

Anselme Baud

Mont Blanc

and the Aiguilles Rouges

a guide for skiers



cordee

Rond Glacier and the Mallory will give you a certain amount of experience. It is, however, also true that Marco Siffredi and the Slovenian Karnicar's descents of Everest on snowboard and skis makes the Aiguille du Midi's 1000 metres or so seem a little small... but even so, it's still quite a ski! Let us not forget the laws of balance...

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

At the start of each of the main routes you will find a practical information section. These tables give a brief resumé of the essential information for the route, and include information on access, starting points and technical data about the descents themselves. Most of the route descriptions also include more precise advice and tips, and provide the reader with a detailed introduction to the route in question. The descents described in this book are generally the most popular or the most practical route for a particular slope, and those that I have skied and have enjoyed.

Below is a description and explanation of the data given in the practical information sections, together with their symbols.



STARTING POINT: This indicates where you start the route proper on skis or snowboard. Access to these points is, in general, included in brackets after the altitude (ski lift, road etc). Where the descent finishes in a different place from the starting point, this is described later on.



HEIGHT GAIN AND LOSS: A single set of arrows shows the height gain and loss for a day tour and a double set indicates a two-day tour (D1, D2).



ORIENTATION: This corresponds to the overall orientation of the route or, for certain routes, the orientation of a key point in the descent (main couloir etc). However, depending on how far into the season it is and the temperature, this does not necessarily give a good indication of the quality of the snow. This is especially true of those slopes that are exposed to low-angle sunlight at the beginning of the winter and in May and June.



PERIOD: This indicates the optimal point in the season for a descent. Nevertheless, this period can change quite significantly from one year to the next and it is strongly recommended that you check the conditions with the ski patrol, local weather forecasts and snow-report, guides bureaux etc...



TIME: The times given for the routes are based on a fit ski-mountaineer going at a steady pace. The timings given are from the Starting Point (see above) and include any climbing up and stops along the way as well as the descent itself. Obviously these times are going to be just a guide as the snow conditions, the level of fitness and size of rucksack of each group member will have a bearing on how long the route takes. Where necessary the timings are broken down per day and are based on a rate of ascent of 350 to 400 metres per hour.



PHOTO: This refers to the page containing a photograph of the numbered routes and/or any variants. These photos are merely a useful tool to help you identify the routes and are not intended to replace the relevant IGN map for the area.

→ Unbroken blue lines indicate the main route and any variants.

Dotted blue lines represent the part of a route that is hidden in the photograph.

---→ Broken blue lines show short descents that link two or more routes or slight variants that are very near the normal route.

→ Orange arrows show routes that have not been included in this book because they are too rarely in condition and are too hazardous for most of the time.

→ Green arrows show descents that are not included in this book because they are exceptionally difficult (ABO), and require helicopter lifts, and rappels etc.



TECHNICAL LEVEL: This grading system has a direct correlation with the skier and his or her technical ability. The grading system I use here is divided into four levels each of which have three sub-divisions. There is also a fifth level with an indefinite number of sub-divisions. This is only an indication of technical difficulty and is defined by the angle of the slope and the nature of the terrain. I have used the traditional mountaineering grading system for the overall feel of the route that takes into account the approach, the level of commitment, the time it takes and the route's difficulty. In this system F means 'facile' or easy, PD is 'peu difficile' or not moderately difficult, AD is 'assez difficile' or quite difficult, D is 'difficile' or difficult, TD is 'très difficile' or very difficult, ED is 'extrêmement difficile' which is extremely difficult and ABO stands for 'abominablement difficile' and refers to a very, very difficult route that is also extremely hazardous.

The level of technical ability required for a descent corresponds to the control that the skier has over his or her skis on firm snow (hard snow or snow slightly softened by the sun, or snow that you cannot really get your edges into). Conversely, when the snow is very heavy or when there is lots of powder and where falls are much easier to stop, the technical rating is very different. If this is the case, why not just ski in soft snow conditions? There are various factors to take into account when responding to this question:

- the top layer of snow must be stable enough to support a skier;
- the objective dangers such as rock fall, cornice collapse, slides caused by melting snow and ice etc should be minimal or one should be able to monitor and check them;
- on the way up to the start of the descent you should be able to get a good idea of the terrain and of the potential hazards (ice patches, rocks etc).

However, given the increasing numbers of extreme skiers and snowboarders attempting these kinds of slopes in soft snow, it would appear that these conditions are less rigorously adhered to than before... In any case, the technical grading can only be defined by using hard snow as the reference point.

- **Level 1** : beginner off-piste skier or boarder who can ski/board up to 30° slopes, sparsely wooded areas, wide couloirs and combs of less than 800 metres descent with minimal risk of avalanche.
EG: Pré du Rocher (Plan de l'Aiguille), Arpille de la Ravoire, Bec-Rond à Bavon, Col des Dards, Lacs Jovet.
- **Level 2** : comfortable on more uneven terrain, in more densely wooded conditions, on firmer and more difficult snow, and on 35° slopes that are longer than 800 metres.
EG: Aiguillette des Houches, Col Infranchissable
- **Level 3** : beginning to tour with good control over skis or board in couloirs, 40° and other longer and more committing slopes.
EG: Mont Blanc du Tacul, traverse of the Dômes de Miages, Armanette Glacier.
- **Level 4** : can descend steep slopes with short sections reaching 50°, narrow couloirs and very difficult terrain including very uneven glacier areas.
EG: Rond Glacier, Milieu Glacier, Spencer Couloir, Grandes Jorasses.
- **Level 5** : extreme skier or boarder who can descend long and sustained steep couloirs and slopes that are over 50°. The skier or boarder's technical ability is very advanced as is his or her mental preparedness. This level is open-ended and includes slopes above 55° that are very rarely in condition and are even more rarely skied or boarded.
EG: Couturier Couloir, north/north-east face of the Courtes.



SLOPE: Gradients for the slopes have been calculated using the 1/25000 IGN maps for the relevant area and in certain cases from measurements taken on the slopes themselves. These figures are always open to adjustment. It goes without saying that the quality of the snow on the day will ultimately determine the difficulty of the descent. An icy 35° slope is clearly going to be more difficult to safely ski than a 45 or 50° slope of thick powder snow. The quality of the light (how much you can make out of the terrain and even the gradient of a slope) is an additional factor. North facing slopes, for example, become more difficult when they are in the shade.

Moreover, although the gradient of a slope is an essential piece of information you also have to take in account its length. For this reason I have tried to avoid putting average gradients and have instead noted the length of the steepest sections of the descent (eg. 45°/250m). The gradient of some short sections at the top of certain slopes (which can be icy or have lots of snow) can vary considerably from the average gradient of the slope as a whole. The average gradient, for example, in the middle of the Gervasutti Couloir on the Tour Ronde or the south couloir of the Col Armand Charlet is 45°, but the slopes to the side that you have to ski or board get as steep as 50°!



DANGERS: I use the term 'dangers' instead of 'seriousness' as I prefer to set out the objective dangers (avalanches, rock fall, serac fall, collapsing cornices, possible blows from a slip etc), rather than focusing on the subjective risks that the ski-mountaineer must overcome him or herself. The known and recorded dangers of hidden crevasses on a broken glacier, and rocks loosened by the föehn or the sun, or of a slide that can start in a hidden corner of a face, for instance, must be included in any guide to the area. That is not to say that we encounter these obstacles on every trip into the mountains, but they form an integral part of the off-piste skier and boarder's alpine adventures and they do perhaps bring their own special piquancy...

- **Danger 1** : small risk of sliding after a fall and few objective dangers. This is off-piste skiing not far from protected areas such as ski lifts, roads, villages etc.
- **Danger 2** : there is a risk of serious injury or worse from hitting a rock or tree while sliding after a fall. The objective dangers (rock and serac fall, cornice collapse, avalanche etc) are quite high especially in unfavourable weather conditions (wind, hot spell etc). The route is remote or technically committing.
- **Danger 3** : you simply cannot fall and only chance or luck will save you if you do. The remoteness and/or the technical difficulty of the route increase the risk. It is imperative that the skier or boarder attempting these routes is technically capable and experienced enough both mentally and physically to make the right decisions.



EQUIPMENT: The list below is by no means exhaustive. I do think, however, it is important to mention a few items now so that the gear list can be efficiently adapted and personalised by each skier and boarder. Some people find gear lists very useful while for others they are the start of great debate and argument. They are nevertheless necessary.

- **Off-piste day pack (DP)** : This should contain a shovel, probe, and ARVA (transceiver for locating people, and being located, after an avalanche). You should also carry a hat, spare pair of light gloves, sunglasses or goggles and a T-shirt in a small plastic bag. In a different colour plastic bag put a basic repair kit (spare ski pole basket, sturdy sticky tape), a piece of bicycle inner tube for securing skis to packs, spare batteries for ARVA, knife, matches or lighter, basic first aid kit, small head torch, skins (if necessary).
- **One to two-day ski-touring pack (SP)** : in addition to the above items you should carry a kit for repairing your bindings and ski boot buckles (wire, string, pliers, penknife/leatherman). Think about taking a change of clothes and maybe a good light duvet jacket... More often than not for these kinds routes you will need a harness, ice-axe, crampons and a rope (for use as a handrail or for rappelling past cornices)... Try to carry a few spare plastic bags as they can come in handy in all sorts of situations, and can even be used as snow anchors. It is also not a bad idea to carry a small stove in case of emergency. For glacier travel you will need the necessary safety equipment (ice screws, slings or Prussik loops, carabiners, crevasse rescue kit).

- **High mountain and steep skiing pack (HP):** as well as the day pack and ski-touring equipment, you should take the necessary ski-mountaineering equipment for your chosen route (snow stake, Abalakov kit, helmet etc).

I haven't mentioned here the usual pieces of mountaineering equipment (map, compass, altimeter, mobile phone, GPS, sun cream, whistle, distress flares etc) that are no less indispensable.

You might think about adding aspirin, throat lozenges, cough sweets, something to soothe upset stomachs, plasters and antiseptic for cuts and burns, and arnica for bruises and cramps to your usual first aid kit and whatever else your doctor or chemist has suggested you carry.

Where you will be in very remote places you might consider taking a splint (inflatable devices and new light-weight materials that set to protect the injury now available). If there is a group of you, you might even think about taking a kit to convert skis and poles into a compact rescue sledge.

DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION OF EQUIPMENT

Equipment is constantly changing and evolving which in turn creates advances in technique, comfort and safety on the mountain. In short, thanks to the advances in equipment design, ski-mountaineers and boarders can now relatively quickly and easily reach a good level of competence. We are presented with a bewildering array of new products and innovations and it is sometimes difficult to make the distinction between what are essentially gadgets and what is actually useful. Moreover, the appropriate use of equipment comes from being well informed. These days it is not uncommon to see skiers and boarders at the top of the Aiguille du Midi, the start of the Vallée Blanche, with all sorts of slings and automatic blocking devices hanging from their harnesses. If they only had these things properly stowed there would be less risk of them catching their crampon points in them and sending themselves down the north face! It



is also not unusual to come across ski-tourers on a flat area or slightly inclined slope getting out their ski crampons (cousteaux) and heel risers.

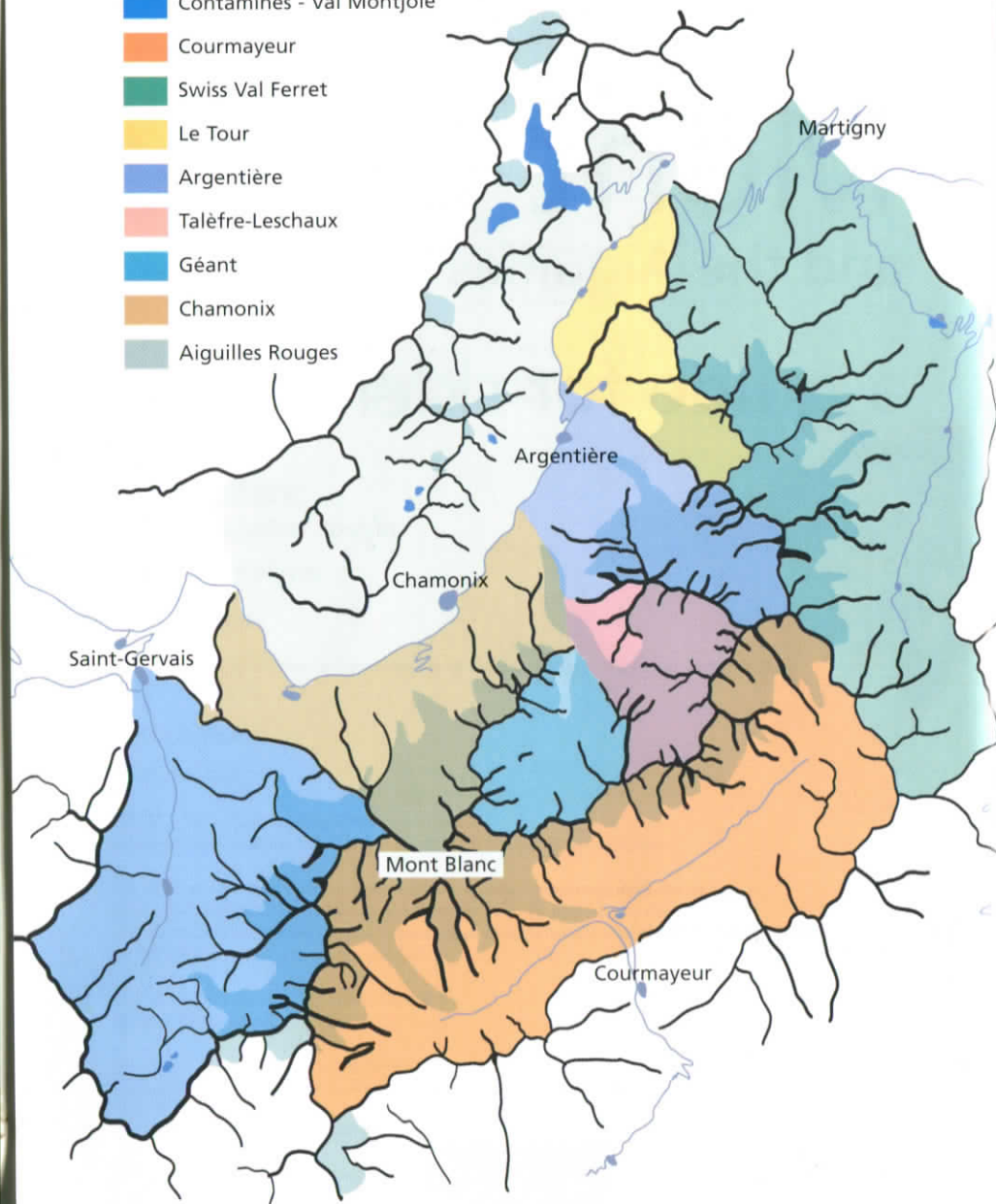
I sometimes suspect that this improper use of gear has little to do with actual need.

The most important considerations for ski-mountaineers and boarders are weight, efficiency and versatility.

- **CLOTHES:** I recommend you take thin and light clothes such as thin jumpers (fleeces or other) and windstopper layers, but you should think about doubling them because they are not necessarily warm enough on their own. The same goes for trousers and gloves. The advantage of this is that you can take off or put on layers according to the time the route takes, its difficulty and the weather. It is equally important to be able to change your damp base layers. Apart from the super fit among us who 'never stop' and even with the new breathable fabrics, it is still useful to be able to change out of wet clothes to avoid getting cold which can be a real handicap in the evening or the next day. With a wet base layer you will not be able to get warm again when you stop (and sometimes not even on the way down) even if you put more layers on over the top. For your head: you may not be warm or dry enough in a bandanna, and a hat (or warm cap) is always better. On your legs: you will find that you can wear two layers of thin wool long johns or fleece trousers under a pair of light over-trousers. Otherwise, long johns and Gore-tex trousers are great and the elastic or zip systems at the bottom of the Gore-tex trousers means you don't have to wear gaiters. One-piece suits are not practical or very well suited to winter off-piste skiing. Moreover, on steep slopes it is not a good idea to wear something that will let you slide too far in case of a fall.
- **BOOTS:** There is a huge choice of ski boots on the market now and you are sure to find a boot that is comfortable and suits your style of skiing. Touring boots these days can be almost as stiff as downhill boots and they have soles with moulded grips. For a long time I used very light, rear-entry, downhill boots which had two buckles and a vibram sole. The advantages of these were that they were light, good for skiing technical slopes and comfortable (with very light customised Thermoflex inner boots). Having said that, it is better not to use very stiff, high cut and heavy boots for touring, especially on the descents. The lack of forward and back flexibility at the ankle can be a problem especially in wooded areas and narrow couloirs. You can adapt your ski touring boots by replacing the laced inner boots with unlaced downhill inners which are more comfortable and technical. If you find that the front of your foot is loose in the boots, an in sole between the shell and the inner boot will lift your foot up and hold it better.
- **SKIS:** The new wide carving skis are so good that it would be a shame to carry on skiing on the long and narrow old-fashioned variety. However, for touring you should avoid the really heavy, wide skis with big side cuts, which are great nevertheless for off-piste skiing and heli-skiing. The current touring skis are excellent in all snow conditions and will do the job in hard snow and couloirs. I think that the hole in the end of touring skis is essential. Do take good care of your skis and make sure they are regularly waxed and the edges are kept sharp. You will really notice the difference in 'soapy' fresh, wet snow.
- **BINDINGS:** From the simple, ultra-light performance bindings to the heavier and more practical touring bindings, the choice is enormous. There are also plates that you can add to alpine bindings to convert them into touring bindings when you need them. There are two models available at the moment, the original and difficult to adjust 'Sécurafix' and the more practical 'Alpine-Trekker'. These devices allow you the benefits of your downhill boots and skis in a touring situation. They are, however, best kept for short tours or for accessing a serious couloir.

Mont Blanc and the Aiguilles Rouges

- Contamines - Val Montjoie
- Courmayeur
- Swiss Val Ferret
- Le Tour
- Argentière
- Talèfre-Leschaux
- Géant
- Chamonix
- Aiguilles Rouges



Contents

Map of the Mont Blanc and the Aiguilles Rouges	4
Contents	5
Introduction	6
Mont Blanc	6
Choice of routes	8
Choosing your descent according to snow conditions and the weather forecast	9
Steep skiing techniques and equipment	11
Numbers skiing and boarding steep slopes	13
Practical information	14
Development and evolution of equipment	18
A few tips	20
Fundamental rules for skiing in the mountains	24
About the author	26
Maps	26
Abbreviations	26
Photo credits	26
Les Contamines - Val Montjoie	27
Courmayeur	61
Swiss Val Ferret	97
Le Tour	125
Argentière	141
Talèfre-Leschaux	171
Géant	195
Chamonix	221
Aiguilles Rouges	247
Index of routes and variants according to level of difficulty	275
Index of routes and variants	279
Hut index	286

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

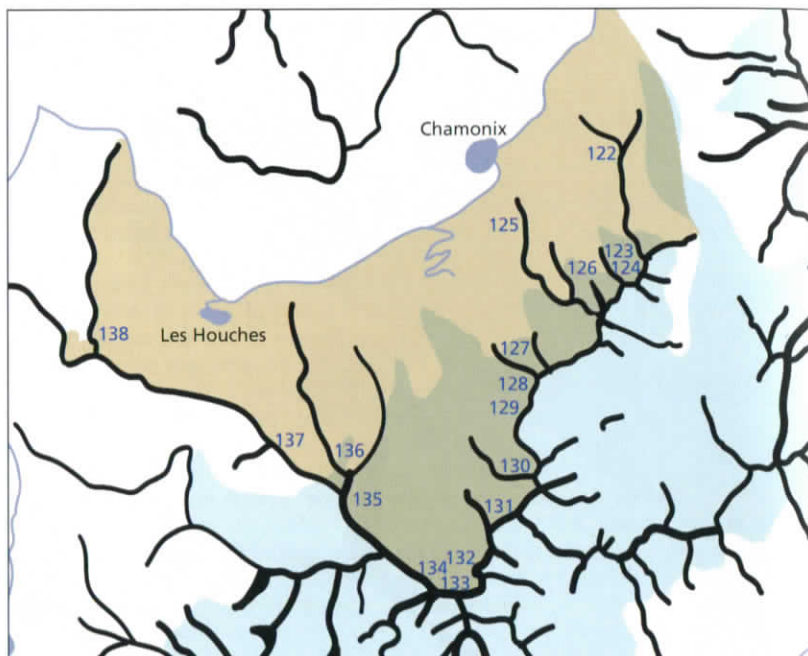
Chamonix Tourist Office: 04 50 53 00 24 / www.chamonix.com
 Compagnie des Guides: 04 50 53 00 88 / www.cieguides-chamonix.com
 Ass. Int. Guides du Mont Blanc: 04 50 53 27 05 / www.guides-du-mont-blanc.com
 Summits: 04 50 53 50 14 / www.summits.fr
 Office de Haute Montagne: 04 50 23 22 08 / www.ohm-chamonix.com
 PGHM: 04 50 53 16 89
 Weather forecast: 08 92 68 02 74 / www.meteo.fr
 Snow report: 08 92 68 10 20

SKI LIFTS

Aiguille du Midi: 04 50 53 30 80 / reservations: 08.36.68.00.67 / www.aiguilledumidi.fr
 Montanvers: 04 50 53 12 54

ROAD ACCESS

From Annecy, Geneva or Sallanches follow the A40 (or N205) to Chamonix.



We now come to the Chamonix Aiguilles and the final section of the Mont Blanc Massif. You can't miss the Chamonix 'Needles' as you arrive in this, the capital of mountaineering. Above and behind them, forming the heart of the Massif, sit Mont Blanc and its surrounding peaks (the Tacul, Maudit and Goûter), which have made the valley famous.

Previous page: On the north face of Mont Blanc du Tacul

There are two different approaches to skiing in this area:

- classic ski-touring, with its 1 to 2-day climbs and long descents that require mountaineering skills and experience as this is a high mountain environment crossing glaciated terrain;
- the 'new wave' of freeriders. Using the cable-cars means you can shorten or completely avoid long climbs up to some of the routes in this area, and the approach to the valley's 'mythic' descents, such as the north face of the Aiguille du Midi, can be relatively quick and easy. In fact, from the start of winter a veritable festival of freerider descents is played out before our eyes. Just after a large fall of snow, the slopes on the Glacier Rond, the Cosmiques Couloir and many other routes become almost 'snow parks', which would have been inconceivable 30 years ago...

MOUNTAIN HUTS

Ref.27 ■ Cosmiques Hut (3613m, F)

Private hut, 140 places, guarded from February to October, tel: 04 50 54 40 16

From the top station of the Aiguille du Midi cable-car descend the exposed north-east ridge. Traverse beneath the south face of the Aiguille du Midi and climb up for 10mins to reach the hut that is easy to spot.

- ⚓ 3790m
- ⌚ 30 mins to 1hr
- ↗ 70m
- ↘ 200m

Ref.28 ■ Plan de l'Aiguille Hut (2205m, F)

Very basic winter room, 12 places

From Chamonix, take the first section of the Aiguille du Midi cable-car to the Plan de l'Aiguille. Follow the less steep slopes on the large north/north-west facing headland, and lose 100m in height to get to the hut, which is virtually below the cables.

- ⚓ 2310m
- ⌚ 15 mins
- ↘ 100m

Ref.29 ■ Grands Mulets Hut (3051m, PD)

CAF, 68 places, guarded from March to September, tel: 04 50 53 16 98

From Chamonix, take the first section of the Aiguille du Midi lift to the Plan de l'Aiguille and traverse beneath the north face of the Aiguille du Midi to a kind of balcony above the old Glaciers cable-car station (you are not allowed to ski downhill of this traverse line as controlled avalanches are set off here using Gasex explosions). From this promontory, the first difficult section is the descending traverse to the Bossons Glacier. You can either take your skins off here or leave them on, depending on the snow conditions and the track. This traverse can be dangerous (risk of sliding after a fall and, in the afternoon, risk of avalanches above). Cross the Bossons Glacier via Plan Glacier and traverse towards the left bank up

to La Jonction (crevasses, seracs). Now zigzag your way up the section of glacier beneath the Grands Mulets Hut (steep at first, 45 mins). Leave your skis at the foot of the rock and follow the cables to the hut (5 mins).

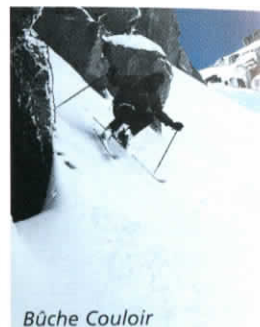
📍 2310m	🕒 3hrs
↗ 800m	
↘ 60m	

122 AIGUILLE DE L'M Traverse of the Col de la Bûche

2785m
AD

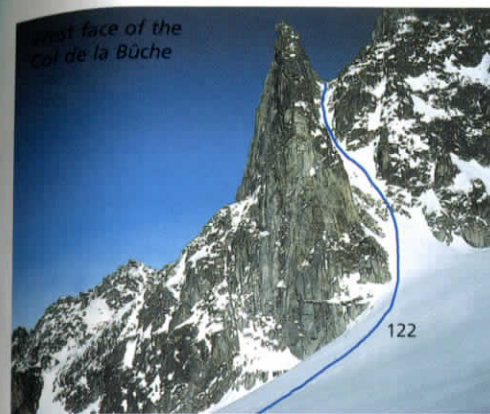
📍 2310m	📅 January-May	⚡ 40°-45°/200m, 2 sect. of 50°
↗ 470m	📷 224, 225, 228	⚠ 1
↘ 1750m	🕒 4hrs	📌 SP
📍 West and east	🔪 4.1	

As it is quick to access, and if you have a good idea of the conditions when you decide to ski it, the Col de la Bûche is one of the classic descents in the valley. In the winter, and if you are fast, you can do this traverse in an afternoon especially if the track going up is already there. This is an example of a route that has been optimised by the use of the cable-car, although you should try to keep to a steady pace so as not to exhaust yourself before you get there. You should also respect the time it takes for the snow to stabilise – minimum of two to three days.



From Chamonix, via the Plan de l'Aiguille cable-car (2310m), traverse eastwards to the foot of the first, pronounced line of moraine (below the Lac Bleu, 2299m). Cross this crest and pass below the Blaitière Glacier and go to the top of the second line of moraine at 2475m.

Continue, on a flat traverse, to a third line of moraine and watch out for wind-lab formations. If you are unsure of the conditions on this traverse, just before it you can climb up another 50m to a kind of shelf. From here you can descend along the line of the rocks to the foot of a final rock spur, where you can shelter. From here, you can see the final accumulation zone to cross. You sometimes have to go all the way round the top of this section to the moraine. A short descent



now takes you to the Nantillons Glacier, which you cross to its right bank (one or two crevasses at the beginning of the season). The climb to the bottom of the couloir provides you with an excellent opportunity to practice your kick turns. Now the slope steepens up to 40°. The snow may be hard in the morning and it is often easier to walk up. The descent of the east face, above the Mer de Glace, is normally in powder snow because it protected

by the Trélaporte ridge. There is a big cornice at the col and sometimes you will need to be belayed past it. Cross the cornice on the right and move back to below the Aiguille de l'M. At the bottom, the couloir narrows and early in the season it can be rocky (30m rope useful). Head right, below the Petits Charmoz and join the top of the moraine of the Thendia Glacier. If the snow cover is good, follow the glacier on the right and at the narrow section, go left before the moraine. There is now a descent on a very pleasant slope. Head left again and a final small couloir takes you to the Mer de Glace. If the snow cover is not good, descend rightwards below the Thendia Glacier and exit it through the rocky points before the path to the Envers des Aiguilles Hut. Whatever happens, it is best to avoid the middle of the combe. Join the Vallée Blanche (route 120) and return to Chamonix.

Note: Emmanuel Ballot skied a section of the north face of the Grands Charmoz (several rappels).

122.a ■ North couloir of the Col Blanc (AD). Descend 100m via the east couloir, then climb up for about 60m to the Col Blanc (2755m). The descent is relatively straightforward, although it narrows at the bottom. You end up above some large north-west slopes (Gasex). Now follow 125.a or b to Chamonix.

123 COL DES NANTILLONS North face

3292m
AD

📍 2310m	📅 February-June	⚡ 35°-40°/200m
↗ 980m	📷 226	⚠ 2 (seracs)
↘ 2250m	🕒 5½hrs	📌 SP
📍 North/north-west	🔪 4.1	

The Col des Nantillons is one of the most accessible and impressive cols in the Chamonix Aiguilles. The delicate and narrow Pic de Roc heightens the feeling one has of floating above the Mer de Glace. Opposite, the Aiguille de Tacul, the crenellated Périades ridge and the long, steep barrier formed by the peaks on



the Franco-Italian border put this little corner of the Alps into perspective. However, the uncertainties that one associates with high mountain terrain and steep glaciers, have earned the Col des Nantillons its place as a ski-mountaineering destination. You can see the Spencer Couloir from here and this can also be an alternative route to the Spencer Couloir. Why don't ski-mountaineers carry on up to the Grépon, a peak so emblematic of Chamonix? The short and varied climbing on this slender sliver of granite and the 20m of cragging in the sun on the Knubel Crack (section of V plus, rock shoes useful!) to get to it is glorious. Indeed, Gaston Rébuffat said that 'climbing this mountain [was] a delight'!

From Chamonix, via the Plan de l'Aiguille cable-car, follow route 122 to the Nantillons Glacier (1hr). To start with, climb up in the direction of the Doigt de l'Étala, then head towards the centre of the glacier. Now continue up the left bank of the glacier and stay out of the central section that is exposed to serac fall. If the climb up is icy or the upper seracs look too menacing, you can climb up the central spur (100m of II and III). Traverse quickly below the band of seracs towards the Grépon (crevassed area). Continue to the middle of the small steep glaciated valley above the seracs. At around 3250m, there is a traverse left from where you easily reach the Col des Nantillons. The main exposed section on the descent remains the zone below the seracs. If this feels too dangerous, you can descend via the rocky rognon (60m rappel). Continue your descent via the Plan de l'Aiguille or go back to Chamonix via 125 and one its variant routes.

124 BRÈCHE DE BLAITIÈRE Spencer Couloir

3449m
D

🚩 2310m	🗓️ March-June	⚔️ 45°-50°/250m
↗️ 1140m	📏 226	⚠️ 2
↘️ 1140m + 1300m	🕒 7hrs	🏠 HP
🧭 North/north-east	🔪 4.3	

The first to dare to descend the Spencer Couloir was the Valais skier Sylvain Saudan, on 26th September 1967. Thanks to some spectacular photos of the descent, this was the start of his career, in the eyes of the public, as the 'skier of the

impossible'. From 1968 onwards, with the help of his loyal friends (also guides), he started to add to his list of impressive descents, such as the Whymper, Gervasutti and Marinelli Couloirs. He became the steep-skiing specialist and was the subject of several films and talks, and he would refer to his unconventional technique as his 'windscreen wiper' turn. It was inevitable that he was going to have his rivals and his fans. That is how I came to accompany him on one of his descents in the USA, where I was working with a group of youngsters at the foot of Mount Hood in Oregon. I was convinced, following this adventure, that I could have a go at skiing everywhere, wherever I saw white, a dream I had had since my first experiences on skis!



Start of Spencer Couloir

From Chamonix, via the Plan de l'Aiguille cable-car, follow route 123 to the foot of the Spencer Couloir. The bergschrund is quite easy to cross, and you do this on the right. After a few pitches you get to a narrow section, which is the steepest section. After this, you get to the rocky crest between the two summits of the Blaitière. On the descent, if there are gullies in the first section, you can traverse right to the 'demi-lune' (curving snow crest) where the snow stays colder. On the other hand, there is ice just beneath the snow here and the

slope does exceed 50°/100m. The Spencer Couloir gets the sun quite early from the spring onwards. Therefore, an early start is a good idea even if this means you have to wait for the snow to soften once you get to the start of the route. You can either go back to the Plan de l'Aiguille or follow route 123 to Chamonix.

124.a ■ Right couloir (AD).

On the climb up, before you traverse towards the upper serac band, look out for the shortcut on the right that is sometimes possible to follow directly to the Spencer Couloir (see photo, steeper, less dangerous, 40°/100m).

124.b ■ Contamine Couloir (D).

Follow route 122 and, after having crossed the final line of moraine on the left bank of the Nantillons Glacier, climb straight up towards a couloir that faces slightly left. After a steep diagonal climb you quickly reach the



Spencer Couloir in July 2001

upper section of the Nantillons Glacier. After a final steep section, you pass under the Contamine Couloir from where you can join the Spencer Couloir. When there is lots of snow, this is the quickest access route and the least exposed to objective dangers. This is also the access route to the Contamine Couloir. The Contamine is narrower, the snow cover is not as good and its lower section is more sustained than the Spencer. It was skied for the first time by Serge Cachat-Rosset in July 1971 (50%/200m).

125 PLAN DE L'AIGUILLE Pré du Rocher

2310m
F

🚩 2310m	🌨 Winter	↘ sections of 35°
📏 1300m	📷 228, 230	⚠ 1
🧭 North	🕒 45 mins	👤 DP
🔪 1.3		

The Glaciers cable-car was built between the wars, although its final section, up to the Col du Midi, was never finished, and it was replaced in 1954 by the current cable-car. Its two sections, instead of the three envisaged in the original project, join Chamonix with the Aiguille du Midi. The first Kandahar race was run on the piste that went from the top of the first station, in 1948. The race was won brilliantly by the young Chamoniard James Couttet, on 2.07m skis, and behind him came a band of Austrian skiers and the second Frenchman was a certain François Baud. Nowadays, the section above the Mont Blanc Tunnel is officially closed at certain times so that the slopes can be 'purged' by controlled avalanches using Gasex explosions, which are set off from the valley.

From the Plan de l'Aiguille mid-station, head north and descend a series of small valleys that get progressively steeper. At around 2100m, via a crest and the first



Grand Chalet descent toward Les Planards

larches trees, come back a little right (summer path). This is the steepest part of the descent. Follow the series of north-facing clearings (sites of old chalets), which soon brings you to a well-marked path (1600m). The path takes you back to the Aiguille du Midi car-park.

125.a Blaitière-dessus (PD).

From the Plan de l'Aiguille traverse as high as possible towards the Blaitière Glacier moraine. The traverse of the lines of moraine and the steep combe above the Torrent de Blaitière can be dangerous (windslab). When you reach the same height as the first larches, ski in to the pretty north-west face where you will find the renovated Blaitière-dessus chalet (1926m). Ski through the wood on the right to get to the Blaitière-dessous chalet (1708m). Take the left-hand track to cross the Torrent de Blaitière and join the Pré du Rocher descent.

125.b Grand Chalet (PD). Climb up via route 122 to get to the nice moraine slopes between 2400m and 2500m and descend either via Blaitière-dessus or via the Grand Chalet (or more rarely on the north face, via Les Fontanettes). Make sure you come back via the path on the left. Good snow at the start of winter.

125.c Grands Bois (F). From the Plan de l'Aiguille head south in to the small valley that is before the Glacier des Pélerins. Immediately descend the north face or traverse further, depending on the quality of the snow (faces more or less north-west). At 1800m, where the small valley narrows, come back right (path). A large part of this woodland was destroyed by the storms of 1986-7. The Service des Eaux et Forêts has planted thousands of larches here. As a result, you should on your guard and try not to cut the tops off the trees. If the snow cover is bad, it's better to follow the path to pick up route 125.

125.d Former Piste des Glaciers (PD). Climb to the top of the Pélerin Glacier moraine, at 2500m, and ski in to the valley or climb up higher and continue right, below the north face Aiguille du Midi to get to 2600m (1 1/2 hrs). Descend the steep slope near the old Piste des Glaciers and from there go to the tunnel entrance. If the pollution and heat created by the traffic haven't melted the snow, you can continue right, via the track, to Chamonix.

126 AIGUILLE DU PLAN

North face

3673m
TD+

📍 3790m	📅 May-June	📏 45°-50°/500m (sect. of 55°)
📏 200m	📷 230, 231	⚠️ 3
📏 1350m	🕒 3-4hrs	👤 HP
📍 North	🔧 5.3	

This face is too visible from Chamonix not to mention it here, even if most people will only ever ski it in their dreams... In December 1975, Patrick Gabarrou and a client climbed up a new route on the north-west face of the Aiguille du Plan. Emmanuel Ratouis was the first to ski it, in 1998. Ski-mountaineers on the look-out for good lines to ski are always interested in what the ski lifts have to offer, and that is why the Aiguille du Midi area is so popular. Among the extreme routes done around here there's the descent of the route that Robert Chéré first climbed in 1976. The first person to ski it was none other than Jean-Marc Boivin. He descended this 1000m slope, with the help of a few rappels, which is for the most part between 50° and 55° and even has sections of 65° (he got past these sections with a rope!)



North face of the Aiguille du Plan

From Chamonix go to the Aiguille to Midi. Follow the Midi-Plan ridge the Col du Plan (steep sections on the Vallée Blanche side). This traverse includes a section of down-climbing and a 25m rappel on the east face. Alternatively, you can climb up the south face of the Envers Glacier (see route 121). Join the shoulder (50m below the rocky summit of the Aiguille du Plan). The first descent of this impressive face was by Jean-Marc Boivin and Laurent Giacomini in June 1977. It was repeated by Eric Bellin and Jean-Franck Charlet (both guides) among others, but the snowboarder Alain Moroni's fatal accident seem to have put an end to subsequent attempts. It normally takes three rappels to cross the seracs at the top, then there is a longer one to cross the lower seracs. The conditions on this face vary considerably, and it seems it is impossible to ski the

whole descent without rappelling past some of the sections.

126.a North face of the Col du Plan (TD).

Several skiers claim to have done the first descent of this face, including Dominique Neuschwander. However, Yves Détry appears to be the first person to ski it, in 1977, using three short rappels. In spring 1975, I climbed up the entire length of the left couloir hoping to exit from the upper gullies, but there wasn't enough snow. I ended up skiing the lower section, and later on, for a film, I skied the upper section. This face is rarely in condition and looks much more attractive from afar than it actually is up close. Make sure you are properly equipped (ropes, snow anchors etc) if you go there, so as to avoid having to be helicoptered off the face, as happened to a group of Americans in spring 2000...



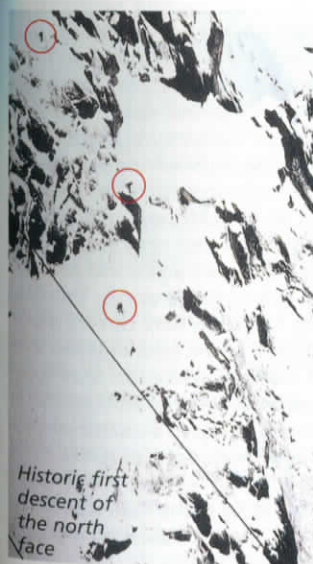
Col du Plan, north face

127 AIGUILLE DU MIDI

Mallory Route

3842m
TD+

📍 3790m	📅 April-May	📏 50°-55°/500m (sect. of 58°)
📏 1500m	📷 228, 231, 232	⚠️ 3
📍 North	🕒 2hrs	👤 HP
	🔧 5.3	



Historic first descent of the north face

I had wanted to ski a route on this north face for some time, as you get a very good view of it from the valley. On my first attempt I got as far as the hanging glacier, and I felt ready to try the descent proper. One Monday, after a descent of Mont Blanc had been cancelled, I found myself at the Aiguille du Midi in the hope of trying a first descent of the Mallory and I just had time to catch up with Yves Détry and Daniel Chauchefoin who had set off a little before me that morning. The top of the face was in good condition and it took me just five minutes and a few turns in powder to surprise my friends at the 'demi-lune' (curving snow crest). The difficulties started lower down and the risks increased significantly after the sharp rocky outcrops. After the soft snow on the crest that reminded me of a tightrope, came the Pan de Rideau, which was steep with hard snow and was shiny and smooth-looking following the snow slides of the day



Aiguille du Midi, north face

before. Although ideal for climbing up in crampons, this top layer offered little purchase for skis, despite their good, sharp edges. A few cautious turns and some judicious side-slipping and we finished this hard diagonal traverse and found ourselves above the rock bands. We had to put in a 25m handrail to get to the last section, which was relatively easy. Since then, this descent has been repeated several times. It is, nevertheless, rare for the snow to be soft from the top to the bottom of this route. You have to choose between relying on your technique in hard snow conditions, where you simply cannot afford to fall, or your nerve as you head down it in soft snow trying not to get swept off your feet as the snow falls away under your skis...

On 26 May 2001 I had just come back from a trip to Nepal and I

was filled with doubt and some trepidation as I watched my son Edouard and one of his friends ski the same route. I was reassured by the fact that he had climbed the route the day before to check the conditions, but I was still a little worried by the fact that he was using light and soft ski-touring equipment, which I didn't think would help him on the hard snow in the lower section.

The Mallory is one of the few routes that can be seen in its entirety from the cable-car. You start from the platform of the east tunnel (exit for the Vallée Blanche). Descend the first slope for about 100m until you get to the hanging glacier. The slope is slightly less steep and you have to traverse left towards headland that sometimes consists merely of seracs. Lower down, on the first descent, the rocks barely showed through the snow, whereas now you have to go round them and go to the 'demi-lune' that is above the extremely steep north/north-east couloir (3350m). After 80m of this couloir that is squashed in between the glacier and a wall of rock, you arrive at the top of the north/north-west Pan de Rideau (large slope). This descent of this is exposed and it is above a band of rocks. The snow here can be 'glass-like', as it was when we first skied it, at around 11 o'clock in the morning. The diagonal slope steepens up before joining a very small passage, above the north gullies. Descend this passage and side-slip towards the edge of the left-hand side where you set up a 25m rappel (need gear). This gives you access to a distinctive diamond-shaped névé on the north/north-west face. Come back right to get in a final, narrow couloir/ledge that faces north/north-east for 150m. You now join a wider couloir that comes down from a notch under the cables of the cable-car. After a small bergschrund the couloir widens out into a large cone at the bottom of the couloir, which you exit on the right to get back to Plan de l'Aiguille.

127.a Eugster Couloir (TD+).

From the 'demi-lune' on the Mallory (3350m), you can ski a direct and very steep (especially at the top) descent when the north-west couloir is full of snow. Skiers who have done this route quite often have to set up rappels because the snow can be very hard between the deep gullies and the rocky steps. The slope gets up to 56°. The first descent was by Laurent Giacomini in June 1977. It can come into condition more quickly than the Mallory, but there can also be more snow slides.

127.b Primi Vici (TD+).

First descent of the Tournier Spur by Edouard Baud and Benoît Fanara in April 2003 (45-55°/1100m, 2 rappels in the lower section). Another line has been skied close to the Frendo Spur (55° minimum, ED+). The descent passes in the north-west face of the spur. Cross the section of mixed climbing using rappels and stay on the right. Via the snow slopes, below the seracs again, cross a final steep wall and the bergschrund. This descent was skied for the first time in June 1977 by Laurent Giacomini and Jean-Marc Boivin. It has been repeated at least once, although it is very rarely in condition.

At the start and roped up, but on telemarks...



128 AIGUILLE DU MIDI Rond Glacier

3842m
D

🚩 3790m	📅 February-May	📏 45-50°/800m
↗ 30m + 50m	📅 235, 237	⚠️ 2
↘ 1530m + 1300m	🕒 2-3hrs	👤 SP
📍 North/West	🔧 4.2	

Some years, the north-west face of the Aiguille du Midi has dozens of visitors who come to play in the winter powder snow. Often the wind fills in the depressions and hardens the moguls formed by the skiers and snowboarders, and the slope becomes exposed again. You should also be aware of the orientation of the second west slope, which can contain hard snow in the morning, from the spring onwards. On the other hand, it is not unusual to ski this face with 50cm of fresh snow. The Glacier Rond gets its name from the lower glacier and not in fact the hanging glacier above. Other, new routes have recently been skied for the first time here (left bank of the hanging glacier and also a mixed face more to the west, after the middle crest).



Old setting off point on Rond Glacier (below Abri Simond)

From Chamonix take the Aiguille du Midi cable-car up and, via the east tunnel, descend the start of the ridge to the Vallée Blanche. Put your skis on as soon as possible and get warmed up on the first south-east facing slope (40°). Go round the south face of the Aiguille du Midi and climb up for 50m to the left of the Abri Simond. The traverse across the west face to reach the top of the north slope, is exposed. Ski on the left-hand headland (cable) at first to get used to the gradient of the slope. Further right, there is sometimes ice showing through the snow. Join a small col downhill and, via a very steep section, go to the top of the large west couloir. The left bank is steeper but often in better condition. From the final cone at the bottom of the couloir (bergschrund), head back right and stay near the rocky face. The cones at the bottom of the couloirs partly fill in the bergschrund and the crevasses. Cross the Glacier Rond and follow the track that goes to the Grands Mulets Hut (ref.32) and climb up for 30mins to the same height as the Glaciers cable-car. If the snow conditions allow, you can continue your descent to Chamonix (125.d to the Mont Blanc Tunnel). Otherwise, go back to the Plan de l'Aiguille.

128.a ■ West couloir (TD). From the bottom of the first north slope, cross the bergschrund and continue on the right bank of the hanging glacier. Climb and walk up (60m) right towards a notch. From here the west couloir looks narrow and very steep at the top (scoped this out during one of my reconnaissance trips in the 1970s, first complete descent by Pierre Tardivel in 1994 from the north face, TD). A short down-climb gets you to the couloir and you can now ski it straight down to the Glacier Rond. The icy steps exceed 55° for a few metres. The average gradient of the central section at the back ('heart') of the slope is 50°/200m.

128.b ■ Cunningham Couloir (TD). Also known as the Passerelle Couloir, you can rappel directly into it from the footbridge (passerelle) between the two stations on the Aiguille du Midi, or you can reach the notch at the top of it via the east ridge. This descent is a very good example of how to interpret data regarding the gradient of a slope. The centre and bottom ('heart') of the couloir is given a gradient of about 45°, whereas the actual slopes that you ski on the left bank exceed 55° and the snow on them is often hard! In short, this is not a very attractive route and that is why, having skied the first (probable) descent with a client in 1979, I have never been back to this couloir.

129 AIGUILLE DU MIDI Cosmiques Couloir

3842m
D

🚩 3790m	📅 February-May	📏 45°-50°/800m
📏 20m + 50m	📷 235, 237, 244	⚠️ 2
📏 1500m + 1300m	🕒 2-3hrs	👤 HP
🧭 North/west	🔧 5.1	

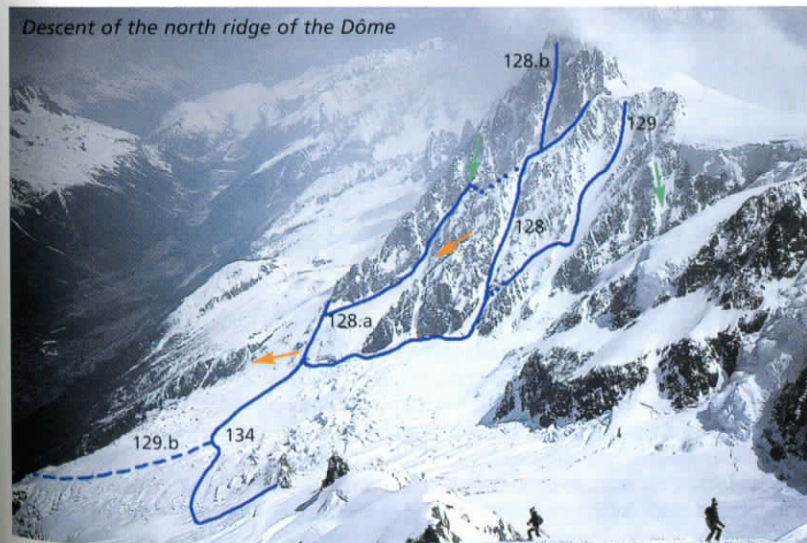


James Couttet

Chamonix hosted the 1960 World Ski Championships and from that moment on James Couttet (who had won in Engelberg in 1938) devoted his life to the creation and development of the Les Bossons ski area. The chairlift and drag-lift give skiers access to various pistes with almost 400m of height gain. To guarantee snow cover, water is taken from the Taconnaz Glacier to feed the snow canons. Moreover, the night skiing is an excellent bonus to the

valley's attractions. Born and bred in the village of Les Bossons and as well as being a champion skier, James Couttet was also a talented mountaineer and climbed with, among others, Rébuffat and Lachenal. He was an all-round 'mon-tagnard' and worked hard to preserve the authenticity of the mountains and their inhabitants. It was a great privilege to have known him. And it seems a litt-

Descent of the north ridge of the Dôme



le superfluous to add that his pure and honest approach to life was as precise and well-controlled as his ski turns!

From Chamonix, via the Aiguille du Midi, follow route 128 to the col between the Cosmiques Hut and the Abri Simond. Set up a rappel (up to 50m some years) to cross the first few metres of mixed ground in the narrow couloir. Ski on the right bank, pass below the rocks and soon after use the west face. The couloir narrows towards the middle and where it widens out again you can join the Glacier Rond route (via route 128 to the Plan de l'Aiguille or routes 129.a or 129.b). From the tunnel you can ski right of the road via the summer tack down to the Aiguille du Midi car-park.

129.a ■ Descent via Taconnaz Glacier (AD). From the foot of the couloirs, and if there is good snow cover, you can ski the Taconnaz Glacier. At La Jonction area head left and make your way through the seracs and crevasses (you will need to roped together for this). From the Gîte à Balmat, descend the first north-facing slope that ends in a rocky section, then traverse left at the level of the small col (2221m) before the Bec du Corbeau. Traverse and ski the large west combe, head left (bands of rock downhill of you) and join the right bank of the Taconnaz Glacier (risk of avalanche in the afternoon). Via the line of moraine and the piste/track to the water supply points for the snow canons, join the pistes of Mont Blanc Glacier and Les Bossons ski area.

129.b ■ Direct descent via the Bossons Glacier (AD). At the bottom of the couloirs, follow the variant above. From the Gîte à Balmat, go to the small col (2221m). Stay on the north face and ski the length of the combe. At the bottom, head left 100m before the edge of the glacier to follow the narrow east-facing couloir, opposite the Plat du Glacier. There is a very slightly ascending traverse towards the right bank. Leave the glacier and, via a clearing in the woods, pick up the Cherro trail that leads to the right of the tunnel entrance area. There are other variants on the right side.

130 MONT BLANC DU TACUL North face

4248m
AD

🚩 3790m	📅 April-October	⚔️ 35°-40°/400m
↗️ 1070m	📷 216, 237	⚠️ 2
↘️ 3470m	🕒 4-6hrs	📏 SP
🧭 North	🏆 3.3	

It may seem something of a paradox, but you can ski on the Mont Blanc du Tacul at any time of the year except during the winter months. It can be very dangerous in winter, as the snow builds up here and does not stick to the slopes very well. Nevertheless, devoted ski-mountaineers bump into each other quite often here, and, among the big names of extreme skiing, Dominique Neuenchwander deserves a mention. This discrete and committed skier from Geneva advocates a pure form of extreme skiing and refuses to use 'mechanical means' on his routes (helicopters...). He has been scouring the world's mountain ran-

ges for steep slopes to ski since the 1970s, and his first descents in the Mont Blanc Massif include the Gigord Couloir, the Aiguille Carrée (Grands Montets Ridge), the Domenech-Jaccoux Route (west face of Mont Blanc), and a route that links the east and west couloirs of the notch on the Dames Anglaises...



From Chamonix, via the Aiguille du Midi, descend the start of the east ridge. Ski down the first large slope on the right (there is

sometimes a bergschrund to jump) or follow the normal route of the Vallée Blanche to the foot of the ridge. Go to the Col du Midi and then ski to the Cosmiques Hut (open some of the winter). The first slopes to climb towards the right can often be up to 40° before the crevasse. The next wide section is less steep. Now head right (crevasses) to go round the upper seracs, or alternatively climb straight up! At 4100m follow the ridge to the final section of rocky ramparts (30m of mixed climbing with crampons) before the summit. The descent follows the same route down and, depending on the season, you can ski back down to Chamonix via the Vallée Blanche. However, in general, when Mont Blanc du Tacul is stable and can be skied safely there isn't much snow left in the Vallée Blanche. Therefore, you usually have to take the Aiguille du Midi cable-car back down to Chamonix.

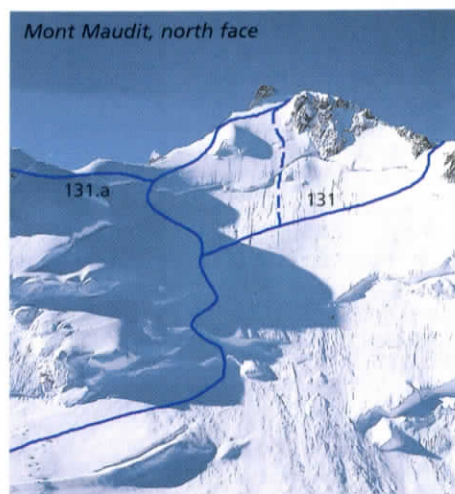
131 MONT MAUDIT North face

4465m
D

🚩 3790m	📅 April-October	⚔️ 45°/150m
↗️ 1430m	📷 238, 239	⚠️ 2
↘️ 1430m	🕒 5-7hrs	📏 HP
🧭 North	🏆 4.3	

The descent of the north face of Mont Maudit can be said to be serious, given that if there is not a track in, your decision to carry on will depend on both your knowledge of this kind of mountaineering and your experience of high-mountain terrain. You will need more than just solid technique and competent control of your skis, therefore, to ensure a adequate safety margin for this tour, and there will be other factors to take in to account (dig a snow pit, 'coin suisse' – another means of testing the snow's stability). In the top section (gradient of up to 45°) any fall could be extremely serious and there is always the risk of slab avalanches and serac fall (the cause of several accidents each year) in the lower two thirds of this route.

Take the Aiguille du Midi cablecar from Chamonix to the top station. Descend the ridge and put your skis on above the south-east combe. Follow route 130 to reach the shoulder on the Mont Blanc du Tacul (4100m), then descend to the Col Maudit. You usually go to the right of the seracs, then up the face to the bergschrund (4300m). You reach the shoulder uphill of the Col du Mont Maudit via the small face on the right (45°/80m). Traverse south to go round the rocks and climb up the steep slope to the summit staying close to the easy ridge. Your choice of descent route will depend on the conditions you will have observed on the way up. If in doubt, follow the your route of ascent via the shoulder. The north face is made skiable by the fact that the powder snow stays here temporarily. If the snow is hard, the 45° start below the summit is very serious.



131.a ■ North-east ridge (D). Depending on the snow conditions and the risk of serac fall, you can climb directly up the north-east ridge from the Col Maudit. The climb gets a bit more technical (AD, ice and mixed climbing, 3 to 4 pitches) and exposed as you reach the top of the Kuffner Ridge. You can also climb directly up the north face, under the summit, rather than going to the shoulder (risk of windslab avalanches, 40-45°/120m).

132 MONT BLANC Traverse

4810m
AD

3790m	May-July	sections of 40°
D1 + D2: 1400m	239	2
D1 + D2: 2800m	D1 + D2: 11hrs	SP
North	4.1	

Although it looks so close when you are down in the Chamonix valley, Mont Blanc remains a very high mountain that is covered in glaciers. Despite its kindly appearance and the gentle atmosphere of competition created by the sheer volume of visitors to the mountain, you should not underestimate this route. Even if the record for going from Chamonix church to the summit and back (part of the descent involved some judicious bum-sliding!) is just 5hrs and 10mins... On skis, if you are fit and well-acclimatised, this route can quite often be done in day (there and back from the Aiguille du Midi). To do that, however, you need to be very fast, there has to be a track already in, you need a good and reliable weather forecast and you need to choose a day in spring when the days are longer.

D1 ■ From Chamonix go to the Aiguille du Midi and follow ref.27 to the Cosmiques Hut.

D2 ■ From the hut go to the Col du Midi and then follow route 131 to the shoulder on Mont Maudit. You will sometimes need to wear crampons on the traverse to the Col de la Brenva as it can be exposed (ice and slab avalanches). After the col, the Mur de la Côte acts as a reminder of the laws of altitude! Depending on the snow conditions, go round the Petits Rochers Rouges on the right or join the middle section of the long final headland to the summit. If you are running late, are tired, or the weather doesn't look good, you can join the centre of the north face and the Grand Plateau below the Rochers Rouges (at around 4550m) and you will need a snow stake as you will probably have to set up a rappel.

From the summit if the west ridge looks in good condition, you can put your skis on straight away. Otherwise, in crampons and preferably roped together, down-climb for about 150m to find an area that looks easier to ski. Go down the right of the ridge and join the Grand Plateau via La Tournette, the Bosses and the Vallot Hut. Now follow 134 to the Grands Mulets and the Plan de l'Aiguille.

132.a ■ Start on the north face (AD). Traverse beneath the west ridge (bergschrunds) and then join the ridge below the Tournette rocks. This is a variant to use if the ridge has a high cornice and is icy or if the face is not in condition until lower down, on the Grand Plateau (35° then 40°/100m).

132.b ■ Return via the Corridor (AD). Descend via the Mur de la Côte (45°/100m). Then, leaving the Col de la Brenva on your right, ski the huge combe ('Le Corridor') watching out for the deep crevasses. From 4150m you have to go left to find a way through the steep section (seracs, possible rappel depending on the conditions). Watch out for serac fall down the north face of Mont Blanc when you get to the Grand Plateau. Follow route 134 to the Grands Mulets rock outcrop and on to the Plan de l'Aiguille.





Mont Blanc, bad weather threatens...

133 MONT BLANC North face

4810m
D

📍 3790m	📅 May-July	📐 sect. of 45°, 30-35%/650m
➔ D1 + D2: 60m +1300m	📷 239	⚠️ 2
➔ D1 + D2: 200m +2800m	🕒 D1 + D2: 9hrs	🏠 HP
📍 North	📏 4.2	

Heli-drops from Italy into France were allowed up until 1981. As a result, some weeks in spring the north face of Mont Blanc would look like a piste with mogul fields. As I recall, the same President of France who was one of the first people to use a helicopter to access and to ski this face with the guide André Contamine in the 1960s, was the man who subsequently banned them. The first official descent was by the guide Lionel Terray and the skier Bill Dunaway for the purposes of a film in 1953. Spring 2001 saw huge numbers of skiers on the north face owing to great conditions (no need to rappel). The sheer weight of traffic in the area made the route into a very regular slope and my son Christopher and I were able to ski to the Plan de l'Aiguille from the summit in an hour. I



Arnaud van Schevensteen, the first one-legged person to climb and ski Mont Blanc!

should point out that the evenness of the slope allowed us to ski the route as if it was a piste, skiing fast and putting in wide turns, and generally making the most of the great snow conditions!

D1 ■ From Chamonix, via the Aiguille du Midi, go to the Cosmiques Hut (ref.27). From here you can study the north face.

D2 ■ Follow route 132 to the summit of Mont Blanc. The descent starts immediately below the summit. Ski a little to the left so as to pick up a slight couloir to cross the upper bergschrund. This is a not an extreme slope, but it is relatively exposed as the snow here is often hard. The gradient of the slope slackens off and you go round the large crevasse to the left (check it out beforehand). Come back to the centre of the face into a huge funnel-shaped area that often has an ice wall in it. (Be prepared to set up a rappel.) The route now follows the depression on the left with a large band of seracs above it. There are now about another 100m at 40°, then you cross the Grand Plateau. Follow route 134 or climb up towards the Dôme to descend the north ridge (aesthetic route for which you have to add an hour to the basic timing for the route, see route 135).

133.a ■ **Traverse towards Les Bosses (D).** After the first 200m of the face, traverse left towards the 'bosses' ('humps') on the normal route on Mont Blanc. Once you know that the route is ok all the way down, this descent of the north face is fantastic (between 40° and 50°/400m). Up until 2002, this route was sheltered from the seracs uphill of it. However, following an enormous shift in the seracs it is possible that before long this route will become extremely exposed as it is now in the line of potential serac falls.



On the north face of Mont Blanc

134 MONT BLANC

Normal route

4810m
AD

📍 2310m	📅 April-June	📐 sections of 35°
↗ D1 + D2: 740m + 1760m	📷 235, 239	⚠ 2
↘ D1 + D2: 2600m	🕒 D1 + D2: 3h ^{1/2} + 8 ^{1/2} hrs	👤 SP
🌐 North	🔪 4.3	

Because of its altitude and exposed glaciated terrain (crevasses, serac fall), skiing Mont Blanc is a long and committing route. Nevertheless, bearing in mind these difficulties, the attraction for the ski-mountaineer remains the fact that this is the highest, one of the best and one of the most committing routes in the Alps.

If you have to descend to the Mont Blanc Tunnel (or, for the purists, if you start at the Mont Blanc Tunnel), you must ski beneath the power cables that are supported by the pylons for the old Glaciers cable-car, as the risk of avalanche is minimised here and controlled Gasex explosions carried out all around this area. This is especially true if you find yourself caught in bad weather.

The hardest thing about skiing this route, is sticking to the timings. You should follow the timetable given below.

- start from the Plan de l'Aiguille before 10 o'clock in the morning,
- be on the section below the Aiguille du Midi before midday (same goes for the return journey),
- reach the summit around 9 o'clock the following morning and return around 11 o'clock.

Finally, it is much better not to stop at the Vallot Hut, unless it is absolutely necessary. The hut is too high!

D1 ■ From Chamonix follow ref.29 to the Grands Mulets Hut.

D2 ■ From the hut, head towards the Dôme du Goûter to cross a first crevassed area at around 3200m. The main danger here comes from the risk of seracs falling from the Dôme du Goûter. Climb a little way up the left bank of the glacier, then, after making your way through the crevasses, move back to the centre of the glacier via an obvious headland and then move to the right bank. Try to stay on the left-hand side (crevasses) as you cross the Petit Plateau, so as to stay away from the seracs. A steep climb gives access to the Grand Plateau (deep crevasse on the side). Now head right and follow a regular slope up to the Col du Dôme (4237m). From here there is a steep and icy section that leads to the Vallot Hut. Ski-tourers rarely go to the summit with their skis on. The quality of the skiing on the descent is limited by the hard, windblown snow and the tricky and exposed ground you have to cover, especially on the ridge in the final section. It is now 2hrs to the summit (between 1/2hr and 1hr on the way down).

The descent follows the same route you took up back to the Grands Mulets, then to the Plan de l'Aiguille.

Note: There is a very real and obvious danger of serac fall at the point where you cross the Petit Plateau. If possible, it is preferable to follow the harder route up via the north ridge of the Dôme du Goûter (route 135).

135 DÔME DU GOÛTER

North ridge

4304m
D

📍 2310m	📅 April-June	📐 40°-45°/400m
↗ D1 + D2: 740m + 1250m	📷 239, 244	sections of 50°
↘ D1 + D2: 2000m	🕒 D1 + D2: 3 ^{1/2} + 7hrs	⚠ 2
🌐 North	🔪 4.1	👤 HP

This highly aesthetic route on the north ridge was very popular before heli-drops were banned in the area. In fact, it ought to be both climbed in the summer and skied in the winter more often. Following this route also means you can avoid the objective dangers of the normal route on the Petit Plateau. The descent is 'airy' without being totally extreme and remains one of the most impressive routes on Mont Blanc. As long as you have had a chance to check out the conditions beforehand, you can descend lower down the north face. There is a large crevasse that cuts the slope in half. You can also cross the ridge at its eastern end. The magnificent summit of the Dôme du Goûter and its 4304m sits a little in the shade of its illustrious neighbour, but nevertheless makes a great objective in its own right, especially this direct route to the summit via the north ridge.

D1 ■ From the Plan de l'Aiguille follow ref.29 to the Grands Mulets Hut.

D2 ■ From the hut climb via the Mont Blanc route (134) towards the foot of the north ridge, which you go round from about 3150m. The wide headland narrows (bergschrand) and you will have to walk up in crampons for over 300m (vertical height gain) to reach the Pointe Bravais (4057m), at the top of the ridge. The summit of the Dôme du Goûter is about an hour up from here. If you have seen the route on the way up, the descent should not pose any problems. However, if you decide to ski this route after having climbed up to Mont Blanc, you should stay near the ridge and slightly to the left. There are often windslab formations and ice in the steepest section.



On the north ridge of the Dôme du Goûter

136 GLACIER DU BOURGEAT Trappier Couloir

3060m
AD

🚩 1800m	📅 February-March	📐 40°-45°/400m
↗ 1250m	📷 244	⚠ 1
↘ 2000m	🕒 5hrs	👤 SP
🧭 North/west	🔪 4.1	

This superb route, often used by Monsieur Trappier, a passionate local ski-tourer, offers a 2000m descent on an even slope of powder snow. Accessing this route, however, can be dangerous after large falls of snow followed by strong winds.

From Les Houches take the Bellevue cable-car up and follow the line of the Tramway du Mont Blanc (see route 1). After the Col du Mont Lachat, join the second steep combe at around 2200m. Traverse directly left, then climb up a sustained slope to start with and then on a steep headland that overlooks the Arandellys gully (summer path to the Dérochoir). Head into the next small and steep valley on your left. At its eastern end, a slope followed by a double couloir towards the right allow you to cross the rock band (2800m). Depending on the snow cover, descend slightly

and, via the thalweg of an ancient glacier, head back up and east. You can see, below and to the right, the Baraque Forestière des Rognes (2768m). Cross the Glacier de la Griaz. Sometimes no more than blocks of blue ice, you can go round the top of this, but it makes the crossing quite dangerous. Join the obvious ridge of the Trappier Couloir at around the point marked 3029m on the map. Behind this point there are several relatively steep couloirs that give access to the main couloir (almost 45°). Follow the main couloir for about 500m. If the central gullies are too deep, you can join on the left, via a notch, a small steep couloir that runs parallel to this. The snow conditions are better here. Come back right on a huge cone at the bottom of the



Mont Blanc from the Aiguillette des Houches

couloir at around 1600m. Keep well to the left on the wooded slopes, and via a series of steep densely wooded steps, you will reach the bottom of the main slopes. Stay on the left bank of the Torrent du Bourgeat and go to Les Granges and Saint-Antoine on the Les Houches road. In this case, it is easier to stay on the right bank of the mountain stream and go back to Tacconnaz via Le Tremblay.

136.a ■ La Griaz ravines (AD). At the bottom of the Bourgeat valley (at around 1800m), keep traversing left (trees and steep couloirs). This brings you out at the north-west crest below the Bec à l'Oiseau. Descend into a series of wild ravines, at the foot of enormous avalanches that have come down from the La Griaz and Les Arandellys areas. Via the left bank of the Torrent de la Griaz (track near the road), you can rejoin Les Houches. This is quite an athletic variant! The less agile skiers may end up spending quite a while here...

137 MONT LACHAT North-east ridge

2115m
PD

🚩 1800m	📅 Winter	📐 sections of 35°
↗ 316m	🕒 3hrs	⚠ 1
↘ 1100m	🔪 2.3	👤 DP
🧭 North		

This short route is great for the start of the season and can be done after the first falls of snow. In this case, the climb up in skins following the track is a great training route and a good route to do if the weather is not looking good. Despite the sounds of the nearby valley, as you enter this area you quickly feel like you are in the wilderness and only the chamois feel at home here...











The north-east face, between the Col du Mont Lachat (buildings) and the Roche Fendue headland, is an averagely steep slope covered in dry grass where the snow builds up. Despite the fact that there is a track that crosses this slope, it regularly becomes avalanche-prone. You can also do this tour with snow-shoes from the bottom up to at least the Baraque Forestière des Arandellys, at around 1800m.

From Les Houches, via the Bellevue cable-car, follow the Tramway du Mont Blanc (traverse of a steep couloir on the Bioannassay face) or follow more or less the line of the west crest of Mont Lachat. From the summit, start your descent on the north-east face. You will quite soon come up against a lot of shrubs and bushes (cables and pylons). You end up at the Baraque Forestière des Arandellys via a series of steep slopes. A little downhill of here, traverse left via the track that you follow to the Bellevarde pastures. On your descent of this track there are two avalanche couloirs, which you should cross with care.

137.a ■ Roche Fendue (F). At the start of winter, before the lifts are open, you can set off from Les Houches (Route des Gens, between the church and the Mairie or Town Hall). At the end of the road, follow the track (Baraque Forestière des Arandellys). The climb, which you can do using skins, is quite athletic. The recommended descent route is via the Roche Fendue and route 136.

138 LE PRARION-VAUDAGNE Traverse

1967m
PD

 1850m	 December-March	 35°/50m
 110m	 2hrs	 1
 1950m	 2.1	 DP
 North-east		

Over the last few decades 'moyenne montagne' skiing in the Northern Alps has become a bit tricky. There are several reasons why skiing at lower altitudes has become more difficult. For example: the locals no longer use the forest undergrowth as firewood, and the price of spruces has dropped while forestry work has become devalued and underpaid. As a result, there are all kinds of bits of brushwood growing all over the place, which is not good for skiers, least of all over the last few years when the winter's snowfall has hardly been heavy enough to regularly and properly crush the dead wood. Our ancestors worked incredibly hard to clear and to tame the mountains. They pulled up stumps, flattened banks and moraines, redirected mountain streams and dug tracks. When skiing first began, we made use of these 'organised' mountainsides, but over the last few years our high mountain pastures have disappeared along with the tracks that used to lead up to them. The solution is to maintain the ski areas. This is what the ski instructors in the Morzine-Avoriaz ski area decided to do. Volunteer, they give up one or two days each summer to clear the forest areas that have been overrun by unwanted vegetation.

From Les Houches, via the Prarion gondola, go to the start of the crest that leads to the Prarion. Between the trees and via a final step that steepens up, you arrive in 35mins at the summit. Descend via the north ridge that narrows. There is a steep and narrow section before the slope widens out again. In the same direction, between the trees you end up at the Col de la Forclaz. Follow the track, on the right, that goes back to Les Chavants. In the best snow conditions you can ski the right side of Le Prarion, near the gondola. After only a few minutes of climbing you can join this great off-piste run on the north/north-east slope.

138.a ■ Col de la Forclaz (F). Just as with the Mont Lachat route, this tour can be done in snow-shoes or with skins without using the gondola. Follow the tracks that lead up from Les Chavants (or from the small villages of Vaudagne and Le Châtelard) to the Col de la Forclaz. All of these tracks are signposted and are in the forest. From the Prarion 'belvedere', or panoramic viewpoint, you get great views of the whole of the north and west faces of the Mont Blanc Massif, as well as part of the Contamines area. From Le Châtelard, starting at Les Brions (1051m) it should take 3 1/2 hrs. Watch out as certain sections of the route can be dangerous if there are heavy snowfalls or there is a thaw (this is a useful consideration, as this route is often put aside as a poor weather-day alternative).

AIGUILLES ROUGES

