

Mont Blanc

June 2008

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David Salesin

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13 June 2008, 1:30pm.

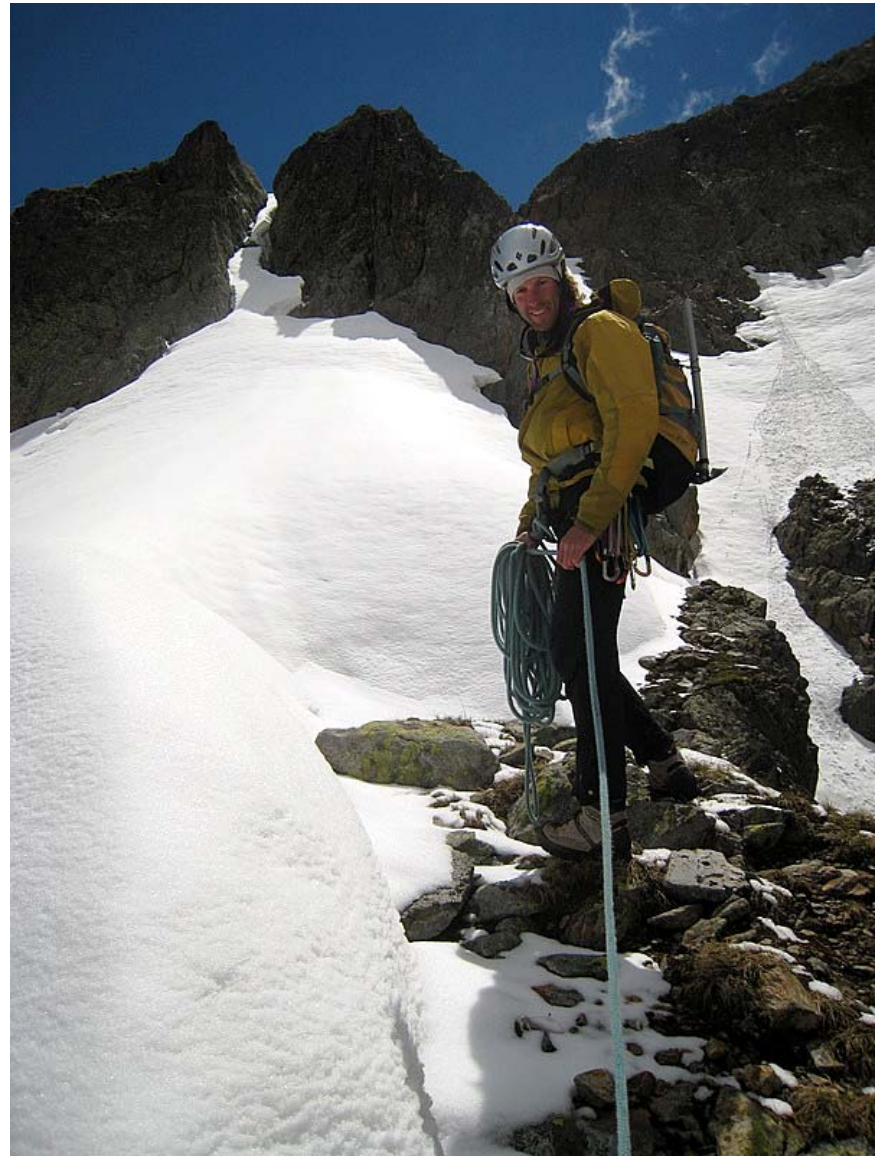
I was in Europe for three conferences with a four-day gap in between so arranged to climb Mont Blanc with a guide, something I had always wanted to do. The first day we spent refreshing my technical rock and snow technique. We practiced in an area called Index, across the valley from the Aiguilles Vertes, which would peak out from time to time through the clouds.



13 June 2008, 2:16pm.

I was originally supposed to climb with Tim Connelly from the American Alpine Institute, a guiding outfit based in Bellingham that I had climbed with before. However, Tim developed a blood clot in his leg on the flight over and had to take a week's rest before participating in any sports. Fortunately, he was able to find a local guide, Pete Mason, who was available to take me up the mountain. Pete is originally from upstate New York but married a French woman and has made his home near Chamonix for the past five years.

For practice, we did five or six pitches on very steep rock (at least for me) and finally had lunch in this relatively flat spot. Here's Pete, just before we sat down to lunch.



13 June 2008, 2:16pm.

A view across the valley to the Aiguilles Vertes from where we stopped for lunch. In the foreground you can see the pitch of the rock we came up.



13 June 2008, 4:15pm.

After a brief afternoon of review and acclimatization, we headed back down the Téléférique Flégère to the Chamonix valley below. One of the things I love about France are the ads for lingerie you find everywhere, even in the primitive hut at the top of a lift.



13 June 2008, 8:47pm.

That evening in Chamonix I dined at Satsouki, a Japanese restaurant with some of the freshest fish I've found anywhere. It was a nice change from the cream- and cheese-based cuisine of the past few days. From the village, you could see the glaciers descending from the shoulders of Mont Blanc. The high mountain itself was shrouded in fog, making it appear all the more forbidding.



14 June 2008, 8:52am.

I had planned the trip around the gap in my work schedule, but it turned out that the timing was ideal. Today was the opening day for both the Téléférique les Houches–Bellevue and the Tramway du Mont Blanc, which together take you up to the Nid d'Aigle at 7800', cutting the lowest 3300' off the climb. The train was jam-packed with climbers.



14 June 2008, 8:53am.

The view from the train was spectacular. Here is the Aiguille de Bionnassay, at 13,294', as seen from near the end of our ride. It was frightening to imagine that, if all went according to plan, we would be climbing to a summit much higher than this before the day was through.



14 June 2008, 9:08am.

The train tracks came to an abrupt halt at the far end of a tunnel. All hundred climbers filed out.



14 June 2008, 11:37am.

Although the weather was predicted to be mostly sunny for the entire day, we were shrouded in fog for most of the morning. At last, upon reaching the Glacier de Bionnassay, we got just above it – and were rewarded with this tremendous view of the Aiguille du Midi, looking almost like some special effects concoction out of *Star Wars*, or *Lord of the Rings*. The téléphérique station, the highest in the world at 11,000', is that little brown spot on the small summit just below and to the left of the spire.



14 June 2008, 4:16pm.

Our original plan had been to rest for the night at the Gôûter hut, at 12,523', which we had reached about an hour before, and to depart for the summit in the middle of the night. However, Pete and I were concerned that the weather, which was still pretty good, would turn worse overnight and make the summit unattainable. So, after an hour's break for lunch, we moved on.



14 June 2008, 9:12pm.

Eventually, and without stopping for dinner, we climbed well above the clouds. The wind picked up as nighttime began to fall and we approached the summit. Pete advised proceeding at a slow and steady pace, at whatever rate my ordinary breathing would permit. And so we did. I've never had a more enjoyable climb, or felt better oxygenated, in my life.



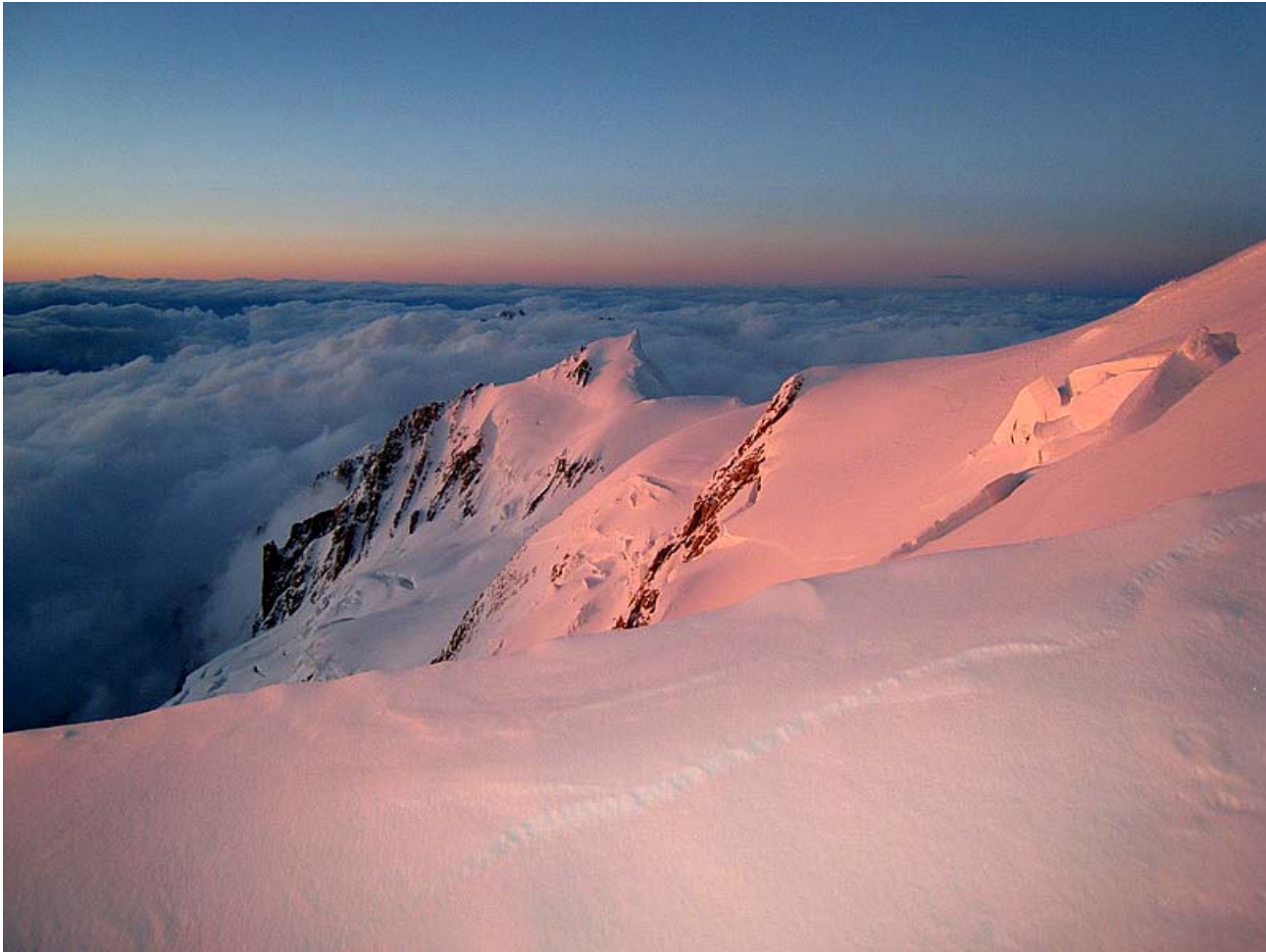
14 June 2008, 9:28pm.

By sunset, we were just below the summit dome. Freed of any hope of reaching the summit by nightfall, I was able to relax and take my time even more on the final approach. I went from a caterpillar's pace to a snail's. I was breathing slowly and meditatively, like practicing yoga.



14 June 2008, 9:28pm.

The changing hues were astonishing. In fifteen minutes, the snowy terrain shifted from orange to pink. It was the very same alpenglow one sees from the valley, only we were right up there in it.



14 June 2008, 9:28pm.

Snow conditions were perfect for our ascent. The summit ridge is like a fin, which becomes increasingly thin and sharp as you reach the top. Near the very summit, there were several times when my northernmost ski pole hit thin air rather than snow.



14 June 2008, 11:25pm.

Here I am on the summit of Mont Blanc, at 15,780'! All by ourselves on top, we had climbed nearly 8000' in 14 hours, with just an hour's break for lunch and a few other short rests.

For some reason, the moon, nearly full, shone with the very same alpenglow as the mountain had before — it was bright pink in the sky, almost like a gigantic version of Mars.



15 June 2008, 1:19pm.

We returned to the Goûter hut a little after 3:00am, just as the other hundred or so climbers were heading up. While we slept (from 4:00 to 8:00am), they fought the howling wind. None reached the summit. Our climb down the next morning was difficult in the blowing snow but manageable. After stopping for soup at the Refuge de Tête Rousse, we hurried down the Glacier de Bionnassay to catch the 1:30 train – the next one being two hours later – and made it just in time.



16 June 2008, 9:44am.

It turns out Mont Blanc makes a great warm-up for the Mer de Glace, which we visited the next day. (I'm being facetious. Ordinarily, Mont Blanc is done as a six-day tour, with the first four days for practice and acclimatization, including the Mer de Glace, and the actual summit attained on the morning of the sixth. We did the "modified," two-day version, summiting on the second evening.)



16 June 2008, 10:05am.

Getting onto the Mer de Glace, a giant glacier descending from the Vallée Blanche above, requires a steep descent from the Montenvers train station, about a half hour's trip from Chamonix. You have a choice between descending these very long ladders, which contour along the rock face, or walking along a thin ledge blasted out of the cliffs. We descended by ladder and came back up along the ledge.



16 June 2008, 10:18am.

Here's a part of the descent that can only be done by ledge.



16 June 2008, 11:13am.

The consistency of the Mer de Glace is a lot like freezer ice, the kind you have to defrost your freezer every so often to get rid of. Here, Pete studies a crevasse in the ice. Most of the crevasses you could hop over. Some, like this one, you had to walk around.



16 June 2008, 11:40am.

A lake formed by melting glacier water. Such lakes can grow quite large, then drain suddenly as the ice below gives way to the mounting pressure.



16 June 2008, 11:56am.

Some of the peaks surrounding the Mer de Glace. If the snow ever melts away from Mont Blanc, it too will appear this way — as a bunch of sharp spires rather than a rounded dome, according to ultrasonic imagery geologists have done.



16 June 2008, 2:48pm.

On our way back down, we walked beside a fast-flowing river weaving its way through the ice.



16 June 2008, 2:54pm.

The snow along the riverbank was coated with a fine, reddish-brown sand. The sand is carried by the wind from the Sahara Desert and deposited here, a thousand miles away.



16 June 2008, 4:19pm.

We climbed out of the glacial moraine along a series of almost invisible ledges.

Back in the valley later that day, the rain was coming down hard. Chamonix had seen three months of almost interminable rain. My original guide had had to drop out due to a freak medical condition. Yet, through careful planning — and flexibility, most of all — we had made it. A fine trip.

