

THE RUCKSACK CLUB JOURNAL 2015



Two Old Codgers and a Few Big Hills

Parminder Chaggar



Two Old Codgers, Lagginhorn summit.

Photo Chaggar collection

... or as Andy kindly opined: One old codger, a (relatively) young tyke and a few big hills! This summer, Andy Tomlinson and I undertook what has become, in recent years, our annual ‘boys trip’ to the Alps, and this year we had chosen an early season window with the hope of putting his new Viper axes to good use on some classic snow/ice routes such as the Dreieselwand on the Lenzspitze and the Whympfer Couloir on the Aiguille Verte.

Many weeks of flicking through guides and glossy coffee-table Alpine books, exchanging multiple e-mails with tick-lists and logistics and deliberating over the optimum selection of ropes had served only to build excitement and expectation of the journey ahead. An obsessional fascination with the jet stream and weather charts revealed we were likely to be blessed with stable high pressure across much of the Alps but the final call on our destination would be left until the last weather check on the midnight ferry from Dover. Despite initial plans of climbing in the Oberland to tick the mighty Lauteraahorn, Finsteraahorn and Eiger, the seduction of wall-to-wall sunshine in Chamonix proved too much to resist and after an overnight drive we found ourselves in the familiar Carrefour in Sallanches, stocking the trusty campervan with vital supplies (beer, cheese, salami and a new camera for Andy as the new one he had brought to the Alps was too

nice to take on a proper hill, although it was many months before this expense was declared to finance control in Stoke). However, doubts on our destination started to develop on arriving at the Mer de Glace campsite where temperatures were a balmy 35 °C and our fears were confirmed in the Office de Haute Montagne – a month-long heat wave with the 0 °C isotherm persistently above the summits had seriously affected snow stability and all snow/ice routes were out of condition. Armed with a guidebook and fuelled with strong Belgian beer after a nocturnal drive from Calais, we were not to be deterred and an alternative tick-list was devised. After all, this is the prerequisite of a good mountaineer – to read the conditions and adjust the plans accordingly!



Andy Tomlinson climbing Gâteau de Riz, Argentière. Photo Parminder Chaggar

Wanting an easy but classic first tick to find our legs and ease us into the thinner atmosphere, we elected to exploit the Aiguille Rouge chair-lift system and spied the traverse of the Aiguilles Crochues (who are we to argue with Monsieur Rébuffat?). The following morning we found ourselves on the first bin and, despite taking an unintentional alternative line to access the ridge, were on the route ahead of most of the crowds, climbing solid Chamonix granite in the sunshine and with superb views across to the Tour, Argentière, Mer de Glace and Bossons glacier basins. Thankfully, our fast and light 9mm 30m rope had just enough reach to get us to snow at the end before a rapid descent to beers in more sunshine.

Inspired by a great day on the Aiguilles Crochues and eager to gain more easy mileage while acclimatising, the following day we took the Montets lift to help gain the Aiguille du Refuge behind the Argentière Hut. The south face of this orange-red Chamonix granite peak is blessed with a delightful 200m multi-pitch route (Gâteau de Riz) on sound rock, which starts only ten minutes from the hut. With the sun on our backs and superb views across to the Courtes, Droites and Verte, we enjoyed the succession of easy but interesting pitches (never harder than 5a); even the chimney pitch which gratefully received several layers of my skin like a ceremonial sacrifice to the mountain deities. But note, if you intend on following us up this route, do not follow our route down via the horribly loose adjacent gully, adorned with enticing abseil tat. Instead, read the guide properly and traverse to the next, much safer, gully!

Rejuvenated with a good meal and a restful night's sleep at the hut, the next morning, after missing the high traversing path on the lateral moraine, we descended a complete choss-fest of a glacier to the Lognan lift station and onward to Argentière. However, we longed for more traditional Alpinism and despite being surrounded by beautiful sun-kissed granite, a recurrence of a finger tendon injury meant the amount of rock-climbing we could do would be limited. Meanwhile, the high temperatures were even destabilising the rock. Therefore, we immediately packed up the camper and headed over the Col de Forclaz into Switzerland and a campsite in Saas Grund. With a favourable weather window, cooler temperatures and good reports from the Guides' office, we decided on a traverse of the Lagginhorn (4,010m), ascending the South and descending the West-South-West ridges), a classic AD in the valley.

During dinner at the Hohsaas hut we met some pleasant young Germans who had spent most of the previous week climbing in the Monte Rosa group which Andy and I had visited the year before. They also had their eyes on the Lagginhorn traverse, but were clearly better acclimatised (after a week at 4,000m+ compared to us who had barely broken 3,000m) and they looked 'ripped' with huge biceps. The plucky Brits therefore made a plan to set off at 4am to get a good head start as we were undoubtedly going to be slow in the rarefied air. Arising before dawn to a clear sky, we made our way up the easy rock ridge and snowfield to the Lagginjoch, which separates the Lagginhorn from the Weissmies and marks the start of the South Ridge. Treated to a delightful sunrise and welcoming the warming solar rays to

combat the biting wind-chill, we progressed quickly on mostly sound rock in a superb position past multiple gendarmes and false summits. We had seen the strapping Germans about half an hour behind us on the snowfield but, to our surprise, the overtaking manoeuvre never came and they moved further away, clearly weighed down by their unnecessary 'guns'. The brisk wind was unrelenting but spurred us on to climb quickly and efficiently so we were the first on the summit that day by any route, and well within guidebook time. A straightforward descent followed, past multiple parties climbing the voie normale, back to victory beers in the sun at the Hohsaas hut, surrounded by an impressive view of fourteen 4,000m peaks of the Valais.



Andy Tomlinson on the summit tower of the Lagginhorn. Photo Parminder Chaggar

Buoyed by a strong performance on the Lagginhorn and with continuing favourable weather, we chose a Martin Moran recommended route, the Rotgrat on the Alphubel (4,206m), as our next objective, and wasted no time by heading straight round to the Zermat valley and ascending to the Täsch Hut. The Rotgrat proved much more challenging than the Lagginhorn South Ridge owing to significant amounts of loose rock. Everywhere! A loose block coming away in Andy's hand offered a poignant reminder of the mountain's fragility and our own. Thankfully, the fast-light rope and a running belay limited the damage to only a bruised ego. Now fully committed to the ridge, and with the easiest way off via the summit, we progressed carefully, triple-checking each block and hold for fear of another mishap. The position was superb but the aesthetics of the line were detracted from by dreadful rock as we passed over a series of rocky pinnacles interspersed with snowy ridges. Finally at the base of the summit tower, we feared what conditions we might find on the steeper terrain but were pleased and relieved that the rock improved with the steepness and the climbing was even enjoyable at times. After a final loose section, we arrived on the easy summit ridge, some way behind guidebook time, but safe. The single malt in the hipflask tasted particularly sweet at the summit cross. A soft descent down the South-East Ridge provided a pleasant end to an otherwise harrowing day and brought us back to the valley and the comforts of the van where we could ponder over our pizza and beer just why we venture into such terrain.

Undeterred by the Martin Moran recommendation and with continued stable weather, we felt a traverse of the Matterhorn would replenish our Alpine enthusiasm, despite deciding in the pre-trip planning phase that we would avoid the Matterhorn in the 150th anniversary year of its first ascent. However, not only had we reneged on our promise to avoid the 150th year, but we had chosen 14th July, the actual 150th anniversary. Fortunately, we were spared a likely circus event since the hut informed us that the mountain was officially closed for the anniversary and no one was allowed to climb from any route. So, thankfully, an alternative objective was enforced and attention moved to another challenging pointy pyramidal peak; the Weisshorn (4,506m) via its North Ridge and the Bishorn (4,153m).

Andy nearing the summit on the Lagginhorn, with fourteen 4,000m peaks of the Valais in view. Photo Parminder Chaggar



The next day, a swift drive to the neighbouring Zinal valley was followed by a not-so-swift 1,600m climb to the Tracuit Hut, perched in a spectacular position with inspiring views of the objective; two kilometres of knife-edge ridge composed of snow and rock sections including a Grade IV pitch usually done in crampons.

We ate well that evening and mixed with two other parties intending the same route. The other groups followed suit for a 1am start and after the exertion of the hut walk, we slept peacefully and the rise at an ungodly hour was surprisingly painless. Progress up the Bishorn glacier was swift and the easy ascent of the Bishorn was dispatched under guidebook time. 'Back to form' we thought, but losing the occasional leg in thigh-deep soft snow in the middle of the night started to ring warning bells of concern in our deeper recesses; the snow conditions should have been firm at this cold hour but even these high Valais mountains were suffering from the high temperatures that had decimated conditions in Chamonix. We moved on nevertheless but, by the time we reached the start of the ridge, there were still patches of cruddy snow and we were feeling growing unease with the terrain ahead. Reversing this terrain in the heat of the day was asking for trouble and with the majestic ridge tantalisingly close, bathed in beautiful dawn light, we made the difficult but correct decision to retreat. The other two parties had pressed on and as we retraced our steps, passing the crowds that set-off at a more sociable hour on their ascent of the Bishorn, we questioned whether we were victims of our own caution, perhaps unconsciously blighted by our experience on the Rotgrat. However, the sight, a couple of hours later, of the rescue helicopter lifting climbers from the ground that we had rejected, provided a sobering realisation to our decision making. The decision was vindicated further when, on the walk down from the hut, I received a phone call from my wife that she was now four weeks pregnant with our first child; definitely must get home in one piece, now. We only hoped our fellow climbers were all safe.

With another few days of our trip still available, and not wanting to end on a negative, we scoured the guidebooks in search of a suitable objective. Fuelled by Belgian beer, French vin rouge and Scottish single malt, we found



two that could be linked for one long satisfying day; the West Ridge of the Dent de Tsalion and the Aiguille de la Tsa. We had stared up at these prominent features of the Arolla skyline three years previously when we were both on a mountain medicine course and so it seemed a fitting finale to the trip. A short drive later we were parked at the head of the valley and enjoying the short but steep ascent to the Tsa Hut. Hoping for a relaxed evening in the sun we were welcomed by a guided party of twenty 'youths' on a mountaineering course and feared the worst: that they would all be on our line, forced along by a pushy European guide. They were a pleasant but excitable bunch, but twelve of them would be climbing the same route as us. We therefore decided to try and beat the 'youths' with an early start the next morning and were away 30 minutes ahead of the rest. This gave us plenty of room on the West Ridge with no concerns of rocks falling from above.



The Author on Lagginhorn South Ridge.

Photo Andy Tomlinson

The route rose along a narrow ridge with solid rock on the crest, which provided excellent and exposed climbing. We gained ground rapidly as we moved together and only had to pitch a short section after inadvertently veering too far onto the loose ground on the face. The summit arrived within five hours of leaving the hut and we took some time to refuel in the sunshine at the col underneath the Aiguille de la Tsa. This aiguille is an impressive pinnacle on the Arolla skyline and accessed by 130m of straightforward but enjoyable climbing from the glacier behind. If you want to climb this distinct feature, do it soon as, after witnessing a large rock fall from the front face, it may not be there for too long. Having tagged the narrow summit and celebrated with the last of the single malt from the hip flask, two abseils brought us to the glacier and only the long walk to the valley, via the Bertol Hut, lay between well-deserved ice cream and us. Back at the van we bumped in to the dozen 'youths' that shared the first ridge. However, they had only just returned from climbing the single route and a much shorter descent than ours, quipping that Andy moved quick for an old codger. Certainly, his knees were also in agreement.

And so, for another year this one old codger and a (relatively) young tyke came back from the mountains with a few more grey hairs, a bit less cartilage but fantastic memories and enormous smiles. Plans for next year are already underway; just when is it socially acceptable to take a child across a glacier...?



The Author descending the Lagginhorn voie normale.

Photo Andy Tomlinson