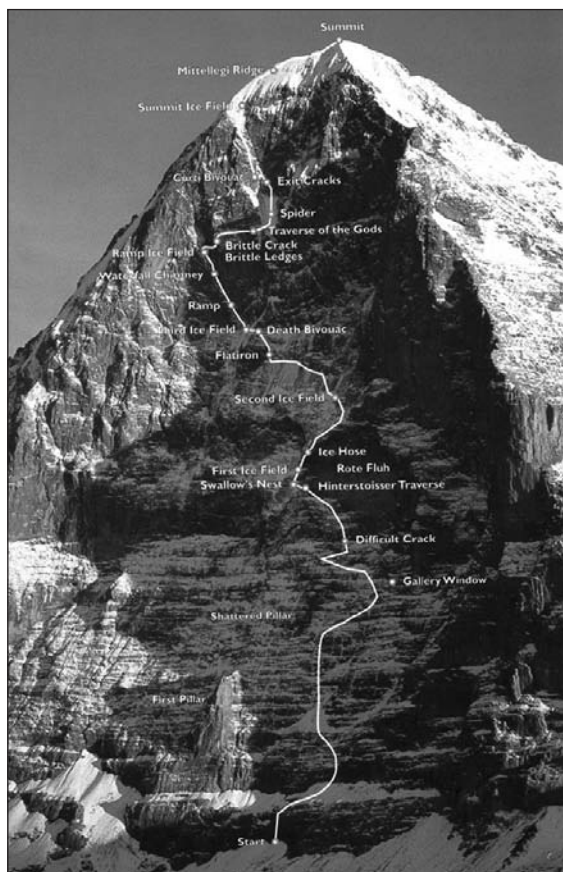


The North Face of the Eiger

by Nick Wallis



North Face Route

WWW internet resource

‘Safe.’ James’ voice came out of the darkness. I could just make out the faint glow of his head-torch reflecting off the snowfield above. The rope quickly went tight and I started front-pointing up the hard, thin ice.

It is the 19th April and we had just set off on the 1938 route on the Eiger Nordwand. We’d not got off to the best of starts, though. Despite receiving it the previous afternoon, we had somehow missed a turning on the big bootpack leading across the snow-slope beneath the face. James had quickly

dispatched the resulting unnecessary first pitch, but we both cursed ourselves for not being more careful. We knew we could ill-afford many more route-finding mistakes like that.

It had all started the previous week with a chance encounter in a friend's apartment in Chamonix. I had stayed on for an extra week at the end of a skiing holiday and James Thacker was staying in the apartment and was looking for a climbing partner. We were both keen to go climbing and knew that the Eiger was in excellent condition. Sir Ranulph Fiennes' guided ascent had been on the television news recently and a few friends had climbed it too. Remarkably, we didn't really discuss it for long, nor the fact that we had never actually climbed together – it just seemed right. We spent a few days going through the usual rituals of checking forecasts, guidebooks and sorting equipment. We were both conscious of the need to go as lightweight as possible on a route as long as this. We carried very lightweight sleeping bags, minimal gas and food. Our rack consisted of a single set of wires, some hexes and cams, a few ice screws and a dozen or so quick-draws. We decided to climb on one 50 metre 9mm rope and I packed 50 metres of 5mm Spectra in the bottom of my rucksack to use as a pull-line should we need to abseil. We silently hoped that we wouldn't need to use it.

Back on the route, things started to go a little more smoothly. We took the rope off after the initial entry pitch and made steady progress, zig-zagging our way up the easy-angled lower reaches of the face. We rapidly realised that this was a one-way ticket to the summit: the thought of descending this kind of ground, especially with the lack of good belays and our small rack, was extremely unappealing. Snow conditions were excellent though, with perfect first-time placements in squeaky *névé*. However, we didn't have it all to ourselves; as it started to get light we saw several parties coming in from our right, on what was now the obvious easier start to the route.

The impressive Rote Fluh loomed larger and larger above our heads and the climbing intensified as we searched to find the best line to the start of the Difficult Crack. The rope was back on now as James led a difficult rightwards traverse to get to the base of this famous pitch. As I quickly sorted the rack, two more parties arrived hot on our heels, having made an early start through the Stollenloch gallery window. We were lucky that the rock was dry and not too cold, so I was able to take my gloves off and rock-climb the pitch, still wearing crampons. It felt steep and awkward and it was with tired arms that I reached the stance at its top, with a French guide following close behind. There were several guided parties on the climb that day and they were not hanging around. We were happy to let them pass,

rather than trying to share the minimal stances (and gear placements) with them. I quickly brought James up and he grabbed the gear and headed off leftwards across steeply-angled snow, hemmed in by rock walls above.

It felt strange to finally be on the Eiger, after dreaming about climbing it for such a long time. There is so much psychological baggage associated with this face, that it's hard not to think that something is about to go wrong or that the weather may deteriorate at any moment. Even when the conditions are perfect, the weather is good and you're climbing well, there are still small doubts at the back of your mind, reminding you that everything could change in an instant. Passing the landmark points on the route only serves as a very real reminder of the history and the epic rescues that have ensued on these steep walls of snow and ice. And so it was on the lower section of the face that I found myself climbing almost with a sense of foreboding, wondering what might happen next, what difficulties may be waiting out of sight around the next corner. However as we gained height, slowly these doubts were displaced by more positive thoughts. We were climbing well, feeling confident and the weather was good. What could go wrong?

I clipped into the fixed ropes at the start of the Hinterstoisser Traverse and started to pull myself across. The exposure suddenly hits you here, for the face directly below falls away more steeply, as you try to spot any small edges to use as footholds for your crampon points. The traverse is also surprisingly long, nearly forty metres, and ends abruptly at the Swallow's Nest bivvy site. This was buried under lots of snow and looked pretty cramped, so we were glad not to be spending the night there. I led on up the First Icefield, and took a stance just to the left of the Ice Hose, the narrow ribbon of ice linking the First and Second Icefields. James came up and quickly led on through. Our newly formed climbing partnership was working well. He was definitely quicker than me on steep snow and ice, however I was slightly stronger on the steeper rock pitches. The bottom section of the Ice Hose had melted out, so there were a few metres of precarious mixed climbing before the ice could be reached. This didn't slow James down too much though and we were soon belayed to an ice screw at the start of the Second Icefield.

Taking the rope off at the start of the Second Icefield just felt plain wrong. However, we knew that we needed to move quickly and that moving together on this ground with only a few ice screws was probably no more secure. I watched James confidently front-pointing upwards as I coiled the rope and then set off after him. We decided to climb straight up to the top edge of the icefield and then traverse horizontally across, rather than taking a more direct diagonal line. The reason for this was that it afforded better

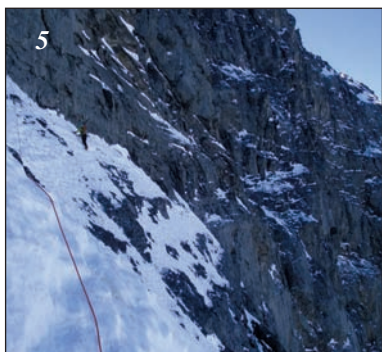
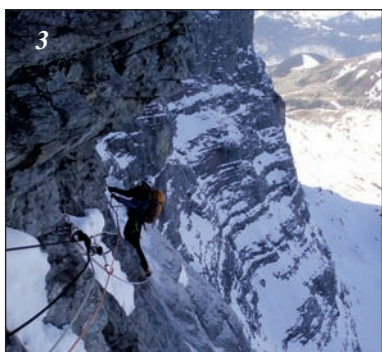
protection from any rock-fall, although we had not seen or heard any so far. The Second Icefield is huge and it's hard to appreciate the scale even when you're climbing it. It seemed to take a long time to reach its top and even longer for the horizontal traverse.

We put the rope back on for the Flatiron, the steep buttress that bars access to Death Bivouac from the Second Icefield. I grabbed the gear and led off up a narrow gully, followed by a left-wards traverse onto some pretty steep ground. Fortunately this was short lived and soon led to an easier angled snowfield above. James led through and it was at about four o'clock in the afternoon that we arrived at Death Bivouac, a relatively spacious snow ledge just over halfway up the face. We briefly considered carrying on as there was at least another four hours of daylight left. However, we knew there were at least three parties ahead of us, probably bivvying somewhere in the Ramp, so we reasoned that we'd have a much more comfortable night staying where we were. We were pretty pleased with the day's work, but we knew there would be plenty of hard climbing in the ramp and the exit cracks the following day.

A very pleasant few hours were spent drinking tea and drying equipment in the afternoon sun, before settling in for our first night on the mountain. We had such a good night that we slept through the alarm and it was already starting to get light as James left the bivvy and traversed off onto the Third Icefield. As is often the case early in the morning, it took a while to get going but we were soon making good progress up the lower reaches of the Ramp, the huge diagonal fault line that dominates the upper third of the face. This gave interesting and enjoyable climbing and as we gained height the ground became steeper and the rock walls closed in above our heads. I took over the lead. A delicate leftwards traverse, followed by a difficult groove led to a belay in a snow bay. The next pitch looked even more difficult – a steep icy chimney barred access into the upper section of the Ramp. This must be the famous Waterfall Chimney, I thought to myself as James quickly climbed up to join me on the stance. I set off again, inching my way up, with a long stretch to clip a peg on the verglassed left wall of the chimney.

The exit from the chimney was the crux of the climb so far. I just managed to get one axe into some thin ice above the bulge at its top, before fully committing to it and pulling over with some relief onto easier-angled ground above. James led through on another hard pitch on verglassed rock and thin ice – the Ice Bulge pitch, and after another short pitch we reached the easier-angled snow of the Ramp Icefield. From here the route left the Ramp and traversed back rightwards into the middle of the face. The Ramp had fully lived up to its reputation for hard climbing, and it felt good to have

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North Face Ascent – photo sequence.

1. Moving together on the lower slopes early on the first morning.

2. James at the top of the Difficult Crack.

3. James following in the footsteps of history on the Hinterstoisser Traverse.

4. James exiting the Waterfall Chimney high on the Ramp on day two.

5. Don't look down! James setting off across the Traverse of the Gods.

6. Sunlight and shade, White Spider and the meadows of Alpiglen 5000 feet below.

Photos: 1 James Thacker. 2 – 6 Nick Wallis.

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it behind us at last. We climbed to the top of the Ramp Icefield, before traversing off rightwards along the Brittle Ledges – there were plenty of bivvy sites hacked out of the snow here, but they were small and cramped compared to Death Bivouac. We felt that we had made the right decision to stop where we had the previous afternoon. The traverse across the Brittle Ledges was easy but very precarious with little protection and loose rock.

We belayed at the base of the Brittle Crack, the next key pitch which barred access to the start of the Traverse of the Gods. It looked steep but at least it was dry – and as I racked up the gear I felt more confident than I had done before the Difficult Crack the previous day. I climbed up a short corner and placed some gear, before pulling steeply out rightwards on big side-pulls, with feet high on sloping footholds. The climbing was flowing and



James on the summit snow slopes.

Photo Nick Wallis

fluid now, and I found that I wasn't pausing anymore to try and get gear where none existed. THIS was how climbing the Eiger was meant to feel, I thought to myself, as I confidently pulled up again and was rewarded with hand-eating flakes up which the pitch finished. The climbing was of a totally absorbing nature. I arrived at the next stance and took the rope in with a big smile on my face. The line from here was all too obvious; a sensational passage rightwards across steeply inclined-snow, with sheer rock walls above and below. The Traverse of the Gods. Like all of the other features on the climb, it was well named. James took over the lead now. The climbing was relatively easy but very exposed, delicate and poorly protected. As the rope came tight I moved off and we moved together as we tip-toed across towards the White Spider, the hanging icefield in the middle of the face. James took a belay at the end of the traverse, and I led through up the Spider, keeping to a rib up its centre to avoid a patch of hard black ice further right. A couple of rope lengths up this and we were soon belayed at the foot of the Exit Cracks – and hopefully the last hard climbing separating us from the summit.

It was now mid-afternoon, and the sun was going to work on the upper snowfields of the Eiger. With it came a few bits of rock-fall, fortunately well off to our left. We had been very lucky in this regard, with no rock-fall at all on the climb so far. We couldn't afford to relax yet though; the Exit Cracks had a reputation for containing some of the hardest pitches on the climb. They were also poorly protected. One good thing about the Eiger is that you have time to become acclimatised to these obstacles before you actually reach them; I'm sure that had we encountered the hard climbing early on the first day, it would have felt much more severe. As it was, we quickly moved up the lower pitches of the Exit Cracks and were soon belayed at the base of the Quartz Crack. If we were lucky, this would be the last hard pitch of the climb.

James set off, and it was immediately obvious that the climbing was difficult. There was no ice at all, just smooth, rounded limestone, and the usual spaced protection. He made good progress up the initial corner and then reversed back down for a rest. After regaining his high point, he moved up and spotted a hidden peg out on the right wall. Some steep moves out to gain this, followed by a long stride back left into the continuation corner and he was past the difficulties. I breathed a sigh of relief as he belayed and took the rope in; we were getting close now. I joined him on the stance and then led through on a traverse line that leads leftwards and down to the site of the Corti bivouac. This was done on a piece of in-situ rope that was way past its best but I was past caring by now. Without hesitating I clipped into it and slid quickly down to the belay at its end.

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The next pitch was one I had heard friends talk about and I looked up at it, dry-mouthed as I belayed James across the traverse. A wide chimney led straight up from the stance. It was devoid of any snow or ice, just melt-water from the snowfields above running down the back of it. There was no protection at all for as far as I could see. There was a bolt at about the thirty-foot mark, tantalisingly out of reach on the right wall. Presumably you needed ice in the chimney to be able to reach it.



James in the sun as we join the Mittellegi Ridge.

Photo Nick Wallis

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I set off, heart in mouth, knowing that this pitch was going to be taxing but knowing that it was the last difficult pitch. I balanced up, crampon points biting on the sloping wet holds, hands palming and leaning off the rounded handholds. I thought about trying to reach the bolt, but decided not to as it looked hard just getting to it, and even harder leaving it. So I placed a poor cam, my first and only piece of gear, and carried on. A few more balancy, insecure moves and it started to relent. With some relief a peg appeared on the left, then a few more bits of gear before a welcome belay. James quickly came up and led though up the continuation chimney which was similar but not quite as hard or as run-out as the previous one. The exit chimneys led to mixed ground, which in turn quickly led to the summit snow-slopes.

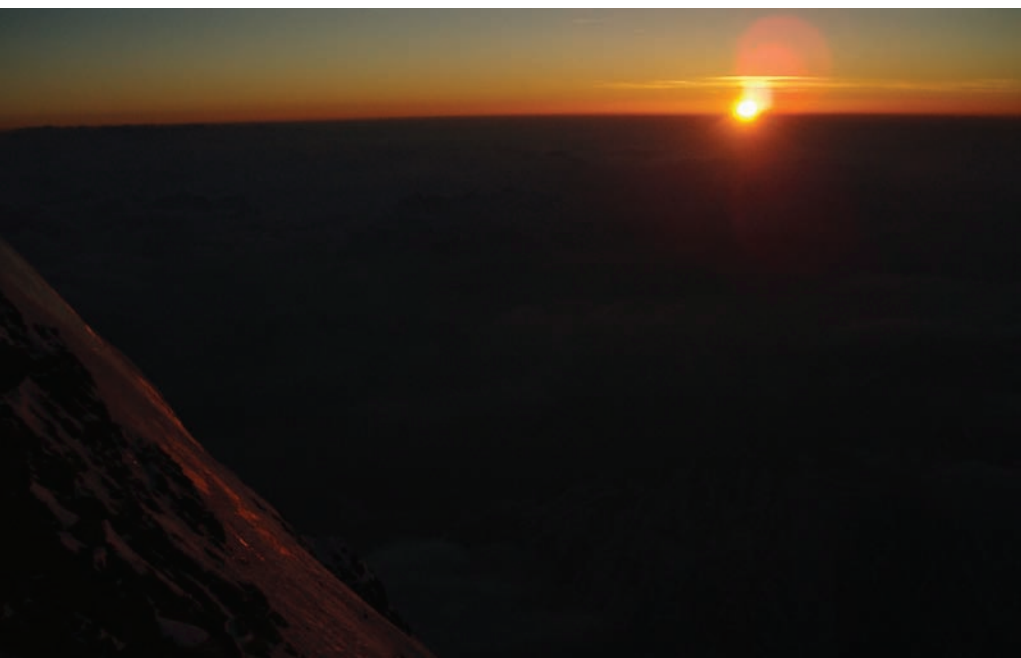


Bivvy on summit ridge. Nick enjoys a well earned cuppa. Photo James Thacker

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Fortunately these were in excellent condition and it was on tired legs that we front-pointed up the final few rope-lengths to the Mittelligi Ridge in the late afternoon sun. For the first time in two days the views started to open up around us and the surrounding peaks were bathed in sunlight as we moved together along the summit ridge.

It was too late to descend the West Flank back down to Kleine Scheidegg that day so we found a good bivvy site on the south side of the ridge. The summit would have to wait until the following morning, but we didn't care as we slid into our sleeping bags for the night. We had enjoyed a wonderful adventure on the greatest Alpine climb of them all, the North Face of the Eiger.



Room with a view. Sunset from the bivvy on the summit ridge. Photo Nick Wallis