

# Alpine Adventures with My Chimp

Andy Tomlinson

## Papillons Arête, Aiguille du Peigne

*'A brilliant route which takes in a variety of pitches through some amazing terrain at an amenable grade - this is a "must do" for anyone operating at this level':* so reads the Rockfax Chamonix Guide overview of the Papillons Arête (D+/5c). This route was, therefore, high on our 'tick-list'; and what was not to like about it?

I had met Jeremy at Geneva airport Monday evening. Next morning an early start to Plan Praz, courtesy of the ski-lift, saw us the first climbers up Hotel California (D/5b), a fun if slightly disjointed route on this easily accessed part of the Aiguilles Rouges. Sitting above it looking across to the Plan de l'Aiguille Jeremy suggested heading to the Refuge then tick the Papillons tomorrow. Why not indeed. A quick descent, shopping, packing, parking, then taking the last lift of the day; we were soon soaking up early evening views over the Chamonix valley, followed by an excellent meal at the Refuge du Plan de l'Aiguille. Gear sorted then sleep but, inevitably, woken by the urge for a 'pee'. On returning to bed my 'chimp' woke up, and started to nag.



Refuge du Plan de l'Aiguille.

Photo Jeremy Windsor

Before going further, an introduction to *The Chimp Paradox: the mind management programme for confidence, success and happiness* by Professor Steve Peters. The book uses a simple analogy whereby our brains have a human and a chimp part; the human part is rational, organised and considerate whilst the chimp is irrational, thoughtless and disorganised. In stressful circumstances (climbing at times?) the chimp often comes to the fore. Strategies are outlined to help us learn to take control of our emotions and act in our own best interest. (Visit: [chimpmanagement.com/books-by-professor-steve-peters/the-chimp-paradox/](http://chimpmanagement.com/books-by-professor-steve-peters/the-chimp-paradox/)).

My chimp, over many years, has played havoc with my climbing when I've failed to 'manage' him. This night he (yes, definitely male!) nagged away gently as he had over the preceding two weeks whilst in the Alps, with the same mantra: was I fit enough, had I climbed enough this year and, worst of all, wasn't I getting too old for this game? He instructed me to work on ways to dupe Jeremy into leading all the hard pitches. Uneasy sleep ensued and I made my way down to breakfast feeling less than well rested. The best hut breakfast of the trip followed and we were off at 5.50am. Jeremy set a perfect pace which, to my surprise, saw us reach the bottom of the route in guidebook time; a small victory for me over my chimp - I *could* keep to guidebook times at my age!

We moved up unroped, looking for the start of the route proper; it got steeper and with it my chimp became unhappy. Jeremy sensed my concerns and suggested we roped up - good idea - and he'd lead on. Perfect, as he led a 'thuggish' 5b pitch and I got an easy pitch, leaving Jeremy the first 5c pitch. The chimp was happy as all was going to plan. Even so, whilst Jeremy was revelling climbing the immaculate granite, I was feeling decidedly uncertain. Five easier pitches led to the base of the 'letter box' pitch which, Jeremy informed me, was the second crux, and my lead - not what I, or my chimp, had planned. I led up, surprised to find I was enjoying the climbing. Quickly I was at the bottom of a steep wall topped by overhangs. Pegs bristled and the climbing looked hard but well protected. Controlling my chimp I carried on, as I guessed the pitch I was leading included this next section; I assumed it was 5b and quietly, but firmly, told my chimp so!



*Andy Tomlinson moving up towards the 'letter box'...a French climber can be seen high up on the steep crack. Photo Jeremy Windsor*

In-situ gear was strategically placed as I moved up and right. I'd seen a French party go straight up a steep crack above a jammed cam; it looked steep and hard, so I followed, clipped the gear and stepped back down for a rest. Looking around I thought the route could go further right round a rib; I moved this way and, yes, it was indeed much easier. However, there was now a problem: significant rope drag as I'd clipped the cam short. Climbing on was not an option and the chimp was unhappy. I rigged a good belay, Jeremy climbed steadily wary of the rope drag, collected the gear and moved up to a good belay back on the ridge. I followed quickly and looked at the guidebook; the pitch I had led was 5c and I should have belayed at the base of the steep wall. Lesson: don't rely on memory and check the guide, even when feeling the need to move quickly. Five pitches remained and, swinging leads, the route was completed in guidebook time, another minor triumph for me over my chimp. Jeremy was buzzing about all aspects of the climb but I had to admit to lacking the same feelings, a real shame given the quality of the route, which I recognised. All the way up I had managed the chimp, but only just, which had a significant bearing on my enjoyment. I felt a sense of relief.

A quick abseil into the Peigne Couloir, followed by down scrambling and a couple more abseils saw us back to the path down. We took this all slowly, enjoying the surroundings before heading to the Refuge for more of their excellent soup and cheese, and plans for tomorrow. These revolved around heading for the Torino, and managing my chimp!



*Dent du Géant from the Marbrées.*

*Photo Andy Tomlinson*

## Dent du Géant

The plan was the SW face of the Dent du Géant, and the chimp was unsettled, even though the climbing had gone well so far this trip. The next morning we were at the Torino by 9am, allowing for an enjoyable traverse of the Marbrées having missed the early rush. The chimp remained quiet all day, surprising given my history of this route.

Last year I planned to do the Géant with Parminder (Chaggar, fellow RC Member). The Torino was packed, as were all the routes. We did the Aiguille d'Entrèves, which was heaving. The chimp was unsettled by all the madness seen. We had returned to the hut to hear stories of small to table-sized boulders being dislodged close to the couloir that has to be ascended on the approach to the Géant. A friend we met in the Torino had a narrow miss with one such boulder a couple of days earlier, my chimp became decidedly unhappy and I could do nothing to console him. After a long and sleepless night, I decided to head back down to the valley leaving Parminder to climb the Géant with said friend who was up for more adventures. At the time this had been a major turning point for me; whilst anxiety about certain routes had never been far from the surface throughout my life, I'd never bottled like this before. At the time I seriously questioned whether I would ever return to climb in the Alps again. Over the winter I had persuaded myself another trip would be a good idea, then Parminder and Jeremy arranged to join me and here I was; I had decided I wanted to do the Géant.

Whilst removing our crampons on return from the Aiguilles Marbrées we got into conversation with an American guide and his client. They had just returned from the Géant and the guide was buzzing as, after three trips to this peak he had, on this occasion, worked out the correct route up and down the loose couloir. He generously told us all he knew and then, as a parting gesture, told us that the CEO of a well-known climbing equipment manufacturer had been killed by rock fall, caused by other climbers, when descending the couloir last year. The chimp woke, I pacified it. Back at the Torino we sorted food and I rested for a couple of hours. Dinner, gear sorted (a bit of a ritual for me, but seems to keep the chimp quiet) then bed. Jeremy understands my chimp well now and recognised a later start, hopefully avoiding the crowds, was advantageous. Time was not an issue as we had decided to spend another night at the Torino to aid acclimatisation - we had plans! We were off at 6.40am.

A couple of parties were in front as we headed across the glacier towards the Géant. Soon after the fork to the Marbrées, larger numbers of people appeared in the distance behind us - the first lift had arrived. Some, moving remarkably quickly, caught us up and overtook. The chimp awoke: get a move on otherwise we'll be caught by stone fall. On this occasion my human brain could not disagree and we were soon at the base of the rocky couloir. Even 5 years ago this would have been a straightforward snow slope in July, but not now with the effects of rapid climate change. Crampons removed quickly, we followed the line of climbers above, carefully watching for any rockfall whilst ensuring we did not dislodge anything either. Whilst loose, it didn't seem unduly so and we made good progress. Teams were strung out

above us, some moving fairly far right (as we had been advised), whilst others took a more direct line. We headed right, it was steeper with quite a lot of loose blocks. With great care, we ascended it safely. We were also fortunate not to have parties above us. All in all, the chimp remained quiet and I was absorbed by the ascent. We were at the Salle à Manger, a large flat area beneath the Giant's Tooth proper, in guidebook time. After stashing sacks we were ready for the off just before a French guided party. We decided to allow them to set off first; a good move as they moved quickly, but we were not too far behind, so we soon had our own space on the route.

The chimp got me to engineer Jeremy into leading the first pitch, as the first move appeared quite exposed. All was calm as we headed up. We had brought the right amount of clothing too, so kept warm, something I have not always achieved. Swinging leads I found myself heading off up the first pitch of the Burgener Slabs, enjoyable climbing avoiding the fixed rope except where a harder move appeared. This was to keep up momentum to ensure we were not being harassed from behind, as this unnerves the chimp. Jeremy led through and, cleverly, belayed below the steep flake filled chimneys above the slabs; the chimp and I thought this would be Jeremy's lead! However, whilst very steep, the fixed rope made it very straightforward climbing and we were soon at Point Selle, followed by an exposed traverse to the summit where we joined a German guide and his client. We only had a single 60m rope so, rather cheekily, asked the Guide if we could abseil down on his double 60m ropes; he generously agreed. We were soon back at the Salle à Manger thanks to our expert leader - it would have been a significantly longer time in descent with our single rope.



*Jeremy on the steep crack at the top of the Bergener Slabs. Photo Andy Tomlinson*



*Teams on the summit of the Géant.*

*Andy Tomlinson*

The guide and his client headed off quickly. After a break, we headed down too, finding exactly the correct line and, whilst very loose in places, we descended without incident to the glacier. Crampons on and, after a quick jog over some obvious debris from regular stone trundles, we were back on safe ground. A gentle wander back to the Torino followed by a beer, sitting in the sun on the terrace. This had been a perfect day and the chimp had been silenced. We talked of our next adventure. I pleaded for two rest days, but the weather had other ideas - we could only risk one - and we would be travelling. We slept well in the hut that night and took an early cable-car down the next morning.

### **The Matterhorn**

We phoned the Guides Office in Cervinia and booked beds at the Carrel Hut for the next night; the first hurdle overcome, as this hut only sleeps 40 and there is now a strict booking policy (policed!) to ensure no overcrowding. The weather was looking good, so an attempt on the Lion (Italian) Ridge on the Matterhorn looked to be on. I was excited and apprehensive.

We reached the campsite at lunchtime and, whilst it was still 30 minutes from Cervinia, it was the closest, with the added attraction of great showers and a good restaurant - all we needed. The original idea had been to attempt the traverse of the Matterhorn by going up the Lion and down the Hornli, but Parminder had done this recently and came back with off-putting tales of the descent down the Hornli. It had taken him nine hours from the summit to the Hut and then it involved expensive hut fees and lift costs back to Cervinia. His advice was to go up and down the Lion Ridge. A useful tip too was to phone the Abruzzi Hut and book a lift in the Land Rover 'taxi' that left Cervinia at 8am for the Hut, so saving two hours and 800m of ascent. I could not resist.

We arrived at the Guides Office as arranged and the 'taxi' arrived a few minutes later. What a way to gain height - Jeremy muttered something about cheating - it was 20 euro but I considered it well spent!

The route from the Abruzzi Hut winds its way up around small outcrops and past memorials, which Jeremy found interesting but I, and my chimp, preferred to avoid. Higher the path became vague, climbing sloping rock with loose gravel, steeper at times and with melting snow. It was gruelling, not helped by the heavy sacks which included four litres of water for the next 48 hours, but we made good progress until we caught up with a couple of Eastern Europeans who had roped up. We decided to do the same and waited. They were very hesitant and whilst waiting, two Brits soloed by. I lost patience and passed the Eastern Europeans. Jeremy was quiet and not happy and it became tense. I was happier if moving more slowly as care was needed, the consequences of a slip was unthinkable. Ahead, Jeremy, wanted to get over it quickly. We were soon at the Colle del Leone and happy again. The final ascent to the hut started up sloping ledges covered with gravel and scree-like paths. We arrived at fixed ropes, crossed the Seiler Slabs and arrived at the bottom of the Whymper Chimney. It looked steep and, after a return of glances (my chimp was twitching somewhat!), Jeremy agreed to go first; it was very steep and a struggle with heavy sacks. Once up, we were soon at the Rifugio Carrel hut. What an amazing position, although I didn't particularly relish looking down, as it allowed the chimp to start grumbling away again. At 6pm we queued for the use of a stove to boil water for dinner (we had taken dehydrated food). By chance we had the best beds, bottom bunk and at the wall, so space for ourselves, allowing for a good night.

Teams started stirring at 3am, but we had decided on a more leisurely start and, with both of us awake at 4.45am, we got up. Forcing down a breakfast bar and some water, we were roped up and ready to go at 5.45am. As planned, we were the last out of the hut and had the route to ourselves. I led off from the hut; I offered and Jeremy agreed - later he told me he had engineered this and it worked as it settled the chimp and got me hooked. Swapping leads, we trended rightwards away from the ridge on sloping ledges and some fixed rope, alternating risk with security. The Mauvais Pas passed and, next, the now very small ice field of the Linceul (shroud) protected by a Via Ferrata type wire, followed by more sloping ledges with the option of going off route (which a team ahead had done). A

move back left and up led us to the Corde Tyndall, a 20 metre almost vertical chain, which was perfect for protection with quick-draw placements; and so to the ridge proper at around 4,000m. Importantly the chimp seemed quiet.

Looking up, the ridge seemed to go on for ever and Pic Tyndall, our first objective, looked miles away. The ridge was mostly easy, but exposed, with variable rock and the occasional icy step or two, all a bit unnerving and great fodder for the chimp. We were moving well, unaffected by the altitude but Pic Tyndall was not getting closer and we had been going over 2 hours (Guide Book time 2½ hours maximum). My chimp was becoming unsettled again with the old mantra '*we are going too slowly, wasn't I too old for this game*'. With it, my human brain started to have doubts, so I placated it by setting a turn-around time of 3 hours should we not have reached Pic Tyndall. We continued, finding about enough gear (there was also the odd bolt and peg) and as I looked up, yet again, to what we thought was Pic Tyndall, I saw a Cross on it. Ahead, the ridge now appeared to flatten out - it suddenly clicked that the large lump high up was, in fact, the summit of the Matterhorn! The altimeter confirmed we were at just over 4,200m as we reached a point at the end of a crest (Pic Tyndall) which we then moved along, very reminiscent of Sharp Edge. The chimp was silenced; we had taken 2 hours 25 mins to here, so just over guidebook time, but moving well. 3 hours more to the summit it said.



*Jeremy Windsor arriving at the top of the Echelle Jordan. Photo Andy Tomlinson*





*Andy Tomlinson leading on Fixed ropes above Echelle Jordan. Photo Jeremy Windsor*

The ridge, with a couple of down climbs, led to the Enjambée (gap), from where we climbed upwards, zigzagging, to fixed ropes. Up these and then the ladder (Echelle Jordan), steep but straightforward. A few more pitches and we were on the summit, 5 hours 30 mins after starting. The chimp was silenced! We thought about crossing to the Swiss summit, but it was like a zoo with people and ropes all criss-crossing and looking decidedly unsafe, so we left it. A quick photo, then into descent mode.

A mix of abseiling, moving together and down-climbing saw us pass well-recognised points in reverse. Hunger and tiredness were slowing us by the time we reached the top of Corde Tyndall. We abseiled this quickly and, mistakenly, thought we were getting close to the Hut. I led down a gully Jeremy was certain we had climbed; it was very steep, but as he was so insistent, I went down, leaving plenty of gear. Once in the gully he realised we had not climbed it so we rigged a lower-off, all very slow, taxing and stressful, although the chimp remained quiet. Lesson: listen to yourself, not others! We were now taking more time than expected and route-finding was tense. Just above the Hut we caught up with a young Italian couple. Unfortunately they wanted to abseil the fixed rope section so we lost another 30 minutes, arriving back at the Hut at 6.45pm. As the Guidebook states, it is quicker moving together down ropes - another lesson learnt.



*The Matterhorn with the Abruzzi Hut in the foreground. Photo Andy Tomlinson*

A quick turn around and off at 7pm, my chimp wasn't looking forward to this. We abseiled the Whymper Chimney then moved together quickly down ropes, gravelly rock steps and paths to the Col del Lion. The section where we had been slowed by the Eastern Europeans passed quickly on soft snow. The light was starting to fade and tiredness was blurring our thought processes. Time was lost by errors putting crampons on unnecessarily. I

ended up a long way behind, the chimp got anxious. It was near dark and there was still one awkward section to negotiate, Jeremy found the key passage, phew! Darkness descended, and with it, paths were less obvious and we wandered. Eventually the Abruzzi Hut appeared at 10.30pm. The guardienne organised a huge sandwich and mattresses for the floor. Off to sleep after a long and very focused day. There was great elation and quiet satisfaction, as another long-held ambition was fulfilled. Oh, and the Chimp had finally been silenced - seems to happen once descent commences!

The Matterhorn dominates Cervinia, but is not as 'perfect' a mountain from this side as from Zermatt. From Cervinia it is just a huge lump of structured rock, with both Pic Tyndall and the summit easily seen. We looked up at it frequently as we descended the next morning. Back at the van we enjoyed a proper brew, packed and headed for Chamonix, where we headed to Bar National for pizza and beer, then on to Geneva Airport. With Jeremy safely delivered for his flight home I drifted gently north and home over the next 3 days, undisturbed by my chimp.