

Chamonix 1964

Our trip started off badly with the engine of the car seizing up on the M6. We limped across the channel and spent the first few days of our holiday in Calais whilst the car was repaired. We then drove non stop, alternating drivers through the night to the Chalet Lieret in Chamonix.

In our explorations of the Alps, Kathy and I favoured early summer for our walking holidays, a time when the high level routes are normally clear of snow, but with plenty of it on the high peaks. At Chamonix we were a little unlucky, as there were late snow falls, and some of our chosen routes were still under new snow. We found others of course, and even climbed quite high on the side of the Bossons Glacier. We wanted to walk the high level route along the Plan des Aiguilles to Argentiere, so we took what is probably the most spectacular cable car, to the Aiguille du Midi, where you are hoisted to 12,609 feet in two dramatic lifts to the very top of the mountain. As we changed cars at the first station, on the Plan, we could see just how much snow had fallen. Even if it did look attractive, our planned route was completely buried in deep snow"

Aiguille du Midi

At the summit we spent a considerable amount of time with our compass, trying to identify all the distant peaks. Mont Blanc was a gleaming dome of snow, as befits the highest peak in Europe. Eventually we started to explore, knowing that there was a high level walker's route part way along the ridge. We reached a tunnel, hung with large icicles, with a notice 'Only skiers and alpinists beyond this point.' Since we were, as a precaution, carrying our rope and axes we hoped that we looked like alpinists and went through. The whole of the Italian side was also plastered with snow, and far below us, some enthusiastic skiers were enjoying an extension of the season. There were some canes showing the skiers the way down to their piste, but the walker's route was obliterated by new snow. We turned back, and descended once more to Plan des Aiguilles. We struggled through the soft snow in the direction of Argentieres, but found it hard and unrewarding work, so decided to take our lunch on some dry, sun baked slabs of rock, which were clear of snow.



After lunch, our siesta was disturbed by the sound of voices in the otherwise silent world. I lazily lifted an eyelid to look in the direction of the Cable Station, but there was nobody to be seen. A few minutes later I heard distant voices again, and this time, looking into the far distance, towards Argentiere, I saw them.



At first they were just a line of dots making their way across the shoulder under the pinnacles. Then we could recognize that they were a large group of climbers, but when they passed us, with a cheery wave over an hour later, we could see that they were members of that elite French regiment of mountain troops, The Chasseurs Alpines, on a training exercise from their camp in the valley.

We now looked towards Argentiere, to find that over 30 pairs of boots had well and truly marked the route along which we wanted to travel - OUR FIRST MAGICAL MOMENT.

The Brevent

Although we had enjoyed our mountain walking during our stay in Chamonix, as the time to start for home approached we realised that we had not attained a single summit, so we chose the Brevent, a modest mountain which loomed right over the town. It was well within our capabilities, being not much more of an ascent than Ben Nevis. There was a good marked mule trail shown on the map, refreshments available half way up and on the summit itself and the added attraction of a ride down on the cable car, if we felt like it.

We started in excellent, sunny weather and thoroughly enjoyed the first section, through a deep ravine and up onto the shoulder, where there was a cable car station and refreshments awaiting at the restaurant. Ahead and above us, we could see the well engineered trail as it zig-zagged upwards, which in turn would lead us onto the rocky summit of our mountain. Higher up, however, we noticed that the revetments of the trail started to disappear into the snow, and the weather was taking a turn for the worse, with storm clouds gathering to the north.

To the Top?

We calculated that we were more than half way to the summit, so pressed on up the trail until it finally disappeared into new, loose snow. Optimistically, we convinced ourselves that we only had a half hour's climbing left to do, and stood a good chance of reaching the summit before the storm broke.

Although the soft snow made our axes of limited use, there were enough rocks showing through the snow to make good belays, and we roped up. We headed directly up the steep snow for the col, hoping to pick up some parts of the trail again. After four ropes however, the storm was on us. It started to rain, then to snow, as the comforting sight of the Cable Station, way below us, disappeared and visibility diminished to a few metres. Sadly, it was time to turn back, near as we might be to the summit. I was retracing our route, carefully, as I thought, testing each one of the steps that we had kicked into the snow, when it happened.



The Fall

When instructing on Outward Bound Courses in the Lake District, we had to instruct our students in the use of the ice axe. When conditions were right, they had good sport on a long easy snow slope, using their axes to halt their progress after a simulated fall. It was all good fun, but I could never find out exactly how much thinking time you really have between a slip and being able to use your axe. I now know precious little indeed.

One moment I was looking forward to a hot drink at the restaurant, the next, the hemp band was tightening around my waist as I hung on the rope, thankfully well belayed by Kathy above me. And there was, dramatically, blood on the snow. I realised that in my fall the pick of the axe had slightly penetrated my palm. Crestfallen, I very carefully climbed back up to Kathy's stance, my proud boast of never having had a fall in nearly ten years of climbing gone for ever. .

We opened our emergency flask of coffee and sat drinking it, in our own little silent world, cut off, it seemed, from the rest of humanity, when our second magical moment happened. Two chamois, those elegant small antelopes who inhabit the high places of the Alps, passed within only a metre of us in their headlong dash to find a more sheltered spot before the storm really broke. It was sheer magic. They were there for only a second, it seemed. We had to examine their dainty footprints to convince ourselves that we had not imagined the incident.

Of course within a few minutes the Cable Station had reappeared below us, and in a very short time we were enjoying refreshments at the restaurant and the solicitous waiter insisted on examining my small wound and in dressing it with great care.

Oh yes, we did ascend to the summit the next day, by cable car, and ate myrtleberry tarts at the summit bar in glorious weather after we had packed up our car ready for an early start the next day.

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