

The Summer of 2005

Major alpine peaks expedition

Mike Streule
St Edmund Hall

Journeys to 4000m+



The European Alps; a range of contrasts. Rocky spires, snow covered domes and jagged ridges. This report is about the journeys from the hustle and bustle of the valley through the tranquil serenity of forests and meadows to the majestic alpine peaks. We experienced busy mountains but stood on summits in solitude where one could appreciate nature's beauty. This was to be a trip to go to many of those European mountains that I had dreamed of climbing but never had the time yet. Many of them I had had fleeting visits to in past years, but now it was time to get up them. And so it was time to make many journeys to 4000m+.

Switzerland

The Bernese Oberland

The end of the bad weather, or was it?

I had spent a week with my parents doing some valley walking in the Chamonix-Mont Blanc area. It had rained almost every day. I would return there later but for now I travelled to meet Nick in Wilderswil. Time to get climbing.

The bad weather persisted. The continental high pressure hadn't established itself over Southern Europe and instead good weather in the UK was pushing cloud south. But first we had to do that acclimatisation thing. We needed to go and breathe thin air.

Wilderswil, in the north of the Bernese Oberland, is ideally situated at the foot of a railway system which we used to take ourselves up high. The weather forecast was promising an improvement soon as high pressure was slowly building. The morning dawned bright. We got on the train which climbed up through tunnels inside the Eiger. Is this cheating? Not really I thought. This was the best way to get the acclimatisation job done quickly. If we felt bad we could always get down quickly. If not we would be above 3500m and the job would be done.

We found ourselves exiting the Jungfrauoch station onto the glacial plateau in bright sunshine. Maybe the weather had finally improved. The snow was deep, about a foot of powder, and no trenches through it as we were there on the first morning of good weather. There was a feint indication of where the old trench had gone so we began on a way towards the Jungfrau. It was a relatively short climb in terms of height and distance but this was a 4000m alpine peak. We began our first journey; we would see what happened, keep listening to our body's response to this high air. The response was only one of slowness, further exacerbated by the deep snow. It was terribly slow. A route finding error further delayed us a little and required some difficult climbing. A good reminder that in the Alps one should always climb well within ones limits.



Photograph 1 looking south from the Jungfrauoch down the Aletsch glacier basin. Fresh snow blankets the upper reaches of the glacier.

The new snow was also causing concern. It was poorly bonded to the old neve layer and miniature point release avalanches were occurring from our footsteps. If they got bigger they could knock us off our feet, although not bury us. As the afternoon arrived so to did the clouds that were rising from the south. As we surmounted the shoulder of the mountain the clouds finally came in. We had been climbing too slowly, the snow was dangerous. A brief glimpse of the summit and then white out; time to go. Our highpoint was just below 4000m. Not bad for a first climb and it was getting the acclimatisation job done.

Snowfall came on, further increasing the avalanche problem. The slopes were becoming more loaded and their liability to slip was evidenced to be on the increase during our descent.



Photograph 3 The summit of the Jungfrau from our high point on the snowy shoulder. Minutes later thick cloud rolled in



Photograph 2 Nick resting in deep snow before we made the decision to descend. Visibility was down to our rope separation.

That night we camped down on the Jungfraujoch, returning to an equipment cache we had left there at the start of the day. Climbing high and sleeping at 3500m was doing a lot of good. But the weather was not doing us any good. That night a blizzard developed with high winds and heavy snow. The wind was still pummelling the tent the following morning. Even our tracks around the edge of the tent had disappeared over night. This was no environment in which to be climbing with only partial acclimatisation. We went down.

Evidently the high pressure was not yet fully established and was only slowly squeezing out the cloud. A day later and there was a day of 100% sunshine. This is alpine climbing. This is how it is supposed to be. The day was spent making preparations for a return to altitude. This was not a wasted day. Most avalanches happen 24hrs after new snowfall, so leaving time for consolidation of the snow pack, along with personal recovery left us in good

stead to climb the next day. We went up on the train during the afternoon, preferring an early start to the day instead of the rather too late start that was achieved by taking the first train up in the morning. Camping on the Monchjoch, the night was cold and clear.



Photograph 4 Nick nearing the summit of the SW ridge of the Monch. The Jungfrau is behind.

The following early morning the snow was like concrete; a far cry from the foot of powder two days ago. More acclimatised too now meant that we quick marched over the glacial plateau. The SW ridge (AD) of the Monch was our objective.

The climbing was exhilarating; steep snow, rock scrambling and a pitch of III rock. The ridge fell away to the green Swiss meadows north and the Aletsch glacier stretched away to the south. We summated in good time, and had the summit to ourselves. The view stretched for miles. Thus was what 4000m peaks are all about.



Photograph 5 The Jungfrau from the Monchjoch. Late afternoon cloud spills over the Jungfrauoch from the valleys in Switzerland

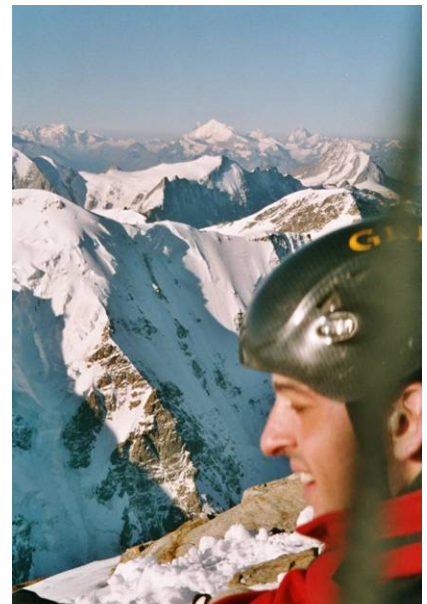
We descended the SE ridge (PD). Technically it was noticeably easier and a quick route down to the Monchjoch. We were back by lunchtime. Safe, this is the way to climb mountains in the Alps; early starts, early finishes. And a traverse of a 4000m peak is a good way to begin our summit efforts.

The weather remained stable so we with a similar morning plan we set our sights on the Jungfrau. This time we went the correct way, and climbed iron hard snow and ice at least twice as fast as we did on our first attempt on the mountain. We reached the summit in the rising sun, now able to see over to the

Mont Blanc range to the west, the Valais to the south, and the lesser Austrian peaks to the east. You only get views like this over 4000m and every bit of effort was worth it. All the big mountains we could see.... We would be on some them soon, very soon.



Photograph 6 Myself on the summit of the Jungfrau. The Eiger (left) and Monch rise up behind,



Photograph 7 Nick on the summit of the Jungfrau. The Valais alps to the south.

We had now had two very successful days climbing high mountains. We were pretty much out of food and tired also, only now getting 100% acclimatised. So we went down on the train. Job done.

We only had one day left on our train passes so we spent the following morning fairly relaxed, myself taking a light valley walk. The weather looked good over the whole of the Alps now. We had seen that for ourselves now. So despite there being so much more to do in the Oberland, we went to explore a new place. Bigger mountains, harder mountains. The Valais Alps beckoned.

The Valais Alps

The Valais Alps offered a high density of big peaks all with a variety of styles and difficulties of routes. They are cut with a set of parallel valleys also offering a variety of valley cultures. We began our exploration in Evolene, a French area and very quaint. No ski paraphernalia scaring the hillside, which of course meant no easy mountains. But we had done our acclimatisation and got fitter in the Oberland. We were well rested and so it was now time to put all of that to good use. Sat on the campsite the Dent Blanche reared up at the head of the valley. It was irresistible. We would leave the following morning. The weather forecast was good.



Photograph 8 Nick on the trail walking up to the hut below the Dent Blanche (behind).

This is no small mountain. The road head, from where we ascended 1500m to the hut, was just below the treeline. It was great to ascend through the different levels of flora; forest to alpine scrub through to meadow and finally the sparse glacier-side flowers eking out some sort of living. This was classic alpine climbing and worth it.

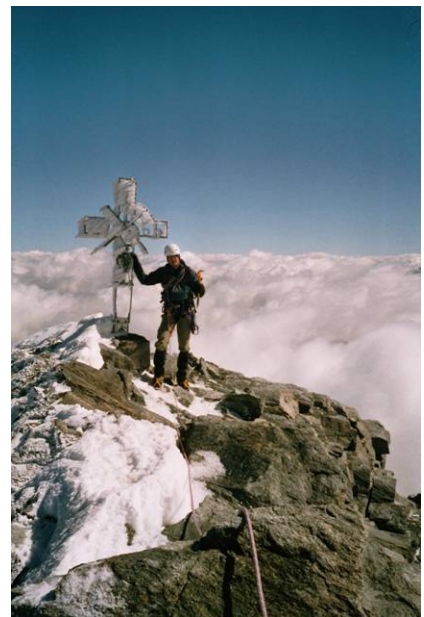
The hut was busy but a great atmosphere. After a good feed, and discovering that most people were headed for the same mountain we squeezed onto the sleeping shelves. We were heading up the south ridge of the four ridged pyramid. A strong wind had ripped across the Arolla glacial plateau all night. It was still blowing in the morning after. The sky was clear so we set out along with many other people 800m more ascent still to do. Soon people spread out along the ridge, the wind now pushing cloud onto us. And then we hit a bottleneck near the summit. These fastest parties were returning whilst we climbed the last few hundred metres. The descendants said

they had been in cloud on the summit but it was slowly clearing. The delay would do us justice in the end for when we arrived on the summit the clouds were clearing and the panorama was immense.

The high peaks, cold and windswept all battling against the encroaching cloud at their flanks.



Photograph 10 Approaching the summit of the Dent Blanche. Winds were foming clouds on the lee side of the ridge.



Photograph 9 Myself by the summit cross on the Dent Blanche. A place not to linger too long in the cold wind.

To the descent. Switching from abseiling, moving together, snow to rock took time but we got down safely. We hit the hut mid afternoon. There was still 1500m descent still to go. We rested at the hut and descended in the late afternoon sun. Job done.

Such amounts of descent in one day takes it toll on the body, well the knees really! Time for a rest day. As luck would have it the next day was raining. The best use of the day was to move location so we travelled a valley east. Less than 50 miles as the crow flies and a complete change of culture and we were back in Germanic Switzerland; the Zermatt valley. This was a wholly different experience to Evolene. Gone was the tranquillity of alpine pastures and villages and in with the hum drum of a tourist resort. Zermatt is car free which is nice but also inconvenient. The Dent Blanche had gone well and we had learnt how to do long hut walks well. So on with the Dom. No cable cars here either.

This time it was 1700m ascent to the hut. We had to leave longer for this which inevitably meant climbing in the heat of the afternoon in what was now a full scale alpine summer. But we made good time. Now fit and strong we were cutting guidebook time significantly. We had a good feed and rest in what was again an excellent friendly hut.

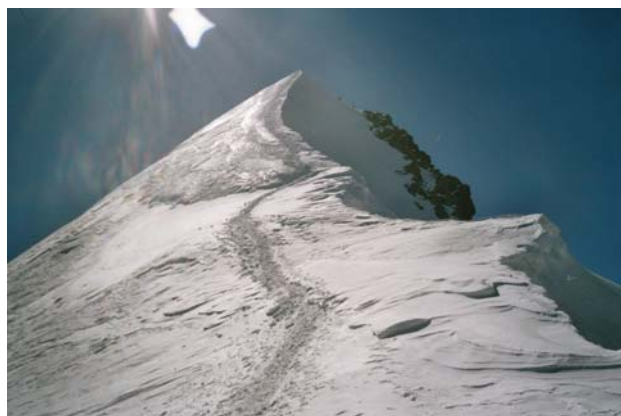
Summit day; 1500m ascent still to go. We were the first out of the hut which turned out not to be the best idea. We found ourselves on a variant of the route, which ascended a ridge instead of a crevassed glacier. All would have been well until in the breaking dawn Nick announces he has left his ice axe in the hut. Too late to turn back we tentatively pressed on along the rocky ridge.

We came across some ice. Was it safe to carry on? Most accidents happen because of a simple slip. It's the consequences of the simple slip that are the problem. So it's all about good footwork which we would then rely on. That was all fine until Nick's crampon fell off. It fortunately didn't end up down a crevasse so we carried on. But was this an omen? Are things going from bad to worse? From then on the climb became a whole lot more straightforward; easy snow slopes now gained most of the 1500m of ascent required that day.

The summit cone was magnificent. Nick stopped slightly short of the summit, the descent requiring the extra balance afforded by an axe. So we overcame all the problems. It was satisfying to be able to deal with all of this. Alpine climbing well within ones limits is what it's all about.



Photograph 11 The Dom rising up behind the Domhutte. The ascent trail began up the moraine behind.



Photograph 12 The summit cone of the Dom.



Photograph 13 The summit of the Dom, looking south towards the Monte Rosa group.



Photograph 14 Looking southwest from the summit of the Dom. The Mont blanc range forms the right hand skyline, the Matterhorn is on the left.

For the descent this time we were on for over 3000m. We had done almost this on the Dent Blanche. Cut in two with a rest back at the hut made the descent bearable, maybe even enjoyable. Again we descended in the setting sun down to the valley. Job done.

So we sat that evening in the campsite pretty wasted. But after a good nights sleep we were some way back to being recovered. We weren't ready immediately for another massive hut walk and Nick had to begin his drive home soon.

We had always wanted to climb the Materhorn.

Ideally via the Italian ridge but this would require a massive drive to get from Zermatt to Cervinia. And we now didn't have days to spare so the Hornli ridge beckoned.

We had heard horror stories of up to 200 people a day on the ridge and a queue of people to get onto the summit. And of course the modern guiding circus was in full flow on the Hornli. So with 2 days left we just had to go and see what all the fuss was about.



Photograph 15 The Matterhorn towering up above the Zermatt, from where we would begin our journey to the summit.

Still with a little ache in the legs from the Dom the day before we made the journey to the Hornli hut. This time we were aided by a cable car for some of the way. Surely after descending well over the height of Everest over the past 10 days we surely deserved this? And this time we were bivvying by the hut. The Hornli hut was full with all the guides and clients. We slept under the stars with the Hornli ridge shooting up in to the stars above.

We awoke at 3am. Many lights were already on the move from the hut. They were going nowhere else

but the same place as us. Although the guides were there in great number they had a very important use. They knew the way. There were many false trails on the lower section of the 'ridge', the route often taking detours onto the east face. They were of use to begin with but by dawn they were in the distance and out of sight. So it was then up to us which was ok, until we ascended from above the shoulder.

For the next half hour the experience was rather remarkable, for we met the fastest guides, with their clients descending from the summit. At this point we were now climbing the fixed ropes, attached at regular intervals by huge iron stakes. This enabled the guides to throw there clients down as fast as they could, half falling and barely in control of what they were doing. They had paid their money so they had there ticket to the summit, irrespective of the way in which they did it. The guides were rude, with no respect for us and the way we wanted to climb the mountain. I don't think some of the clients were enjoying it too; I managed to catch a word with one of them as he flew past!

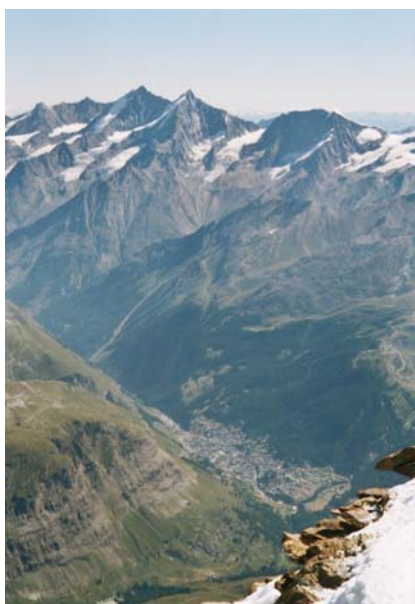
So we just stopped for 30 minutes as there was a constant stream of descendants. We couldn't move. It was like the guides were in competition; who could get their client up and down the fastest? But as fast as they came they were gone and so we continued up, having the summit to ourselves momentarily. We were closely followed by a group of Italians, who were, like us, there for the climb and the experience of the mountain.



Photograph 16 Nick on the summit of the Matterhorn. The Italian summit is behind.



Photograph 17 The view from the summit of the Matterhorn. The group of Italians closely following our ascent. The Monte Rosa group is behind.



Photograph 18 The view Northeast from the summit of the Matterhorn. Zermatt is far below. The Dom, the highest of the Mischabel group is on the skyline.

This was certainly a great mountain. Zermatt was far below to the north. All of the peaks of the Alps spread about. Cervinia was 3km below to the south. This was certainly worth it. There were no where near 200 people on the ridge that day, and the queues to the summit non existent. We now knew what it was all about.

But we still had the descent to go, which would be as hard if not harder than the ascent. It had taken a little over 7 hours to climb the ridge. It took the same to descend. Mentally concentrating for over 14 hours took its toll. When we finally reached the hut I felt mentally absolutely gone. There was still something left in me physically which was fortunate as by now there were no more cable cars back to Zermatt. So we began to walk. We arrived in Zermatt at night fall after 18 hours on the go. There was now nothing left physically. But we were back home safe and we sat in Zermatt looking at the magnificence of the mountain we had been stood on top of that morning. Job done.

It was time for Nick to go back home but I had one more job to do. If this trip was about major alpine peaks then there was one more that had to be done. Back to Chamonix then and meeting up with a new climbing partner (also called Nick).

France

The Mont Blanc Massif

We had only a limited amount of time in Chamonix; less than a week. And we wanted to climb Mt Blanc in a classic way, making use of our now excellent altitude fitness. We needed good weather for an extended period of time but we were fit and ready to go at a moments notice. The weather forecast for some bad weather and a day latter clouds began to brew by late morning. Should we start climbing today? I was worried. These worries were quickly confirmed when we found that the Aguille de Midi cable car was shut due to 90 kph winds. It was reassuring to feel that our weather judgements seemed sound. So we got on the first cable car the next morning, 6AM after the storm had passed.

We were carrying bivvy gear, and planned to climb Mt Blanc du Tacul and Mont Maudit before ascending the Blanc. We would probably stop for an overnight bivouac on the Brenva col before the final summit.

The storm had raged all the previous night and its remnants lingered. A cold wind ripped across the Midi col and pushed occasional cloud in too. But by the time we had reached the foot of the Tacul face it had cleared. It was hard going. We had heavy packs and the snow had not frozen the night before due to the storm. We climbed up, soon hitting hard frozen snow. We made good time, making the summit of Tacul quicker than most parties with only day packs. We continued towards Maudit. One down two to go. The weather continued to clear.



Photograph 20 Mont Maudit from the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul. Mt Blanc is hidden behind.



Photograph 19 The Aguille du Midi from the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul. Chamonix is below underneath the clouds.

Descending Tacul, we left the crowds, and very few people were on Mont Maudit. Was this increasing solitude set to continue? We continued to make excellent progress, not being too badly slowed by our heavy packs. We made the summit of Maudit, an excellent summit spire that is so sorely overlooked due to its neighbour. From there the summit of Mt Blanc was now tantalisingly close, only an arms reach away. We descended to the Brenva col.



Photograph 22 The summit of Mont Blanc from the summit of Mont Maudit.



Photograph 21 Nick on the summit of Mont Maudit. The Dome de Gouter and Gouter ridge are behind.

We had made good progress and the wind continued to be strong, often lifting up the spindrift into our eyes. It was very cold in this wind but it kept the snow surface hard. There was no reason to stop, we were above the freezing level and there were no threatening seracs that may be loosened in the sun. So we headed on up those final summit slopes. A goal for so many, and if I were honest, not just another summit for me in this excellent week I had been having. I had dreamed of climbing this mountain ever since I had first seen it on my teenage years on a walking trip in the Vanoise national park. Now my time had come.

The final snow slopes were painfully slow. By now we had done many metres of ascent at altitude. It was now time to do the last metres of the whole trip. And then as if by magic the hill went on no further. We were on the top of the Alps, and somehow, yet again, we were there on our own for 5 minutes or so. Despite this being an enormous pile of snow we felt most jubilant. Three of the Alps' biggest peaks in one morning; I think that was a job done.



Photograph 23 Nick on the final slopes of Mt Blanc. Mont Maudit is behind.



Photograph 24 Looking up the final summit slopes to the summit of Mt Blanc.



Photograph 26 Myself and Nick on the summit of Mt Blanc.



Photograph 25 Me on the summit of Mt Blanc. Clouds are thick but far far below us.

There were still many clouds far below. Peaks one sat in the valley and looked up at now looked like small hills, dwarfed by the giant on which we were standing. We were on top of Europe. We continued down the Gouter ridge. An easy route, which would then set us up for a continuation of our epic high altitude journey over the Aiguille de Bionassay and the Domes de Miage. We arrived at the Vallot hut and the afternoon saw more ferocious winds and more cloud. We sheltered there, and eventually elected to stay there, along with many other people who were to make a summit attempt the next morning. We fired the stove up and looked after ourselves. We felt refreshed; this Mt Blanc thing seemed easy.



Photograph 27 The many people ascending the Gouter ridge the morning after our climb to the summit.

We awoke the following morning to a remarkable sight. When we left the shelter all the people from the refuges below were on their way to the summit. People were lined up nose to tail all along the ridge. It was as if they were travelling to a religious Mecca. I suppose in climbing terms maybe it was. I was glad that we had used the storm and our excellent fitness and acclimatisation to good effect. The day we had ascended the mountain no one was climbing from the huts as they couldn't be accessed the day before. We had played the game well.

We descended towards the Aiguille de Bionassay, a splendid pyramid, again overlooked due to its larger neighbour. But there was a problem. I've seen many cornices in my time but never as big as what presented itself to me now. The snow arête we were to climb seemed to be supporting a gravity defying cornice that looked ready

to drop. Already the sun was risen and shining on the ridge. We thought it too risky to be climbing this ridge in the warm sun with a cornice ready to collapse. We returned to the Gouter ridge and

descended to the Gouter Hut. It was nice to be on a safe route back to the valley. The climbing was over and I now felt sure I would now finish off these achievements unharmed. The Bionassay would be there for another day. We descended the whole distance back down to Chamonix. We did not need our strength for anything else now. The job was done.



Photograph 29 The Aiguille de Bionassay in the early morning. The snow arête is supporting a huge cornice near the summit.



Photograph 28 Looking back toward Mt Blanc. The summit capped with clouds indicative of high winds.



Photograph 31 The Gouter hut and the tented village that has grown above it. Hundreds of people were based here to attempt Mt Blanc.



Photograph 30 Looking down to the Chamonix valley from our descent from the Gouter hut. We would walk all the way down.

Epilogue

On returning to the valley, and eventually home a story emerged. During the same day that we had climbed Mt Blanc du Tacul in the morning a serac had collapsed in the afternoon. It had hit a party of 6 British soldiers descending the face. Two had died, the rest were in hospital. It was a sobering thought. We had been on that face only hours earlier. But bad judgement had led to the tragedy. The freezing level was high the night before, higher than the Midi col. We had ascended above this quickly. And I make a point of not climbing late into the afternoon. Evidently what with the warm night previously and the afternoon sun the seracs were unstable. Those soldiers had lost the game. They had died in a beautiful place.

Perhaps also it reassured me of our own judgment. We had not climbed the Bionassay because the sun was on the face and the cornice looked unstable. I lived on, perhaps with a greater appreciation of the power of nature, and that ever present reminder of the frailty of human life.

The mountains will be there for another day. And I will go back to them soon.

Mike Streule. August 2005