# AREA NOTES

COMPILED BY A V SAUNDERS

## The Alps 1990

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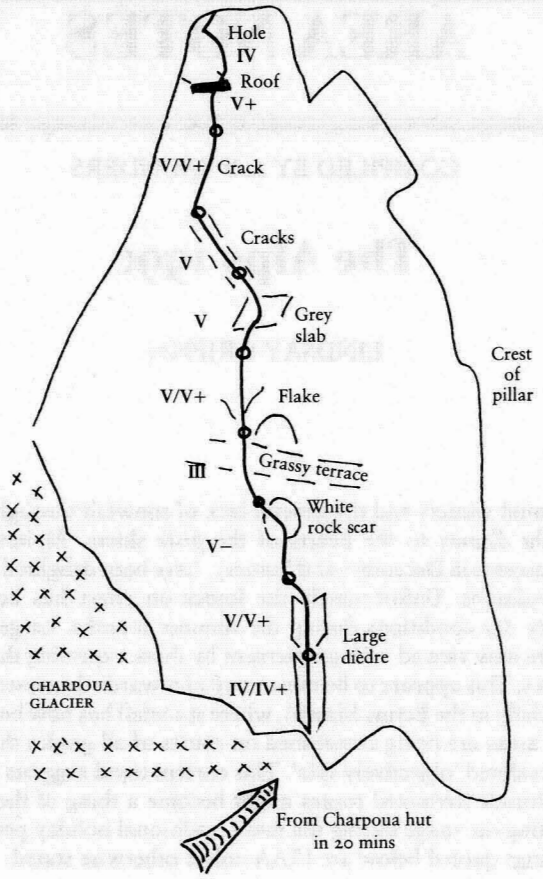
The recent mild winters and the general lack of snowfall throughout the Alps have brought dismay to the hearts of the *piste* skiers. Alpinists, however, attempting ascents in December and January, have been delighted by the quasi-summer conditions. Unfortunately the knock-on effect has been to create exceptionally dry conditions during the summer months. Large expanses of bare rock are now viewed with amazement by those expecting the usual snow and ice slopes. This appears to be most marked towards the western end of the chain (especially in the Ecrins Massif), where stonefall has now become serious and danger areas are being established on routes of all grades that were until recently considered 'objectively safe'. This current trend suggests that many of the lower-altitude ice/mixed routes might become a thing of the past for the alpinist visiting the range during the more traditional holiday periods.

Gradings quoted below are UIAA unless otherwise stated.

### Mont Blanc

Additions to the repertoire of 'Short Rock-climbs' are countless. Route diagrams of the fine granite towers, such as the Trident du Tacul or Pt 3014m on the Evêque above the Charpoua, show a myriad of dotted lines. Included is a Topo showing a very worthwhile and highly recommended outing at a reasonable standard on the excellent granite of Pt 3014m. Romain Vogler has again played a prominent role in this type of development and has also created a fine new line on the Pt de L'Androsace (300m French 6c). The latter lies above the glacial basin of Combe Maudit which is still wonderfully unfrequented.

In 1989 the Swiss climber P Steulet freed the Darbelley route on the N face of the Petit Clocher du Portalet to give the massif's first-ever French 8a. This year T Renault and A Ghersen produced the second when they climbed the short yet vicious front face of the second gendarme on the Cosmique arête (Aiguille du Midi) to give 'Digital Crack'.




## L'EVÊQUE WEST FACE
## Pt 3014m
## 'MONSEIGNEUR LEFEBVRE' TD – 300m V+
### P AND G BORNET, 28 July 1988 Rappel Descent

On the Brouillard face of Mont Blanc, both the Red and Right-hand pillars have received additions from the ever-productive Piola–Anker team, with the crux moves going at a reasonable (for these days!) VI+/VII–. The Garbarrou–Long on the Red Pillar is rapidly becoming a modern classic. On one occasion three teams were seen to be simultaneously engaged on the route and one of these, rappelling from the summit of the pillar, made the round trip from the Monzino hut on the same day! It is reported that all the necessary pegs are now in place on the big aid pitch. If this is the case, the difficulty associated with this time-consuming section has been significantly reduced.

A British team, attempting to repeat the Grassi route Etica Bisbetica on the Right-hand pillar, was stopped low down by stonefall which appeared to originate from the depression left of the true crest of the upper pillar. In the lower section the correct line was difficult to locate but sported at least one double bolt belay 'in an area with an embarrassment of good cracks'. The original Bonington route was thought to give a safer and probably better line. This year, approaches to pillars could be made from the Eccles by rappelling the monster rimaye from an *in situ* stake.

Two significant events occurred on the Central Pillar of Frêney: the first winter ascent of the Jori Bardill route by R Escoffier and Ghersen on 9 January 1990 and, during the summer, the first recorded free ascent of the original route. The latter was a well-known problem that, perhaps surprisingly, had not been solved earlier. The crux, (not surprisingly) the chimney pitch through the roof above the Chandelle, was given a French 7a+ grading by Alexis Long.

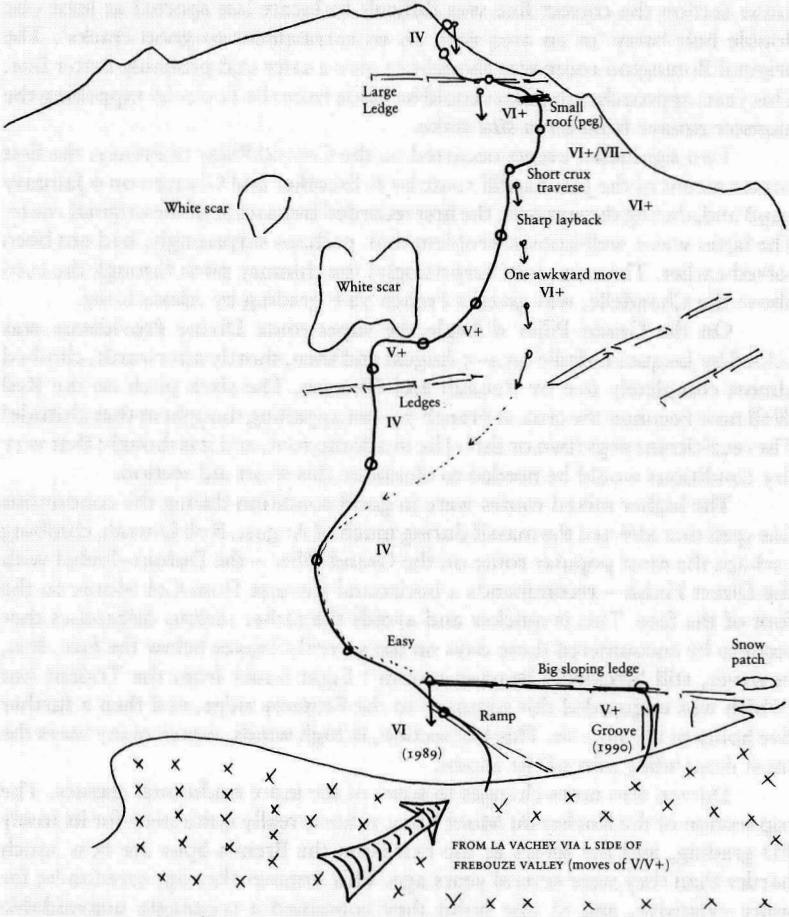
On the Grand Pilier d'Angle the super-route Divine Providence was soloed by Jacques Lafaille on 4–5 August and then, shortly afterwards, climbed almost completely free by Renault and Ghersen. The sixth pitch on the Red Wall now becomes the crux at French 7c – an appalling thought at that altitude! The recalcitrant pegs (two or three) lie in a damp roof, and it is thought that very dry conditions would be needed to eliminate this short aid section.

The higher mixed routes were in good condition during the continuous fine spell that affected the massif during much of August. Rob Durran, climbing perhaps the most popular route on the Grand Pilier – the Dufour–Frehel with the Direct Finish – recommends a horizontal traverse from Col Moore to the foot of the face. This is quicker and avoids the rather serious difficulties that seem to be encountered these days on the several rimayes below the face. It is, however, still 'decidedly heart-in-mouth'! Eight hours from the Trident hut (which was unguarded this summer) to the Peuterey ridge, and then a further five hours to the summit. This last section, in high winds, was in many ways the most demanding part of the ascent.

Durran also notes changes to some of the more traditional classics. The top section of the Rocher du Mont Blanc route is really quite steep for its lowly PD grading, and the seracs at the exit from the Brenva Spur are now much harder than they were several years ago. This summer they appeared to be far more extensive, and at one point they contained a seemingly unavoidable overhanging wall – albeit with a good landing!

Gabarrou and Grassi still continue to discover those ephemeral ribbons of ice that occur during the spring. On Mont Maudit the last unclimbed couloir on the 'Three Gendarmes' fell to Gabarrou, Gourdini and Passino on 16 May. This is the steep narrow runnel between the Central and Left pillars. It is 400m and took 11 hours which is a long time for Gabarrou; so the climb must be hard! The August/September edition of *Vertical* gives a good overview of the range with full descriptions of many of Gabarrou's new gully lines throughout recent years.

The Bonatti route to the summit of Pt Whymper on the N face of the Grandes Jorasses received its third ascent with a fine solo effort by S Svetičič. This, together with his winter ascent of the Eiger, will continue to enhance the considerable reputation of Eastern Block mountaineers.




AIG DE L'EVÊQUE Pt 3019m
E FACE 'CRESSWELL ROUTE' TD VI+/VII- c500m
T PENNING AND A TIERNEY, 24 July 1990 Rappel Descent

Two significant events have taken place on the W face of the Petites Jorasses. On 15 January Piola and H Bouvard made the first winter ascent of the Czech 1976 route. In the summer Piola and Sprüngli created 'Anouk'. This is a 21-pitch route with unavoidable moves of VI. The climbing is sustained at VI+ to VII−, with a small roof of VII+. What is so special about this ED(1) line? The answer lies in the fact that the route is protected by 108 *in situ* bolts! Recently many top Swiss climbers have harshly criticized their countryman who, with this offering, has created the first '100-bolt' route in the massif. However, it is a reflection on the current popularity of 'safe' climbing that the route has already been repeated 25 times. The rappel anchors, down the line of ascent, are reported to be excellent!

Now into a quieter corner of the range. In 1989 Tony Penning and Pete Cresswell were climbing unroped up the first section of a proposed new line on the E face of the Aiguille de l'Evêque above the Frebouze glacier basin when, tragically, Cresswell fell to his death. Penning returned with Andy Tierney in 1990 and on 24 July climbed the face, finishing at Pt 3019m to the east of the main summit. The approach to the area beneath the face (from La Vachey via the L side of the valley below the glacier) is quite serious as it involves a 50m runout at around V/V+ beneath some hanging seracs. It is almost certain that the Aiguille has never been approached from this side before and that this is the first route on this vast face. There is some good climbing on sound granite and a Topo is included.

Lastly, let's try something different! Descents on a surf-ski have now been made of the N faces of the Plan, Pain de Sucre, Midi (Mallory route) and the Jager couloir on Mont Blanc du Tacul. The French skiers Govy and Ruby have been the main activists.

## Bernese Oberland

A remarkable *enchainement* was achieved by Michel Worth on 16 September 1989 when he completed, solo, the N faces of the Mittaghorn (700m TD+), Grosshorn (1200m TD+) and Lauterbrunnen Breithorn (1050m ED) in a total of 17 hours. Better still, he descended from each summit by the rather old-fashioned means of down-climbing the easier northern flanks of the peaks that lie between the routes. Quite a contrast to the usual parapentes, hang-gliders, helicopters etc that often accompany these exploits nowadays.

On the Eiger, S Svetičič made the first winter solo ascent of the Harlin route.

## Bregaglia/Bernina

Snow conditions on the classic routes in the Bernina remained very good until late in the season, but the weather seemed rather less predictable here than in the Western Alps. Notable omissions in the Bregaglia included the snow-patches usually present on the approach to the NE face of the Badile from the N ridge

and the more famous one on the Cassin route itself. There was very little evidence of the snow dome on the summit of the Cengalo by the end of August. With current glacial recession this area has a definite sub-alpine feel and any ice climbing has become rather impractical after mid-June.

New bolt-protected routes are being worked out on steep slabs of the Spazzacaldeira, and the Albigna valley is by far the most popular in the range. Excellent all-free climbs that have much attention from local climbers but are largely unknown to visiting British alpinists are: The Kasper Pillar on the Frachiccio (VII); Leni route (VI/VI+), Felici (VI) and Nigg direct (VI−) on the Spazza. Here the famous Fiamma still gives a steady pitch at V, while the Dente has come under the scrutiny of the sports climber and gives a well-bolted final pitch at VI+. The superb granite of the Bio Pillar is very popular and, in keeping with exploration in the Mont Blanc range, two routes were equipped and climbed this summer on the slabs below the Albigna hut.

On the south side of the range, the Vinci route on the Cengalo (VI+) has impressed many parties. Certain authorities have coined that wonderful expression 'one of the best rock climbs of its type in the Alps'. Outside of the Mello, climbs in these southern valleys seem little frequented by non-Italian alpinists. The range has still not received the thorough grooming that has been applied to, for example, the Chamonix Aiguilles, and much scope remains.

## Dolomites

A significant achievement on the S face of the Marmolada was an ascent of the Koller–Sustr route, 'The Fish' by Roger Everett and Mick Harris, 24–26 July 1990. Although it has been climbed completely free (VIII+/IX−: Mariacher 1987, see *Mountain* 132), most parties will be forced to use a fair amount of aid, and two good skyhooks are essential. All belays are in place and the route is well equipped with rappel points all the way to the major terrace after pitch 21. However, as the line is neither obvious nor straight, a good memory of the ascent route is required for any retreat. Two to three days should be allowed for a complete ascent but a fast party with minimal gear, capable of climbing British 6b quickly and/or skilled with skyhooks, should be able to reach the terrace and rappel off in one day. The crux is above the whale-shaped niche (The Fish) at 500m. The original description and grading (VII and A1) are pure fantasy. Parties making recent repeat ascents of some of Koller's and other Czech routes in the Bregaglia have also found them badly undergraded. With little *in situ* protection the harder pitches can be very bold. The climbing is continually excellent, mostly on perfect rock and of a difficulty which matches many a bolted crag (but without the bolts!). A revised description now follows but is likely to be at the upper limit of its grade (1000m VII A3 24hr).

### Marmolada South Face

Attraverso il Pesce (The Way through the Fish). ED sup. (Koller, Sustr, 1981)

Start R of an obvious brown water stripe and wire cable which descend from the téléphérique station. Scramble up to the undercut start at a block on the ledge, about 50m right of the brown stripe. (Peg runner in overhang.)

1. 50m. Climb over the bulge (VI+, loose), then go up over a second bulge (VI) to easier ground. Continue direct to sloping ledge and peg belay.
2. 15m. Go easily up left to an easy open groove. Belay below a steep flake crack.
3. 40m. Climb the crack (V+) and continue to a narrow ledge. Move left to a peg belay.
4. 15m. Easily up to the next ledge, then right for a few metres, past a vague pillar, to another peg belay.
5. 45m. Climb the right side of the pillar leftwards (V+) to reach a crack. Follow this (V) to a stance between small roofs.
6. 45m. Zig-zag up to a bulge (IV+), over this on R (V) to a groove leading L and finally back R (IV+) to a stance below a smooth bulging wall on the L.
7. 20m. Climb up, then trend R below the bulging wall (IV) to reach a sloping ledge (a vague terrace which crosses the whole face). Belay on the R.
8. 50m. Step back L, over a bulge (V) and into a long chimney corner which is followed direct to a stance under a bulge (V).
9. 35m. Continue up the corner which bends rightwards (V) (or climb the crack on the R, V+), then traverse delicately R (V+) to a stance under a bulge.
10. 25m. Climb the bulge leftwards (VI−), then the wall above (VI), then trend L to a small stance level with a line of niches on the R.
11. 35m. Continue direct, then trend slightly R to pass a small roof on the R (VI), then up to a peg belay.
12. 35m. Climb a crack and wall (VI−) to an easier groove leading to a bulge. Traverse delicately R 4m (VI−), go over the bulge, then boldly L to a smooth wall. Climb this (VI+) to reach a flake on the R, then traverse L to a belay below bulges.
13. 20m. Climb over the bulge on the L (VI+) to a small ledge. Traverse L across the wall (VII) to a crack. Climb this (A3) to exit over a bulge to another cramped stance. (Friend 1 useful; the difficulty will vary greatly depending on the length of slings in place on the next belay. The second part of this pitch follows a seepage line and will rarely be dry.)
14. 30m. Step left to a short flake. Climb direct up the wall for 4m (VII), then move L to the L hand of two shallow niches. Climb the bold wall above to a peg belay in an amazing position on the L (VI).
15. 45m. Climb the slabby wall on the R of the shallow groove above for 15m to peg and thread runners (VI+). 7m above on the L of the groove is another peg. Reach this by a combination of hard free and aid climbing (A3, skyhook essential). After the peg, trend up and R, then up directly to pegs below a bulge (VI+).

16. 25m. Traverse the wall on the R (A2, skyhooks) to holds leading up and R into the Fish (VI). Continue to the R end of the Fish.

    10–12 hours seems a reasonable time to here for a sac-hauling team; bivouac possible. Abseil escape would be awkward from the Fish, although another route does come up directly. It would be better to retreat after pitch 15, or after pitch 17.

17. 40m. Exit the R side of the niche. Climb the wall direct (VII, bold) to a peg, then make a long unprotected traverse L above the Fish (VI, then easing). When above the L end of the Fish, climb the wall above, past a break, to a hanging stance and peg belays (A3, skyhooks).

18. 45m. Climb the wall above (A2, skyhooks) to easier free climbing up to scoop (VI). Move left (VI) then diagonally up and left for 15m to a peg (A3, skyhooks and awkward nuts. There is another peg horizontally L from the scoop; this is off route.) Now move R across the blank wall (A3, skyhooks) to holds leading to peg belays.

19. 40m. Climb the slabby wall above to a peg (VI–). Tension almost horizontally leftwards for 10m to a crack (A3 and VII, skyhook useful). Climb the crack to a stance on the L (VI).

20. 15m. Traverse back R to the crack, then up to the large roof. Undercut R and pull round to a stance immediately above (VI).

21. 45m. Descend a little, then traverse R to the bottom of a corner. Climb this direct, then over an overhang (AO and V, or VI+) to easier ground and a large terrace and excellent bivouac sites.

    Allow 5–7 hours from the Fish. Abseil escape based on the line of the route is possible from here.

22. 20m. Start 15m R of the bivouac cave. Climb a wall (VI), then move L to the bottom of a corner.

23. 30m. Climb the corner direct over a number of bulges to easier ground (VI).

24. 45m. Climb the slabs above, trending slightly L (III).

25. 45m. Continue in the same line to a stance below steep walls (III).

26. 45m. Climb the overhang on the L to the bottom of a corner line slanting R below steep walls (V+). Continue up the corner (IV).

27. 45m. Follow slabs on the R (III).

28. 30m. Move R on to slabs on the front face, and up to a line of grooves (III).

29. 45m. Climb the grooves and a fine white slab, trending back L to the corner line (IV).

30. 45m. Climb the chimney (IV).

31. 45m. Continue up the chimney to a bay below overhangs (IV).

32. 30m. Climb the overhanging crack on the L (V+) to a stance above.

33. 20m. Continue up the chimney, then move out R to a corner (IV).

34. 30m. Climb the corner for 10m, then swing back L into and up the chimney (IV+).

35. 35m. Continue up the chimney to a stance below where it narrows and overhangs (IV).

36. 40m. Climb the outside of the narrowing (IV+), then easily up broken ground.
37. Continue up, then move L towards a ridge on the L (II).
38. 40m. Go through a hole in the ridge, traverse along a wire cable, then up a short gully to the ridge line (II).
39. 40m. Negotiate rock, metal ladders and the guide rails of the téléphérique housing to reach the glacier (II and AO).

Allow about 6 hours from the terrace, giving about 24 hours climbing time in total. Awkward spacing of the only reasonable bivouac sites means that this may have to be spread over 3 days, especially if afternoon storms threaten.

*Józef Nyka adds:*

The Yugoslav climber Slavko Svetičič completed the first solo ascent of the Harlin route on the N face of the Eiger, in a single 26-hour push starting at midnight on 13/14 January 1990. The crux section in the lower part is above the Eigerwand station (VI+, A2). The second crux, 200m high, is below the Spider. The pitches above the Spider involved strenuous hard ice climbing of 70 and 80°.

On 13 and 14 January 1990 the 'classic' Heckmair route was climbed by Marija Frantar from Yugoslavia, accompanied by Dare Juhant.

On 11 October 1990 Catherine Destivelle completed the first female solo of the Bonatti Pillar (SW buttress) on the Petit Dru (3733m). She started the climb at 11.30am and reached the summit at 3.50pm. The ascent was made free and without protection, except for the 40m Fissure des Autrichiens, where rope and pitons were used. The first free ascent of the Bonatti Pillar was made in 1982 by Marco Pedrini and Silvio Vicari with a 7a variant to the right of the Austrian Crack.

*Lindsay Griffin would welcome further information and new route descriptions for publication in these pages and the forthcoming guidebook to the Bernina/Bregaglia at: 2 Top Sling, Tregarth, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 4RL.*