

**CLIMBING
ADVENTURE**

Words and Pictures Damian Hall

MOUNTAINS MADE EASY?

Can you go from armchair alpinist to 4,000-metre summiteer in under a week? Or is that too much of a climb? We sent Damian Hall to find out

"Like ants on ice-cream"...
tiptoeing along the knife-edge
Aiguille du Midi Ridge, near
Mont Blanc in the French Alps



“I haven’t concentrated this hard on anything since I lost my virginity - and this lasts much longer”

Laden with “preposterous amounts of kit,” Damian embarks on his first 4000-er

YOU NEED THREE things to be a high-altitude mountaineer,” says Tim, my guide, over breakfast in Chamonix. “One, a high pain threshold. Two, a bad memory. And, three... I can’t remember what the third one is.”

I’m in no particular rush to test my pain threshold, but if this is typical climbing humour I think I’m going to enjoy my six days of mountain-bothering in the French Alps.

Mountaineering seems so very dangerous. “There are only three sports,” the writer Ernest Hemingway once said, “bullfighting, motor racing and mountaineering. All the rest are merely games.” Yet at the same time, the sport seems so compelling. As the mad mountain men do their basic maths on fewer and fewer fingers, why do they keep going back? I want a taste of what fires their imaginations.

Chamonix is the world’s mountaineering capital. On either side of a narrow valley, snow-clad rockets soar for thousands of metres, including the Alps’ biggest at 4,810m, Mont Blanc, where mountaineering officially began in 1786.

Tim, an IFMGA-qualified guide with Adventure Consultants, has been charged with turning me and another chap – a 51-year-old bank treasurer named Neville – into mountaineers. He shows us the essentials of rope work and explains how the professionals use a combination of patience, energy preservation, good balance and mental calmness to get up the hill.

At home I’ve been hillwalking with a pack, running and cycling – but that can’t prepare you for the curveball called

altitude. It starts to be a factor for most people above 3,000m, and our course will climax with a summit attempt on a 4,000m peak. So as we learn our basic skills, we also need to acclimatise.

Next morning we’re up at 5am, knocking back brekkie and gearing up. The amount of kit seems preposterous, but mountains are not a place to be unprepared. I’m wearing and carrying three pairs of trousers, a trio of gloves, ditto headwear, plus gaiters, glasses, goggles and other layers. Plus all the pointy technical equipment. I feel like a knight in armour, ready for battle.

We ascend through a moraine field, then a mix of snow and rock, and stop at the edge of a glacier. It’s hard to imagine that this pristine, innocent-looking surface hides a sea of hungry, gnashing mouths. I’d heard only yesterday about a Slovenian climber who was lost in a crevasse two weeks ago. He should have been roped up. He wasn’t.

Tim teaches us the basics of crampon use, then we rope up and climb for a couple of hours, into the clouds and worsening wind, to the top of Tresenta (3,609m). It’s snowy as we pause for handshakes and snaps at the summit. We descend through quasi-blizzard conditions: stinging sleet and good old-fashioned rain. Back in the hut with steaming soup, the weather has dampened our kit, but not the euphoria of my first Alpine summit.

The next day is set aside for an acclimatisation hike, across a glacier that curves and bulges erratically, like an unmade bed. As we cross, crevasses loom out of the

pea-soup clouds, and fragile ice bridges convey us delicately over beckoning canyons. The enchanting chasms are like sirens. I know I should steer clear of them, but I just have to look inside – at their ice crystals, their ethereal blue glow and their yawning, enigmatic silence.

Back in Chamonix next morning, we get two cable cars from 1,035m up to 3,800m. In just 15 minutes we’ve swapped a busy roadside for the dreamy world of snow, rock and ice. We step through a gate into an ice cave, and look out upon a sight that leaves me chilled to the bone.

The Aiguille du Midi ridge is a minor hit on YouTube. It is knife-edged, with a 2,000m-plus drop to my left, straight down to Chamonix. On the right a steep slope leads off around rocks to... goodness-knows-where, but doubtless some kind of messy, icy half-death. There’s not even enough space to stick ice axe and walking pole at either side. I feel like a two-year-old looking down a slide for the first time. That way? Really? Without a parachute?

After a mentally torturous wait for two groups to climb slowly up towards us, finally, I go first. It starts out flat, but then goes steeply downhill. I feel the exposure pulling at me, wanting me. I haven’t concentrated this hard on anything since I lost my virginity – though this lasts much longer. I have a small but intense headache and I’m regretting not taking out life insurance. I’ve done bungy jumps and skydives, but this is more hair-whitening.

“Relax your feet,” says Tim, among other reassuring things. Somehow, 20 horrifying minutes later, we’re off it.

I laugh as a wave of euphoric relief washes over me. Welcome to real mountaineering, I suppose.

From here it’s a glorious walk across a glacier bowl circled by magnificent peaks to the Cosmiques Hut, at 3,613m. It’s sensationally located, a castle on an island of rocks, with views of Alps in all directions – and beer on tap. From the deck, the climbers on nearby peaks look like ants on ice cream. They appear so vulnerable, but I’m desperate to join them.

Some head to Mont Blanc from this hut, but it’s only a few weeks since an avalanche on the route killed nine people, and most guides judge the current conditions unfavourable. Our target will be 4,248-metre Mont Blanc du Tacul. On our last acclimatisation day we do pitches with ice screws up a sleep snow slope, which has my calves on fire. We rest in the afternoon, our alarms set for 3am.

As we strap on crampons next morning, a caterpillar of headtorches leads out into the darkness. Soon my feet add to the honeycomb crunch of the snow. The torches merge with the twinkling stars above, and we start to climb steeply. Snowballs triggered by Neville and Tim, walking ahead, skitter past me and off the edge, down towards Chamonix. Ice blocks the size of buses loom over us.

We climb and climb, zigzagging to combat the steepness. I have what must be summit fever: a frenzied obsession with getting to the top. I *must* get there – and I want to go hell-for-leather. But I remember Tim’s advice about being

continues over>

As the sun rises, it’s time for an assault on Mont Blanc du Tacul’s craggy summit



Our heroic writer tops out at 4,248m - this is just before he nearly fell off

patient and preserving energy. Finally we reach a plateau, and share snacks and tea with two Polish climbers as the sun starts to flood the jagged horizon. We see our summit, a pointy black rock piercing its white surrounds, with an ice cliff jutting sideways like a freshly cut slice of pavlova. Tim shortens the rope and the final few metres are a tricky combination of rock and ice. I hesitate a few times, indecisive about my crampon placements, still learning to trust them. But again Tim gives good advice and I pull myself over the top of a rock to a little platform of snow - the summit of a 4,000m Alp.

A new feeling oozes through me, one of joy and triumph. We are surrounded by white dragons, and it feels like the best place in the world. I want to stay forever. I've finally joined an elite club... though I'm about to get a reminder that perhaps I'm not quite ready for Everest yet.

I'm still in dreamland an hour later, on the descent. Tim is guiding Neville down a tricky section as I wait below. I'm just messing about, complacently kicking and whacking at the snow with no purpose. A little too late I realise my crampon hasn't gripped on my latest kick. And I'm gone...

I don't go very far. Neville saves my life - or at least saves me from some cuts and bruises - by digging into the white stuff and letting the rope do its job. I feel sheepish the rest of the way down. Worse still, unlike the rest of the world, I have the uncomfortable sensation of feeling grateful towards a banker. Neville's instinctive response showed how much he, at least, had learned from Tim.

We've been taught a lot by our guide, not least about mountain humour. One of his best bits of wisdom concerns a failsafe way to test if trousers are breathable - release airborne toxic events and see if anyone notices. Tim's trousers, it should be noted, are impressively breathable.

■ *Adventure Consultants runs 58 expeditions and courses worldwide, including in the Alps, the Himalayas and Antarctica. For more details visit adventureconsultants.com*

Mountain kit essentials

Going from hill-walker to mountaineer requires a serious kit upgrade...



1. BERGHAUS ILAM DOWN JACKET £240 Berghaus' new Ilam lightweight jacket features hydrophobic down, which holds warmth even when the feathers are wet, and dries more quickly: berghaus.com. **2. BLACK DIAMOND HALF DOME HELMET £50** The popular Half Dome has recently been redesigned, bringing improved fit and weight savings: blackdiamondequipment.com. **3. BLACK DIAMOND COULOIR HARNESS £45** This harness has quick-release leg loops and packs up small enough for pockets. **4. GRIVEL G12 NEW-MATIC CRAMPONS £135** Clip-on crampons like these are ideal for the Alps, as they are quick to get on and off, saving time on mixed climbs: grivelgb.co.uk **5. BLACK DIAMOND RAVEN ICE AXE £75** For general alpine climbing you need a straight-shafted axe, 60-70cm long. **6. SCARPA JORASSES PRO GTX BOOTS £350** This insulated leather mountaineering boot is warm, waterproof and supportive for snow and ice climbing: scarpa.co.uk.co.uk.