Thunderstorms and Fireworks: A Bicentenary Experience

(An account of two days at Chamonix)

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7 August 1986: It is half past midnight, more than five hours before dawn, on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the first ascent of Mont Blanc.

I have been asleep for about three hours in a snow-hole bivvy in a cornice above the Aiguille du Goûter. At an altitude of 4000m, the previous evening had offered a spectacularly peaceful sunset above the clouds. A party each of Yugoslavs, Norwegians, Germans and ourselves came together with shared tea and conversation before the night's approaching freeze. Five hours had now passed of the morning of the eve: my three companions and I stood alone in the darkness on the highest point in Europe, awaiting the rising dawn over Italy.

Each with his own thoughts, we relished these moments in frozen silence, while the stove struggled to produce a 'brew'.

One could sense the blackness fading to a deep prussian blue, then quite suddenly a brilliant light burst over peaks and clouds below: we were witnessing dawn from the summit of Mont Blanc.

Others were now arriving to share the experience. We four descended past toiling teams while the rising sun behind cast an enormous mountain shadow in stark outline over the whole world before us.

The 'ultimate fell-walk' it had been, I considered, looking up at the big white peak that afternoon, while lounging in the sun, now overhead, back at the Chamonix camp-site. Time now to plan the bicentenary day itself (well away from the slopes of Mont Blanc). A last 'steady' rock-climb was required to wrap up the end of the holiday.

Two of us packed sacks for the *Voie des Français*, the classic 400m TDsup route up the S face of the Aiguille du Pouce.

8 August 1986: The Aiguilles Rouges lie, like the N fells of the Lake District, separated from the main massif, and the approach to the 'Pouce' is like entering 'Back o' Skiddaw' country – the isolation is all the more noticeable after leaving the crowds behind.

Despite another early start, by the time our rock-boots stepped anxiously across the threatening bergschrund it was already late morning. Just 24 hours before, we had been up and almost down the hill of that day. And so to the Pouce: I lead up a challenging first pitch away from the snow, cold in every sense: belayed, and my companion, Caval, followed. This was his third visit to the climb, after having been rained off on two previous attempts. Caval linked a couple of unspectacular pitches – were we off route already? I forced an overhanging block, traversed right and pulled round into the great central


SOUTH FACE
AIGUILLE DU POUCE
2,874 m.
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
start
Voie des Français
5○ = stances taken.
L.J.G.P. '87

dihedral. This was it! Caval romped up another full rope-length and the climb opened out into the full vastness of the face.

I lead another double pitch and we felt certainly committed. Looking up, however, further progress seemed completely unobtainable, barred by overlaps that defied gravity in remaining attached to the mountain. Caval led up the unhopeful crack to belay 15m underneath the incredible overhangs.

I left the stance, too encompassed in the climb to notice the change in the weather. Cav shivered in the shade. Leading up to the roof I marvelled at the nerve and route-finding ability of the original ascensionists in 1960. At one point, where it seemed that wings would be required to complete the route, a finger-crack led away horizontally across an otherwise blank face. Several metres away was the first old rusty peg, followed by another. The moves were stupendous – summing up the whole reasoning for why I climb: finding a passage to an altered state of consciousness. This was active meditation in the extreme. I had left my office desk of five days a week to confront reality; to address questions of life and death, of faith and trust in oneself, in another, in mankind. The climb was itself a route, a way (up the mountain); but to climb thus is, in itself, the other 'way' – that inner experience often missing in Western (so-called) 'civilization'.

I clipped a running belay into one of the pegs and moved across to a break in the defences of the overlaps. Caval followed across, exclaiming, and led through, up, over, and out of sight. I joined him and approached the second overlap. At this point it began to rain and then immediately to hail, hard. With the crux-pitches below us we had estimated a further 150m of climbing to the end of the difficulties. Our difficulties, however, were just beginning. The face sloped back from vertical above the second overlap, and the hail-stones 'ping-ponged' down the slabs. Tiny footholds were lost and fingers began to go numb. After a few teetering pitches, Caval escaped up an awkward chimney, and above I found a passage of hail-covered grassy ledges. The storm increased, and looking up was impossible; the hail blinded, the rain soaked, sponged into one's inside. Rivulets torrented down the broken slopes up which I dragged the rope. Another lead through, and then I was in a mist-concealed 'non-place'. I dived down off the summit rocks as a thunderbolt clashed, and at the same time I was illuminated in lightning with all my ironmongery. The rocks buzzed; I had become the centre-point of nature's anniversary firework display. There was nowhere to go until Caval reached my hiding place, coiling the sodden ropes. We exchanged unspoken emotions, decided on the route, and began down.

It was very late afternoon and the storm had raged while we had been down-climbing, abseiling, re-ascending, re-routing, slipping, gripping and recovering for four hours down an invisible mile of ridge. With thankfulness at being off the Pouce, we stumbled out on to the col on which we had left my sack. It was gone, together with our spare clothing, anoraks, food and light. The situation was becoming serious. Soaked through, shivering uncontrollably, we had little mist-laden daylight left in which to re-ascend the main chain of the 'Rouges' and to descend beyond to the Chamonix valley. The storm had now ceased, leaving a strange empty silence. We hurried up to the main ridge and clattered down scree out of the mist and on to snow below in the last light.



Lewis Preston leading up under the 'Great Roof' pitch, between belay points 7 and 8, see route diagram.

Across the valley huts blazed anniversary lights. Then, spectacularly, the original route up Mont Blanc became a shining trail of torches, up from Chamonix into the mist at mid-height. We had to descend the distance we could see illuminated, without torch, to the valley. For the next half-hour our way was

sporadically lit by 'star bursting' and 'falling lantern' fireworks kindly provided by the Chamonix townsfolk celebrating their 200 years of history.

Afterwards we were gripped by darkness and fatigue in the lower forests that cut out even the street-lights, still 1000m below. In the small hours we stumbled out on to level ground and located the car. Now, within a few flat miles of camp and bed, we were finally thwarted. Chamonix was a madhouse of motorists; thousands of them were trying to leave after the evening's festivities. We were in a jam and we could not climb out of it; we pulled off the road and fell asleep where we were.