

## Three of a Kind

by Nick Wallis

The text from Rich confirmed my suspicions: *'Yes, in the Solvay now. Stellar conditions, but it's a long way from the top of the ramp to the summit so stay psyched. Have fun!'*

The pieces of the jigsaw were slowly falling into place: Route in condition? Check. Weather forecast? Check. Psyche levels? Getting there. Climbing partner? Climbing partner – Mmm. Some frantic head-scratching, phone calls and e-mails followed. All of the usual suspects were either away, busy, working or already on the route! Fortunately a friend in Chamonix, Matt Dickinson, was available and keen for some climbing. I'm not sure an Alpine north face was exactly what he had in mind, but he didn't take much persuading either.

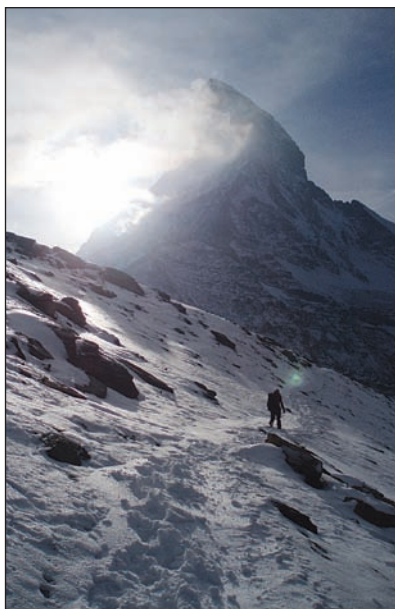
The North Face of the Matterhorn was first climbed by brothers Franz and Tony Schmid in the summer of 1931. My knowledge of this face was less than that of the other major Alpine walls, and I knew even fewer friends who had climbed it. It seemed somewhat elusive, and it was hard to gather much first-hand information about the route. So when I heard on the grapevine that it had received some ascents in the late-autumn of 2008, I knew this was an opportunity not to let pass. Matt and I quickly made plans to get ourselves over to Zermatt as soon as possible. I was living down in the Ecrins at the time, and so arranged to meet Matt in Chamonix the following day. The Schmid brothers had ridden by bicycle from Munich before their ascent: we were not up to repeating this feat, but we did decide to take mountain bikes to use for the hut approach and descent. This was certainly an unusual approach to an Alpine climb, but we had heard that the Schwarzsee cable-car was not running, whereas the Trockener Steg lift was. So our plan was to take our bikes up the Trockener Steg lift and cycle over to Schwarzsee from there. What could possibly go wrong?

Buckling under the weight of our large rucksacks, we attracted strange looks from passers-by as we wobbled our way out of the lift station on our bikes. Luckily we were still below the snowline, but the summer path was steep and rocky which made the riding interesting from the start. The views across to the Matterhorn were stunning, with the North Face outlined in sharp profile against a deep blue sky. I silently wondered what the climbing would be like on the mountain; would the snow we could see be climbable névé, or useless mush? Would we be able to find somewhere to bivouac? Would we find adequate protection on the harder pitches? A loud scream

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*Alpenglow on the Breithorn and Matterhorn North Face. Photo James Roddie*



*Left – The perfect Mountain? Matt Dickinson approaches the Matterhorn in style.  
Right – Matt on the final approach to the Hörnlihütte. Photos Nick Wallis*



*Matt leads off on the crux pitch, Day 2.*

*Photo Nick Wallis*

from Matt brought my daydreaming to an abrupt end. He had decided to take an 'off piste' variation and had gone flying over the handlebars after attempting to cycle through a boulder field. He writhed around the ground in agony, holding his right knee tight up against his chest. Our climb could be finished right here before it had even begun, but after a few minutes Matt was up and limping around. Having shrugged off his injury as 'just a minor flesh wound', we were on our way once more.

We continued to just past Schwarzsee before abandoning the bikes. The next section to the Hörnlihütte would be easier on foot, so I hid our trusty steeds out of sight behind some rocks whilst Matt administered some much needed first-aid to his knee. The Matterhorn grew in stature and was becoming increasingly imposing above our heads as we moved above the snowline. We donned crampons for the final steep pull up to the hut, which required an acrobatic manoeuvre to gain access into the winter quarters.

The small winter room was bustling with activity and also contained a few familiar faces. It's funny how you bump into old climbing friends in situations like these, although not entirely surprising. It was immediately obvious that we were not the only ones to have heard that the Schmid was 'in'. There was no sign of our friends Rich, Graham and Stuart, so we presumed they must have decided to stay in the Solvay refuge for the night. Later that evening, two other friends Dave and Robin stumbled into the hut; having missed the last téléphérique they had approached on foot from the valley. We set about cooking some dinner, melting snow and organising equipment for the following day's climb. For some reason that is hard to justify, we decided not to take sleeping bags on the route. We thought that we should be well acclimatised, as both Matt and I had spent the summer climbing in the Alps, and we hoped to complete the climb and descend as far as the Solvay the following day. The rack was also pretty minimalist, comprising just a few ice-screws, some quickdraws and a handful of wires. At least our rucksacks would be light! I set several alarms for 2am before drifting off into a deep sleep.

The hut was already a hive of activity by the time the alarm sounded. We crawled out of our bunks and forced some breakfast down before venturing out into the cold darkness of the night. A thousand stars sparkled brightly overhead, as we picked our way up the slopes above the hut before traversing off to the right to get onto the glacier. There were several parties already ahead of us, and more following behind including, somewhere, Dave and Robin. Matt led a steep pitch through the rockband that separates the snow basin below from the Matterhorn Glacier above, before we traversed off rightwards again, heading towards the middle of the face. However, route-finding was difficult, the climb not following any obvious line in its lower reaches, and with no prominent landmarks to show the way. Thus we made the mistake of not continuing far enough rightwards on the traverse, instead launching directly up snow slopes of good névé linked by snaking icy goulottes. By this time the various teams were spread across the lower third of the face; some left, some right; most heading upwards, some deciding that enough was enough and bailing back down. The middle third of the route climbs a very prominent rightwards-trending ramp line, and as dawn broke our route-finding errors became apparent. The base of the ramp could now be seen, a long way off to our right. And so began a very long calf-burning traverse, rising rightwards towards the top corner of the icefield.

I took a stance at the base of the ramp and belayed Matt as he led through on tricky mixed ground. We had lost valuable time on the lower part of the face, and I guessed that it must be late morning already. Matt made short



work of his pitch, and I quickly followed before setting off once more. It felt great to be climbing an Alpine north face again, and we were now moving well and feeling confident. I took a moment to savour our surroundings; off to our right the overhanging Zmutt nose soared skywards, shaped like the hull of a huge ship. Straight down, the face plunged over a series of large buttresses before ending in the chaos of the glacier. Without really realising it, we were already in a position of some commitment.

Conditions on the lower face had been good, thick névé, but this gave way to harder, thinner ice in the ramp. Still, it was perfectly climbable with precise pick and crampon placements, if a little tiring on the calf muscles. The ramp ends abruptly at a large gully which descends directly from the Hörnli ridge above. I grabbed the gear off Matt and started across on old, brittle ice. Another tricky mixed pitch followed up the rib on the other side, and there was now a sense of urgency as it was getting late. The sun cast long shadows along the valley floor, and the mountains behind us were bathed in beautiful late-autumn sunlight.

The way ahead from here was not at all obvious, and so we consulted the guidebook for some clues. The description had us heading out rightwards, onto improbable looking terrain in the centre of the face. It looked difficult, but after spotting a couple of pegs and with no better ideas I decided to give it a go. Fortunately the climbing eased after a few difficult initial moves, and I was soon belayed on a snow ledge bringing Matt across. The next pitch was even more difficult, straight up the steep rock buttress above; a superb lead by Matt in the fading light. 'We're definitely off route – it's supposed to be TD, not Scottish VI!' I said to Matt as I pulled onto the stance. The futility of my comment struck me as I gathered my breath and surveyed our situation: The steep rock buttress continued above us for at least one more pitch. It had just gone dark and we were somewhere around 4000m on a major Alpine north face at the end of October. And we didn't have any sleeping bags.

We decided the best plan was to stay put for the night, and so we quickly set about hacking a ledge out of the snow slope. Somewhat predictably, we soon hit hard ice and rock. We persevered though and eventually had something large enough to sit down side by side, with our legs dangling over the edge. I arranged the belay – a collection of wires and cams in some flakes above our heads, whilst Matt got the stove out and made a brew. I looked back and spotted Robin and Dave emerging from the final pitches in the ramp, and as we slid into our bivvy-bags they set up a much more comfortable looking bivvy on the snow slope below. We sipped our tea and enviously watched them unpacking their sleeping bags. To my surprise, Matt produced a full size paperback novel from inside the depths of his

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rucksack! Not entirely normal equipment for an Alpine climb, but with sleep in short supply that long cold night, it came in pretty handy.

Dawn the next day arrived all too slowly, and it took us a long time to warm up. But with not much equipment to pack away and not much food for breakfast, there wasn't much to delay us further and we were soon ready to get moving. The climbing was again difficult right from the bivvy, and I led a tricky pitch up compact rock to a ledge just above. Matt led through and the next pitch looked pretty outrageous; an exposed ramp leading leftwards across an otherwise smooth, blank wall. The only positive was that we could see what looked like easier ground above. Matt made several tentative forays across the wall, each time returning to the last resting point. He removed his rucksack, clipped it into the last piece of gear and went for it. This gave him just enough extra impetus to make it across, although the climbing was very tenuous indeed. Matt pulled his rucksack across, with me following behind. It was with some relief that I sunk my axe into firm névé at the end of the traverse. The climbing had been much harder than either of us had anticipated, and we were relieved to have it behind us.

I set off across the next icefield, which was fortunately in excellent condition. It felt good to be moving quickly again, and we both soon



*Room for two more? French on the Matterhorn summit.*

*Photo Nick Wallis*

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warmed up as we moved together, heading diagonally across towards the Zmutt Ridge on our right. It really didn't look that far, but I remembered Rich's advice and it did indeed take an age before we finally emerged into the sun on the ridge. Our reward was a stunning panoramic vista of the Alps on the other side, with crystal clear views across to Mont Blanc, the Grandes Jorasses and beyond. As our eyes traced lines across familiar summits and ridges, we were reminded of past adventures in this amazing Alpine playground.

We quickly turned our attention back to the task at hand, as we still had several hundred metres of the Zmutt Ridge to climb before reaching the summit. Matt was pretty tired, having done most of the hard leading that day, and so I set off first. The ridge gave superb climbing at a moderate level, but in a sensationally exposed situation. I took a belay to bring Matt up a short step, and then set off again. It wasn't long before the summit slopes came into view, and I slowly picked my way up towards the crest, the altitude taking its toll. For the first time, I suddenly realised that the summit was within reach, and what this meant. In recent years, I had been lucky enough to share some amazing experiences with friends on some of the great North Faces of the Alps, and it all seemed to culminate in this moment. It all got a bit emotional for a while as I made my way along the summit ridge, but I quickly pulled myself together before Matt arrived. We stopped for ten minutes on the Swiss summit for the first food and drink of the day, before setting off on the long descent down the Hörnli Ridge.

Mountain days do not get any better, and this one will be remembered for a very long time.



*Nick settles down for second bivvy on the Hörnli descent.*

*Photo Matt Dickinson*