

Events and Trends in the Alps

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A British party was approaching the summit of the Aiguille Verte, carrying the normal commodious rucksacks necessitated by the inclusion of bivi gear, having completed a conventional roped ascent of one of the many fine ice routes for which the mountain is renowned. The weather was decidedly dubious and the prospect of descent down the tricky Whymper Couloir uninviting. Contemplating their feet whilst trudging the summit calotte they almost bumped into a continental soloist, lightly clad and carrying a miniscule rucksack. They offered sustenance and were duly welcomed to join him inside his bivouac shelter. On expressing surprise that such a small rucksack could hold a 'three man' bivi sack, the Frenchman unfurled a light silk parachute which they then proceeded to wrap around themselves. After just getting pleasantly comfortable with a couple of welcome brews, the British party were politely told that he 'would have to be on his way now chaps', and would they mind holding out the parachute to maximise the effective wind catchment area. After a couple of unsatisfactory attempts at this he jumped from just below the summit and drifted gently down to the valley leaving the other party to negotiate the usual long and dangerous descent which they would be lucky to complete before nightfall. There is no moral whatsoever to this story; just a difference in attitude!

The development rate of all facets of mountaineering is exemplified by the almost uncontrolled pace of Alpinism which nowadays allows singularly little time for consolidation. No longer are we really surprised to learn that the N face of the Eiger has been soloed in 6 hours or that the S face of the Fou has been climbed completely free. Alpine climbs have no absolute difficulty—too many factors are involved, notably the era in which the climb was done. It is much less of an achievement and a far easier proposition to climb the Walker Spur today than say the N face of the Dru 10 years ago or the Grand Capucin 20 years ago. Certain climbs that were considered 'quite something' 5 or 6 years ago are now being achieved by young Alpinists often unknown outside their immediate circle of friends.

In most recent years climbing has diversified enormously with a large swing towards pure free rock climbing in a suitable warm and hospitable climate and an increased emphasis on the greater ranges due to the far greater ease with which an increasing number of mountaineers can visit the Himalaya or Andes instead of the traditional Alpine season. Modern trends in the sport have been seen through these two windows; Alpinism as practised in Europe having quietly lost the focus of attention.

To look at the situation more fully we should compare the achievements of British Alpinists with those recorded by continental

climbers and in doing so we again find ourselves having to turn to the Mont Blanc region in order to examine the 'top end of the scale'.

It is obvious and inevitable that, at present, the total population involved in mountain activities is increasing. Walkers are becoming prolific and more adventurous in their undertakings, especially between the upper valley and the glaciers, where high Alpine huts are often the goal of many excursions. This is more apparent in areas such as the Dauphiné where only a relatively small percentage of the bodies found in an overflowing hut will in fact be going onto the mountain the next day. The Aiguilles Rouges area above Chamonix is becoming immensely popular and an increasingly large number of walkers are completing projects such as the Tour de Mont Blanc every year.

While the seventies marked the transient era of advancement in, and concentration on, ice/mixed climbing, the wheel has turned the full circle bringing us back to the development of high standard free rock routes as the current means of progression of Alpinism as a sport. There are, naturally, still many ascents of the major ice climbs but little new can be accomplished in summer. Obscure couloirs still exist but they tend to require April/May type conditions and are consequently very limited. Winter is a different matter and considerable scope exists for exceptionally difficult routes up many of the very thin steep ice runnels that occur at this time of year.

This is true to a lesser extent in other areas of the Alps besides the Mont Blanc Massif. Potential still exists for fine new ice/mixed routes of a more classic style in the Berner Oberland and Valais. The main instigator here is Patrick Gabarrou who with almost monotonous regularity and a number of different partners continues to 'unearth' each year a number of fine couloirs and faces throughout the range.

As one would expect, the average Alpinist operating from Chamonix is going to be climbing at a higher technical standard than in previous years. However, he apparently places far less emphasis on commitment. The American influence on pure rock climbing inevitably prevails, as does the attitude of no longer climbing in unwieldy boots and a rucksack but making a rapid ascent with PAs and chalk bag. In a dry spell it is possible to pick out lines on the Peigne from almost as far distant as Chamonix due to the 'whiteness' of the rock in that area.

In vogue are climbs that offer an easy and quick approach, have a reputation for excellent quality climbing, and can be descended with ease in a relatively short time by abseil. Can the American direct start to the W face of the Dru be any longer considered a 'hard' route when as many as 30 parties can be engaged on the climb at the same time on a good weather forecast? The majority of ascents now terminate at the 'jammed block' or sometimes above the '90m diedre' and well equipped abseil points lead directly back to the starting point. The same can be said of the Cordier Pillars on both the Aiguille de Roc and W face of the Grand Chamois. Both are modern classics, where the difficulties are

'considered' to finish before the summit and a rapid abseil descent will lead down to a mound of rucksacks and boots neatly piled at the foot of the climb. In the last decade the number of ascents per year of such classics as the Mer de Glace face of the Grépon has fallen from over 100 to less than a dozen. By comparison the S face of the Fou and the Cordier Pillar on the Roc receive almost 70 ascents a year and long queues to get onto the W face of the Charmoz are not unknown. A lightweight overboot is now on sale in France, comprising a thin plastic shell with a vibram sole which can be worn over an E.B. type rock boot to allow crampon usage yet weighs little when packed neatly away in the rucksack whilst climbing.

In the upper echelons of Alpinism, projects last summer seem to have centred around the combination of 2 major difficult routes in one day. This follows on no doubt from the previous year when Jean Marc Boivin and Patrick Berhault climbed the S face of the Fou and the American direct start to the Dru; intervening transport provided by a double hang glider.

Summer 1982 saw a complete ascent of the American Direct to the summit of the Dru followed by the Bonatti Pillar in 5 hours apiece. Later in the same week an ascent of the Dufour-Frehel and the Grand Pilier d'Angle was followed by the central Pillar of Freney, again in one day by a French party. Their approach was obviously committing and somewhat interesting. A British party climbing the latter route on the same day first became aware of the current rush tactics when one member, having clipped an etrier onto his waist whilst negotiating a section of free climbing found the Frenchman climbing up the rungs behind him! Moving swiftly past wearing only tee shirts, tracksuits and PAs and carrying ostensibly nothing more in their rucksacks other than a pair of plastic boots and a cagoule, they had to reach the Vallot Hut that night; an unenviable situation as it was certainly dark and stormy by the time they emerged from the top of the Pillar.

However even though conditions in the summer of 1982 were perfect for some of the great *Grandes Courses* such as the Freney Pillars etc., surprisingly few people made the journey, being content to concentrate on more technical climbing around the lower peaks.

Of the new routes completed recently those on the Grand Capucin, W face of the Petites Jorasses, N face of the Pélerins and Aiguille de Roc—in the main by Michel Piola and Pierre Alain Steiner—are said to offer excellent and very difficult rock climbing with pitches that would rate 5c and 6a in a British grading system. These could well become the hard classic climbs of the future.

Recently a startling number of continental soloists have emerged. The Droites N face, Dru and Super Couloirs receive a number of solo ascents and the classic hard rock routes continue to be soloed in increasingly impressive times. Last winter the very difficult Bouchard route on the N face of the Grand Charmoz, the French route on the N face of the

Aiguille Sans Nom and the Dru Couloir all received solo ascents. On the latter, the climber concerned didn't even bother to carry bivouac gear! However the most impressive performance came undoubtedly from the Italian, Casaroto, who soloed 4 routes consecutively on the S side of Mont Blanc over 15 days in February 1982.

As far as British Alpinism is concerned there appear to have been a polarization towards the areas of Chamonix, Dauphiné and to a lesser extent the Bregaglia; areas where rock is the predominant medium. A friend spent 4 weeks in the popular Zinal valley during the summer without encountering another British party and similar sentiments have been expressed with regard to other areas in the Pennine Alps and Oberland.

The Dauphiné in the last few years has seen an overwhelming influx of British climbers enjoying the classic easy and middle grade routes despite the fact that written information in the English language is still very poor in comparison with other regions. The difficult *Grandes Courses* in this area, however, are still almost entirely neglected; a situation which may change shortly when the translation of Rébuffat's 100 Best Climbs is published in this country.

Not so long ago, to travel from Britain to climb on the continent was synonymous with tackling the Alpine ridges and faces. The limestone of southern France was known, of course, and parties occasionally travelled there to escape the periods of interminable bad weather surrounding the higher mountains, but it was rarely a holiday's *raison d'être*. Today this is no longer true and masses of British climbers are frequenting the areas of Buoux, Buis and Verdon in the Provence; the Handegg Walls near the Grimsel Pass where the climbing can resemble the best of both Tremadoc and Tuolumne in quality; the Val di Mello to the south of the Bregaglia and even further afield to the sandstones of Germany. The stories are the same; brilliant rock climbing, usually excellent weather, lots of people and enormous incidence of theft. Leaving one's car unattended at any of the southern limestone cliffs appears to be a major risk nowadays and in the Val di Mello people have been advised to walk over to, rather than camp in the valley due to the high disappearance rate of tents!

From the point of view of rock climbing, Spain has been considered a bit of a back water in the past but offers some excellent limestone which although still relatively unknown to the British is just beginning to attract many French and Swiss across the border. It will be interesting to see just how 'unknown' these areas will be in 5 or 6 years time!

To turn to the Mont Blanc range the criticism that has been levied is that while the standard of British climbing is still high—e.g. the Walker Spur, Dru Couloir, Droites, Aig Sans Nom etc., get many ascents by British parties—most tend to remain fairly unadventurous, sticking to the top 10 routes in Rébuffat and regarding these as the ultimate. The situation in winter is different, with several parties having completed

some excellent routes in the superb conditions that prevailed in Feb./March 1982. Indeed, far from the 'remote isolation of winter climbing', overcrowding was almost a problem: 3 parties climbing the N face of the Grand Charmoz at the same time (2 British) and 2 British teams on the Droites simultaneously. On the Grandes Jorasses a previously unheard of situation occurred when a British party making an ascent of the Walker Spur found parties also engaged on the Shroud, Central Couloir and Croz Spur.

Although not so developed as the French, there have still been some exceptional British summer solo ascents such as the Droites N face, Super Couloir and French route on the Aiguille Sans Nom.

The technical climbing around the 'fringes' of the massifs has also undergone extensive development. The Handegg walls at the eastern end of the Berner Oberland have already been mentioned but there is excellent climbing to be found on the outskirts of the Dauphiné and, in winter, ascents of the frozen waterfalls that emerge from the glaciers in the Argentière and La Tour area have also been recorded.

The time has come, I feel, for a truly full development of the smooth granite slabs below the Montenvers Hotel!