

# THE HAUTE ROUTE

To be transported from Argentiere (1200m) to Gr. Montet (3200m) in about 15 mins is always a shock to the system whether you are used to it or not. One minute it is reasonably warm and the crowds milling round the bottom station are mostly friendly, next minute (or so it seems) you're standing there, mind filled with doubts, its cold, its big and lonely as all the piste skiers have gone very quickly. Are you fit enough?, will the weather hold (or improve)?, do you have the right gear?, can you ski well enough?

We were heading first for the Argentiere Hut. To do this you ascend Gr Montetes cablecar and ski 2000 feet down to the Argentiere Glacier before a short ascent to the Hut, well, try to ski in our case. The rucksacs felt heavy, as did the powder snow off-piste. We resorted to kickturns and worried about the crevasses that we knew were there somewhere. However we got down without too many falls and booked into a quiet if cold hut.

The poor weather forecast and the fact that it was still two weeks before Easter were the main reasons for the lack of people. We were wondering about the weather as "beau temps demain" floated across the room. We were on for tomorrow. Would we make it to Zermatt?

The next morning dawned cold and clear. It was to be the start of 8 days almost continuous good weather. We were in the right place at the right time.

From the Argentiere Hut you ski down a little and then ascend to 3,332m at the Col de Chardonnet. As we had been in Scotland 48 hours before this proved tough going; altitude, cold, and the fact that there was no trail up the glacier all combined to make a hard start. However we hung back and let a guided party break trail. The scenes of snow and ice on the Chardonnet were very beautiful. The Col de Chardonnet proved interesting as always. John and I were about the 5th and 6th through that day, and we skied it as we had at least two to three feet of powder all over, the dreaded bergschrund being completely filled. As one or two other parties veered off we were able to see who was with us on the Haute Route, a party of three (more of them later), and a party of two, plus myself and John, an Englishman and an Irishman.

We made for the Fenetre de Salienz with plans to stay at the Trient Hut, however more signs of bad weather moving in caused us to change our minds and move to Champex. The Plateau de Trient provided a pleasant run, in light powder, and we actually took the lead for a while, breaking trail towards the Fenetre de Chamois. This proved pretty

exhausting, again a new trail was needed and a hairy avalanche prone traverse led to a stunning drop on the other side. It was getting windy now and we shared ropes with the others for the initial steep sections.

Now for a great ski run in deep powder down the magnificent Val d'Arpette I thought. This was not to be, snow there was in vast quantities but it was heavy powder and a real problem to ski. This, combined with avalanche worries from the slopes above, caused us to ski very cautiously. The release of tension when we came out on to the pisted slope of Champex was great, we were tired but elated, and as the bad weather crept in we zipped down the piste to Champex whooping and hollering with joy. We were tempted to stay in Champex but instead pressed on to the Bourg St. Pierre, getting some very cheap and comfortable accommodation at the Auberge des Charmettes. A meal, a shower, and a good sleep saw us ready for whatever the next day might bring.

It snowed overnight, but not too much, and was misty, but not too bad, so we decided to go for the Cabane de Valsorey. Skis were donned adjacent to the village and we had a leisurely ski up the valley, passing through an exciting gorge, then the mist came down. I was also unhappy about the avalanche danger below the Valsorey Hut so after a half-hearted attempt we decided to go for the Velan Hut, this still proved pretty tough as the snow ran out on the moraine below the hut. However, we staggered into the hut at 5 p.m. to be greeted by a friendly guardian (he had seen no-one for four days) and three of our companions on the HLR who had independently made the same decisions as us.

It was decided that introductions should be made and so we met Gerhart (Bank Director), Erik (Guide), and Martin (Bus Driver), from Germany. It turned out Erik was on holiday, and after schnapps, wine and beer it was decided we should travel together next day to the crucial Plateau de Couloir. Whilst eating our meal the mists cleared away and we all rushed outside to enjoy the alcohol enhanced view of the Grande Combin across the valley. We went to bed happy and drunk, whether with alcohol or just the pleasure of being in such a beautiful place I do not know possibly both.

A beautiful if cold morning dawned and Erik, our friendly guide, seemed confident we could make it, despite the extra distance from the Velan Hut. An awkward 500ft descent and then a 2000ft ascent led to the Valsorey. It was very cold and several of us had trouble getting skins to stick. However we arrived at the Valsorey in just over three

hours to find there were nine in front of us, breaking trail. No one had been through the Plateau de Couloir for some time, so someone was up there working very hard and I was glad it wasn't me.

The Plateau de Couloir is simply an open 2,000ft. snow slope that is a shoulder of the Grande Combin, you ascend this and pass over a small col to descend and then climb a little to the Col de Sonadon. The average angle seemed to be about 40/45 degrees but it felt much worse. The slope was well snowed up and we were all concerned about the avalanche risk so a route through some exposed rocks was taken, involving many kick turns, how many I do not know, it felt like hundreds, all difficult and exposed, requiring care. Eventually, after much sweat and toil, we reached the top of the snow slope and traversed across, then the sting in the tail, off with skis, on with crampons and a delicate traverse, on one foot of windslab with glacier ice below, to my mind the worst avalanche risk yet. A short descent and climb took us to the Col de Sonadon.

Next should have been the magnificent descent of the glacier, but again this was not to be. It was now 1 p.m., too late for comfort and some light mist had settled on the glacier. I knew from previous experience that there were some monster crevasses somewhere so the decision was taken to ski roped up. John and I had not done this before so we did pretty well keeping up with the others and linking parallels in powder whilst roped together. Meanwhile the mist resting lightly on the glacier amplified the power of the sun and we were gently fried despite taking all the usual precautions.

The descent was successful and after a short reascent and some super non-glaciated skiing we eventually staggered into the Chanrion hut 12 hours after leaving the Velan. We were burnt exhausted and happy and it was great to pull out the wallet and gasp "Repas" rather than fiddle about cooking. Straight to bed was the order of the night. We were only two days from Zermatt and not to be beaten by anything.

The next day, to the Vignettes hut, was short, simple and very scenic. You leave the Chanrion, ski downhill for a bit, through an iced up gorge, and eventually up the long, wide, Ottemma Glacier. It actually got really hot in the afternoon for the first time, but we made the Vignettes Hut by 1 p.m. with no problems. To my relief the hut was quiet, only about 30 people, though more than we had seen earlier on the HLR as we were catching people up who had started before us but had been delayed by bad weather. At times this hut is a horror story in itself, with hundreds of

## An account by Pete Main of the classic alpine ski traverse from Chamonix to Zermatt





Above: The Valosrey Hut  
 Left: On the Ottemma Glacier  
 Below: Col de la Vallpoline





skiers trying to stay there each night as it is the junction of the Verbier and Chamonix HLRs, plus several shorter tours.

We were anxious to get to Zermatt and there were 3 cols to cross, so it was up at 4 a.m. and away by 5 a.m. John and I had the scent of success in our nostrils and broke trail all the way up to Col d'Evique, arriving 20 minutes before "tout le monde". However Erik and friends passed us on the descent and we were then together for the rest of the day. The weather was even better on this day with a certain clarity of air giving superb views; a good powder ski and a steep descent of Col No. 2 (Col de M. Brule) brought us to the climax of the trip.

The Col de Valpolline is high (3,568m.) and as you ascend, the Dent d'Herens and the Matterhorn gradually come to view, first the tips and then more and more of the mountains until they are seen close up for the first time. We all landed on the Col together which was thus the scene for much handshaking and mutual posed photography. There was Zermatt 5,000 feet below us and the Matterhorn in front, what a sight. All that was left was a long ski down the glacier, not to be underestimated as it is steep and heavily crevassed, but without a doubt the most magnificent ski run I have ever done.

One minute you are traversing a hillside and then "plop", you are on a piste. Next appears a cafe and ski lifts. The cafe is full of beautiful, rich people sunning themselves and you stop anyway, buy a beer and celebrate success. What these piste skiers must think of the dirty, dishevelled crew wearing funny boots and large rucksacks I don't know, and come to think of it, I don't care. So a few thousand feet of piste bashing saw us booked in at Frau Biners, "the first from Chamonix for three weeks" she said. We

tried not to let it go to our heads.

Erik and friends pushed on so we parted company. We decided on a rest day mainly because of sunburn. John in particular had a swollen face and lips. This was despite taking every care not to get burnt. So we whiled away a day drinking and eating in Zermatt and wishing we were really rich.

## Saas Fee

The weather was still holding and we had several days left so we decided to push on to Saas Fee. We had hoped to go via the Klein Matterhorn lift and climb the Breithorn, but although a nice day, it was windy high up, so we went up Gonggergrat railway and after a hair raising descent on to the Gornergletcher arrived at the Monta Rosa hut with hopes of Monta Rosa (Nordend) next day. However the weather broke and next day dawned misty and snowy, so we spent it in the hut, together with 20 ordinary skiers and 80 Swiss military reluctantly doing National Service. The hut was thus steamy, sweaty, and filled to capacity, the only one of the trip that was like that.

However, like the curtain on a stage the clouds were drawn away to reveal a magnificent sunset over and behind the Matterhorn. We were running out of time and, following the 80 military skiers, we set off towards the Adler pass. Fortunately the military veered off and left us on our own.

The pass proved steep and high (3789m). John seemed to have a bad time, made worse by yet another 80 soldiers descending the pass as we were trying to get up it. A magnificent ski down the Allalin Gletscher brought us to a quiet Britannia Hut, a nostalgic visit for me as it had been my first

Alpine hut twelve years previously. I was pleased to see that nothing had changed except the prices, and the hut was beautifully looked after.

We rose late next day and were away by 7 a.m. All that remained was a magnificent descent to Saas-Fee. This accomplished we arrived at Saas on a very cold morning, just as all the piste skiers were coming up. The Swiss have made an appalling mess of the valley below the Felskinn, with an excess of iron mongery by way of ski-lifts. Then to Chamonix and a flight to Glasgow. We were home before we knew it and it all seemed like a dream.

Much has been written about the HLR, mostly saying how easy and how crowded it is. Our experiences were the opposite of this, quiet huts, very cold mornings, a general avalanche danger all the time, with little or no afternoon melting. The trail did not exist and had to be made by us at times with attendant navigation problems, especially if it was misty. I suppose we were lucky with weather, but it was my third Easter out there.

All in all a magnificent experience, enhanced by going as a small unguided party of two, mostly making our own decisions and accepting their consequences. As a famous mountaineer once said "We knocked the bugger off".

An account of the High Level Route Chamonix to Zermatt, as completed by Peter Main and John Armstrong during the first two weeks in April 1984.

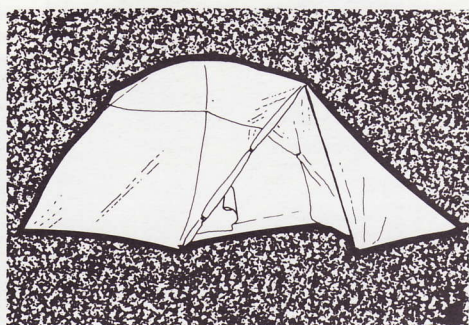
# HILLARY

## a great name for tents

### New Haven

Our latest model for 1986. A three person, three season dome tent for small families and youth groups. Easy to pitch. 49sq.ft. inner and 15sq.ft. of storage space. Fire retardant and mildew resistant fabrics used throughout.

From Everest to Edale. For friends or family. The Hillary range has something for you.



For further details please send large s.a.e. to

### Outdoor Pursuits Services

Hurst Mill, Derbyshire Level, Glossop, Derbyshire SK13 9PT  
Telephone: (04574) 3247/68182



## Peak Performance

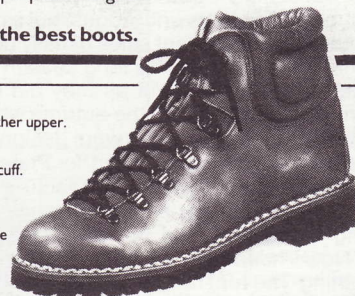
For hill walkers, hikers, ramblers, walkers and bird watchers, in fact from complete beginners to experienced walkers, Loveson offer a comprehensive range of boots at incredibly low prices. All made of high quality water resistant leather for extra comfort and durability.

Ring or write now for brochure and details of Loveson stitchdown, cemented, injected and Trekker ranges of purpose designed footwear and remember -

The name's the same in all the best boots.

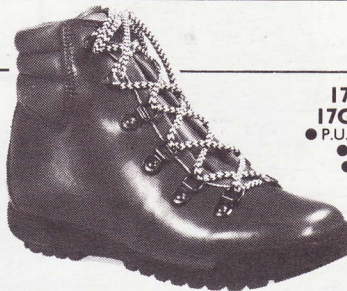
### 511 "LUNNA"

- Brown, waxed Anfibio leather upper.
- Fully leather lined.
- Padded bellows tongue.
- Padded, soft leather ankle cuff.
- Steel shank.
- Veldtschoen construction.
- Bonded leather throughsole and "Vibram" patterned cleated sole.
- Suitable for crampons.



### 17B "SKERRIE" - TAN 17G "SKERRIE" - GREY

- P.U. leather upper.
- Leather lined.
- Thickly padded bellows tongue.
- Soft, padded leather ankle cuff.
- Bonded, lightweight sole unit.
- Cleated sole with comfort heel profile.
- Removable contoured footbed for extra comfort and support.



**Loveson**

Thomas H. Loveday Ltd.  
Islip, Kettering,  
Northants. NN14 3LW  
Telephone: 08012 2148



The Haute Route by PETER

FOOTLOOSE

# Footloose

in the outdoors

March 1986  
85p  
issue number 34



SLEEPING BAG SURVEY

HILL WALKS ABOVE GRASMERE

SKI TOURING IN FINLAND & IN THE ALPS