

An invitation to Mont Aiguille

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Once known as one of the 'seven marvels of the Dauphiné', Mont Aiguille which raises its proud outline 40 km S from Grenoble, is one of the most famous and typical summits of the French Alps. It is today one of the favourite goals of Grenoble climbers, attracted by its bold appearance, its easy access and the variety of the climbs it offers. From a geological point of view, it is a part of the pre-alpine group of Vercors, a small scale version of the Dolomites, which offers many interesting climbs 300 or 400 m high; but while Vercors itself consists mainly of a single ridge, with summits little individualised, Mont Aiguille is a huge isolated block of limestone, vertical on every side and separated from the main ridge by erosion. Even though it is of only a modest altitude (2086 m), it is a very spectacular summit, that one discovers from far away. The N face raises an impressive yellow wall just above the green forest; narrow and slender, it really justifies this name of 'aiguille' (needle). On the contrary, the E face is much more massive and wider, and also more attractive for the climber who finds there not less than 7 very difficult routes. The great WSW face, not very separated from the proper W face is not to be seen from the valley; seldom vertical and of an easy access, this is the face of the historical routes; the relief is complicated, consisting of gendarmes, towers ('Vierge', 'Taureau', 'Gémeaux'), gullies and scree-ledges. The summit is a very large meadow where it is a real pleasure to rest on a flowery sward after having climbed an extreme route. Besides flowers and climbers, other stranger things such as a wheelbarrow and a sheep have been found on this summit; a famous aviator is even able to land there with his little 'choucas', but the most common way to come to the summit remains the climb . . .

The story of the alpine conquest of Mont Aiguille is a good illustration of the evolution of mountaineering: first climbed in spite of its difficulties, by the most obvious route which was also the easiest, it was then climbed less for the summit itself than for the difficulties offered by severe routes. The last stage of this evolution may be considered in a certain way as 'acrobatic climbs', in which great mountaineers took part, such as Desmaison, Livanos or Seigneur . . . For a long time, Mont Aiguille had been named 'mons inaccessibilis' ('the unclimbable mountain') but it was nevertheless one of the first, if not really the first, difficult summit climbed: its conquest took place in 1492. That climb does not seem to have had scientific, aesthetic or sporting motivations: as he was riding in this region on his way to Italy, King Charles VIII was interested by this mountain and he ordered one of his knights to try the climb. So Antoine de Ville reached the summit with 7 companions, using ladders as if he had assaulted a fortified castle. On the top meadow where popular imagination had promised fabulous creatures, he only found a flock of chamois. He was so proud and so anxious to have his climb certified by a notary that he stayed 6 days on the top! . . . For nearly 4 centuries, the chamois and their descendants



28 Mont Aiguille. Photo: R. W. Clark

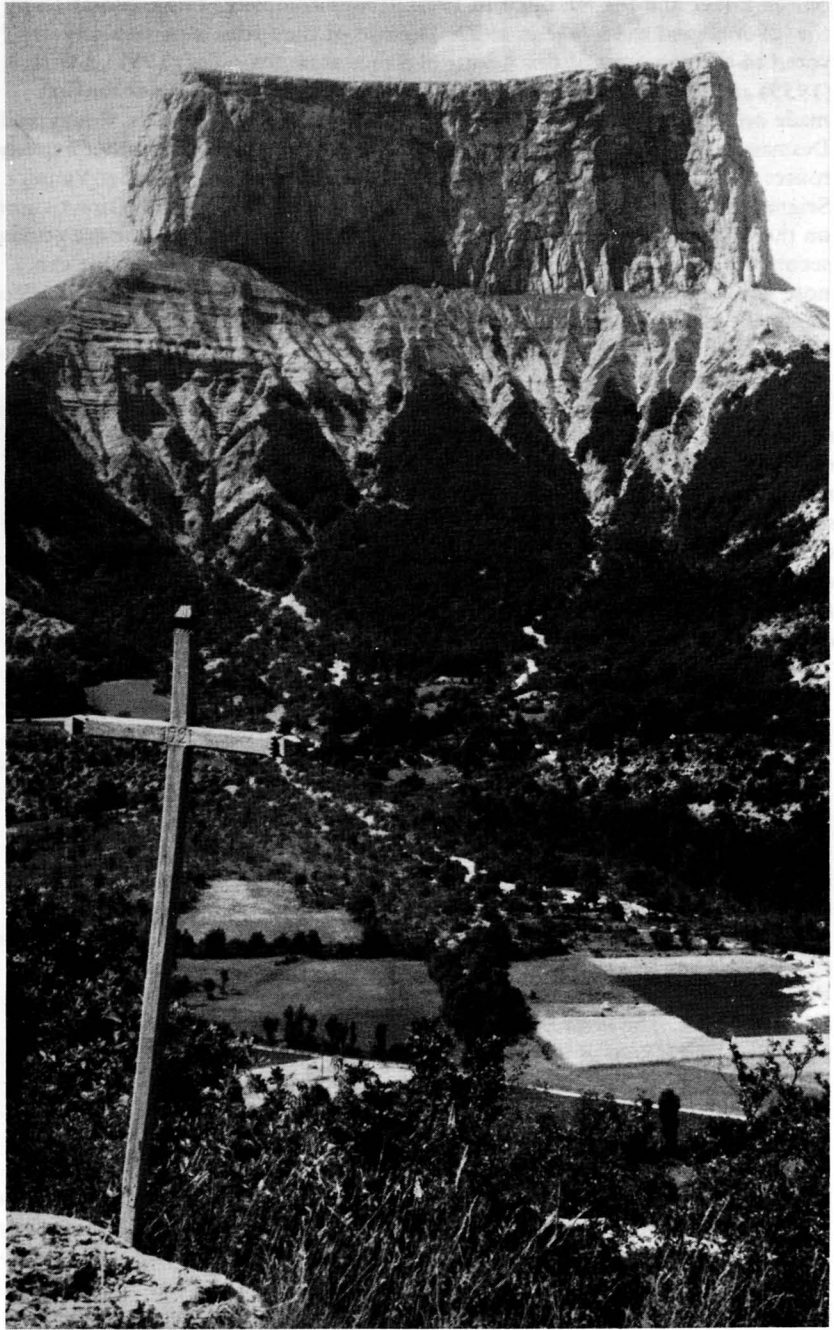
were to live in peace: a local shepherd made the second climb in 1834 and the third ascent only took place in 1877. In 1895, a very audacious enterprise for the time took place on the impressive N face; 2 guideless climbers put up a very difficult and exposed route made dangerous by grass and loose rocks. Some years later, a land-slip altered the morphology of the N face and the route disappeared.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the normal route, where cables have been placed in 1878, is often climbed but it is necessary to wait until the twenties to see new routes discovered: in 1922, the famous skier Zwingelstein (he was the first to cross the Alps from the Mediterranean Sea to Austria, alone, in winter 1933) climbs the 'Tubulaires' route (which had been, perhaps, the route of Antoine de Ville?) and climbs the 'Vierge' for the first time. In 1924, the first TD route is made, with very complicated wanderings on the E and S faces. Five years later, another D-route is made and yet another in 1947. All these routes, of medium difficulty, are on the WSW face and end by tiring scree-gullies.

At the beginning of the fifties, the conquest of Mont Aiguille begins a new era with systematic search for difficulty. It is only at that time that the great possibilities of Vercors (and, more generally, of the French prealps) are discovered; the merit of this exploration seems to be due simultaneously to a group of Lyon climbers and the alpine guide of Chambéry, Serge Coupé. The former were the first who dared to assault the E face, which seemed before to have discouraged all attempts; they climbed the 'Couronne' which is the first route

on the E face and the NE pillar in 1950. Coupé completes this exploration by the '29 Mai' and the S face in 1952. The end of the fifties is particularly devoted to the conquest of this beautiful S face area: SW pillar (1957), SW face (1959) and 'Etudiants' in 1960. This latter route is ED, but it is not the first made on Mont Aiguille: 3 years before, two great French climbers, Couzy and Desmaison had already climbed an ED route on the E face. Two other extreme routes were to be made in 1964-65: NW face by the famous climber Yannick Seigneur (Makalu-West pillar, 1972), 18 hours with 110 pegs and 'Directissime' on the E face, 100 pegs, 20 hours. New routes made after that time are generally secondary: they are detail corrections or they traverse the towers. One can note yet another route on the E face, 'Claude Baudet', climbed in 1970. According to the Vercors climbers' guide-book, there were at the beginning of 1973 no less than 25 routes on Mont Aiguille one of which is F, 1AD, 5 D, 14 TD and 4 ED. Is it to say that the alpine conquest of this summit is ended? In June 1974, a new ED route is climbed in the E face by the president of the Grenoble section of the CAF with two alpine guides. There is always something new to discover on old Mont Aiguille! But most climbers are satisfied by classical routes and for them there are plenty of good climbs. All these routes are described in the guide-book 'Escalades en Chartreuse et Vercors', Serge Coupé, (Arthaud, 2nd edition, 1973). It gives a lot of practical details about access, descent . . . it is complete but rather expensive . . . and heavy (such a detail may be important for the climber!). According to my own experience and the opinions of good climbers, some routes are especially to be recommended.

For the average climber, the only interesting route is the 'Tour des Gémeaux'. It is one of the finest free climbs of Mont Aiguille, on good rock and sustained. It is D+, with very fine pitches especially in the 2nd and 5th rope-length. All the other recommended routes are at least TD, generally with mixed climbing. According to the Coupé guide-book, S pillar is 'one of the most beautiful climbs (but not the most difficult) of Mont Aiguille'. Very airy, it offers free and artificial pitches. The S face area presents other very interesting climbs: the 'Etudiants', which is very steep, direct and sustained (ED), 'Claude Baudet' route and 'Voie des Diabes' with a traverse in VI, which ends by the S pillar. Rather fine also, SW pillar is very short and it is nothing more than a training artificial climb. The most popular routes on Mont Aiguille are '29 Mai' and NE pillar. The former is interesting, mainly free with an artificial pitch on a great overhanging slab but it begins with grassy rock and ends with scree gullies. NE pillar is the only route which goes directly to the summit, without escaping possibilities; it is also the longest route (320 m), with good rock but it is a very special climb of chimneys and a so-called 'sandwich', very strenuous, which has already discouraged many good climbers! Among the extreme routes, the Seigneur one is expected to become classical. Many other routes have only a historical interest, among them 'II Brumaire', Couzy-Desmaison, Desmaison-Grandmont, 'Directissime', 'Couronne' routes. They are very seldom climbed and not to be recommended: pegs may be lacking, the rock is sometimes very bad. This is a common problem to the whole Vercors group but in the more frequented routes, loose rocks have generally disappeared and the rock is generally good (even if it cannot always be compared with the Dolomite limestone!).



29 Mont Aiguille. Photo: French Government Tourist Office.

The first (?) and normal route is without any interest for the climber but it may be done also by non-climbers. It requires some caution and also patience for it is very frequented, especially on sunny Sundays of Spring or Autumn, but it leads to a marvellous belvedere. You discover the snowy or rocky summits of Oisans, the green artificial lake of Monteynard, and farther away, the Mont Blanc group. You see also the nearest cliffs of Parquet, where there are also many fine climbs (generally TD and ED), and the highest summit of Vercors, Grand Veymont, very impressive but of little interest for the climber. Beyond these summits, the boundless rocky plateau of Vercors appears as a lunar and desert landscape, very strange . . .

I did not want to be a 'Baedeker' and my only purpose was to raise some interest for this beautiful mountain. I do hope that such an evocation will persuade climbers to come and discover, perhaps on the occasion of a journey to Oisans, Mont Aiguille and, more generally Vercors. I'm sure they will find there much pleasure to climb . . . and to discover, on their way from Mont Aiguille to other fine climbs such as 'Jardin du Roy' or 'Glandasse' the sparkling 'Clairette de Die' which is certainly the best wine to accompany this discovery of Vercors!