An Alpine Virgin

“Right Brian. You’ve done ice climbing so you’d better lead now.” “I haven’t done ice” he replied. “I thought you had.” I gulped and looked up at the 1000 feet of ice slope above me. We were on the Brenva Ridge of Mont Blanc, one of several routes on this 4000ft. face and things were most definitely not going to plan. It had started well enough when we’d got the cable car up the Aiguille du Midi, walked across the Valle Blanche and climbed up the small, wooden bivouac hut on the Frontier Ridge, thrilled to see Walter Bonatti’s name in it.

It wasn’t my first visit to the Alps. That had been in 1970 with fellow North London member Dave Godfrey. Neither of us had a car but there were so-called “student flights” which went from Gatwick to Geneva. These were the original no frills flights I suppose, the main difference being the price you saw was the price you paid and they were quite cheap, £8.50 with another enormous advantage: there were no security checks then, meaning we could carry everything we needed. OK, not very comfortably for going camping and climbing but it was possible – just. We waddled through check in and onto the plane, our voluminous jackets making mysterious clinking noises, causing the staff to view us somewhat suspiciously. Once sat down we were mightily relieved as we removed the crampons, pitons, hammers and sundry bits of gear which we’d concealed.

We met up with a couple of other North London members who suggested a route on the Aiguille de l’M, a common training peak above the town. I was eager to get going the next morning and not at all concerned when they said we’d walk up to it and not take the train to the nearby Montenvers station. Three hours later we came out of the trees onto the moraines under the M. I was exhausted, head bowed and sweating profusely. I looked up and there, beyond the M (quite a small peak) the sight that greeted me made my heart sink. “Oh my God,” I muttered. “ Nobody can climb something that big, surely.” It was the Aiguilles Dru and Verte soaring impossibly high into the sky. And we’d already come up so far. My heart sank. If I was this tired before I’d even got onto the start of a climb what chance did I have of doing bigger things. We did half the route before realising it was getting late so headed off back to the valley. It wasn’t the best start to an Alpine career but I did get one route done, a rock climb on the Aiguille Ravanel before going home a little wiser, but not much.

So there I was the following year, with Brian who I knew slightly from the club. It was warm and cosy in the hut making us oversleep a little. I blamed it on the fact that we were sleeping across the French/Italian border with our heads in France and our feet in Italy and there being a one hour time difference between the two countries so it took longer for my legs to wake up than it did my head. When we left in the pre-dawn darkness we didn’t know exactly where to descend to the glacier so went straight down. This turned out to be a mistake after some 200 ft. as we saw our torch beams disappear over vertical cliffs below us. After floundering around for an hour or so we finally discovered some steps in the snow and followed them down. Skirting crevasses as we crossed the glacier as the sun came up which was a trifle disconcerting really as we should have been well up on the route by now, but, carried along by the ignorance of youth we continued.

Climbing up a snow slope we reached a narrow ridge crest, Col Moore, with the vast sweep of the Brenva Face to our left. It was hugely impressive but we had no time to linger and went on as rapidly as we could, meandering up a rock buttress and traversing a very narrow snow arete to the foot of the main ice slope. It was at this point that our lack of experience became manifest. There were two options: run away or carry on up, even though it was late. We chose to go up; after all, what could possibly go wrong? We were young and immortal. I took our two ice screws and, armed with these, my trusty wooden-shafted ice axe and a short ice hammer set off, thinking “Isn’t it nice to have the whole mountain to ourselves. Good idea starting late.” The climbing was quite easy: I’d run out a ropelength, put in one of the ice screws for a belay and bring Brian up to me. Taking the other screw I’d lead off again. It was slow – we should have been moving together – but we felt safer that way. At long last we reached the top of the slope, to be confronted with a green cliff of ice, 40 feet high. There was a slightly less steep ramp running up it and an ice piton sticking out so, aiming for that I led up, crampons only just biting in the solid ice. Totally committed and in something of a blind panic I gibbered my way to the top, to be greeted with gentle slopes leading up to the still distant summit. When Brian reached me we carried on up towards the top, rather slowly by now. “Er, Brian. I don’t like to be negative but that cloud around the summit. It’s kind of purple and green. I don’t think cloud should be that colour should it?” “No,” he agreed. There was only one thing for it: Run Away!

We turned and headed off downhill as quickly as we could, which wasn’t very. There was a short exhausting section up to Mont Maudit, then steeply down to a level section close to Mont Blanc Du Tacul but after that the angle increased sharply. We were brought up short towards the bottom of the slope by a yawning bergschrund. Fortunately there was someone abseiling from a snow stake over it. I yelled out in impeccable schoolboy French “Est-il possible de utiliser votre cord, s’il vous plait, monsieur?” He gave me a strange look and yelled back “Oui.” Safely over that obstacle we could wend our weary way up to a hut, for the last 100 yards I was on all fours, completely unable to stand up

Brian had to go home soon after and I recovered quite quickly and teamed up with fellow North London members Jeff Banks and Bob Pearson. They really wanted to climb the Matterhorn so we drove over to Zermatt in Bob’s little Austin, arriving in the afternoon just as a fairly typical spell of Alpine bad weather was coming to an end. Wasting no time we rode the cable car up to the Schwarzee (a small lake close to the mountain), got our tents up and pondered on which route to do. They weren’t keen on the ordinary, Hornli Ridge, but fancied the harder and better Zmutt Ridge on the west side of the mountain.

Heavy rain in the night dampened our enthusiasm as much as it did the tents so we slept late but on poking our heads out in the morning realised it was a beautiful day. Scurrying to get ready we threw everything we needed into our ‘sacs and headed off up the path, turning down onto the glacier below the North Face. Some way across we climbed a steepish snow ramp to get onto a higher shelf, just as a rather large boulder came hurtling down the face, missing us by a few yards. “Hope there’s no more where that came from” Jeff muttered. “Shouldn’t be”, Bob replied. “It is the middle of the afternoon and I know this is a rather stupid place to be at this time but the face is well snowed up so, in theory, it should be OK.” Nothing else followed the errant piece of rock so we were forced to agree with him. A bit further on, Jeff looked up and said “Why don’t we go up the North Face instead?” We craned our necks to look up at it and it did look very inviting. “How many pitons have we got?” Bob asked. Searching in our ‘sacs we came up with what we had. “Four” I said. “Hmm, Jeff murmured. “Not really enough. We’d probably need at least six.” We reckoned Jeff knew what he was talking about as he’d done the Walker Spur, so, on we went: a decision that probably saved our lives, if not a major epic.

We climbed up and across a very steep snow slope to bring us out at the start of a narrow ridge leading up to some rock towers, known as the ‘teeth’ By the time we got there it was almost dark so time to call a halt and bivouac. There wasn’t anywhere big enough for all of us so we found a narrow ledge each, had a bite to eat and tried to get some sleep. I had a thin down jacket and a Space Blanket for warmth and a boot for a pillow. Luxury!

The long night came to an end, as did the Space Blanket, my tossing and turning shredding it. As the sun came up we climbed on, across a couple of the teeth followed by a semi-abseil into a gap. The ridge above looked really impressive, overhung by the Zmutt Nose, but it turned out to be fairly easy so we moved together on pretty good rock. After a steep buttress we reached a point above which hundreds of feet of vertical or overhanging rock barred the way. “Now what? I asked. “Across to there I reckon”, Bob answered, pointing to a little, high-angled snow ledge a long way to our left across a series of slabs above a terrifying drop. I gulped (I did a lot of gulping in those days) and tentatively set off, searching for somewhere to place some gear. There was nowhere. After the rope ran out the others followed and I just held it loosly in my hands. Jeff led through, again with no protection. Fortunately the rock was dry and the climbing not hard but it was frightening work, particularly when the odd stone whizzed down from above. Reaching the snow ledge we gathered ourselves and followed the ridge above now enveloped in drifting cloud. Arriving at some more ledges we could tell we were near the summit but couldn’t get to it easily so Bob led off into the mist, up and left. When the rope came tight I didn’t know if he was belayed so just had to start climbing, all the while shouting as loud as I could “Have you got me?” with no reply. With exposure biting at my heels I had to clear snow off the holds to make progress but finally reached him, squatting across the summit ridge with a big grin on his face. Jeff joined us and the cloud cleared a little as we got to the cross on thesummit. There was no-one else there and we didn’t linger as time was getting on. The summit ridge was narrow and exposed but we moved quickly across and soon got to the fixed ropes that led down the ordinary route. The weather was closing in rapidly, with rumbles of thunder and snow falling as we reached the Solvay emergency bivouac hut, some 800 feet below the summit. Closing the door against the blowing snow found we weren’t alone as half a dozen other climbers were crammed in.

The storm raged most of the night. Three of the occupants left not long after dawn but soon returned. “Impossible, sans guide” one of them told the assembled company. We were a bit crestfallen at that but as we had no food or fuel there was little option but to try anyway, telling ourselves it couldn’t be that bad and the others must be wimps. It actually wasn’t too bad, Bob leading down and finding abseil stakes every rope length so we got down quite quickly.

I was back in Chamonix the next year. In the Nash one evening looking for someone to climb with I got talking to a chap called Steve who gave me a long list of routes he’d done. He was maybe a year or so older than me and I was impressed and quite pleased when he suggested we could go up and do the East Face of the Grand Capucin then go onto the Route Major, another big climb on the Brenva Face. In my naivety this seemed an excellent plan except for the one minor flaw: the East Face of the Capucin was the biggest artificial climb) in the Alps and I had only done one little route of that sort, and that was in Derbyshire. “No problem” he opined, “I’ve done loads and you’ll soon get the hang of it.”

So, off we set, carrying enough equipment to open a gear shop. We got the cable car up the Aiguille du Midi and trekked across the glacier to the foot of the Grand Capucin. Once again it was the middle of the afternoon and we planned to bivouac on some ledges at the start of the climb. To get to the ledges we climbed up a runnel in a steep snow slope, my new friend some way ahead of me. Just as I got out of the runnel a monstrous boulder came hurtling down it, missing me by a few inches. Feeling shaken and a bit sick with this near death encounter I thought ‘Thank God that didn’t have my name on it. Probably couldn’t spell it.’ I reached Steve with no further problems and we arranged our bivouac on a commodious ledge.

After a fitful sleep disturbed by dreams of rapidly descending rocks we set off on the first pitch. Steve went up first, a little slowly, which I put down to not being warmed up. I followed even more slowly, thrashing about trying to get the hang of the little rope ladders and things I’d borrowed to do this sort of climbing. I led the next pitch; moving carefully from piton to piton then Steve led through. After five hours we hadn’t made a great deal of progress, I was getting very thirsty in the burning sun and beginning to think this was going to turn into a bit of an epic at this rate. I was also coming to the conclusion that, just maybe, Steve had been a bit “economical with the truth” when describing his mountaineering experience and I was getting scared, realising I was way out of my depth. I had just begun to formulate a plan for running away with honour and how I persuade him when he murmured “I feel sick.” Brilliant, I thought, we can retreat. “Oh no” I said. “That’s a shame. Do you think we ought to go down?” “Yes”, he mumbled feebly and we made our slow and tricky descent, eventually getting safely back to Chamonix and going our separate ways, never to meet again.

So, what did I learn?

1. Maybe Chamonix is a bit ambitious for a first Alpine trip
2. Try to be realistic about objectives and don’t let enthusiasm cloud judgement.
3. Don’t climb with a complete stranger you meet in a bar.
4. Start early.
5. Get as fit as possible.
6. Ensure you have the skills you will need for the chosen route.
7. Be lucky.