

Recuperamo On The Walker Spur

by Nick Wallis

Our trip to Chamonix hadn't got off to the best of starts. Getting caught in a storm whilst descending from a rock route above the Envers hut had left us and our equipment thoroughly soaked, and our nerves battered. We had been lucky though - one guy who had injured his leg in an abseiling accident on the descent from the Grépon had to be helicoptered down to the valley that evening.



Nick on a perfect day on perfect granite.

Photo Martin Cooper

The following day we hung kit out to dry under glorious sunshine and marvelled at the expanse of granite surrounding us. Over breakfast outside the hut we mulled over what to do next. We were out of sync with the weather and didn't want to waste any more of our precious holiday. We needed to get up high and get some longer routes under our belt. Eventually we decided to return to the valley, repack and head up to the Torino hut for some altitude and hopefully better weather. As Martin and I picked our way back down the Mer de Glace, we caught glimpses of the North Face of the Grandes Jorasses from behind the clouds. It looked imposing and inspiring at the same time and after the previous day's storm, the top quarter of the face was looking very wintry indeed.

Over the following few days, the weather gods were kinder to us (save for the usual afternoon thunderstorms). We climbed the Swiss route on the Grand Capucin and the Gervasutti Pillar on Mont Blanc du Tacul. Both amazing climbs which got us more tuned in to the granite (we needed it) and as an added bonus we both seemed to be acclimatising well. On returning to Chamonix we were tired but happy to have done some good climbing in the mountains at last. We met friends that evening for pizza and beers and a fun evening was had recounting tales of derring-do, before retiring home for the first full night's sleep for a good few days. Checking the 'Météo' is something you seem to do a lot of in Chamonix and the following day was no exception! We made plans, changed them, checked the weather, phoned huts, pored over guidebooks and maps. Finally we decided to just get on with it - we would go up to the Leschaux hut the following day.

The following morning wasn't the normal preparation for a big alpine route - we were looking after Jon's three kids! Jon was an old friend who now lived in Chamonix and since we'd been abusing his hospitality for the last week or so, we thought it was the least we could do to give him a few hours off before they all headed off to Fontainebleau on holiday. We then spent a few hours organising our equipment: rucksacks were packed, emptied and then re-packed as we tried to reduce the weight as much as possible. We were going as light and fast as possible: however we knew it was unlikely we would top out in one day, given the mixed nature of the upper section of the route. I decided not to take a sleeping bag, choosing instead to carry a lightweight duvet jacket and a bivi bag. Martin left his duvet behind, preferring to have a sleeping bag. We carried one lightweight 'ski-touring' type aluminium ice axe each. A dozen quickdraws, a single set of wires, a few cams and a single 50-metre 10mm rope completed our rack.

The Montenvers train was as busy as ever but we soon left the crowds behind as we once again descended the ladders to the Mer de Glace. Apparently good sport can be had by going up (or down) these ladders

without using your hands at all, however we decided not to try this today! We picked our own lines up the glacier and were soon at the junction where the Leschaux glacier comes in from the left. There was a sporting leap over a river of meltwater here which Martin managed easily but resulted in me getting a boot full of icy cold water. As we continued up the moraine we were rewarded with more and more impressive views of the face. I tried to trace out the line of our route, trying to make the guidebook description fit the features of the mountain. All too soon we were climbing the ladders up to the Leschaux hut, which surely has one of the finest vistas of all Alpine mountain huts. The hut was pretty full and the guardians very friendly, cooking us all a fantastic evening meal. Chatting around the table after dinner it seemed there were at least three or four other parties heading for the Walker the following day, mostly Italians. We decided an early start was in order, so we packed our bags and retired to the bunks with their amazing real duvets - no itchy blankets here!

The alarm went off at 1.00am. It was hot in the hut and everyone else was still fast asleep. I often feel nauseous on these early Alpine starts and today was no exception. I struggled to force down the excellent breakfast that the guardian had prepared for us, a combination of not enough sleep, nerves and excitement of what lay ahead meaning it didn't sit too well in the stomach. We quietly gathered our possessions and then headed back down the ladders into the inky blackness. After years of early starts like this in the mountains, our bodies instinctively knew it was going to be a long day...

It was hard to pick out the best route up the glacier with little moonlight and our miniscule headtorches, but we found a reasonable line and quickly arrived at the bergschrund at the base of the Spur. We had heard stories of people getting onto the Spur from higher up to the right, but that looked more crevassed to us so we headed straight for the lowest rocks. Martin immediately set off into darkness, front-pointing his way up bullet-hard glacial ice. The climbing looked interesting enough with just one bendy ice axe and part-way up the pitch Martin realised that in his excitement to get going he'd forgotten to put on his gloves. The rope quickly went tight and I followed a trail of blood up the hard icy slope - not a great start! At the stance I wanted to put some more clothing on, so Martin continued in the lead while I cursed myself for not being better organised. We could now see several groups of torches below us, advancing up the glacier like swarms of ants moving in on their prey. I joined Martin on the next stance, grabbed the gear and headed off leftwards.

We now started to make better progress, the hard ice giving way to easier rocky ground as we moved together upwards and leftwards towards the

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Classic Queues. Nick waits his turn on the 75m diedre. Photo Martin Cooper



Day 2 - Nick, top of the chimneys on the Red Tower. Photo Martin Cooper



No points for style. Martin at the bivvy site, the Grey Tower. Photo Nick Wallis



Sunset from the bivvy, what will tomorrow's weather be?

Photo Nick Wallis

steep rock buttress above. It was coming light now and the face was bathed in the most amazing dawn of yellows, oranges and reds. We carried on leftwards, not sure of where we should break through the steep walls above to find the base of the Rebuffat crack. Eventually we realised that we had gone too far and we lost valuable time getting back on route before finding ourselves at the base of this famous pitch. We were soon joined by two or three Italian parties who had avoided our circuitous variation, but who seemed reluctant to set off up the obvious pitch above. Martin didn't need a second invitation and quickly handed me his rucksack before leading the corner crack in fine style. Carrying two rucksacks gave me the perfect excuse to pull on the in-situ pegs but it was still hard work. We continued heading towards the right-hand edge of the spur with the Italians hot on our heels. By the time we reached the base of the 75m dièdre we were sharing stances with this vocal, enthusiastic group of climbers. After each pitch their belayer would shout up to his leader 'Recuperamo!' and we soon worked out this must mean 'take-in!', or similar. And so it was only a matter of time before Martin and I started using the same climbing calls, much to the amusement of our Italian friends.

The 75m dièdre gave two superb long pitches and the climbing above was continually interesting, with tricky sections of mixed climbing and verglas all the way to the base of the grey slabs. These gave more superb bold climbing on compact rock. It was getting late now and we started thinking about where we might bivouac for the night, especially with so many climbers all within a pitch or two of each other. We decided to press on to just below the red chimneys where we found two small sloping ledges with some snow patches nearby for melting water, a short distance below where the Italians had stopped for the night. A northerly wind was blowing and as the temperature dropped I enviously glanced at Martin unpacking his sleeping bag. I also realised that the bivi bag I had bought with me had large mesh panels in the front of it, which was slightly sub-optimal in the conditions! As I started melting the first snow on the stove the dying rays of the sun dipped behind the clouds and the Chamonix Aiguilles, giving a simply stunning dusk scene across the horizon. A fitful night's sleep followed for me, constantly shifting position to relieve cramp and feeling the cold somewhat. I think Martin had a marginally better night.

The morning arrived all too slowly and with it a definite change in the weather. Clouds were gathering on the highest peaks all around us and whilst it didn't look overly threatening at this stage, we were mindful of what weather lay out of sight on the Italian side of the range. We quickly packed up and got going; however progress was slow due to the parties above us and we were forced to wait around on stances for the bottleneck

in the chimneys to clear. When we did finally get climbing we were glad of the numerous in-situ ropes and made full use of them, although this still gave strenuous climbing on steep mixed ground. One of the Italian parties, a father and son rope, decided they had had enough and abseiled down a few pitches before calling the helicopter on their mobile phone! Watching them being plucked from the face one-by-one, reminded us how brave and skilful a job the rescue services perform week in week out in the mountains.

Traversing out rightwards under the red tower gave some of the hardest pitches of the climb, with tenuous mixed climbing on verglassed rock. We were relieved to start heading back left towards the crest of the Spur, however this was short lived as the weather was now worryingly closing in. Rumbles of thunder filled the sky above our heads as I led up towards the crest. At one point I placed a few bits of gear before quickly lowering myself down to a ledge some distance below the ridge, as lightning illuminated the rocky gendarmes around us. A worrying period followed; fortunately for us this soon passed and we were able to continue upwards.

Martin was mainly in the lead now and the final pitches gave delightful snow and mixed climbing up narrow couloirs just to the right of the crest. I led what turned out to be the last pitch and it was with some relief that we topped out onto Pointe Walker at around lunchtime. The clouds and mist robbed us of any summit views so we didn't linger too long on top and soon started our descent into Italy.

We had enjoyed one of the finest routes that either of us had climbed in the Alps and I made a mental note to return to this face in the spring or autumn to sample some of its fine-looking neighbours. We couldn't see it this day, but rumour has it if you look carefully to the east, the most shapely of the Valais peaks has an excellent looking 'face nord' too. Recuperamo!