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“High school: mountaineering in Chamonix”

By Jonathan Trigell

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High school: mountaineering in Chamonix

You don't need years of experience to scale a mountain or traverse a glacier. Jonathan Trigell learns the basics in a week on a high altitude summer break

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Mind the gap ... mastering deadly crevasses is all part of a day's work for budding mountaineers.

Photograph: Patrik Lindqvist

Not much is known about Bonifacius Rotarius of Asti, except that, some considerable time after the last crusade, he was held captive in the Holy Land and, probably through the paying of a ransom, was eventually able to return to his home near Turin. Perhaps nothing would be known of him at all, were it not for the fact that in honouring a promise made in confinement, Bonifacius made the first ever recorded and undisputed ascent of a mountain peak. Six hundred and fifty years ago this summer he climbed the 3,538m Rocciamelone in the French-Italian Alps and placed at the summit a small metal statue of the Virgin Mary.

It was 500 years after that climb that another great step on the path towards modern mountaineering was made: in the winter of 1857/58 the Alpine Club was founded, the first of its kind. It was started, not by people in the Alps themselves, but very properly by gentlemen in London; its purpose, to support and promote mountaineering. It was not everyone who considered such endeavours fitting, as a letter to one of its first presidents indicates: "Sir. The sooner [the Alpine Club] becomes defunct the better. It is an absurd bad thing from first to last ... an encouragement to foolish men

who have, or think they have, more bodily strength than they have good sense ... let them employ their energies in some more useful way than doing what a squirrel can do much better."

There is another celebration this summer, of which the writer of that letter may have approved: 100 years ago, the Montanvers Cog Railway opened in the mountain mecca of Chamonix in France, to allow tourists to visit the Mer de Glace - Europe's longest glacier - without the arduous walk up. And so, in this year of anniversaries, in honour of those pioneering adventurers, I undertook a trip, which promised in the course of only a week to train the absolutely uninitiated in safe high-mountain and glacier travel sufficiently to finish with the summiting of Gran Paradiso: a 4,061m permanently snow-covered peak, the highest mountain entirely in Italy, and just 20 miles, as the eagle flies, from that first conquered by Rotarius of Asti.

I've skied down countless slopes over the years, looking up at the summits above and beyond the points where the lifts stop, wondering how hard it must be to reach them. As I spoke to Kingsley from Icicle adventure holidays, outside their Chamonix office, I had to casually disguise the creeping realisation that the couple of extended walks I'd taken in preparation did not conform very closely to the month-long pre-course exercise plan which had apparently been sent out to everyone else.

The company's website promised the course was open to pretty much anyone: "ramblers" was the word from the list that stuck in my mind; a word that smacked of pack-a-macked, map flapping retirees. So I was cautiously optimistic as I enquired, in a very nonchalant kind of a way, about the sort of people who would probably be taking part. Kingsley, who is about six foot five in his socks, said they get all sorts, and by way of illustration told me that the previous week's group had included a former professional rugby player and a serving Royal Marine.

I met the rest of my group at the evening briefing, where the other Icicle rep, Sarah, made sure we had all the equipment we needed. Most of this is provided, but of the other five in the group, three had their own mountaineering boots and two their own helmets, which seemed like downright treachery on a beginners' course. At least there were no Royal Marines in evidence, a paramedic and a removals man being the closest we got to professional athletes.

The next day Kingsley led us to the top of Le Buet, towards the border with Switzerland. We started from a parched earth car park at the height of Ben Nevis, and walked through fields, then forests, until we left the tree line behind and ascended another Ben Nevis, to a height where the snow was deep enough to work on ice axe skills. We also practised walking like old men - evidently the trick at high altitude is to go at a pace where you can simply keep going. Big strides use your quads inefficiently, which burns energy rapidly. It is better to go slowly but continuously.

Trudging along, we saw golden eagles, chamois, ibex and marmots, as well as the jagged spear points of the Chamonix Aiguilles mountains: "The Needles". I was pretty pleased with my performance, managing to keep up with the others even though my feet were killing me. I didn't realise how bad they were until I took my boots off at the end of the day. The French for blister, I learned, is ampoule, the same as the word for light bulb. And my blisters were already as big and numerous as Christmas tree lights. Sarah administered three packs of special gel-filled blister compresses, wrapped in zinc oxide tape and liberal smears of Vaseline, to see me through the rest of the week.

The goal of Icicle's "Summits & Skills" week is not just to conquer Gran Paradiso, but to set you on the road towards autonomy, building confidence to safely cross mixed rock, snow and ice. Days are spent on the mountain, and every night there are theory lectures in the Icicle office - which also doubles as the breakfast venue - to reinforce the skills learned. After 8pm, your time is your own to dine out, cook in your cosy self-catering apartment or sample Chamonix's famous night life. But after the exhausting days, I found that sleep was my highest priority.

Day two we spent on the lower, snow-less ice of the "dry" glacier, learning crampon techniques and ice climbing. We were taught by Benoît - or "Benzine" to his friends - a chirpy, confident French guide who soon had the group sharing his enthusiasm for scampering up steep ice. Day three was spent on the snow-covered Glacier des Rognons, where the crevasses are concealed. They of climbing are a real danger to mountaineers: crevasse falls have killed at least three people in Chamonix so far this year. Forewarned with this cheery news, I was directed by Benoît to drop into the depths of a crevasse, so that the others could try to hoist me out. I slid myself backwards over the lip, and even before I had chosen my moment, my scrabbling hands lost their purchase on the snow. I plummeted until the 15mm thick rope slammed me to a stop like a static bungy. Another couple of feet and I would have hit what appeared to be the bottom, but the holes in it showed it was actually a pretty fragile snow bridge. We had been told in the previous evening's instruction that crevasses are rarely deeper than 40m; while dangling, I worked out that this is more than 12 storeys; which seemed far enough.

On the fourth day - after a morning of rope work and rock climbing at a spot called Les Gaillands - we were driven through the Mont Blanc tunnel, which runs from Chamonix to Italy. There we walked up through the stunning national park to the high hut Vittorio Emanuele. We were told the food there is princely by comparison with the usual refuge fair, though it reminded me of primary

school dinners: indeterminate stewed meat, next to an ice-cream scoop of mashed potato and a solitary segment of diced carrot. We set off from the refuge at 4am and scrambled over rock fields lit by head torches in a curiously refreshing light drizzle which cleared to blue sky when the sun rose.

A five-hour slog brought us close to the summit. At least it looked close. For the next three hours we travelled roped together in case of slips or of the collapse of one of the snow-bridges, which start to soften as the day goes on. The true summit was still further, though; along a boulder-topped ridge, a precarious, precipitous scramble in crampons. On one side of it you might survive a fall, provided your head missed the rocks; unfortunately much of the traverse takes place on the other side, where there is a sheer drop (actually both sides are pretty sheer - it's just that one is much further).

My religious sentiments usually occupy the narrow seat between Dawkins and Hitchens, but I was extremely pleased to see the Blessed Virgin. Not because I'd been converted - not even because she marked the highest point - but because she was bolted to the rock by some pretty solid looking metalwork. I wrapped my arms around her and found that, though painted to look like alabaster, she too is metal, like the statue Bonifacius bore up, not far from here, 650 years ago. I noted with some satisfaction that at 4,061m, I was actually half a kilometre higher than him . . . but then he probably did it in chain mail.

This was the highest I had ever been, apart from in an aeroplane, and it felt like the whole of Europe was unfurled before me: Mont Blanc; Monta Rosa; the Matterhorn; La Meije; all the great mountains standing out starkly, like challenges.

We didn't stay up there for long. Benoît told me the guides have a saying: "When you're on the summit, you're not in the valley". Which sounds pretty obvious, but makes the point that the peak is not the objective, it is only the halfway point, the object being to get back down safely. But gravity is friendlier to the descender, and the sun was out on the journey back. We even swigged some *génépi* and grappa, the soul-lifting liquors of two great mountain nations, and I toasted a third: the Alpine Club, the tweed-suited Brits who pioneered this beautiful madness. Because it is beautiful. I was tired from lack of sleep and exertion. My heels were agony, I had only just got back the sensation in my fingers from the cold final mile. And yet I felt total exhilaration - some fraction, perhaps, of the thrill of those first conquerors.

I finished my holiday in style. To celebrate its opening in 1908, the Montanvers cog railway is running special evening trips, with four-course meals served in the *fin de siècle* granite Grand Hotel. From its 1,913m perch beside the Mer de Glace, this surely boasts one of the most stunning views in the Alps.

We were serenaded on to the original rolling stock, all freshly refurbished in white wooden slats, blacked metal and gleaming brass, by a pin-striped New Orleans-style jazz band, who continued to play during the luxuriantly lazy halfhour ascent. And as I sipped champagne en route, served by a costumed waitress, I felt every bit the English gentleman. The food was delicious, too: parcelled duck served on warm grapes.

And as the band played us down, the lights of Chamonix winking beneath the hulking Aiguilles Rouges, I thought again about those who set us on this path: those who dedicated - and often gave - their lives to this overpowering love of the mountains and of life itself. It takes a better man than me to resist that romance, full of red wine, in a lamp-lit rack-railway carriage, open to the pineoaked evening air. Which is why I can't shake the feeling that, somewhere on that journey, I promised to climb Mont Blanc next year.

Jonathan Trigell's novel *Cham*, set in Chamonix, is published in paperback by Serpent's Tail at £6.99.

Way to go

Getting there

London to Chamonix by train takes around 9.5 hrs via Paris and Geneva with Rail Europe (0844 848 4070 , raileurope.co.uk), from £103 return.

Further information

Icicle's (0845 058 9878 , icicleuk.com) introductory Summits and Skills week costs £749 including six nights B&B, guides, cable cars and transport. Upgrade to full board for another £99 or book an acclimatisation weekend for £99.

Montanver's Centenary Trips are available every Thursday and Sunday until September 25 (€75 adults, €53 children) including aperitif drinks and dinner at the Grand Hôtel. Further information: compagniedumontblanc.fr.