

# Adventure

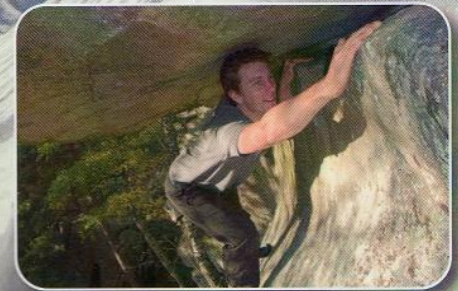
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Practising crampon and ice axe skills on the Mer de Glace



It was a traverse across a smooth plate of ice that dropped down steeply to our right. No outrageously pointy rocks, no drop of death and no real sense of impending doom. Frank scampered across looking like he could have done it backwards and in high heels.

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# Winter Thrills and Skills

Calling all keen hikers and hill-walkers who fancy taking on some snowy mountain routes. We sent Zanna Shute on a winter skills course in Chamonix to learn some of the skills you need to make your own way in the mountains.

The snow was getting heavier as we climbed. The flakes were so big I could hear individual whispers as they landed on my shoulders, and the guy in front of me was lugging a minor snowdrift up the mountain on his backpack. When we left the shelter of the trees I realised we were in thick cloud, and people who were separated from the main group were just ghostly shadows in the white.

Every sensible person was heading down the mountain for a restorative vin chaud but we were still climbing, with the plainly absurd intention of digging a hole in the snow and sleeping in it. It had sounded like a laugh when I'd read about it on the website, but as a clump of snow worked its way into the crack between my hat and my jacket and ran its icy fingers down my back I really wasn't so sure.

Once we reached the bank of snow that was to be our bed for the night we got to work quickly. There were eight of us and after about two hours we had excavated two roomy chambers connected by a tunnel. We bundled in, piled lumps of snow against the entrances to keep out the worst of the wind and set about cooking our dinner. When we finally hunkered down to sleep I can't say that it was comfortable or that it was warm - but it was pretty entertaining to lie there with a bunch of strangers and giggle about the stupidity of our situation.

If I ever build another snowhole I'd change the design a little. I

wouldn't make the floor slanted so that we all ended up huddled in a corner; although to be fair it must have helped conserve heat. I would have devoted more time to clearing away the loose snow and a little less to sculpting the customised drinks alcove that held the impressive array of spirits we'd dragged up the mountain.

But you live and learn - which is what the week was all about.

I was in Chamonix on a winter skills course learning how to deal with the challenges and dangers of the mountain environment. Through a combination of practical sessions on the mountain and evening theory classes, the course covers a massive amount of technical stuff including

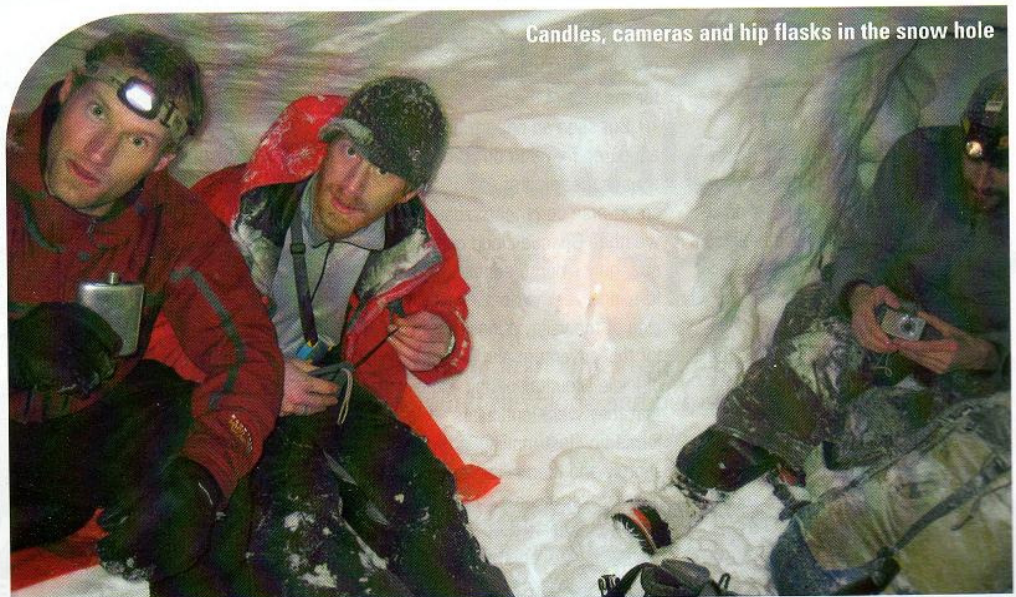
glacier travel, ice climbing, crevasse rescue, ropework, crampon and ice axe techniques, mountain weather systems, avalanche prediction and search and rescue using transceivers. Phew.

I learned about a million things in a week - so much that it would be madness to try to explain it all. I can now place an ice screw and make an abalokov belay. I understand the principles of the foehn wind, and anabatic and katabatic winds. If someone falls down a crevasse I can construct a pulley system with a mechanical advantage of 1:3 or 1:5 to rescue them, even if they've had all the pies. If we were to get caught in an avalanche I would have a really decent chance of getting a friend out

of the snow before they suffocated. Even better than that, having learned to read the terrain and plan routes across it, we'd be much less likely to get caught in one in the first place.

If you're likely to spend a significant amount of time in snowy mountains, whether mountaineering, skiing or ice-climbing, a course of this kind is an incredibly valuable way to invest in your safety and the safety of the people you'll be out there with.

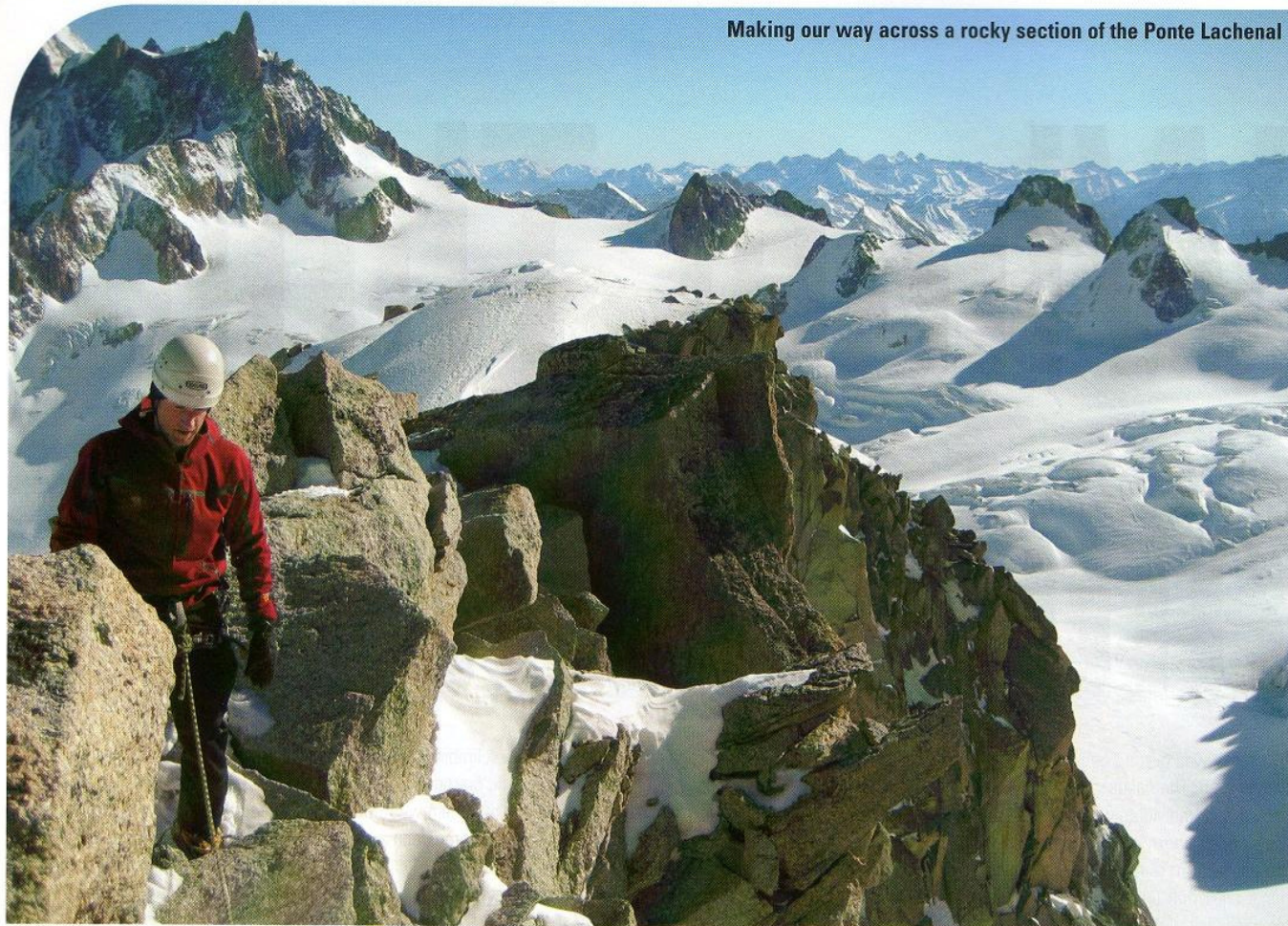
But I'd hate to give the impression that it was all dry and educational - something you should do rather than something you'll want to do. I got the chance to climb vertical ice on frozen waterfalls, did my first proper high-altitude mountaineering route, skied



Candles, cameras and hip flasks in the snow hole



Making our way across a rocky section of the Ponte Lachenal



I would have devoted more time to clearing away the loose snow and a little less to sculpting the customised drinks alcove that held the impressive array of spirits we'd dragged up the mountain.

the Vallée Blanche and generally had a ball.

But back to us in our chilly little lair – I wish someone had been outside when we clambered out. The snow had continued into the night, covering the entrance and most of our tracks, and it would have been so surreal to see a bunch of bleary-eyed idiots popping out of a snow bank like polar bears in the spring.

As we wiped our sleepy eyes the world outside was a revelation. A few wispy clouds were tangled in the mountain peaks but the rest of the sky was brilliantly, blindingly clear. Around the huts pristine snow stretched in every direction. We strapped on our snowshoes and set off to explore – route planning and

digging pits to assess the stability of the snowpack were on the agenda for the rest of the day.

But soon an opportunity appeared for us to do something I've always dreamed of doing – make smart-arse comments about the weather. Opaque cloud caps with strangely smooth edges were forming over the peaks on the other side of the valley. Kingsley, our guide for this adventure and head honcho of Icicle Mountaineering, explained that they were lenticulars – clouds formed by fast moving air rising sharply and then falling again as it passes over an obstacle like a bloody great mountain. The moisture in the air freezes into crystals that are briefly visible in the chilly upper

altitudes before melting when the air drops and warms up again on the other side.

They are deceptive, because while the clouds are fairly still, the air rushing through them is moving at a serious pace. Roughly speaking, seeing lenticulars means that although right now the skies are blue the weather is about to change.

If you spot them, my advice is to stare sagely into the distance and say something vague like 'change is a-coming' (this works well accessorised with a bit of beard-stroking but sadly I don't have that option). You'll still be basking in the glow of your friends' admiration when the weather arrives – whatever it may be.

One of the best bits about the course was the gear. Like any sensible outdoors person I've got a bit of a gear fetish and nothing makes me feel more important than swaggering around wearing a harness pimped out with loads of crazy kit. Throw in a pair of ice axes and some crampons and frankly I'm feeling pretty damn hot.

Now while I do like gear, I'm not very good at keeping hold of it. One morning I rather brilliantly managed to forget my harness and all the

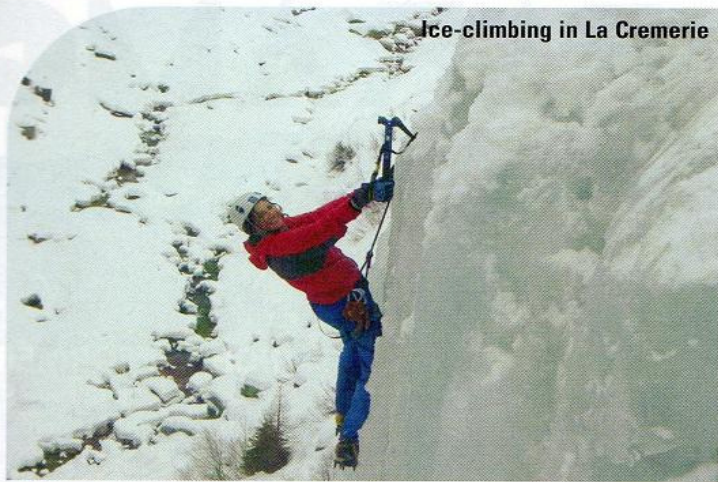
wonderful things attached to it. I felt somewhat foolish at the time, but I shouldn't have worried – I was going to do much worse than that.

Our final day was set aside for a high altitude mountaineering route. I teamed up with an Aussie guy called Nick and we were guided by a Chamonix local by the name of Frank. The plan was hop up the Aiguille du Midi cable car, ski to our start point, climb a ridgeline on the Ponte Lachenal and then ski home via the Vallée Blanche.

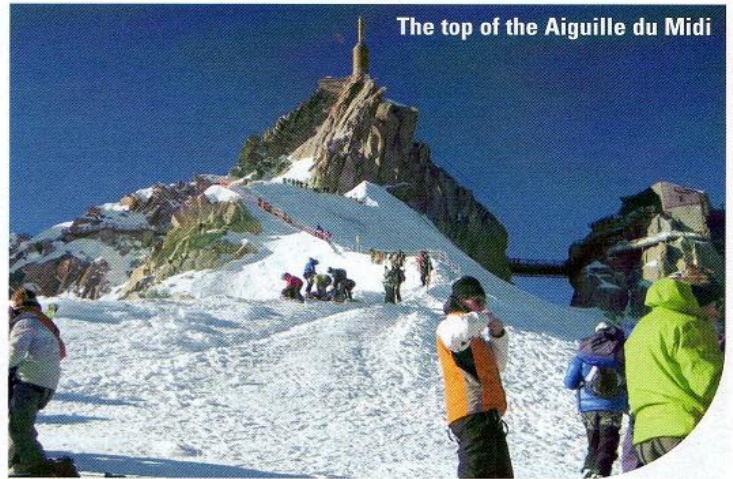
Now, however much time you've spent in the mountains, however many times you've been bored by people going on about the magnificence of Chamonix, there is no escaping the show-stopping, jaw-dropping beauty of the view that greets you when you step off that cable car.

But even in this insane natural cathedral we foolish humans have manage to import our favourite activity – queuing. The steep track down from the cable car station is too narrow for overtaking, so you often see a family shuffling down in terror of the steep drops all around while an angry troop of hirsute mountaineering types builds up behind them, spouting steam from

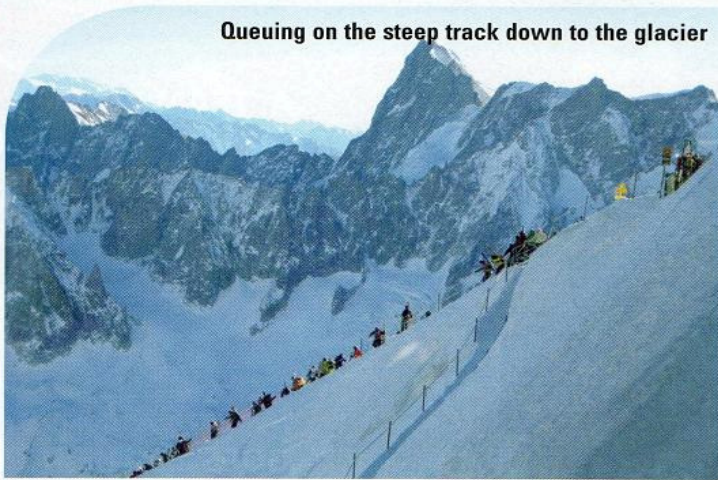




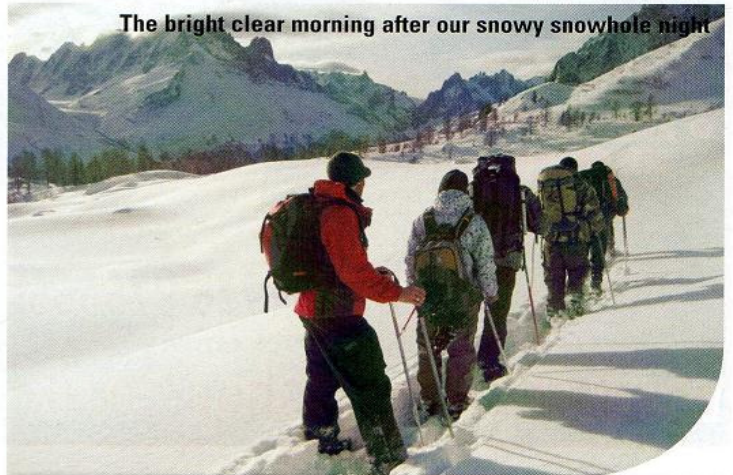
Ice-climbing in La Cremerie



The top of the Aiguille du Midi



Queuing on the steep track down to the glacier



The bright clear morning after our snowy snowhole night

their flared nostrils in frustration. It's all a bit Oxford Circus at rush hour if you ask me.

But the oh-so-French Frank was having none of it. He told us to put on our crampons, rope up and follow him. He set off on a path parallel to the roped one at a trot and we scampered after him like clumsy prisoners in a chain-gang.

The Ponte Lachenal is a small peak to the south of the Aiguille du Midi, named after Louis Lachenal, who along with Maurice Herzog was the first man to climb an 8,000m peak. Our route took us up a knife-edged ridgeline, with the stunning expanse of the Col du Midi to one side and a very airy drop to a steep gully on the other. We were roped up, and on the exposed or difficult sections Frank set up belay points and took us across one by one. It's a mixed route with sections of hard-packed snow, bare rock, rock under powder snow and then the odd patch of bullet-proof ice.

The most testing section of the route for me was a bit that looked really easy. I'd openly poo-pooed Frank's elaborate preparations and asked if we really needed to be belayed across it. It was a traverse

across a smooth plate of ice that dropped down steeply to our right. No outrageously pointy rocks, no drop of death and no real sense of impending doom. Frank scampered across looking like he could have done it backwards and in high heels.

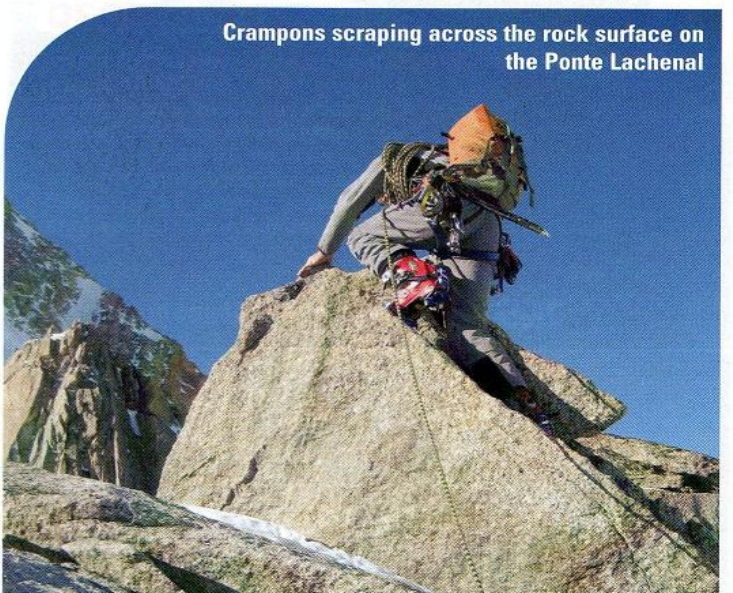
I figured I'd be OK.

Ah crap. So there I was halfway across and I'd just dropped my ice axe. I'd had it hooked through a loop in my harness while I used my hands to hug my way around a rocky outcrop. As I twisted my body the rope hooked under the axe handle and flipped it cleanly out of the strap.

Clatter, clatter, clatter. A sudden jolt of terror turned my legs to jelly. They were shaking so much I swear I could hear tiny squeaks coming from the points of my crampons as they quivered in the hard-packed ice.

I looked back at Nick and shared some choice swearwords. Frank was far away from us behind a wall of rock but in the vacuum Nick stepped up and told me in no uncertain terms to just get on with it – we'd sort out the axe later. So my jelly legs and me continued our crab-steps sideways. I held on to the rocks where I could and wailed inwardly (at least I hope it was inwardly) when I

I can now place an ice screw and make an abalokov belay. I understand the principles of the foehn wind, and anabatic and katabatic winds.



Crampons scraping across the rock surface on the Ponte Lachenal



had to let them go. I got across.

I was greeted by a bored looking Frank who couldn't understand why I had taken so long.

The rest of the route went smoothly and I relaxed enough to appreciate the giddy grandeur of our situation. Perched on some rocks at the summit I was really proud of what we'd achieved, but as we watched a couple of bearded heroes top out on a 100m nightmare of mixed rock and paper thin ice I figured I had a fair bit left to learn.

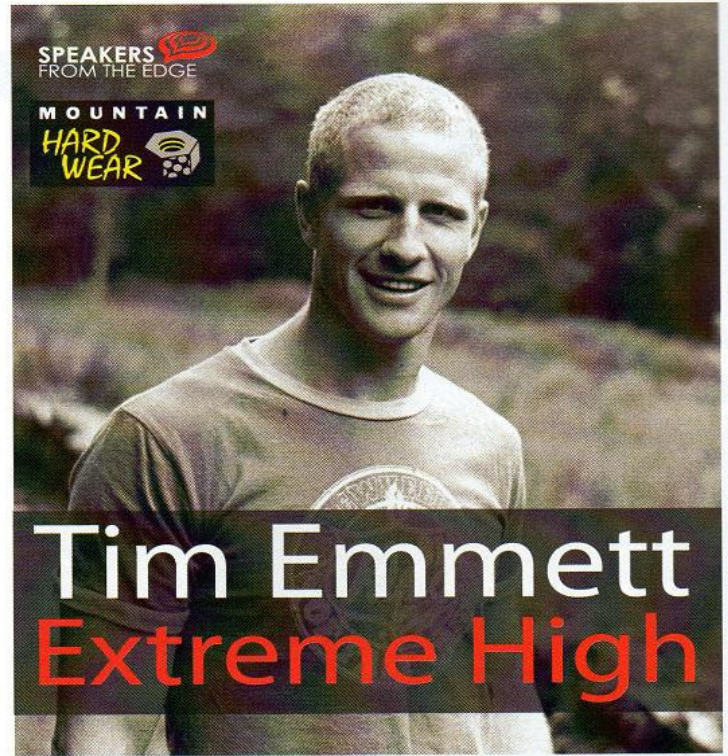
The ski down was bliss. Yes I was tired, and yes it was late but finally I was back in a place where I knew what I was doing. Lots of people come to Chamonix specifically to do the 22km Vallée Blanche, one of the world's classic ski descents. I've wanted to ski it for years and to be able to tag it on to the end of an incredible day's climbing felt like a complete gift.

The terrain isn't too steep if you stick to the main route, although at the very end of the day there were some pretty serious moguls and it asked a fair bit of the old legs. The smooth contours of the slope

gave way every so often to crevasses, slim ranks of turquoise-toned cracks and the occasional gaping chasm. Most were well exposed by the passage of hundreds of skiers, but even then every blind rise could potentially conceal a serious threat.

When we stopped for a breather, Frank commented phlegmatically that Louis Lachenal had died in a crevasse on the Vallée Blanche. Suddenly I felt intensely grateful for all the gear on my harness – gear that by this point I actually knew how to use.

As we coasted down the long flat tongue of the Mer de Glace I sat back, admired the superb scenery around me and grinned. In a few short days I had climbed a vertical waterfall of ice, done a mixed ice and rock mountaineering route and slept in a snowhole that I'd built myself. I'd learned a huge amount about avalanche safety, route finding, glacier rescue, mountain weather and the terrifying alcohol tolerance of people who live in ski resorts. What more could you possibly ask for? ■



**SPEAKERS FROM THE EDGE**  
**MOUNTAIN HARD WEAR**

# Tim Emmett Extreme High

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| 24/02/09 <b>KENDAL</b> Brewery Arts Theatre   | 22/04/09 <b>INVERNESS</b> Edan Court         |
| 15/03/09 <b>BUXTON</b> Opera House            | 23/04/09 <b>KIRKCALDY</b> Adam Smith Theatre |
| 18/03/09 <b>MALVERN</b> Malvern Theatres      | 24/04/09 <b>GRAYS</b> Thameside Theatre      |
| 19/03/09 <b>TUNBRIDGE WELLS</b> Assembly Hall | 25/04/09 <b>WORTHING</b> Assembly Hall       |
| 20/03/09 <b>BRECON</b> Theatr Brycheiniog     | 29/04/09 <b>LOWESTOFT</b> The Marina Theatre |
| 31/03/09 <b>SHEFFIELD</b> Students Union      |  |

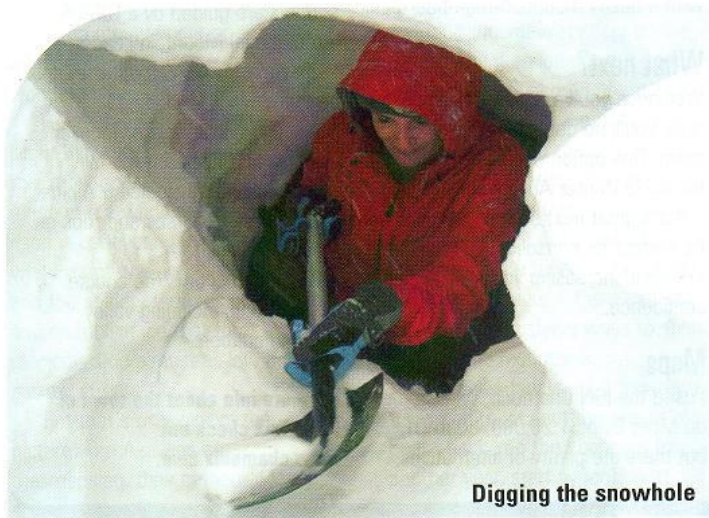
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## Who's Writing?

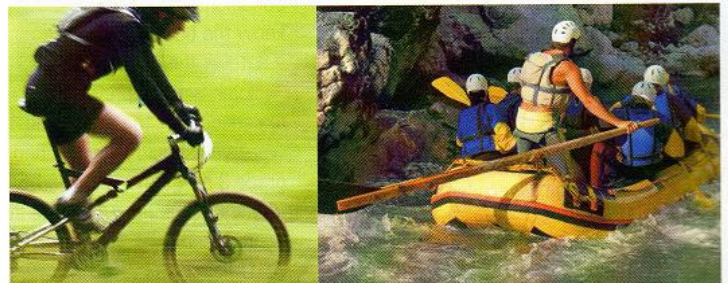


AT regular Zanna Shute is concerned that she seems to have a knack for finding

naked people wherever she goes. This is a bit odd, since being a committed ski bum she normally goes to very cold places. An accomplished big mountain skier, international race coach and adventure journalist she is best known in mountain circles as the girl who falls on her face a lot.



Digging the snowhole



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## Let's go...



Testing the stability of the snowpack by digging a pit

### Getting there

Chamonix is one those places that adventurous types tend to find themselves eventually. Don't even try to resist. The easiest way to get there is to fly to Geneva, about 50 miles away in Switzerland and get the hour-long bus transfer. The closest alternative airports are Chambéry (85 miles) or Lyon (135 miles).

### The Alpine skills course

Technical skills taught on the course include glacier travel, ice climbing, crevasse rescue, ice axe belays and anchors, ropework, crampon & ice axe use, equipment selection, avalanche prediction, search and rescue using transceivers.

The course has changed a bit for winter 2009. You still learn how to build a snowhole, but you actually stay in a comfy mountain hut with duvets. Wusses. The courses are very flexible, allowing you to focus on what you really want to learn and although plans are inevitably subject to

change because of weather conditions the guys at Icicle know the best places to be whatever the conditions.

Even with no previous experience, by the end of the week you should have climbed grade 3 or 4 ice and tackled a famous Alpine PD / AD route in winter conditions.

**For more info about the town of Chamonix check out [www.chamonix.com](http://www.chamonix.com).**

### When to go

Courses run through from December to April, but the nature of the course changes with the conditions. If you are keen on waterfall ice climbing it's best to go for an early course as the later ones are out of the normal ice climbing season and likely to have more of a mountaineering flavour.

### Equipment

You need sturdy 4 season boots that are waterproof and can fit crampons and gaiters

for walking through deep snow.

This kind of trip requires some pretty careful layering – base layers, thermal layers and a waterproof shell. You tend to get very hot when climbing or digging and then you run the risk of getting very cold due to the moisture next to your skin. Always try to take as many layers off as possible before you start doing something energetic to avoid getting sweaty and keep a few spare bits dry in your backpack.

We definitely needed down jackets for our night in the snowhole but it's well worth having one even if you don't sleep husky-style. For ropework in cold conditions it's well worth getting some thin GoreTex Windstopper or similar gloves, and still having sturdy waterproof ones for when the ropes come off.

Throughout the course we all wore avalanche transceivers – beacons that allow you to locate people buried under the snow in case some of your group are buried in an avalanche. We also had probes to pinpoint people exactly and shovels to dig them out.

I hired or borrowed all the technical gear including crampons, ice axes, prussic loops, slings, ice screws, transceiver, shovel and probe from Icicle. I have since bought my own avalanche rescue gear because I'll have lots of opportunities to use it and having your own gear gives you much more chance to practice with it and shave valuable seconds off your search time.

You'll feel more at home in Chamonix if you come equipped with a bushy mountain-man beard.

### What next?

Well once you've got these new skills you'll no doubt want to use them. One option could be to do the Icicle Winter Autonomy course – it's a great next step that would be perfect for consolidating your skills and increasing your confidence.

### Maps

I used the IGN Chamonix, Massif du Mont Blanc 1:25,000, 3630 OT, but there are plenty of alternatives.

You don't strictly need a map for the course, but you gain a lot from being aware of where you and where you're going. They also come in pretty handy for planning your next adventure and reminding yourself how much fun you had.

### Other activities

There is, of course, copious quantities of skiing around Chamonix. Alpine Elements [www.alpineelements.com](http://www.alpineelements.com) offer some good ski packages in the area, as do Ski Weekend [www.skiweekend.com](http://www.skiweekend.com) Chamonix is a proper town though, with loads of stuff you wouldn't get in your average ski village. There's a large sports centre with a swimming pool, tennis, gym and an ice rink where you can watch ice hockey games. There are lots of shops, supermarkets, cinemas, a bowling alley and an Alpine Museum. There's an indoor climbing wall in Les Houches and parapenting and horse-drawn carriage rides are available. But frankly if you're reading this magazine, chances are you'll spend all your time up a mountain or in a bar. Good for you.

### Further info

Icicle is one of the largest UK providers of specialist Alpine mountaineering, ice and ski courses. They have a permanent base in Chamonix, staffed by Kingsley and Sarah who are incredibly welcoming and fantastic company, as is their beautiful dog Max. All their climbing and ski courses are led by an IFMGA International Mountain Guide and all trekking and snowshoeing courses are guided by a UIMLA International Mountain Leader. Icicle run trips throughout the Alps and worldwide, including Aconcagua, Kilimanjaro, Toubkal and Denali. Check out the full itinerary Winter Intro 'Ice & Alpine' and the other courses and trips on the Icicle website - [www.icicleuk.com](http://www.icicleuk.com). The course cost £699pp, including valley accommodation.