

# Shortcut to the summit

Mont Blanc | Skiing from the top of the Alps' highest peak demands time, effort and commitment – but there is an easier way. By *Tom Robbins*

From almost any point in the French town of Chamonix, you can look up and see the summit of Mont Blanc, a pure white dome rising serene above a chaos of tumbling glaciers and jagged rocks. It draws the eye and the imagination as you sit outside a bar, catches you by surprise as you fumble with bags outside a supermarket, pops up in your rear-view mirror as you park – the eternal refusing to be obscured by the mundane. Maybe the locals have grown oblivious, but for visitors it is hard not to stop and stare: the top is 3,775 metres – more than two vertical miles – above the town, significantly more than the height of Everest above its base camp.

I had been looking up at it for years, from Chamonix and from other ski resorts in France, Switzerland and Italy, where instructors would invariably pause to point it out on the horizon with the tips of their ski poles. This time, though, was different – I was coming not just to look, but to attempt to stand atop the “dread and silent mount”, as Coleridge had it, then ski down, carving the S-shapes of my own turns into his “crystal shrine”. The idea felt fantastical, irreverent, probably foolhardy, and as the plane descended towards Geneva and the familiar peak loomed large in the window, for the first time in my life, I looked anxiously away.

There is no ski lift to the top of the Alps' highest peak, 4,810 metres above sea level; you have to walk up. The usual minimum for out-of-towners is a week, with four days spent warming up and



acclimatising in the surrounding mountains, then two days for the summit bid, staying overnight in a high refuge en route. I had tried once before – an attempt thwarted by an incoming storm before we'd even put on our skis. Years had passed and with a growing family, declining fitness and a drastic lack of free time, I was growing used to the idea of leaving it unticked on my bucket list. But then Gavin Foster, a British tour operator based in Chamonix, suggested an alternative, a shortcut to the summit that would maximise the chance of success and minimise the time away from desk and family duties.

Key is the fact that though heli-skiing is banned in France, it is permitted in Italy. The border runs along Mont Blanc's summit ridge, but at around 4,000 metres is a rocky spur called the Piton des Italiens that is wholly in Italy. The plan was to drive through the tunnel from Chamonix to Courmayeur, on the Italian side of the massif. There a helicopter would lift us to the Piton, from where we would begin the 800-

metre climb to the summit – still a tough challenge, given that the air up there contains 40 per cent less oxygen. If we made it to the top, we would clip into our skis, and drop down the north face back towards Chamonix.

Thus, the summit bid becomes a one-day trip instead of two – cutting the odds of being caught out by weather. More importantly, there is no need to sleep at high altitude on the mountain, so you can acclimatise for two days instead of four. By the time the effects of altitude begin to strike, you should already be skiing down. If all goes to plan, you can conquer Europe's most iconic peak, and only have to take one day off work.

Actually, if you can work remotely, you needn't take any time off. On May 4 this year, I found myself in France's highest café, perched on the summit of the Aiguille du Midi, a dramatic pinnacle on Mont Blanc's northern flank. Standing in Chamonix, Percy Shelley had looked up and imagined “a desert peopled by the storms alone”; today, a cable car brings tourists here in just 20 minutes, giving them a discombobulating taste of the high mountains and year-round snow. The summit station offers viewing platforms and telescopes, a gift shop, museum, an Insta-ready glass cubicle suspended over the abyss, and what must be Europe's most efficient place to acclimatise. You can sit all day working in the café – the coffee is expensive but the WiFi strong – getting used to the lack of oxygen at 3,842 metres, then return at night to the restorative air of the valley.

Efficient it might be, but sitting up there alone, pushing cursor around screen as the clouds swirled around outside, also created ideal conditions for introspection. Mooning about the museum, I came across a ski that had belonged to Rémy Lécuyer, a renowned extreme skier and guide with whom I'd once spent a week, culminating in a descent on the Midi, yards from where I stood. Clever and funny, by far the best skier I had ever seen, he was killed in an avalanche later that same year – my story about our trip ended up an unintended epitaph, posted up at his funeral.

Like views of Mont Blanc, in Chamonix death is never far away. The week before my visit, seven skiers had died in a storm on the Chamonix-Zermatt “haute route”. Earlier that month Dr Emmanuel Cauchy, the town's celebrated mountain rescue expert, had himself been taken by an avalanche. Though there are no official figures covering all of the mountain, there is little doubt Mont Blanc is the world's deadliest peak. In 2017, 11 people died on the “voie normale” alone – the path deemed easiest and safest and so used by the vast majority of commercial trips. That figure is more than that year's total for every route on Everest.

Risk has always been part of the game, even part of the allure, if we dare to admit it. Once I would have been happy to go along with the line at the end of the skier's guidebook to Mont Blanc: “better to be lost to one's passion than to lose one's passion”. But with kids at home, such Alpine aphorisms seemed increasingly banal.

The following day I met up with my guide, Gilbert Matillat, and we set off for a warm-up ski tour on the Aiguille du



Clockwise from main: skiers approaching the summit of Mont Blanc; Tom Robbins and Gilbert Matillat assessing seracs on the north face; looking up to the summit from the centre of Chamonix

Mathis Dumas; Ben Tibbetts; Alamy

## DETAILS

Tom Robbins was a guest of Ski Weekend (skiweekend.com), which offers more conventional ski holidays as well as a range of off-piste, touring and heli-skiing options. The heli-assisted Mont Blanc trip costs from £1,689, including transfers, three nights' accommodation, mountain guiding and the heli-lift. For more general information on visiting the area, see [chamonix.com](http://chamonix.com)



Toule. Adrenalin helped subdue my anxieties, but Gilbert sucked my teeth when he looked at my equipment: standard downhill ski boots and fat, heavy, off-piste skis. Better to use lighter touring skis and boots with a “walk mode”, allowing your ankle to move, but it was too late to change now. Later, Ben Tibbetts, another guide who would accompany us to film a video, was less diplomatic: “Man, this is going to be a suffer-fest!”

We left Chamonix in the pre-dawn grey, quickly entering the neon-lit tunnel. By the time we emerged at the other end, it was light and we craned our necks to try to judge the weather – cloudy but brightening. “I think you're going,” said Gavin.

An excruciating hour on the helipad ensued, as the pilot came in and out of the hangar, scowling at the sky. Then suddenly it was go. He shouted at us to jump in and within a minute we were airborne, powering upwards along a wild ravine on the south-west side of the massif. In truth I can recall almost nothing about the flight – just the odd glimpse of rock pillars and scree slopes – memories flushed away by the rush of endorphins and the disbelief that this was finally, really, happening.

The helicopter touched down on the Piton, we clambered out, then it dropped rapidly away. Ordinarily, this is heli-skiing's

moment of transcendence, when, as the clattering of rotor blades fade, you turn and drink in the view and the silence. Today, though, I could think only of the summit. We fitted crampons to our boots and started off up the bank of snow and ice that reared above us.

After 30 minutes we emerged on to the Dôme du Gôûter, the lofty white cap visible for miles around. We switched from crampons to skis and poled across its flat top – just the three of us, in sunshine, on a white expanse the size of several football fields, the whole endeavour seeming temporarily benign. Beyond, where the snow steepened, we could see lines of people climbing up the usual routes having set out in the early hours from the Gôûter or Grands Mulets refuges. Perhaps 50 would try for the summit that day. In summer it can be several hundred; an estimated 20,000 attempt it each year.

Concerns about overcrowding are growing – 2019 will see a permit system introduced for the first time – but they are nothing new. In an editorial in 1856, the Times bemoaned “Mont Blanc mania”, complaining so many were climbing the mountain that “its majesty is stale”. Driving popularity was a show that ran in London's Piccadilly for six years, in which Albert Smith recounted his 1851 ascent, accompanied by painted dioramas, an orchestra, a pack of St Bernards and usherettes in dirndls. Both Charles Dickens and Queen Victoria were fans, even if Smith's climbing prowess was rather less impressive than his provisioning. With three friends, he was, according to some reports, “dragged” up the mountain by a team of 16 guides, while 18 porters carried 60 bottles of *vin ordinaire*, six of bordeaux, three of cognac and two of champagne.

True alpinists, with their keen wind-whittled code of ethics, will hold my heli-assisted exploits in similar disdain. In fact, I had forgone alcohol, though I was taking drugs – acetazolamide, a medication most commonly used for glaucoma but also effective in preventing altitude sickness, and readily available on the Chamonix black market.

Such shortcuts are anathema to many, but they work. We overtook team after team on the slope up to the Vallot hut (an observatory and emergency shelter at 4,362 metres), then switched back to crampons to start the Arête des Bosses, the ridge that leads to the summit.

Suddenly the ground steepened. We were scrambling upwards, using hands and knees as well as feet, and sinking into the deep soft snow. The wind had risen, whipping across the ridge; the temperature was somewhere around -10C. My heart rate rose alarmingly, blood throbbing in my ears, and at the same time, I caught a glimpse of the drop to our right – hundreds of metres of clear Italian air. I was panting hard and began to sense a rising panic, unsure how long I could keep this up.

Then, as quickly as my ordeal had started, it was over. After 10 minutes of torment, the gradient eased, my heart rate slowed, and all that lay in front of us was a gentle snowy ridge, a well-trodden path along it. We were at the top by 11.30am, three hours after leaving the Piton. We hugged, took a picture with ice-axes aloft, I said a silent prayer, and that, I thought, was that. All that remained was the treat, the ski down.

It took two turns on the north face to realise my mistake. Instantly my legs burnt, the muscles crying out for oxygen, the feeling that usually comes at the end of a long run not the start. Even so it was a sublime experience, dropping



down that first, steep section, the mighty spire of the Aiguille du Midi now a little needle far below us, Chamonix, the real world, hazy and indistinct beyond that.

“OK, rest for a few seconds,” advised Gilbert. “After that we must not stop.” The real danger of Mont Blanc, I was coming to understand, is not that you might fall off, but that something will fall on you. Much of our route was beneath huge seracs, beautiful but deadly ice cliffs that could collapse at any moment. This is what mountaineers call “objective danger”, a useful corrective to the machismo that pervades the sport. If a serac falls or a rock comes shooting down from a mile above, it doesn't matter if you are the world's best skier or a wobbling novice. The truth is that any relatively fit, relatively confident off-piste skier could ski Mont Blanc.

It got hot ridiculously quickly, the sun beating off the glaciers and making rockfalls and avalanches more likely. My gloved fingers had ached with cold at the top; an hour later I was stripped to a T-shirt. We kept moving, contouring around to the east, roping up to pass a section of crevasses and sidestepping up short sections. Sometimes you can ski all the way to town, but the snow had retreated in the sun so we had to make do with the mid-station of the Aiguille du Midi cable car. Two hours, 20 minutes after leaving the summit, and 2,500 metres lower, we slumped into the little bar outside to toast my first trip to the summit, Gilbert's 92nd.

Five hours later I was on a plane, with an altitude-induced headache but also a deep sense of satisfaction. As we took off and turned towards London, I could just make out the peak in the twilight.

For a video of the trip, see [ft.com/travel](http://ft.com/travel)

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