
Area Notes

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The Western Alps 1991

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Lindsay Griffin would welcome further information and new route descriptions for publication in these pages at: 2 Top Sling, Tregarth, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 4RL.

This year was notable for some remarkable solo ascents on many of the great Alpine faces and also, sadly, for the death of Giancarlo Grassi due to a fall at the beginning of April shortly after completing an ice climb in the Italian Apennines. Grassi was probably Italy's greatest modern alpinist, with innumerable new routes throughout the length and breadth of the range. However, he was best known for his first ascents of hard and often ephemeral ice couloirs and his output in this field was only matched by Frenchman Patrick Gabarrou.

Throughout the Alps conditions during the winter months were generally good, despite a poor start to the year. A few spells of bad weather were separated by longer periods of anticyclonic stability, which gave icy temperatures in January but milder conditions in February/March. The heavy snowfalls of the previous autumn and during December/January, accompanied by relatively warm temperatures, went a long way towards restoring all those lovely ice runnels and couloirs, dried out by too many hot summers. Although the snow-line in May/June was still remarkably low, long periods of settled weather quickly ate into this and the conditions on mixed routes were rapidly becoming mediocre or worse by the start of summer. The bottom line appears to be that the deficit in the high mountains is just too great and the effects will be felt by alpinists for a very long time to come.

The Western Alps, in particular, were blessed by an almost continuously stable climate throughout the main summer season. Electrical storms were rare, even in the more notorious areas such as the Bregaglia. At one stage the Chamonix Meteo made an unheard-of prediction, promising perfectly fine weather for the coming eight days – and was right! With that sort of forecast the world should be your oyster but, as in previous summers, choice of route was limited by the lack of snow and the considerable objective dangers associated with this aridity.

Bernese Oberland

Eiger N face From 27 February to 4 March Jeff Lowe pursued an extremely difficult line between the *Japanese* and *Harlin* routes. On some days he could climb only a couple of pitches, and one particular 30m dièdre, which he felt justified an A5 grading, took seven hours. He hauled a 30+kg sack and self-

belayed using a 'Soloist' (made by 'Rock Exotica' in the USA) – an autoblock device working on a similar principle to the Petzl 'Grigri'. A 'Soloist' also seems to have been used by Catherine Destivelle on her solo ascent of the Dru (see below). It is the first self-belay system (other than the dubious(?) 'Barnett' which relies on a prusik loop) that allows continuous movement without the need to use one's hands for adjustment. High on the route Lowe was held after a 15m fall, so the device obviously works! Only 10% of the climb was aided, the rest being a mixture of pure rock and ice with some especially demanding mixed ground in the middle section of the route. A bolt kit was not carried! Although the line of *Metanoia* is rather contrived, and avalanche danger on the W ridge made a helicopter descent necessary, this was an audacious ascent.

Valais

Täschhorn N face P Gabarrou was again active in this region, making the first true ascent of this face. Climbing through the night of 26–27 June with F Marsigny and Gonzague de Thé, he experienced difficult conditions with thin ice-smears and reglassed rock brought on by a recent storm.

Grand Combin NE face Gabarrou teamed up with Alexis Long in late July to climb a new route on this 800m face. Shortly after, the same pair climbed a very fine new line on the neighbouring 900m N face of the **Tour de Boussine**.

Bregaglia

Piz Badile Despite almost perfect weather throughout August the rest of the year proved rather disappointing and few new projects were completed. The main talking point was a new route on the NE face. The sweeping slabs on the right side of the face offer a number of modern routes. These have been created by local Italian climbers, adept at climbing bold new lines in the Mello valley, and are rarely repeated. *Neverland*, which had appeared to be the most reasonable of this collection, was repeated by Alan and Phil George. It was found to be undergraded and quite serious. Main belays relied on one poorly made bolt and very little else. Protection was well spaced, especially on the top slabs, and much of the climbing took place on thin flakes, where the obvious holds tended to be rather dubious. Originally graded VI–, three or four pitches were found to be at least VI+ (British 5b). The route was put up in 1986 by the husband and wife team Paolo Vitali and Sonja Brambati climbing together with Adriano Carnati. The same team put up *Diritto d'Autore*, just to the left, in 1987 using seven bolts, six for belays (graded VI). This year Swiss climbers Bruno and Kurt Muller and Hans Zraggen created *Another day in Paradise* on 19–20 July. The line is very close to *Diritto* and of similar standard, with two harder pitches (VII) that may be negotiated at VI/A0. The difference is that the route uses 120 bolts! The Italians are suitably miffed and Vitali comments 'Swiss bolting style is rapidly reaching the Italian frontier!'.

Piz Badile NE face The obvious crack line on the left extremity of the face

was climbed by G Maspes and L Salini on 4 August. It is relatively short, with difficulties of V and VI, and leads to the E ridge. These days it is probably best approached from the Colle del Cengalo.

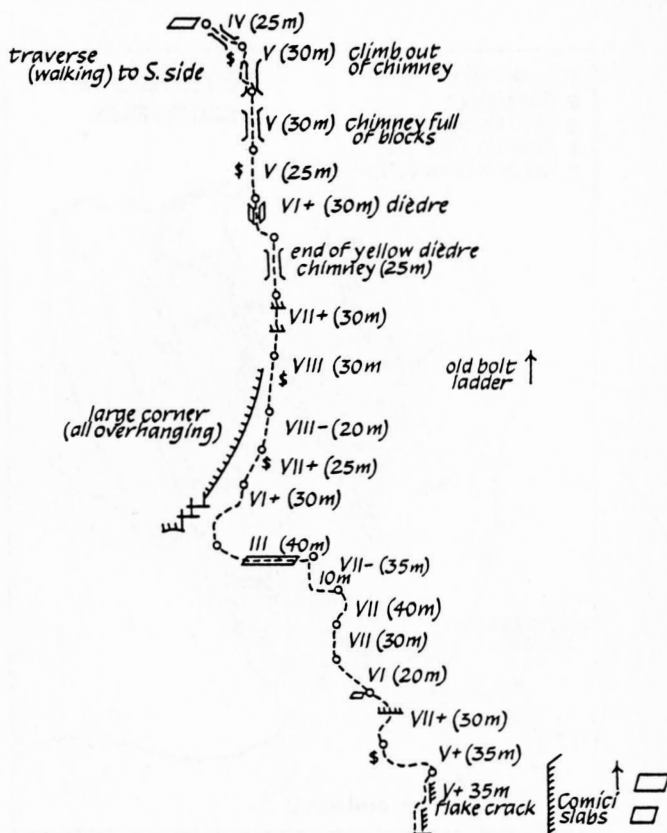
Punta Moraschini O and C Brambilla put up a new seven pitch route called *Chiaro di Luna* (V/VI), left of *Saltamartino*.

Spazzacaldera R and V Libera and D Bioraschi climbed *A kind of magic* (4 pitches VIII-).

Dolomites

Marmolada S face Andy Cave and Paul Jenkinson made an almost free ascent of the *Fisch* over two days during August. Three aid and two rest points were used on the 26 pitches below the second big terrace, where the party bivouacked. The line is not obvious and in order to make a completely free

Topo 1 Brandler-Hasse VIII (French 7a+) E5 6a



crest of the *Serenity Pillar* (450m TD+ 6b). This pair found the climbing superb and the situation quite remote.

Pic Sans Nom On 30 June Gabarrou and Marsigny climbed the true finish to *Raie des Fesses* on the N face. This steep couloir, first climbed by Boivin in 1976 and thought at the time to be perhaps the hardest ice gully in the Alps, terminates at two-thirds height on the face and a long leftwards traverse was made to finish. Directly above and to the right of the couloir lies a huge, smooth slab called the Fesses. Gabarrou and Marsigny, having climbed the couloir in 4 hours, found the slab covered in ice (exceptional conditions!) and were able to continue for a further 6 hours directly to the summit ridge. On the same peak Bruno Ravant soloed the integral version of *Aurore Nucléaire* in 3½ hours and, with his brother, free climbed the *Couzy-Desmaison* route on the Olan at 6c/7a.

On the fringes of the massif an important ascent was made by J C Lafaille on the famous limestone tower of the *Tête d'Aval*. On New Year's Day he soloed a combination of *Ranxerox*, *Polichinelle* and a finish via the *Kelle* route. This involved free climbing up to 7a.

Mont Blanc – Winter

It has been several years since such a substantial buildup of ice has been witnessed during the winter. The most popular excursions in the Argentière basin were climbed almost daily in the latter part of the season. The *Swiss* route on the Courtes, for example, received eight ascents on 2 February, four of them solo!

Les Droites The standard N face route was climbed fairly regularly up to the beginning of July and thereafter appears to have seen almost no traffic throughout the summer. Slavko Svetičič, climbing alone on 12 March, completed the *Boivin-Gabarrou* route (ED2) on the left side of the N face, descending by the W ridge and the Col de l'Aiguille Verte. This was the first truly solo ascent in any season. He later soloed the *Couloir Ginat* (Brèche des Droites couloir, ED2/3) and finally the rarely climbed *Central Couloir* on the Aiguille de Talèfre (TD).

Aiguille Verte The vast expanse of unclimbed mixed ground, to the left of the classic *Direct Route* on the Nant Blanc face, has been scrutinised by many alpinists over the years. They have generally been put off by the huge serac barrier which forms on the flanks of the Calotte and can threaten the entire area. However, the French team of D Authemann and F Marsigny were undeterred and, over two days in January, created *Violent Illusion* – a parallel line to the *Direct* with harder mixed climbing and icy runnels up to 80°. On the NE face Authemann, J Delavolpe and F Vimal climbed a new line close to the 1975 *Bourges-Mizrahi* route. This could provide a worthwhile alternative finish to many of the routes on the face, albeit at a high level of difficulty.

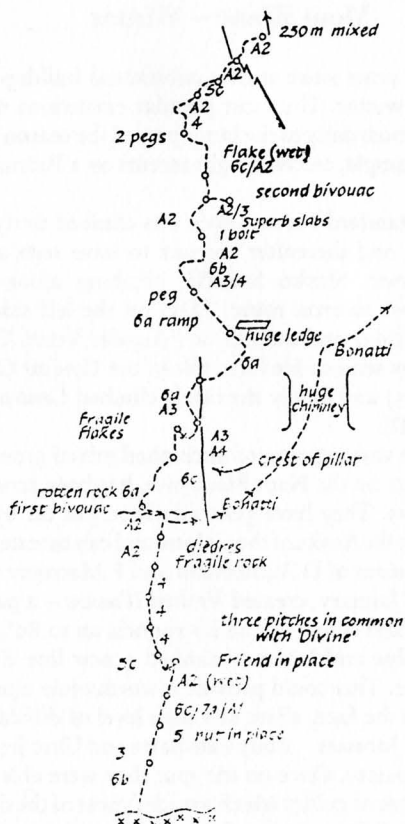
Croz Spur, Grandes Jorasses Andy Fanshawe and Ulric Jessop climbed this between 28 and 31 January. Once on the spur they were able to force a fairly direct line in a succession of gullies which avoided most of the described detours (Scottish 4/5 and rock IV/V). On the final wall they finished up the obvious

couloir to the right of the secondary ridge (four pitches of Scottish 5). Six rappels down the S face led directly to the Rocher de Reposoir and the complete descent to the road took a mere 5½ hours.

Aiguille du Fou, S face Lafaille continued his series of chilly exploits by (almost?) making the first winter solo of the classic 1963 *Route* at the beginning of March. After a night at the foot of the face, 8 hours' climbing took him to the base of the final pitch: the V+ crack that leads to the summit block. With only minimal bivouac equipment he decided to forgo the summit and complete the rappel descent before nightfall.

Aiguille de la Varappe Michel Piola, climbing with P d'Albo, made the first winter ascent of his own 1990 rock route *Et je suis le vent* on the SW face. Conditions for the ascent, completed comfortably in rock boots on 3 February, were excellent. This face is one of several superb granite walls on the **Aiguilles Dorées** that overlook the Saleina glacier. In the last few years a number of fine rock routes have been created here and one or two, such as the magnificent *Eole*

Topo 3 Another World ED 4 6c/7a & A3/4



danza per noi (380m TD+ 5+/6a Gravante/Piola) and, on the neighbouring **Aiguille Sans Nom**, *Don Quichotte* (300m 6b Josi/von Kaenal/Leibundgut 1987), right of the quasi-classic *South Ridge* (AD+/V) are thought to be potential modern classics.

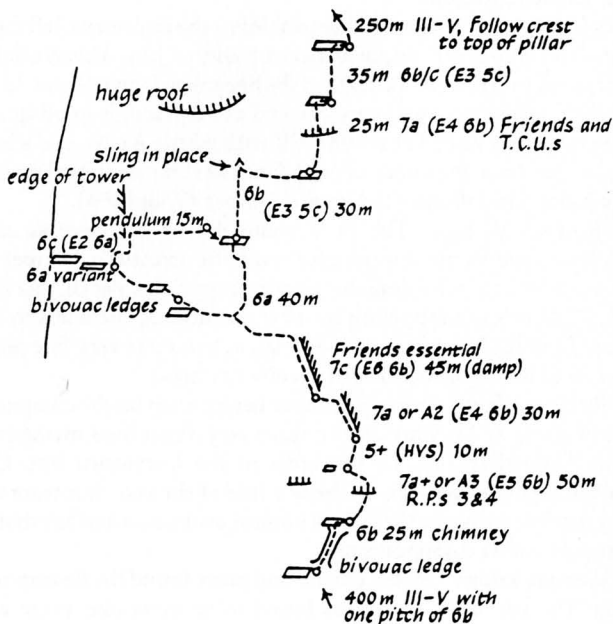
Mont Blanc – Summer

Mont Blanc – Miage face F Damilano, R Hein and P Maurus climbed one of the few new ice routes to be added in the massif this year. *Marius et Ophélie* is a hard, serious yet contrived route and was ascended on 16 August. It starts by climbing directly over the large serac to the right of the 1963 *Central Spur* and finishes up a gully alongside the rocks on the flanks of the Brouillard Ridge.

Grand Pilier d'Angle From 11 to 13 August Lafaille climbed a demanding new route *Another World* (900m ED4 A3/4 6c/7a) between the *Bonatti-Gobbi* and *Divine Providence*. It follows a series of cracks in the upper section and now forms the most direct line on the Red Tower (Topo 3).

Divine Providence received more attention this summer. Cave and Jenkinson climbed the route in two days in August, with a bivouac above the big 7c corner. The initial ramp line is loose, but once on the Red Tower the climbing is superb, with only four really hard pitches. Four rest points were needed on the corner, which is extremely steep and was slightly damp at the time, but the remaining pitches were climbed free. Fortunately the 'wet roof', aided by Renault and

Topo 4 *Divine Providence* ED4/5 French 7c (E6 6b)



Ghersen, was bone dry and went at 7a. The 7c corner appears to have gathered quite a bit of fixed protection which wasn't there on Renault's free ascent and the party were most impressed by his lead of this pitch, which equates to E6 6b (Topo 4).

Central Pillar of Frêne Following his ascent on the Grand Pilier, Lafaille crossed to the foot of the Central Pillar and, during 14–15 August, climbed a new, if slightly contrived, line between the *Jori Bardill* and *Original* routes. *L'écume des jours* has a mixture of free and artificial climbing and is forced to join the *Original* route for several sections towards the top. The rock on the Chandelle is very compact and appears to offer no possibility of climbing an independent line by fair means!

Mont Maudit Still climbing solo (of course), Lafaille put up a new route on the East Pillar of the SW shoulder, left of the huge dièdre taken by the 1978 Grassi-Groaz route: *Ballade pour Mélanie* (650m ED2 6c/A1), with unavoidable and committing moves of 6c.

Aiguille Noire de Peuterey The NE face is one of the most austere walls in the range and had long been considered a suitable winter/spring objective owing to the obvious quantity of bad rock. In recent years conditions on the face have become worse owing to the almost total disappearance of the upper icefield. Undeterred, Joshua Geeter and Ivan Ghirardini reached the summit on 10 September after a two-day climb of 27 pitches (ED2).

Mont Blanc – Satellite Peaks Romain Vogler has again been active, in the company of Jean-Luc Amstutz and Vincent Banderet. They have been responsible for new routes on the **Aiguille Croux**, **Pic Adolphe Rey**, **Roi de Siam**, and **Grand Capucin**. All give well-equipped hard technical climbing (6c/7a) on excellent granite.

Grandes Jorasses A long-standing problem – the impressive left flank of the Croz Spur – was soloed by Svetičič between 7 and 10 July. *Manitua* follows the prominent series of cracks to the right of the line taken by *No Siesta*. Conditions were excellent, as the rock was very dry and of surprisingly good quality. The climbing was very sustained at around VII with a little A1/A2 and a hard pitch (VII+ A3) to exit on to the upper icefield. From here he continued up left to join the classic route and followed this to the summit (V and V+).

Petites Jorasses W face The Piola route *Anouk* has become an instant classic, despite continuing controversy over the excessive number of bolts used. The route is now providing the simplest rappel descent on this side of the mountain. Piola is less happy with his new creation on the walls to the right. *Mon Coeur Espagnol*, climbed on 5–6 August, has some very fine pitches, but overall is rather inhomogeneous in difficulty (7a max).

Petites Jorasses E face Two routes have been put up on the compact slabs in the centre of the face. They are able to force very direct lines owing to the bolt protection. Topo diagrams are available in the Gervasutti hut. Cave and Jenkinson climbed another line on the left side of the face, but were unable to pursue a direct line owing to the lack of natural protection and felt that, overall, their route was rather disappointing.

Petites Jorasses S ridge Rob Collister and party found the description a little misleading. The key snow ramp was found to be more like 150m above the

rimaye and not the 60m as stated. Once on the ridge the climbing was quite sustained and, owing to the remote setting, worthy of a full 'D' grading. Most parties seem to use the S face to descend to the foot of the route, reaching the snow basin by down climbing and a rappel from the snow ridge below the summit. This region remains delightfully unfrequented and even the track up to the hut is still a little vague!

Aiguille de Pierre Joseph The W face has three well-defined spurs that overlook the Leschaux glacier. The left-hand spur rises to Pt 2842m and is well known for the classic *Comte-Englemann* route and various recent additions, such as *Trotte Marmotte* by Vogler et al (200m 6c 6a obl). The right-hand spur, which lies almost in line with the Leschaux hut, has been christened 'Pointe à Daniel' after Michel Piola's brother who was killed, this July, on Mont Dolent. On 7 August Piola and Sprungli climbed *Tonton Daniel* (230m 6b 6a obl). This is an excellent route, especially the first four pitches, and has already received a second ascent. A short approach allows it to be climbed on the same day as the walk up to the hut.

Pointe de Lépiney – E face Muhlemann and Richardson climbed *Je t'ai Conquis, Je t'Adore* (Anker/Piola/Strappazon, 1988) on the right side of the face. It is protected by 61 bolts and has become very popular. Indeed, it was recently reported to be 'one of the finest rock routes in the range'! The climbing is unquestionably superb but does not follow a natural line – hence the bolts! Despite having acquired a reputation for boldness on some of the sustained 6b slab pitches, where the bolts are 8m apart, the route is safe and double bolt anchors allow a quick rappel descent.

Previous routes on the Pointe de Lépiney E face – superb modern classics like *Sécurité et Liberté* and *Les Vacances de Monsieur Hulot*, which generally followed natural lines of weakness and sometimes relied on a few bolts – have been completely superseded by the safer and quicker 1988 creation. As most major faces in the range now have at least one bolt route, the implications are obvious. (Perhaps the prime example of overbolting in the range can be seen on the walls of the Pt Lachenal, where there are so many interconnecting lines, protected by 'metal men', that it is impossible to follow many of the routes without the latest, up-to-date topo of the crag!)

Aiguille du Fou – S face *Ballade au clair de lune*, on the right side of the face, was climbed in 1983 by the late J M Boivin and contained a hard aid pitch on copperheads and skyhooks. It remained unrepeated until this year when, on 18 August, J C Moulin made a solo ascent. A previous attempt had been abandoned after a 20m fall on pitch 6 had been held on a Petzl shunt. Left of the *Classic Route* lies *Les Ailes de Désir* (6b/A2), originally climbed in 1988 (Colas/Grenier). Bolts were only used for the main belay anchors and the route quickly became the best rappel descent on the face. Last year it became the scene of much controversy when the entire route was thoroughly retro-bolted by J M Troussier – including crack pitches eminently protectable with nuts and Friends. He failed to free climb the route, but this event no doubt assisted Escoffier and Gherzen to make the first free ascent this summer. The crux, a crack on the fifth pitch, went at 7c.

Aiguille de Roc Herve Bouvard and Piola climbed the steep slabs between

Dièdre des Mousquetaires and the classic *South Pillar*.

Grands Charmoz E face C Bodin and O Ratheaux climbed the prominent pillar above the Tour Rouge bivouac.

Les Droites NE face In 1969 Eric Lackner and Reinhold Messner put up a route here called the *Bergland Pillar*. Subsequently there have been relatively few ascents, but most of these have confirmed the high quality of the climbing, whilst noting that the route, in the main, avoided the crest of the pillar. This was rectified on 18–19 September by Chris Dale and Jim Kerr. The smooth, rounded buttress that forms the lower pillar was climbed in eight pitches to where the Messner route comes in from the right. The party then moved together over easy ground to reach the crest of the main pillar, which they climbed for a further eleven pitches to bivouac below the upper and more crenellated ridge. Next day they climbed through an area of outstandingly beautiful crystals and, higher, found solution bottles and a spade! There was some delightful climbing on the gendarmes just before the junction with the NE spur. The climb was very varied and on excellent rock with no objective danger. The hard pitches (6b) occurred on the bottom buttress and in the vicinity of a large tower at half height (1000m ED2, no pegs or bolts!).

Petit Dru Perhaps the most publicised event of the summer took place between 25 June and 4 July when Catherine Destivelle climbed a tenuous line of cracks and expanding flakes on the left flank of the Bonatti Pillar, close to the line of the 1986 route *Absolu*. During her solo, self-belayed ascent she sat out a four-day storm, negotiated pitches of A4+ on some quite shaky rock and took a 10m fall high on the route. Although undoubtedly an impressive physical performance on her part, it would appear that the actual route is of fairly dubious value. It should also be pointed out that she was in radio contact with Chamonix and shadowed by a media helicopter throughout the ascent. Destivelle had always wanted to go over the summit and descend to the Charpoua glacier in 'classical' style but, in the end, she succumbed to a lift down to the valley in a helicopter. 'I regretted it afterwards, but at the time all I wanted was a hot bath.'

Petit Dru – Bonatti Pillar It is worth noting that the accepted descent to the Bonatti Pillar now goes straight down from the foot of gendarme 3361m on the Flammes de Pierre. The five rappels down very steep rock are well sheltered from stonefall until the couloir is reached. The last anchor point involves a hanging belay. As this descent is feasible in rock boots, parties are now leaving all their equipment on the Flammes de Pierre and aim to complete the round trip in a day. (Compiler's note: some of us have been using this 'new' approach route for nearly ten years – and keeping it quiet!)

Petit Dru – American Directissima (Harlin–Robbins route) Cave and Jenkinson repeated this and found the line of the route somewhat improbable and the climbing, in a variety of cracks from fingers to off-widths, rather loose. The start is particularly confusing and route-finding can be tricky on some of the very hard pitches where the free line differs from that of the original ascent. Apart from three points of aid on the second roof, the rest was climbed free at E5 6b (Topo 5). This roof always seems to remain wet and slimy and the best effort so far is two rest points by Renault and Profit. As there are no fixed

and, in the process, the climbers equipped the belays with bolts and pegs and placed a bolt in a blank section that had been led, on the ascent, without protection!

Charpoua Glacier Vogler (who else!) added four routes, with a variety of partners, on the walls above the snout of this glacier, finishing at Pt 2699m on the *Flammes de Pierre*, establishing this area as a wonderful granite playground which receives the sun for most of the day. The routes can be reached in 2½ hours from Montanvers and are 250–300m high, steep, sustained and well equipped.

Aiguille d'Argentière Another popular venue for short, quality rock climbs lies on the flanks of the *Straton* and *Jardin* ridges. Hard climbing is often possible all year round and during the spring/summer a number of new routes were discovered by Ravel, Ratheaux and, on one or two occasions, Vogler (yawn!). Overall gradings ranged from 5+ to 6c+.

Aiguille d'Argentière NE face Back on the ice, Robert Durrant and Roy Ruddle climbed a route between the existing *Messner* and *Bettembourg* routes, during the night of 22–23 July. However, it now seems more than likely that this was the same line taken by Chris Dale on his solo ascent in 1982. The initial couloir of the *Bettembourg* route was followed to above its first steepening, where the climbers broke out left and reached the icefield via a series of sustained runnels (five pitches Scottish 3 and 4). On the top buttress they followed an obvious gully 100m right of the *Messner*, to reach the NE ridge. Of interest is the fact that the whole route was on perfect ice, when both the *Messner* (their intended objective) and *Gabarrou* routes were totally out of condition. The climb was conventionally named *Herman HobNob meets Dorothy Dinosaur* (good one lads!). TD- 700m 9 hours.