguille du Midi without incident, very few people about.

Accosted in the Midi tunnel by bunch of snap happy Japanese tourists who want all their pictures taken with tall handsome mountaineers like Jim G and Andy and Orangina Jim (not dwarfs!)

Telepherique back to Chamonix.

Queen Vic for beers and pool competition (England 5 Scotland 1). We meet Andy's lady friend Cio, who is joining us for the summit attempt on Mont Blanc.

### **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> July**

This is the big day. Given that the Cosmiques Route is out of the question we now have no choice but to attempt the Gouter Ridge. We have been unable to get booked into the Gouter Hut at all. The only option open to us is to attempt the summit from the Tete Rousse Hut which is a big ask in terms of distance and height gain. The only night we can get booked in the Tete Rousse Hut is tonight. Our summit bid is a one shot deal and the weather forecast is very poor. We catch the bus from Chamonix to Les Houches at 10.30am it is warm and sunny. We take the Telepherique from Les Houches to Bellevue where we catch the Mont Blanc Tramway to Nid d'Aigle, which is full of touristo's. At Nid d'Aigle the weather is cloudy and breezy and does not look very encouraging. We set out to walk up to the Tete Rousse Hut up a wild and remote rocky ridge, it takes approx. 1hour 40minutes which is well inside the guide book time, the acclimatisation seems to be paying off. Arriving at the Tete Rousse Hut we can see the Gouter Hut way above us. The steep rocky face up to the Gouter is covered in fresh snow and looks interesting/exciting!

They are building a new hut behind the old Tete Rousse but the team are unimpressed with the existing outside toilets. Orangina Jim makes the mistake of looking down the hole and breathing in!

Inside the Tete Rousse it is like a refrigerator, the main room is about the size of the Library in the Dysart! Ask the Hut Guardian what the Meteo forecast for tonight is, he responds "bad".

By now the team has all their spare clothing on, Phil has his waterproof jacket on as well. We retire to the bunk beds with everyone shivering themselves awake, Doris and Horace break into fits of giggles, not much sleep is had by anyone other than Orangina Jim who snores for Scotland.

We look like Snow White (Cio) and the six dwarfs. Dinner is scheduled for 7pm; a check outside confirms that the weather is getting steadily worse with rising wind, snow flurries and poor visibility. Dinner is awful, consisting of thin vegetable soup followed by polenta (I think) with a piece of pork, ugh! Then a whole prune in some sort of set custard. Luckily Andy was able to finish most of everybody else's. Had a chat with team and explained that conditions were poor and getting worse with increasing wind and poor visibility. Had a long chat outside with Andy to assess the chances of getting to the summit in the conditions, conclusion was not very good. Andy and I agreed to get up at midnight to re-assess conditions and to make a decision whether an attempt was on.

We all went to bed at approx. 9pm with the temperature in the hut a bit better due to the cooking (Phil still wearing his waterproof jacket) slept very little, Orangina Jim still snoring for Scotland!

Andy and I get up at midnight to have a look outside. Through the hut window we could see the lights of Saint Gervais beneath us, had the weather cleared? Opening the door we were greeted by a Scottish blizzard. Snowing steadily on a very blustery wind with virtually nil visibility above the Hut. It was a very easy decision to make. We would certainly have had an epic trying to get up to the Gouter Hut by head torch in those conditions. The very high winds (90 km/hour) forecast at 4000m+ would preclude any chance of summiting so there was little point in setting out on a very difficult and risky ascent to the Gouter Hut. We went back to bed.

### **Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> July**

Breakfast is served at 7am. Resembled the poor dinner the night before. Tepid coffee with powdered milk, dry bread and jam. Nobody was in any hurry to move; those that left were heading down to the valley, not up to the Gouter Hut. Outside the hut the weather resembles a Scottish Winters day. About 3" of fresh snow has fallen overnight it is windy and very cloudy. The steep approach slopes to the Gouter Hut are virtually white from the fresh snowfall, the ascent of which would be very testing! We leave the hut at approx. 8.15am with full waterproof clothing, balaclavas etc; descending the very snowy ridge with the wind and snow still swirling around. As we get lower the snow turns to persistent rain right down to the Train Station at the Point Nid d'Aigle. We pass a troop of Horaces who have come up on the first train heading for the Tete Rousse and Gouter Huts. We arrive at the station at approx. 9.15am; the next train is due at 10.25am. We decide to plod down the railway tracks, in the rain, to Bellevue arriving at 10.30am.

A short wait at the Telepherique station before descending to Les Houches. At a local café we "celebrate" with a café au lait and brandy while waiting for the bus to Chamonix.

Returning to the apartment we enjoy a shower, lunch and a couple of beers before venturing to the Queen Vic for a sustained Amstel session and watching the Tennis. Ends up in a very rowdy pool session (with great heavy rock music on jukebox) we depart at an unspecified time. Doris is unable to finish his final pint, yes he is a Scotsman, and this may explain why he was deported South!

### **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> July**

Planned walk along the Balcon Sud is abandoned due to persistent heavy rain with cloud down to the valley floor. Most of squad go off shopping for presents. Cleaner turns up and attempts to throw us out claiming that we are scheduled to leave on Friday! Horace is far from convincing in his defence but we manage to persuade her to go away. It turns out that we were supposed to be out on Friday but luckily nobody was booked in! Horace still hotly disputes this but the rest of us are not convinced.

The final beer session kicks off at 12 noon with Jim G/Doris/Horace and Bob. Phil joins us later, we return to apartment and meet up with Orangina Jim, Andy and Cio. We go out for a farewell meal at our favourite restaurant Les Drus for food, wine and beer.

Session continues in the Internet Bar where we are now all on the wine, several bottles later we decamp to the Queen Vic for more beers and pool. The real drinkers carry on (Jim G/Doris/Horace/Bob) until evicted at 2am. Not sufficiently full (and in a vain attempt to make up for previously unfinished beers) Doris drags us into Les Choucas for a final small beer before leaving at 2.30am and a well-earned rest.

### **Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> July**

Andy collects Phil at 6am for the journey to Geneva. Rest of squad are recovering from previous day's exertions, rising at 8.30 ish. Final packing and tidy up of apartment before cleaner shows up. ATS mini-bus is scheduled to collect us at 9.50am; we are standing outside when original Aussie driver walks by. We accost him and he phones ATS to chase driver, pick up is scheduled for 10.30 so we retire to café for coffee and croissants. Arrive Geneva Airport at approx. 11.30am to book in. Bob gets bumped off the flight, as it is over booked. Flown to Birmingham with Business Class upgrade, Taxi from there to home and £65 cash compensation. Uneventful flight to Manchester where Gillian is outside to collect us.

Saturday night we have a celebration dinner in The Dysart Arms and Bob generously throws his £65 compensation into the kitty.

The end of a big adventure, we should not be too disappointed, no other parties reached the summit the week that we were there including any of the very experienced local guides!

Jim G