



From left:  
Reaching  
the summit;  
Arriving at  
the Cosmiques  
refuge; Turns on  
the North Face.  
Main Picture:  
Boot packing at  
morning light

# man meets mountain in Chamonix

We sit, sweating, on the steps outside the Aiguille du Midi Telepherique. It's a hot April afternoon on the Chamonix valley floor. Our gear piled round us, the last lift of the day finally approaches the station. It's too late in the day for most people to venture up the mountain. The cabin is pleasantly uncrowded as the tin box is wound up the cable to the top. On the summit, the sun's rays are less torturous, given the cool breeze wafting over the glaciers. We hang out at the viewpoints until the staff ask us to leave as they lock up for the night. A short ski down some sun-baked and refried glacial rubbish, posing as snow delivers us to our abode. We offload our gear, then study the route for tomorrow's ascent.

Our pad for the night would make most eagles envious. Perched at the foot of the Cosmiques ridge, Chamonix isn't to our west, it's almost directly below us. Stretched out toward Italy, the Glacier du Geant turns silver as the sun dips below the horizon. We know we have a big trudge ahead of us, so we climb into the bunks in the refuge.

3am. Ouch! It's cold and dark as I stumble around looking for breakfast.

At 4am I'm more awake, but it's pitch dark and frigid outside. There isn't much of a downhill drop between us and the Col du Midi, which we must cross before our climb begins over a kilometre away. I point my headtorch into the dark, turn on my homing pigeon instincts and let my skis run. All of a sudden I'm doing 30mph, far too fast to really see anything with such little light on my head. Alone, ahead of the rest of my group, I'm homing by Braille.

Across the flats I shuffle my skis, avoiding the extra resistance of my skins. The snow is hard and slick, so the glide is good. The slope starts to climb. It's firm underfoot so I swap skis for crampons. After a few hundred yards it gets steep, 60 degrees or so, for 50 m. A deep bootpack appears in my torch light. It's a little unnerving to climb ice this steep with only one axe, skis on my back and no rope.

The short steep section now behind me, the Aiguille du Midi looks eerie in the pre dawn light below. The valley floor much further below is still slumbering in darkness, the only signs of life coming from the faintly twinkling streetlamps. I wait here for my crew,

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and then we crest the shoulder of the Tacul as the face of Mont Maudit rears up before us. We've been climbing uphill for 2 hours. I'm not warm – it's cold up here in the dawn twilight. Skis on again, we glide, more accurately, rattle, on the frozen surface from the shoulder of Tacul to the base of Maudit.

As we ascend the slopes of Mont Maudit, we wind our way through great seracs (huge block of glacial ice that look like teeth). Dawn breaks around ►





From above left: Martin and his homemade snowboard; High on the North Face; the Mont Maudit face to be climbed

us, spilling sunlight like a giant pail of water on a dark painting, exposing a world bathed in blue and white. Almost within spitting distance of the shoulder of Maudit, things suddenly get ugly. We switch from a steep snow plod to an icy scramble. It's only another 50m with an initial 2m step. With more than 3000m of exposure between us and the valley floor it's a whole different ballgame. This is one of those places where you know you need to focus on what's in front of you rather than take in the view. All over this little

section there are bits of fixed rope and various anchors, a testament to some worn nerves. A few tense moments later, it's all over as we transition to a steep, but not so airy traverse which brings us to the Col de la Brenva. We rest for a few minutes and eat. It's hard to stomach food due to the effects of altitude (we're above 4000m here and it's now really cold). I tell my buddies we are more than 2/3rds of the way up in distance and altitude now. Hey, we can see the top not far away. But we aren't halfway there in terms of effort and I'm about to find out how true this is!

Just like the stereotypical tales from the Himalayas. 20 steps, stop 20 breaths, repeat. The slope isn't steep, the terrain isn't difficult. It's just that the air is thin and cold and I'm nowhere near as fit as I thought. Slowly, slowly there's less mountain above us. But time and again we reach a false summit, at least each time the angle gets more gentle.

Seven hours after leaving the refuge we stagger onto the summit. Exhausted and elated on the roof of Europe. There

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is nothing higher in sight. You can see Lyon in the west, the Matterhorn and Monta Rosa in the east. The Jura hills in north, Monte Viso in the south.

On the summit it's a very multinational gathering, with mountaineers from all corners of the world. The diverse assortment of climbers around us brandish skinny skis, cut down, drilled out boots and lightweight bindings. Atypical of most present who made the trudge this sunny April day,

we have lugged our freeride gear to the top. Martin is even riding a huge snowboard we built in my kitchen. Once we have taken in the views up close and afar, it's time to go.

We descend almost straight down the north face. It's reasonably steep, the snow is a chopped windblown frappe, a bit on the stiff side. It feels so high, 3800m above the valley floor. The whole face is a giant jumble of ice, snow and shear rock. We had climbed up a ridge, but we now descend a slope we were unable to view on the way up. With so many routes down

ending in dead ends, the descent can be a navigational challenge. Mistakes mean climbing back up to find a route that goes through. But we manage quite well and drop quickly compared to our long climb. Now gravity is on our side.

Eventually we join the voie normal, as it comes up from the Refuge du Grand Mulets to the Dome du Goûter. We're dropping down from the highest point in Europe, but it feels like skiing down a piste, given the number of people on the mountain and the thrashed snow. Further downslope, we rest, sitting on the softening snow to chill out and take in our day's activities. As we bask in

the sunshine we start feeling better after losing altitude and gaining oxygen.

Lower down on the Glacier du Bossons, we rope up to fight our way through the jumbled blocks of ice. It's only a precaution. However there are plenty of signs of failed snow bridges over cavernous crevasses. Looming above us is the Glacier Rond and the Couloir Cosmiques. A twist here, a turn there, a shuffle round a suspicious block and over a soggy bridge and we make it through to the safety of solid ground.

Skis on again, a slushy traverse over snow delivers us to the old abandoned mid station. For the first time in the whole route we get to leave our mark in the deep, rotten snow. I guess those skinny skis don't work in this stuff. At speed on big skis it's nice. It's just rather hard on our tired legs. We see our lycra-clad counterparts floundering as they sink, unable to enjoy it as much as we are.

Everyone else who shared the mountain with us heads over to catch the Telepherique down to the valley floor. But we are going to the valley floor under our own power. We run out of snow just shy of the other old lift station, one that has been idle since the 1940's, then stagger down through the woods to the Mont Blanc Tunnel. It's hard on the knees despite the soft pine needles underfoot, but easy on the brain. Twelve hours after leaving the refuge it is over. 1500 m of climbing and 3400m of decent. My biggest day on the mountains all winter and a tough one to beat. 🏔️

**Tom Greenall is Natives Senior Resort Reporter. Watch out for more from Tom on Natives.co.uk this winter.**

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