

MESMERISING MONT BLANC

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“All Men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous Men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible.”

T. E. Lawrence

After our successful Kilimanjaro climb in January 2016, my husband Samer and I were thirsty for our next adventure. Our next target: Mont Blanc. Why summit Mont Blanc? “Because it’s there,” as George Mallory says. Mont Blanc is the highest peak in Western Europe; standing at 4,809m, this majestic mountain is ranked eleventh in the world in terms of topographic prominence. So the mountaineering motivation was there; the thrill, the target, the preparation, and the desire to achieve. But something more important was missing - giving a meaning to our climb. Which is why we chose to climb for Al Jalila Foundation by raising funds that would directly go to medical research on cancer and diabetes (through Just Giving-a platform for NGO crowd funding): www.justgiving.com/Cynthia-Salame.

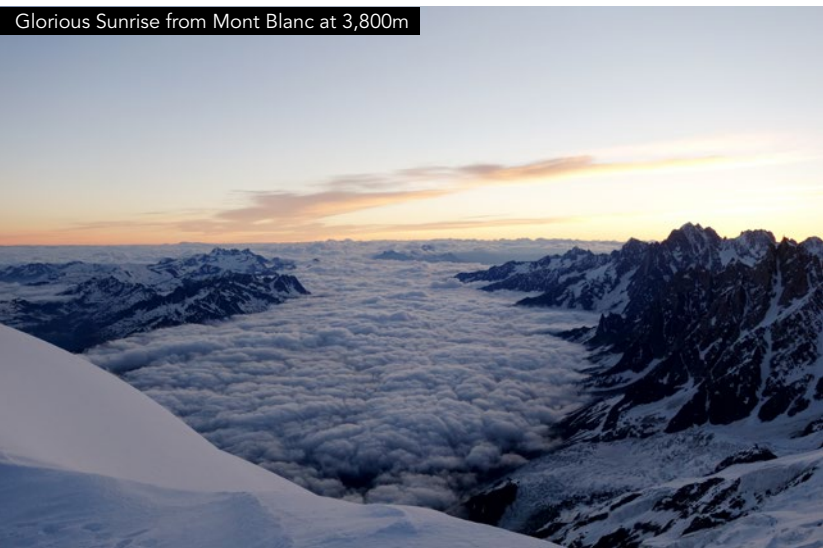
Preparation

In terms of physical strength training, we practiced stairway climbing 3 times a week by going up and down our 10 floor building around ten times (target was 100 floors), carrying a 10-15 kg back-pack! It was a very boring, painful and suffocating exercise (our building’s stairways are not

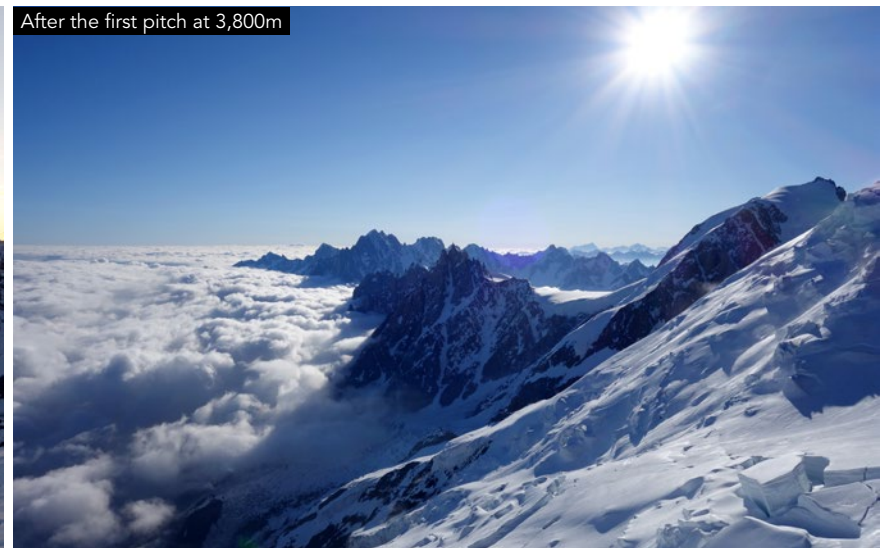
equipped with air conditioners). Climbing up was bearable, but climbing down you could feel the stress on your knees, your legs shaking, and your calves pumping. The elevator was always a temptation, but our internal conscience reminded us that climbing down was essential to develop quad strength for the descent.

On some weekends, we used to hike carrying the backpacks in areas such as Jabal Hafeet, Jabal Al Jais, Stairway to Heaven and Jabal Shams (the highest peak in Oman) to name a few. Moreover, we are both rock climbers who constantly climb at indoor gyms in Dubai during weekdays and outdoors during weekends in RAK, Tawiyan (UAE) and Oman.

Rock climbing is very useful to develop spatial awareness, agility and balance along with the added benefit of building strength in our core, arms and legs. In addition, we took part in interval training, which helped prepare our body for exertion at altitude. All of this physical training empowered our mental strength; the silent will to move on, climb on, and the certitude that all of this preparation will pay great dividends in achieving success on the mountain.



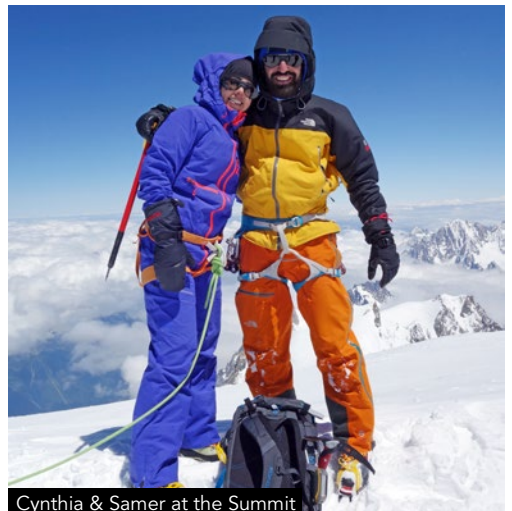
Glorious Sunrise from Mont Blanc at 3,800m



After the first pitch at 3,800m



Ridge at 4,500m



Cynthia & Samer at the Summit

The day before our departure

We were so excited for our European trip to begin! We packed our duffle bags, our bedroom literally looking like a warehouse for mountaineering gear! I had to iterate out loud every item going in the duffle bag to make sure I was crossing it off the list and to be certain that I was not packing some of Samer’s gear by mistake.

Our adventure happened to start as early as the airport, whereby we had a connecting flight via Doha and our flight there had a delay which made us nearly miss our second plane to Geneva (it was already the last call the moment we landed in Doha!). I got to practice my mountaineering skills at the airport, sprinting with a jam packed rucksack through the terminal and skipping all the escalators and going for stairs! Thankfully, we somehow managed to make it to the plane, whilst getting a serious work out! A long nap followed and after that I remember the precious moment Samer woke me up to show me the Mont Blanc summit from the plane!

My heart skipped a beat as the mountain stole my breath... It was so grand! So statuesque and so pure!

Our third companion, Paul, (joining us from Beirut) was already waiting for us at a rock climbing crag close to our lodge when we arrived in the climbing capital of the world. Chamonix was such a magical mountaineering haven! Wooden houses, greenery, lakes, all adorned by the majestic Mont Blanc spilling one of its glorious glaciers into the valley. An urge to climb took over but we didn’t have a rope or quick draws...

Luckily, our guide was equipped with the missing gear that we needed, and we spent half of the next day multi-pitch climbing to warm up to our upcoming summits. Chamonix truly has a mystical aura springing from its history of being the birth place of alpinism...

The following day, we drove over to Helbronner in Italy where we practiced crevasse rescue and self-arrest in stormy weather. The cold was so intense that day that I couldn’t feel my fingers, so I had to quit the crevasse

rescue session and rush back to the hut due to aching fingers as blood started bidding through them...

Having practiced the skills needed, and waking up to great weather, we set off for the first of our acclimatisation climbs on a peak in the Vallee Blanche called Aiguille de Toule (3,538m/11,594ft). We successfully summited after climbing a steep section in deep snow and traversing an exposed ridge. The view was breathtaking; a never ending carpet of peaks gracefully pierced the blue skies on the infinite horizon...

Our next acclimatisation climb was Gran Paradiso, the highest mountain in Italy standing tall at (4,061m/13,323ft) followed by Tresenta (3,609 m/11,840ft). Summiting both not only helped us acclimatise to the high altitude, but also built the confidence we needed before setting off for the massive Mont Blanc. We however failed to acclimatise to the overwhelming beauty of the surroundings and we were stricken by a constant state of awe.



Samer Hajjar on the Summit

Ridge after the first pitch at 3,800m

The climb

A rest day later, and after a heavy dose of uncertainty due to ever-changing weather, we got the greenlight from our guide to take a shot at our dream. It was damp and rainy when we set off on day one, having to climb roughly 900m in altitude gain to reach Refuge Tete Rousse where we were to spend the night, before pushing for the summit. Half way up, the weather got worse and a thunderstorm broke, unleashing fearsome winds, lightning and heavy snowfall. All the other groups heading up turned back, and the outlook was getting dim. The mountain had unleashed its fury and no Man is worthy of challenging her might. Luckily, our guide knew an emergency shelter close to where we stood, and we rushed to it, hoping Mont Blanc would change her mind, granting us the privilege to visit her throne. To our astonishment, a ray of sun broke through the dispersing clouds and we touched a welcoming invite by the commanding force...

We spent the night at 3,200m in the refuge from where we started our summit attempt the following morning at 4am. The



Al Jalila Foundation Summit photo Samer Hajjar and Cynthia Salame

first pitch was quite steep and exposed, with 600 vertical meters of scrambling on ice and rock. But the reward was grand; we witnessed a glorious sunrise beyond what words can describe. There we were, two hours after we set off in the cold night, standing on a snow-coated ridge above an ocean of clouds, failing to make sense of the magnificent shades of radiating colors illuminating the horizon. It's beyond what the eye can behold or the imagination can conceive. We wished for a poet as we felt unworthy of describing what laid before us. Nature, in all its glory, exposing her unparalleled beauty, narrating her perfection in a heavenly composition... a masterpiece superseding humanity, worthy of Gods.

The wind was strong and the snow plentiful, but the mountain was empty due to the storm of the previous day. The skies were blue, indicating the mountain's acceptance of our presence. It was more of a spiritual climb from thereon in. Alone on this massive mass of unequalled prominence, reflecting on life and the splendor of this world, this was the real summit we reached, deep within us. Not a second passed in the

coming hours of ascent without a profound feeling of gratitude for being allowed to be present in such a majestic environment.

Around 4 hours later, we reached a ridge at around 4,300m, feeling the thinning of the air. The ridge was relatively narrow and the wind was blowing hard, but our morale was as high as where we stood. We could feel the realisation of our dreams without losing an ounce of the respect we held for the mountain.

On the final summit ridge, containing our emotions was a losing battle. As we reached the summit, we couldn't help but splurge the unfamiliar mix of emotions that took over. The mountain had allowed us to stand on the very top, and the gratitude, respect, joy, enchantment, awe, self-realisation, accomplishment, utter exhilaration and so much more than my limited vocab was too much to keep in. There we were, on the summit of the legendary Mont Blanc, with a view beyond what we thought possible having conquered nothing but ourselves. At that very moment, we knew that we were changed forever...

Al Jalila Foundation is a global philanthropic organisation dedicated to transforming lives through medical education and research. It was founded by His Highness, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, in 2013. Al Jalila Foundation promotes medical education and research by investing in the UAE's medical treatment capabilities; it provides scholarships to nurture a home-grown generation of medical professionals and supports ground-breaking research that addresses health challenges prevalent in the region. Al Jalila Foundation is fully funded by the generosity of donors. 100% of funds donated to Al Jalila Foundation are invested into medical research, education and treatment in the UAE.

For more information on fundraising, visit www.aljalilafoundation.ae