



# HEAD IN THE

CAN A CHILDHOOD DREAM LIVE UP TO ADULT EXPECTATIONS? TOM GREENALL SETS OUT ALONG THE HAUTE ROUTE TO FIND OUT

Clockwise from above: So much for solitude; Alone in the cloud; The Cabane de Chanrion; A giggling marmot; The Matterhorn, at last; Onwards and upwards

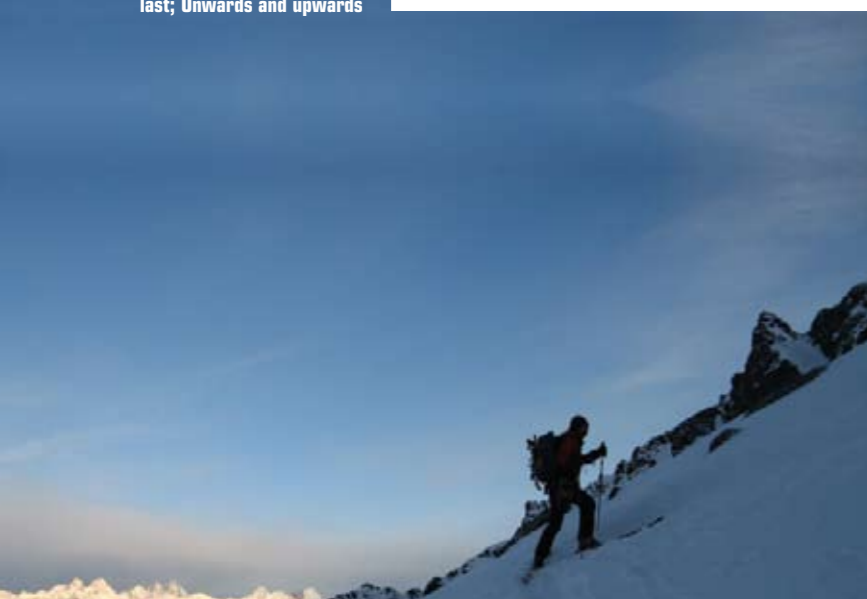
Having heard tales of the Haute Route, the high Alpine touring route from Chamonix to Zermatt, for as long as I can remember, I'd dreamt of completing it myself. Friends, parents and acquaintances all talked of it and yet, despite having been in Chamonix for six years, I'd always worked all season and been unable to take the several days off needed to do it.

This season, by late April, I decided enough was enough and my girlfriend Yoshiko and I set out for Zermatt. And to make things more interesting, we were on home-made skis. Designed for touring, they were made from recycled lumber and were lighter than any other touring skis we came across on the route – we had every faith in them.

As the route suggests, it starts in Chamonix, taking a couple of days to ski tour to the hamlet of Bourg St Pierre before continuing to Zermatt. But living in Chamonix we'd done this first section many a time, so started from the roadside in Bourg St Pierre, an hour's drive from Chamonix, instead.

Strolling out of Bourg St Pierre the sun was already climbing and the crispness of the morning ►

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A rare glimpse of sunlight crossing the Otemma Glacier

gone. We said goodbye to civilisation and headed up the Valsorey valley but barely 10 minutes in and I was already sweating. The snow was melting as fast as we walked. Patchy snow coverage meant it was skis on then off, on then off. The marmots were out in force, playfully teasing us as we slogged upwards in the increasing heat of the day. As we went higher it wasn't plain sailing - there were gullies to be climbed and steep slopes to ascend as the sun's glare took its toll.

Hours after we left civilisation at the roadside in Bourg St Pierre we spied the Valsorey hut above us. It was vertically close - I could not only count the individuals climbing ahead of us but tell what colour clothes they were wearing. But because of the steep zigzags we had to make to reach it, it was still more than an hour before we would rest at the hut for the night.

Perched high on the shoulder of the Grand Combin, the Valsorey hut was a welcoming wood and stone affair. Lots of bed places shoved tightly into not much space within gave it a cosy feel.

There was a sharp chill to the air the next morning as we put skins on our skis to start our precipitous looking climb up to the highest point of the route, at 3664m, on the Plateau de Couloir. The mountain vista expanded with the break of dawn as we zigzagged our way up the steep and not so stable slope. We descended, skis on, down the Glacier du Sonadon but the wind was starting up in earnest and we quickly lost visibility on the short climb up to the Col du Sonadon at 3500m.

Without being able to see much, navigating down the Durand glacier was a challenge. Unlike Chamonix's motorway off-piste route the Valleé Blanche, there was no trail of skiers to follow, and there were vertical ice cliffs and crevasse fields to negotiate. Taking things at a gentle pace, with many references to the map, we muddled our way through and eventually climbed out of the Durand basin to just below the Cabane de Chanrion.

The final climb up to the hut in worsening weather was pretty unpleasant as we skittered over an icy layer on top of slush. But thankfully the refuge exuded welcoming solidity.

The following day we set off half an hour behind a large French group who were surprised to see two English-speaking skiers rattle downhill past them in four minutes. Conditions were grim so it was a day for keeping things simple - a traverse across 12 kilometres of the Otemma Glacier. It was a case of iPods on, heads down and break a trail through the knee-deep snow. We briefly snatched a glimpse of the beautiful remote valley, but then the clouds hid it all again.

The weather took a turn for the worse as we arrived at the Cabane de Vignettes. Just like an eagle's nest, it was perched on a ridge jutting out over the Arolla valley. There used to be a 1000 metre drop from the loo but we were in luck, it had recently been renovated with internal plumbing.

Before dawn on day four, the night's storm had almost blown itself out and it was snowing lightly. The refuge's

**THE REFUGE'S RESIDENT DOG, AN ENGLISH SETTER, SHOWED US THE WAY ALONG THE RIDGE IN THE TWILIGHT**

resident dog, an English setter, showed us the way along the ridge in the twilight to the start of our path.

As the sun hit me I smiled. We'd only been climbing for an hour or so up a nice skin track to Col de l'Eveque when in front of us, there was a decent slope of untracked powder.

It was a steep climb to the top of Col Mont Brulé, where we couldn't see a thing. Inside a cloud, I had to feel around to find the edge and start my descent. Following my tracks, Yoshiko was only able to tell me which way we were heading and how high we were from the perspective I gave - it was so white I was unable to tell whether my skis were pointing uphill or down. A group appeared out of the shadows and we happily let them take the lead. After climbing for two hours it got lighter as we summited the Col du Valpelline and broke cloud cover at the same time.

And there, in front of us, was the Matterhorn, as if it had just jumped out on us. A long slog down the Zmutt glacier and we were in Zermatt, exhausted but elated. After all these years, I'd made it along the Haute Route, with home-made skis intact and full of plans to tackle the other cols, glaciers and valleys we'd glimpsed between the clouds.