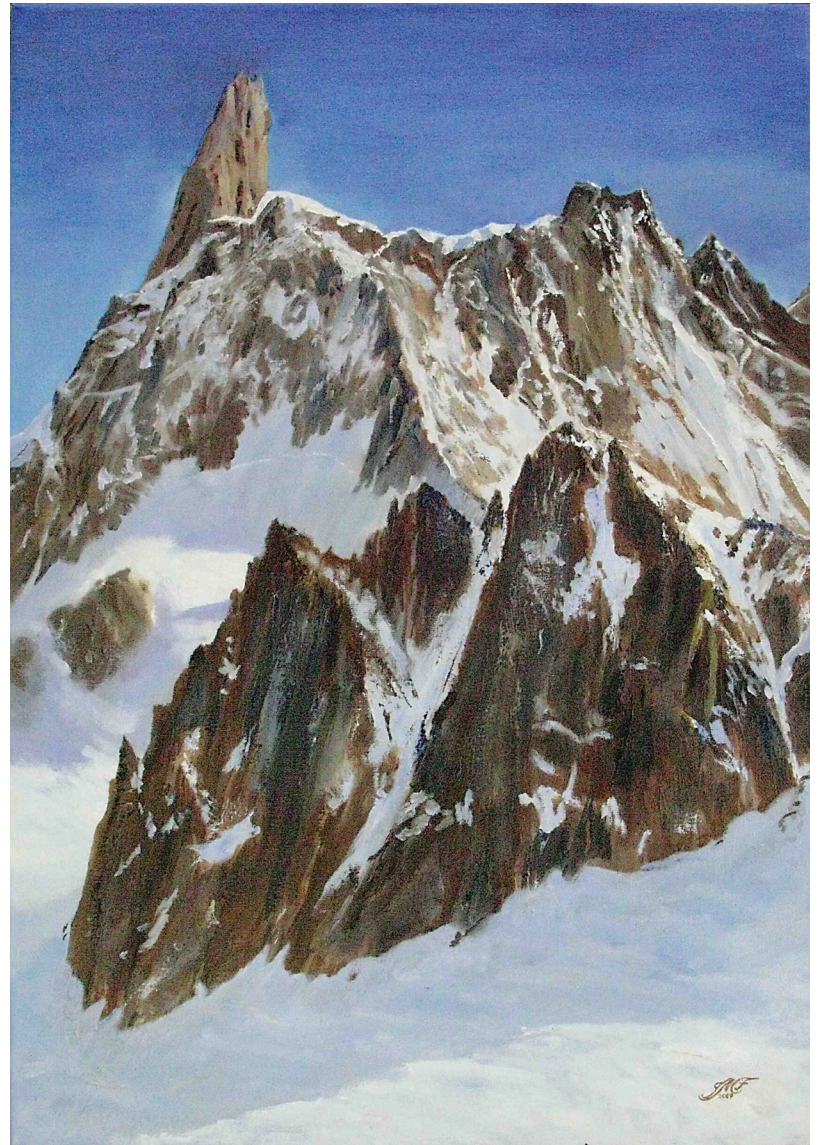


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## Alps & Norway

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117. John Fairley, *Dent du Géant*, oil on canvas, 422x593mm, 2009

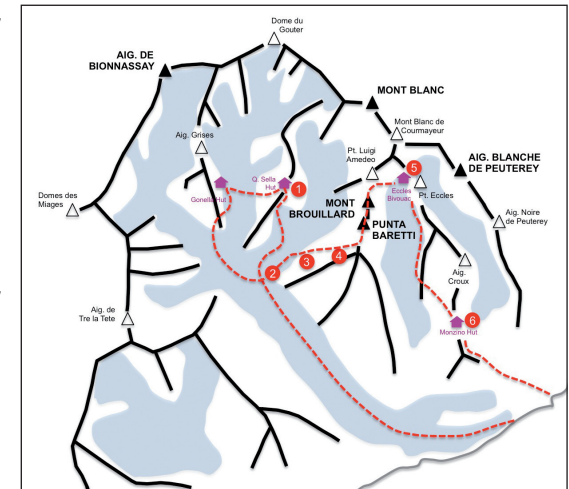
SIMON RICHARDSON

## ‘A Very Tempting Prize Indeed’

Punta Baretti’s South-west Spur

My fascination with the Italian side of the Mont Blanc range began way back in July 1980. It was my second alpine season and, with fellow student Mike Harrop, I made an ascent of the *Contamine Route* on the west face of the Petites Jorasses. It was my first *grande course*, and we climbed the route in big boots and carried bivouac gear, as was the custom of the time. I can remember balancing on the tips of my boots, and finding the slabby climbing a little run out and scary, but it is the descent into Italy that remains firmly imprinted on my mind. We just made the upper reaches of the Frebouze glacier by nightfall, bivouacked on a little rocky rognon, and next morning made a glorious walk down past the Gervasutti hut to the valley.

The sunny ambiance of Val Ferret with a backdrop of high and mysterious alpine walls contrasted sharply with the more austere, but better-known, Chamonix valley. The satisfaction of starting in one country and finishing in another added a sense of journey, only to be emphasised by the hitchhike back to France via the Mont Blanc tunnel. Thirty years on, it is a little sad that modern alpinists rarely enjoy the same pleasure



118. Sketch map of Mont Blanc, south side of traversing the range after climbing this classic route. The chains and bolts on *Anouk* now lead straight back down to the glacier. Going down into Italy would be extremely perverse with such a straightforward abseil descent, and as a result, this classic mountain route has been transformed into a straightforward rock climb.

Val Ferret and the Italian side of the range made a big impression. I was back in 1982 with Nick Kekus to climb the *Gervasutti Route* on the east face of the Grandes Jorasses and the following summer, Roger Everett and I made the third ascent of the east face of the Petites Jorasses via the *Bonatti*



119. Duncan Tunstall climbing the west wall of the First Tower on Day 1 (Pitch 11) of the first ascent of Punta Baretti's South-West Spur. (Simon Richardson)

*Route.* The granite was so good that I returned to climb on the east faces of the Gruetta (twice) and Leschaux, and then back to the Petites Jorasses again. All these routes were climbed on perfect rock, away from the crowds and encompassed a genuine sense of adventure – all very different from the hustle and bustle of the Chamonix Aiguilles. Meanwhile the Italian side of

Mont Blanc beckoned. Ascents of the Central Pillar of Frêne and the Red Pillar of Brouillard were rites of passage, but a new route on the South Pillar of Frêne in 1995 (the first time it had been climbed in its entirety) with Chris Cartwright brought the most satisfaction.

During the spring of 2009, the urge to return to the south side of Mont Blanc returned. Rather than adopt the standard alpine approach of lightweight raids into the mountains to snatch routes, the idea was to treat the trip more like a mini-expedition. The plan was to spend the majority of our nine-day visit in the mountains, as you may do in the greater ranges, and hopefully travel some new ground too.

Luckily, Duncan Tunstall was keen on the idea, even though I was rather vague about what our objective might actually be. By chance, that June I came across a reference from Luca Signorelli on the internet

about a recent ascent of Punta Baretti from the Miage glacier. Three Italian climbers had repeated *Au Bout de la Monde*, (a 1200m long couloir that had been first climbed then skied by Pierre Tardivel and friends in 2006), descended to Col Emile Rey and then made the long descent to the Quintino Sella hut in a very long day. Punta Baretti (4013m), and the neighbouring Mont Brouillard (4069m), are situated on the lower Brouillard Ridge of Mont Blanc. They are rarely climbed, except by collectors of 4000m peaks, but their remote position gives them a certain cachet. 'For inaccessibility and solitude, the pair are unsurpassed anywhere in the Alps,' says Martin Moran in his AC guidebook *The 4000m Peaks of the Alps*.

I wasn't aware of the existence of the Tardivel couloir, but news of the Italian's ascent sent a tingle down my spine. I knew there was a huge unclimbed rock spur on the south-west side of Baretti. I'd seen a small picture of it in *Vertical* magazine in the early 1990s, but it appeared completely inaccessible, dropping into the steep and chaotic Mont Blanc glacier, which was full of tottering séracs and impossible crevasses.



120. Duncan Tunstall moving up to the foot of the steep headwall on Day 2 (Pitch 25). (Simon Richardson)

Intrigued, I read the Italian's trip report and was astonished to see that the lower part of the glacier had receded so much that instead of being an impenetrable icefall, it was now a steep smooth ice snout that led all the way to the foot of the spur. Global warming does not often help mountaineers, but in this case it had given Duncan and I a compelling objective. A new 1200m-high feature leading directly to the summit of a 4000m peak was a very tempting prize indeed.



121. Duncan Tunstall setting up the second bivouac at the end of Pitch 29. (*Simon Richardson*)

Summer 2009 was warm and dry and the Alps looked rather tired when I arrived in Chamonix at the end of August. Duncan had already been in town for a week climbing with Françoise Call. The weather was poor as we drove through the tunnel and walked up to the Petit Mont Blanc bivouac hut, and next day we scoped the upper two-thirds of the route from near the summit of Petit Mont Blanc. Through the blowing clouds our spur looked steeper and more complex than I imagined, and rather worryingly, it appeared to be defended by a series of steep towers near its base. (We would find out later how big a barrier they really were). The weather remained poor, so we spent another night in the hut before descending back to Courmayeur to pack our sacks for the route.

The descent from the summit of Punta Baretto was preying on my mind. It is most commonly climbed from Col Emile Rey reached from the Eccles bivouac huts, but the summer had been so dry that the small hanging glacier below the Brouillard Pillars was said to be impassable, and a fixed rope had even been installed to allow access to the rognon containing the Eccles huts themselves. Our alternative descent was to go down the west side of Col Emile Rey and cross the upper Mont Blanc glacier to the Quintino Sella hut as the Italians had in June. So we agreed on a rather bizarre sports plan. On day one we would climb up to the Quintino Sella hut – a mini alpine route in its own right – and leave a cache of food. On day two we would descend back to the Miage glacier and bivouac below the route



122. Duncan Tunstall moving along the ridge to the foot of the Red Tower on Day 3 (Pitch 32). (*Simon Richardson*)

ready to start climbing on day three.

We rose before dawn on 5 September and set off from the end of the road in Val Veny just after daybreak. Stormy weather had cleared to leave a magically clear morning. As we gained height, Mont Tondu and the Aiguille des Glaciers came into view, covered in a dusting of fresh snow and tempting us to return for a future visit. Progress on the moraine-covered Miage glacier was frustratingly slow with our heavy loads packed with six night's food. After a couple of hours we made a cache for the technical



123. Duncan Tunstall making the delicate traverse to reach the bottomless chimney on the right hand side of the Red Tower on Day 3 (Pitch 33). (*Simon Richardson*)

gear on the glacier and continued up to the hut. Our spur on Punta Baretti was grossly foreshortened from below and the glacier snout of hard grey ice looked alarmingly steep. More concerning was that the easiest line followed a central scoop that was a natural funnel for anything that fell down it. And sure enough there was a pile of ice blocks, the size of foot-balls, scattered around its foot.

The climb up to the Quintino Sella hut was long and tiring. The initial glacier section had stretches of steep ice and the scramble up to the hut itself was rather exposed in parts. With hindsight, I suspect we went the wrong way, but Duncan is in his element on ground like this, and led the way up little vegetated grooves and airy traverses until we eventually gained the final steep path leading to the tiny wooden hut perched on an eyrie overlooking the Mont Blanc glacier and the spectacular Miage basin. Next morning we took the alternative descent down the Y Couloir to the Miage glacier. The couloir is renowned for stonefall, but we were early enough to avoid it although we had a testing time finding our way through the maze of crevasses to cross the glacier to reach the Gonella hut, which was in the process of being rebuilt.

We arrived back at our cache of gear below Baretti's south-west spur on the lower glacier later that afternoon. The prospect of a bivouac on

the crumbling moraine was not very inviting, but then Duncan, with a gleam in his eye, announced he had found the perfect solution. I was a little perplexed, until he pointed to a sheet of eight by four plywood lying on the top of an adjacent moraine. It had presumably been dropped from a helicopter ferrying supplies for the Gonella hut rebuild, so we carried it to the foot of the spur and set up our bivouac in relative luxury. We had been on the move for two long days. The weather was good, but travel on the dry and depleted glaciers was desperately slow.

We slept fitfully and woke at 2 am. The plan was to climb the glacier snout before dawn. It looked easy enough to solo – no more than Scottish Grade III – but the ice was hard and brittle and I was concerned about the consequences of being hit by falling ice. We decided the safest approach was to pitch the route, leapfrogging our two ice screws from belay to belay, so we were always protected. I can't pretend I enjoyed those 13 rope-lengths. It took a long time but at least we were relatively safe. The route followed an icy runnel of softer ice – easier climbing but in the line of fire – until it eventually veered right through a series of triple bergschrunds to enter the mouth of the Couloir au Bout de la Monde. We climbed this for another three rope-lengths to gain a steep gully cutting the right side of the south-west spur.

Now was the moment of truth. What would the rock be like? It is easy to think of Mont Blanc being comprised of perfect granite, but the Miage lies on the junction between granite and schist. Duncan took the lead, and the rock was truly awful. Fortunately we had practised our loose rock climbing skills earlier that summer whilst climbing on a previously unclimbed 200m-high crag in the Southern Cairngorms. We climbed five pitches of IV until the gully steepened and the rock became too shattered. Duncan took to the right wall and led a difficult pitch of VI before returning to the gully and continued up the west side of the spur. Above loomed the First Tower. We climbed its west wall in the afternoon sun for another four pitches to reach a notch below the dramatic Second Tower. Duncan was in a sombre mood when I arrived.

'We're going to have to go down. It's impossible to go on from here.'

It certainly looked difficult above. The Second Tower was a vertical 30m-high blade of schist, no more than two or three metres thick and narrowing to a smooth wafer-thin blade of rock on its leading edge. It was like an upturned knife with its cutting edge facing towards us.

'How about crossing the ridge and looking down the other side?' I suggested.

'I've had a look – it's miles down the other side, and there's no way of regaining the crest.'

I peered into the depths and it appeared that Duncan was correct. But the east side of the spur was now in deep shadow and I was hopeful that the morning light would reveal another solution. The weather was good and there was no point in going down right now. We had nearly 30 pitches of rock and ice below us and we were tired. So whilst Duncan put his garden

improvement skills to good use excavating us a bed for the night, I cooked our dinner of soup and noodles using the remnants of old snow lying on the sloping ledge.

What a difference a good night's sleep makes! When the rising sun illuminated the other side of the ridge next morning, it looked like we would be able to outflank the Second Tower by making two diagonal abseils across the steep east wall to gain a ledge system on the right. Before we left Courmayeur we had debated what kind of abseil tat to take. Duncan had bought 5mm perlon cord because it was light (and cheap) whilst I insisted we need at least 7mm to be safe. Unfortunately we could only find 7mm Kevlar cord on sale in Courmayeur, so we reluctantly bought a 20m length at great expense. When Duncan put his weight on the 5mm cord for the first abseil, the sharp crest cut through it like a knife (he was backed up). Second time around, with the Kevlar in place, we made it safely down. Diagonal abseils can be nasty affairs, but eventually we gained solid ground on the east side of the spur, and two pitches later we had outflanked the evil Second Tower.

Another two rope-lengths saw us past the Third Tower and we continued along a whaleback ridge for three pitches. It felt as if we were really gaining height now with ever-increasing exposure on both sides. Two steep pitches up the Grey Tower led to a huge gap in the ridge, which was fortuitously bridged by a huge jammed boulder the size of a small car.

The terrain above was steep, and Duncan led a fine pitch of VI up a grooved arête to gain easier ledges and the transition from schist to granite. We continued for another four pitches below the steep headwall trending left towards a prominent notch in the skyline, before moving up an open chimney system that led to a cosy ledge on the west side of the spur and our second bivouac. Our progress had slowed considerably from Day One and we had only climbed 13 pitches, but the terrain had been steeper and we were in an upbeat mood, confident that we would finish the route the next day.

We woke to another glorious morning and high on Mont Blanc we could see the Bosses Ridge on the skyline, with dozens of climbers moving along it like tiny ants. It was cold on the west side of the spur and we were keen to start moving. The rock was a little snowy from the bad weather earlier in the week, and we climbed steep ground to the foot of the steep Red Tower that we assumed would be the last obstacle on the spur.

But the route kept us guessing. Above was a steep shattered tower with a narrow shattered crest. To reach it we followed a narrow tightrope, and I hand traversed a wafer thin ridge, to reach the Red Tower. Duncan led across a delicate traverse and then climbed an awkward bottomless chimney that led to a notch and the west side of the spur. We could smell success now; and all that was left were three pitches up icy grooves to easier ground. The way to the top was clear and an hour's scrambling took us up the final 200m to the summit.

We shook hands, slapped each other on the back, took the obligatory summit photos, and generally felt pretty pleased with ourselves. But our



124. Duncan Tunstall and Simon Richardson on the summit of Punta Baretti on Day 3. (Duncan Tunstall)

elation was tempered by thoughts about the descent. We traversed broken rock across Mont Brouillard and descended to Col Emile Rey. We had already written off the stonefall-ridden descent to the Miage glacier; our way back was now via the Eccles huts. The east slope of the col comprised wet snow and loose blocks and we made nine long abseils to the little pocket glacier below the Brouillard Pillars. We should have made our third bivouac here as it was now dark, but I blindly led through the maze of late season crevasses to reach the foot of the rognon supporting the bivouac huts. We were completely off route, but three pitches of icy rock guided by ancient debris that had been dropped from above finally led to the sanctuary of the tiny Eccles Bivouac huts.

It was nearly midnight. As we entered the lower hut we woke a couple of young Swiss climbers who were intent on climbing the Red Pillar of Brouillard the next day. They couldn't understand where we had come from.

'But there are no rock climbs from the Miage glacier up Punta Baretti. You climb it from the Eccles, no?'

We were too tired to try and explain, so we smiled dumbly and pretended that we were just a pair of incompetent British climbers, and quietly went to sleep.

Next day we slowly descended through the detritus of a long hot summer. The snow slopes had been transformed into stone-raked slabs of black ice, and the only way to cross the glaciers was to follow underground mazes of ice. We arrived at the Monzino hut in time for dinner and decided to stay the night – we were on holiday after all. Next morning we wandered down to Val Veny and walked back up to the car. Our plan had worked. We had climbed Punta Baretti by its south-west spur, but more importantly

we had enjoyed a memorable adventure in the mountains. We had been on the move for seven days, made three bivouacs, and climbed 42 new rock pitches and 13 pitches of ice.

Once we arrived home, we were surprised to find our ascent reported on various climbing news websites across the world. At first there was incredulity that such a prominent feature could remain unclimbed in the heart of the Mont Blanc massif, but soon enough our outing was recognised for what it truly stood for – with a little imagination it is still possible to have a wild and remote experience and seek out new ground, even in a mountain range as well-known as Mont Blanc. Without doubt, throughout the Alps, many more exploratory adventures remain.

**Summary:** An account of the first ascent of the South-West Spur of Punta Baretta (4013m) by Simon Richardson and Duncan Tunstall, 7 to 9 September 2009. The 1200m-long ED1 route was climbed in 42 pitches and was part of a seven-day journey crossing the divide between the Miage and Brouillard glaciers on the south side of the Mont Blanc range.

### South-West Spur Punta Baretta (4013m), 1200m ED1

*Simon Richardson and Duncan Tunstall, 7-9 September 2009*

A sustained mountaineering route up the prominent spur left of the Couloir au Bout de la Monde (*Tardivel-Janody-De Sainte Marie 2006*). 60m ropes used. Approach from the Miage glacier by climbing the glacier snout of the right branch of Glacier du Mont Blanc (ice up to 45 deg.) bearing right to reach the foot of the Couloir au Bout de la Monde.

**1-3** Cross the bergschrund on the right and continue up the couloir for 3 ropelengths to the foot of a steep gully cutting the left wall.

**4-10** Climb the gully for 5 ropelengths (IV). When the gully steepens avoid loose rock by climbing the steep chimney on the right wall (VI) for another pitch. From the top of the chimney traverse back left into the gully and continue up it for another ropelength to reach ledges on the west side of the spur.

**11-14** Climb the steep west wall of the First Tower for 4 ropelengths up a series of cracks and grooves, trending left where possible to reach a small ledge just below the top of the First Tower (V+). First bivouac.

**15** The continuation to the Second Tower is a knife-edge holdless ridge that completely bars upward progress. Instead, make 2 diagonal abseils on the east side of the spur, then climb up and right for 15m to gain a crescent-shaped ledge below a prominent fault-line cutting the east side of the spur.

**16-17** Climb the fault-line for 2 pitches (V+) to the top of the Second Tower.

**18-19** Continue up easier ground for two pitches turning the Third Tower on the right.



**20-21** Continue easily along the horizontal Whaleback Ridge for 100m to the foot of the steep Grey Tower.

**22-23** Move right onto a giant chockstone (V) to gain the right side of the tower and then turn it on the right for two ropelengths before descending into a deep notch floored by a large flat chockstone.

**24** Exit the notch by climbing the grooved arête above with a steep exit (VI) to gain easier ledges. This marks the transition to granite.

**25-27** Move up and left for three pitches below the Steep Headwall above to gain the Prominent Notch on the left skyline (IV).

**28** Move up and right on the west side of the spur to gain a ledge just left of a slabby corner (IV). Second bivouac.

**29-30** Climb the slabby corner (V) and continue up easier ground to foot of the Red Tower.

**31** Climb the tower on the right and climb cracks on the east wall (V).

**32** Continue up and right up cracks on the right flank of the spur to below a steep shattered tower (V+).

**33** Turn the tower on the right to gain a steep chimney (V+) and climb this to a notch.

**34** Continue up easy ground on the west flank of the ridge.

**35-36** Climb icy grooves (past an initial chockstone) to the crest of the spur and easier ground.

**37-42** Continue up scree and snow slopes for 200m to reach the summit.