

Skitouring at Fifty

Ann Venables

Should any foolhardy middle-aged female have visions of herself tackling the Haute Route, but feel a trifle unsure of her qualifications for so doing, may I offer the sort of information and reassurance I found very difficult to extract from anyone before I ventured out myself. What I was really looking for was a blow-by-blow account of what it might feel like to be *me* on the HLR. Although I was myself looking for reassurance, I should make it absolutely clear at the outset that I am not suggesting that anyone, with a little jolly along, can do this route. I wanted to be reasonably sure that I was assessing the situation realistically.

I had studied Eric Roberts' guide to the Haute Route fairly assiduously, so I knew what it *ought* to be like, but obviously he couldn't tell me what I personally would find feasible. In the event, 4 or 5 hours climbing or a total of about 1000 vertical metres was as much as I could manage comfortably in a day without long rests. I felt I climbed rather slowly and made heavier weather of it than most of the people (all much younger) that we saw. But, in spite of this, we were not often behind schedule, according to the book. When we did take longer than the young and/or experienced, it was either because of a long uphill slog in the sun such as along the Dix lake and up the valley to the Dix hut, or where the climb was too steep for skins, even with harscheisen. This meant taking off the skins—sometimes deciding to do so too late which involved a delicate balancing act on an already steep slope. Then, if we were lucky, we could walk straight up the slope in the steps of previous climbers. When less lucky, it was a case of floundering knee-deep in soft snow, for instance on a south slope at midday such as the last bit before the Fenêtre de Saleina coming from the Col de Chardonnet; or of kicking steps in unyielding hard snow on what *felt* like a very steep slope, such as the last slope before the Col de Mont Brulé coming from the Haut Glacier d'Arolla. Carrying a load must also have affected my speed and agility. I have frequently skied with a small pack, but never before with equipment for a week. I should have found the going far harder, especially downhill, if I had carried my fair share. As it was, I never carried more than 7-10kg. My husband (2 years older than I) carried more, apparently without difficulty, and Stephen carried a good deal more still.

The only downhill sections which caused any trouble were the Fenêtre du Chamois and a steep slope immediately above the Vignettes hut, coming from the Dix. The difficulty or otherwise of these, and indeed



24 Ski-tourers on the Col de l'Évêque. In the background, the Dent Blanche, Bouquetins and the Tête Blanche

Photo: Steven Venables

any other sections along the route, depends to a large extent on the snow conditions. When comforting soft snow covers a steep slope, rather than ice or hard snow, it is much less daunting, particularly if one has no crampons, which neither my husband nor I had. In April 1981 there was poor snow cover, so that the Fenêtre du Chamois, which is very steep at the best of times, had only a thin cover of very hard snow in which it was laborious, slow work to kick steps—it is too steep to ski down. Though Stephen, on crampons, bounded up and down this slope, we were only too thankful to be firmly fixed to a rope, on this monster of a 'vertical' slope. We ourselves only had 15m of rope which would have made our progress down the 100 odd metres we wished to be roped on, pretty slow. Fortunately, we met an army party of 5 who allowed us to rope up with them on their two 45m lengths. Progress was still slow as there were now 8 people to get down the monster; and after the steepest part there was the delicate business of trying to put on one's skis on what still *felt* like a vertical slope, to me at least. My noble son, with the minimum of cursing, helped me retain a reasonably dignified position on the mountain and also to put on my skis. I then had to be persuaded that the rest of the slope was no steeper than many others I had skied on—a fact I verified for myself once I had steeled myself to get moving. The lesson learnt from this little episode was that progress would be much easier, given certain conditions, if one had crampons and a longer rope. This would of course mean carrying extra weight, but only the small extra of crampons provided the guide carried the rope. My second bad patch, a steep slope immediately in front of the Vignettes Hut, can in fact be avoided altogether by contouring round its side, which is the official way. We had followed one or two others onto the steep part since this was the route Stephen had taken in 1978 when there was much better snow cover. Too late we realised it was virtually sheet ice. We could have climbed back up to go round the other way, but thought we could get down using harscheisen. We probably could have done, but the operation was brought to a standstill by me losing my nerve. This was easy—all I had to do was to imagine what it would feel like to lose my balance (since the harscheisen weren't gripping firmly) and hurtle from top to bottom, as it was far too icy to be able to stop once launched, whether on one's feet or on one's behind. So, off came the harscheisen—an exceedingly delicate operation on the ice—helped by an irritated but resigned son. It was now suggested that we should ski down with the help of my iceaxe, since I refused to go down any other feasible and that I had frequently skied on equally steep slopes, but I also knew that I was frightened of ice and would muffle a turn out of sheer nerves. So, while brave husband (of similar skiing standard to mine) skied to the bottom and sat smugly waiting for me, Stephen had no option but to help me off with my skis and cut steps for me to climb down with the help of my iceaxe, since I refused to go down any other way. Had I been younger, I like to think I should have had the courage



25 Ann Venables in the Val D'Arpette. Behind her, les Écondies

Photo: Steven Venables

to tackle the ice on skis, since it *was* within my technical ability. The only lesson learnt from this is to make sure you have faith in your guide and that he can and will help you out of difficulties and—very important—that he is on hand to do so, not miles ahead or behind.

Having set the scene, so to speak, here is a brief description of the route as it appeared to *me*. We went from Argentières to Champex and then took the 'Little HLR' from Verbier to Zermatt. After 1¾ hours queuing at Argentières we got up the 2-stage Grands Montets Cable car and skied down easy slopes to the Argentières Glacier. It was hot, sticky work as it was a sunny afternoon and the snow was like porridge. This was followed by an easy but even hotter 90 minute climb to the Argentières hut, the only steep bit being the last few metres to reach the eminence on which the hut is perched. Come 6 o'clock the next morning, what I had forgotten was that the sticky last few metres of steep scrambling up to the hut would be a sheet of ice in the early morning—not a confidence-inducing start, but at least it was very short. After a pleasant but all too brief trundle along the glacier we joined the Chardonnet Glacier, which we started to climb from the 2600m level. The slope became increasingly steep and, at times, icy, so there was a certain amount of puffing and groaning; but the Col at 3323m was reached without too much effort, carrying our skis for the last bit as it was too steep to climb easily on skins. The descent down the 45° slope on the other side of the Col to the Saleina Glacier would have been easier with crampons, but the snow was soft enough to kick steps reasonably easily, and we were roped. After another of those all too short runs, this time down the Saleina glacier, there was a steep climb on foot to the Fenêtre de Saleina. It was arduous because it is a south-facing slope and by now it was the middle of a sunny hot day, so that we sank up to our thighs at each step. However, the vast expanse of the Trient glacier to ski down on the far side of the Fenêtre was reward enough. We decided not to stop at the Trient Hut as this would mean facing our next section, the steep Fenêtre du Chamois, frozen solid in the morning. So, on down the glacier until a shoulder is reached where one has to decide whether to carry on down the glacier and icefall or traverse a steep slope to the Fenêtre du Chamois. The icefall route was clearly not for me, particularly as I had a pack and there was poor snow cover. On the other hand, I didn't like the look of the traverse either, as the slope looked very steep and icy. I didn't have the nerve to ski across, and to walk across without crampons on our rather short rope would have been a slow business. While deliberating on what would be best, an army group appeared with lots of rope and they offered us a 'share-in-the-proceedings', so to speak. There were now 8 of us so everything took rather a long time, but for me, the added security made all the difference. Of course I walked across the steep traverse with ease, but the fact that I was on a rope gave me the courage to do it. At the Fenêtre du Chamois, one look over the top was enough to convince me that I



Photo: Steven Venables

would only go down it *very* securely roped—a descent which I have already described. The long run down the Arpette valley was pleasant and easy but would have been more fun with more snow.

This had been a long day for our first full one—about 12 hours, but I didn't feel unreasonably tired and so was already reassured on the question of stamina, and for that matter on the question of technique and 'nerve'. I felt that all three had been put to the test that day and that I had come out of it more or less winning, and certainly ready to face anything that Verbier-to-Zermatt could produce. This, of course, is not the Classic HLR by the Grand Combin. When I read that something '... presents no particular problems for the competent ski mountaineer', such as Eric Roberts describing the climb from the Valsory Hut to the Plateau du Couloir, I know that it is probably not for me. The Verbier variant is easier, and gives a splendid route without the same technical difficulties. From the Montfort hut above Verbier, many parties go in one day to the Dix hut. This would involve more climbing than I thought I could comfortably manage in one day, so we split this stage by spending a night at the Prafleuri hut. This makes for an easy first stage from the Montfort to the Prafleuri hut. An easy, though quite long, climb took us to the Col de la Chaux. After a short run, there was another easy climb to the foot of the Col de Momin. At this point comes the parting of the ways and this was where I wished I was fitter, younger, more 'in-training' or something, as I should have loved to climb the Rosablanche but felt I hadn't enough energy. Instead we headed across the more or less level Grand Désert Glacier finishing with a beautiful and deserted run down to the hut. The next stage, to the Dix hut, was much more demanding in terms of energy. After a very short climb, comes the only downhill part of the day. Once down at the Dix lake, it is uphill all the way. It felt strange to have *finished* skiing (downhill I mean) by 7.30 in the morning. The walk along the Dix lake seemed endless but easy; above the Pas de Chat at the lake's south end the walk seemed equally endless, but now it was a real climb—increasingly hot and increasingly tiring. But it was a particularly beautiful stretch and eventually even the horrid little eminence upon which the Dix, like nearly all huts, is perched was surmounted. Next day the climb up from the Dix hut to the saddle below the Pigne d'Arolla was quite a tough 4 hours, but made easier by cooler weather. We didn't go to the summit of the Pigne as the weather was breaking and we had been up it in the summer. The run down to the Vignettes hut from the saddle below the Pigne was pure pleasure until we realised just how hard and icy was the steep direct route we had chosen as the last bit before reaching the hut. The descent of this slope I have also described as 'my second bad patch'. This was the only time on the whole journey I rather lost my nerve and went down unduly cautiously even when I was near the bottom, to encouraging shouts of 'are we going to be here all day?' and 'you couldn't hurt yourself if you tried'. But I felt my lack of True

British Grit had been vindicated when, later in the day, I saw two people who fell at the top, hurtle all the way to the bottom. Surprisingly, they were uninjured. Anyway, next time, if there is one, it is definitely the back way for me.

The grand finale of this route (when not going on to Saas Fee) is the last day—from the Vignettes hut to Zermatt. It is, as the Book says ‘by far the longest stage in distance, . . . with a considerable amount of downhill skiing’. The scenery is outstanding all the way and we were able to appreciate it to the full as we had clear sunny weather. There are three passes to be traversed with a total of about 1000m climbing—my limit for a reasonable day. The day started with a brief ski down to a large glacier plateau across which we walked before starting the straightforward climb to the Col de l’Évêque. Route finding could present problems here to an inexperienced leader in bad visibility as there is another col in almost the same direction. There was a glorious run down in perfect snow to the Upper Arolla glacier, and then another gentle walk towards the Col du Mont Brulé; another place where navigation could be tricky in bad weather. There was a brief interlude where life was distinctly less easy, on the last 100m, which was very steep, up to the col. Having finally decided it was too steep for skins, I put my skis on my pack and started kicking steps very carefully, straight up the slope, slightly concerned about overbalancing. I felt more than a little silly about my exaggerated caution when a party of quite young boys came charging up, barely kicking steps and rapidly overtaking me. The run down to the basin of the Upper Tsa de Tsan glacier seemed almost to be over before it had started and we were on our final climb up to the Col de Valpelline. Beautiful though it was, I found this stretch long and tiring, mainly because I was so hot and there wasn’t a breath of wind. As first the Dent d’Hérens and then the Matterhorn hove in sight, I forgot my aches and pains and got quite excited at the realisation that we would soon have achieved our goal, largely due to our incredible luck with the weather. In spite of the knowledge that thousands of others had arrived at this Col before me on their passage of the HLR, it was hard not to have a feeling almost of exultation just from standing on such a spot, surrounded by the sort of scenery one can only describe in clichés. The run down to Zermatt was uneventful and a marvellously long reward for all our climbing. There were parts of both the Stockji and Tiefmatten glaciers where one would have to be very careful of crevasses in poor visibility, but in the conditions we had, they could always be seen from some distance away. Below Staffelalp the snow gradually ran out and we had a longish walk down to the village itself, and through it to the Bahnhof, by which time feet and shoulders were adequately sore.

This was indeed a modest achievement for many, but for me a more than satisfying experience. I waited many years to do the HLR but somehow I shall find time and opportunity for another tour before too long.