
TOM LIVINGSTONE
A Winter in the Alps



Rob Smith on the north-west face of the Aiguille du Blatière, climbed on 27-9 January 2023 at WI4+ and M6+. (*Tom Livingstone*)

As the autumn days became compressed by longer nights and the snow line slunk down the mountains, I found myself re-reading Korra Pesce's description of climbing *Directe de l'Amitié* with Martin Elias. This route forces a straight line up the north face of the Grandes Jorasses, one of the most impressive walls in the Alps and, according to Korra, is 'the most challenging route up the Jorasses and the line that satisfied me the most.' I liked the humour in Korra's writing: 'Martin patiently starts up the pitch and then asks me whether this might possibly be the fearsome expanding flake pitch. I don't need to double check: yes, it's the one. And that's why I sent you up first! Have fun!'

The route was long ago climbed in good style, which I like. When Nick Colton and Roger Baxter-Jones made the second ascent of *Directe de l'Amitié*



The line followed by Smith and Livingstone on the Blaitière. Starting up the ice route *Mini Blast* the pair took ground similar to that of Joe Brown and Don Whillans on their first ascent of their famous summer route. (Tom Livingstone)



Symon Welfringer on thin mixed ground on *La Croisade*. (Tom Livingstone)

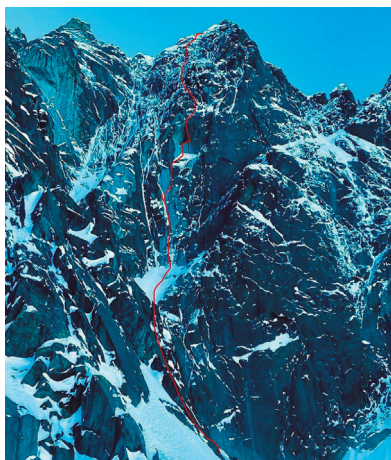
in September 1977, Nick wrote, ‘our girlfriends called for a helicopter as we didn’t return by the time we had stated we would. The helicopter came and hovered above us on our way down into Italy, just below the summit. Roger and I were not sure what to do but after discussion we decided to send the helicopter away and walk down ourselves on the grounds that if we were trying to do the climb in a better style than those who did the first ascent then we really shouldn’t use a helicopter to get down.’

Now that my home mountains are the Alps, I’ve been playing my point-less-yet-entertaining game of trying to free existing hard routes. It’s a challenge to link difficult pitches of ice, rock and snow up a big mountain and it demands a high level of climbing ability. There are routes that had sections of aid where I’ve managed, through a combination of luck, specific training or sheer bloody-mindedness, to be the first to free them. Two highlights include *Vol du Dragon* on Les Droites in 2021 and *Voie des Guides* on Les Drus in 2022. I thought the famous Jorasses might also provide an opportunity to play this game and the *Directe de l’Amitié* had been burning in my mind since last autumn. My ego also wanted more than just two first free ascents because I always want more in my climbing, so greedily I looked around.

But January has short days and bitter temperatures and I knew from experience I must be patient to avoid jumping the gun. Rob Smith and I discussed objectives and he pointed at the Chamonix Aiguilles.

‘There’s one idea up there: the couloir above *Mini Blast*, on the Blaitière,’ he said. ‘I’ve been looking at it for two years from my kitchen window.’

We’d already trained and climbed together a lot that autumn and winter



The line of *La Croisade* (M7+, A2, V+, 5+, 600m), north face of the Aiguille des Pèlerins. This starts up the hard classic *Beyond Good and Evil* before taking the huge roof at half height.
(Tom Livingstone)



Tom Livingstone tackling the monster roof on *La Croisade*. Although done with aid, Livingstone said it would go free at M9 or M10. And as Livingstone puts it: 'M7 in the mountains is hard.'
(Symon Welfringer)

but our first attempt saw us straight back to the climbing wall; we didn't want to cross a sketchy avalanche-prone slope on the approach. Rob and I didn't discuss it much before turning around. At least we were practising our patience. We make a good team and are perseverant.

A few days later conditions had improved so we followed our original track back towards the Blaitière. It was freezing hard. The daytime temperature was -21°C as we soloed the five pitches of ice up *Mini Blast*. Our cheeks were numb and I swung my hands to flush blood into my fingers. Yet I was happy to be moving towards an Alpine goal. The line followed a wide granite couloir, which then narrowed and turned a corner. So with curiosity we began questing, switching from ice to névé and (slightly crumbly) rock. 'This pitch is insane,' Rob and I agreed. It made me think of Alaska, where the couloirs are steep and striking. Popping out of the couloir at the top and enjoying some sunshine, we moved up and right, then found a tent-up bivvy. We agreed that was also insane.

Following our noses next day, we started up a giant shield of granite. I pulled through steep ground and then rocked onto a slab with tiny crystal footholds, shouting 'watch me!' as I went. My crampons zipped and I shocked onto my arms but gripped the axes tight. My patience had been tested and now I was climbing, I loved it and wanted to rage. 'Fuck yeah!' A helicopter buzzed us and we later learned someone had told the PGHM to check us out, saying 'surely no-one could climb up there in January.'

Above the shield the line returned to more conventional terrain and the valley was hidden by fluffy white clouds. And just after dark on our second day we straddled the summit of the Blaitière. We rapped down and reached



John McCune picking his placements on *Les Barbares*. Established over five days in February 2003 by Frenchmen Stéphane Benoist and Patrick Pessi, *Les Barbares* follows a logical 500m line up the north-west face of the Pointe Pré de Bar in the Argentière basin. Not repeated until 2010, it's now regarded as a challenging one-day route. The French used aid on the first ascent but the route is now free. (Tom Livingstone)



The questionable rock of the expanding flake on the Grandes Jorasses classic *Directe de l'Amitié*. (Tom Seccombe)



The north face of the Grandes Jorasses. (Tom Livingstone)

our bivy platform later that night. We'd been wondering whether we should've left our tent, sleeping bag, mattresses, extra food, stove and gas at this bivy and climbed light to the summit but were unsure how long it would take. Neither of us wanted to bail if we were still a long way from the summit late at night, so we had carried the whole lot, only to have wished we'd left it there. Oh well, good training I suppose.

Back in the valley, I feasted at the bakery and basked in the comforts of home with Christelle. Although climbing brings pleasure, there is an enormous sweetness to life on the ground. Yet once again I was thinking of the Jorasses: patience, patience, I reminded myself. Instead, I roped up for a new variation on the Pèlerins with Symon Welfringer and *Les Barbares* in the Argentière basin with John McCune. Whilst climbing with Christelle I'd seen the line of the latter route and noticed the good conditions: *placage* was surprisingly abundant this year. Both of these were excellent routes with an equal mixture of high-quality climbing and long, tiring descents.

'Warmer' weather arrived and I knew it was time for the Jorasses. I felt fit, psyched and somewhat accustomed to the unusually cold winter temperatures. Tom Seccombe agreed to attempt to free *Directe de l'Amitié* on the



Tom Seccombe getting comfy on the inflatable portaledge.
(Tom Livingstone)



Livingstone making a winter ascent of the British route on the north-east face of the Piz Badile. Climbed first in July 1968 by Mike Kosterlitz and Dick Isherwood (who had failed to locate the *Corti route*), the Czechoslovakian team of Zuzana Hofmannová and Alena Stehliková made the first winter ascent in February 1982, a milestone in female alpinism. In February 2008 Fabio Valsechini made the first winter solo. (Gašper Pintar)

north face. Previous teams had freed all except one pitch: the expanding A2 flake that Korra Pesce had mentioned. The clue is in the name, I guess. In hindsight I should've known that a rotten and slightly dangerous aid pitch isn't going to make for a free attempt. But still.

'Big routes demand big packs,' I told myself as I shouldered my bag and staggered out of the Aiguille du Midi station with Tom. The wind cut into our cheeks but I was happy. The Midi really is an incredible feature, one part tourist attraction with a giant rocket sticking out of its head, and one part teleport between Chamonix and the massif. By nightfall, Tom and I were comfortably camped beneath the Jorasses, practically using the 1,000m north face as a headboard. A familiar cocktail swirled around my head: excitement, anticipation and fear. Alpine climbing is such an uncertain game, where events can change everything in an instant. Reaching the top is never guaranteed, especially when trying to climb on sight and free. Persistence is a very useful attribute. I began to doze but in a blink, the alarm went off.

My memories of climbing the *Directe de l'Amitié* are now condensed. I remember the squeak of ice axes and crampons as Tom and I plodded

up the initial ice field, taking turns carrying the enormous haul bag. Moderate pitches quickly ramped up and Tom made some brilliant leads. Then I took over and 'fought like a bastard' too. I don't remember where the bivy was, except that we used my inflatable G7 portaledge; without it we'd have been slumped miserably in our harnesses all night. Still, it was very snug to fit two big guys on a single mattress. Everything took ages and it was a miracle we didn't drop anything. We acted as if handling an unexplored bomb. The first M8 pitch felt alright, but the second was tricky. I rocked onto the belay pretty pumped but would still give it M7+.

The second bivy was a happy repeat of the first: make an anchor for the



Livingstone on the summit of Kukova Špica, Slovenia after climbing the south-east ridge. (*Aleš Česen*)

portaledge, crampons off, hang up all the gear in a mess, squeeze onto the ledge, shuffle into the sleeping bag, don't drop the stove, nice hot food, crash out, wake up, do it all in reverse. The expanding-A2-flake pitch was just that. Cams crunched grossly when I weighted them and I told myself to breathe more calmly when I made a few moves aiding off my axes. From the belay at the top I was psyched to be finished with it but not psyched to try for the redpoint. We continued up.

Getting to the top, on the other hand, really was sweet. The last pitches dragged, as did the haul bag, showering rocks. 'It's a chossy crag,' Tom remarked. The Jorasses isn't great rock and we'd occasionally hear a sickening, elongated *whiz* as something bombed past. At the final pitch, I could taste the sunshine on the summit ridge but couldn't find a belay amongst the shit rock. 'Can we move together?' I shouted down. My brains were getting boiled by the choss. 'Er...' came the reply. Tom carried the haul bag as well as the second's pack for about five metres until I could flop onto the south face and thus give him a belay and start pulling up the pig.

Six hours later, my mates Alex and Harry were handing us pizza in the car park. I've forgotten all the bad bits and the hunger and the fatigue and not freeing the pitch and mostly remember that pizza. It was another great adventure with Tom; and he's a total machine and very determined. I was happy to have waited for slightly warmer weather; trying to climb in the Baltic temperatures of January would've been unproductive. I was a bit disappointed not to have done the first free ascent of a route on the Jorasses but at the same time that expanding A2 pitch was not one to attempt free. Another time, another route, hopefully.

For a change of scene, I visited Slovenia with Christelle, where we enjoyed



After the austerities of winter, Livingstone moved on to sport climbing and the overhanging limestone of Saint-Léger du Ventoux, pictured here working his project *Le Nabab* (8b+). (Aaron Hockey)

catching up with good friends. Then we returned to Chamonix and I climbed *Ecaïlle Épique* on Les Droites in a day with Symon and Silvan Schüpbach. Or at least, until we reached the *Tournier Spur*, where at about 150m below the top I was sick everywhere with a bad stomach. After much deliberation, we called for a helicopter. I'd like to go back for this route.

At the very end of the winter, everything worked perfectly when I climbed the *British* route on the north-east face of Piz Badile with Gašper Pintar. We'd arranged to go climbing in the past but never actually tied in together until now. Our 'blind date' showed patience pays off. We'd waited until we had the right objective at the right time with suitable weather. On the route, we got lucky and the high-quality pitches went fast and on sight. It proved a satisfying end to my winter.