
ALISON HARGREAVES

The Big Six

(Plates 7-11 and back cover)

At the end of March 1993, I set off with my husband and two children, Tom aged five and Kate aged two, on a journey south to attempt the Big Six. I wanted to climb solo a route on each of the classic six north faces of the Alps, as first described by Gaston Rébuffat in *Starlight and Storm*: the Piz Badile, the Cima Grande, the Dru, the Eiger, the Grandes Jorasses and the Matterhorn.

I had previously climbed, with partners, the 1938 route on the Eiger, the Schmid route on the Matterhorn, and the Shroud and Croz Spur on the Grandes Jorasses. I had never before been on the Dru and had not even seen the Piz Badile or the Cima Grande. I had hoped to try and do at least one of the six in late winter or early spring after a couple of weeks getting fit but, as we arrived, the settled unseasonal winter weather changed into a very unsettled snowy spring and reluctantly we were forced to move south. Chamonix and its mountains were miserable and awash, the Ecrins was snowbound, as were the Alpes Maritimes. So Easter saw us, together with hundreds of other good weather seekers, at the picturesque Mediterranean coastal town of Cassis, for the sun, sea and rock of Les Calanques.

The weather was fair and the rock great, and I suppressed my thirst for the mountains by making long coastal approaches to brilliant spacey sea arêtes and remote hikes into the wild mountainous valleys for high brilliant routes. As my fitness and confidence increased, the weather once more took a change for the worse. Exchanging shorts and T-shirts for Gore-Tex and Polartec, I managed to snatch a few more climbs between the storms before we decided it was time to move on. It was still too early for the huge mountainous dump of snow to have settled down on the Ecrins but we decided to spend a couple of weeks at Casset in this lower Alpine area so that I could continue to maintain a level of fitness and at the same time collect some new Alpine routes.

By now the weather was starting to warm up, the wind had changed and we moved around to Ailefroide. Wild camping became a delight. Our arrival coincided with the awakening of the marmots after their winter hibernation, there was still plenty of winter's fallen wood to burn and the children experienced their first open camp fires. I was able to complete our visit with a brisk trip up the Barre des Ecrins. With plenty of rock metreage under my belt and some great Alpine routes in wintry conditions, we decided it was time to return to Chamonix where by now surely the weather must be settling down.

But no. A recent fall of snow had put another layer on the glaciers, so we drove to Zermatt to see if things were any better there. The North Face of the Matterhorn was still in horrible condition and within 24 hours we had chugged our way back to Chamonix again! Having found a wholesome yet cheap campsite in Les Bois, we made ourselves at home once more and I kept up a daily check on the *meteo*.

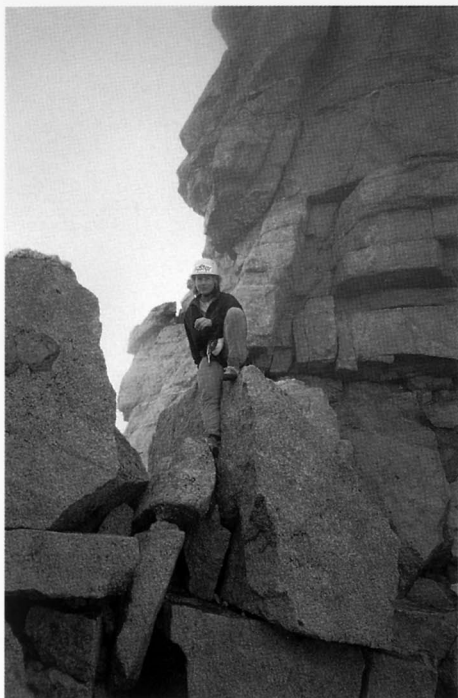
The Grandes Jorasses

At last there was a break in the weather – two warm sunny days were forecast before stormy patterns would move in again. I had my chance. I had kept fit with runs up to Montenvers and in the Aiguilles Rouges and now it was time to put it all to good use. In recent summers the steep lower ice pitches on the Shroud on the Grandes Jorasses have become thin and sometimes non-existent. 'Pray God for an ice age' was an exasperated New Zealander's entry in the Leschaux hut route book! One more run to Montenvers and a study through my binoculars – the Shroud appeared to be complete – and by late morning on 16 June I was steaming up through the woods towards Montenvers. I left my trainers under a boulder and, after descending the ladders, headed up the Mer de Glace.

By mid-afternoon I was happily settled in the Leschaux hut. The great face of the Grandes Jorasses looked fine and I was happy, but soon my equilibrium was to be disturbed and the peace shattered as four more people arrived. Two were just travelling the huts and generously handed out chocolate and cigarettes. The other two were young French guides also heading for the Shroud. Now I had a dilemma. Should I let them go first and have them above me knocking snow/ice onto me, or should I go first, dangerously up the glacier in the dark, to beat their early start and then have them biting at my heels ... I decided to let them go first and was happy to lie in bed awhile after they had gone.

The early hours found me plodding monotonously up through deep snow. Once at the base of the Walker Spur, a move left and a last pull up the deep snow cone to the base of the gully and I was at the beginning of the route and it was time to start enjoying myself. The bergschrund was filled in well and I had no problem, cautiously crossing it and then up. The ice was good, I was feeling good, the movement started to flow and I moved up easily. As the gully narrowed the ice started to thin out, and as the buttress on the right gradually moved in I crept leftwards and diagonally upwards, teetering on little bits of ice left clinging to the rock between the exposed bits. This was climbing at its best. I worked out each placement, side-stepping and working my way up. Where there was ice it was generally good and it was just a matter of not thrashing it to death but working precisely from one dot of ice to the next.

The steep bit was over, the icefield laid back and I caught sight of two figures working their way up. But the cloud was coming down, I could no longer see the ridge, and just kept climbing continuously in the same direction, up and left, cursing the monotony of the slope. Conditions had deteriorated, both under foot and above, and there was a thick layer of

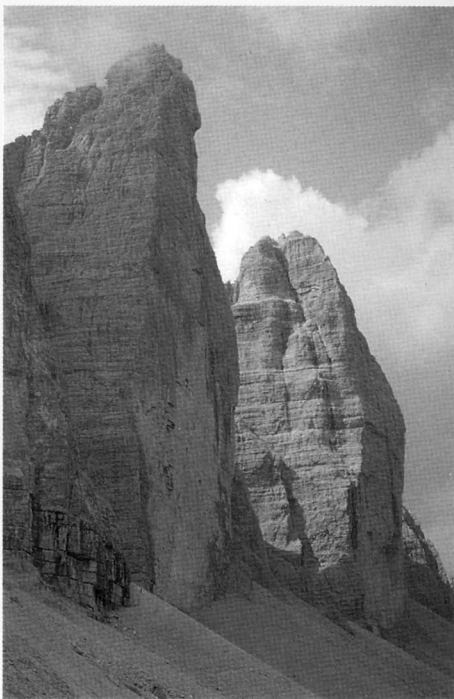


Above

10. Alison in the *niche* on the Dru after soloing the Allain route on 17.8.93. (p16)

Right

11. The N faces of the Tre Cime de Laverado. Alison soloed the N face of the Cime Grande on 24.8.93. (Dave Ballard) (p16)



fresh powdery snow on top of the hard old ice. Kicking hard, I was able to get a bite on my front points, but no relief for the calves. The wind had also decided to join in, with constant icy blasts. As the guides fought their way out of the final exit gully to the ridge, I sank my head into my jacket and waited for a clear run, then climbed the powdery rocks to join them. They were muttering unhappily about their original plan of continuing up the Hironnelles ridge and skiing back to Italy for a pasta supper. I was committed to descending the ridge and so returning to the Leschaux. Moments later they joined me. It was 10pm as I walked into the campsite of Les Bois, very weary, and I spent the next couple of days with the family in a peaceful daze.

The Matterhorn

Zermatt next. We decided to take as much food and kit as we could carry and base ourselves at the Zermatt campsite for as long as we needed. Another look at the face, and even though the weather didn't help, conditions on the face were definitely improving. On 29 June I made the familiar approach from the Hörnli hut. The condition of the icefield had slightly deteriorated but the ramp was now clear of wet or powdery snow, so it looked as if it should go. My problem was how to reach it. A way I had previously spotted – right and then back left – now looked desperate, but the direct line to the bottom of the ramp appeared no better. At least it was upward, so I carried on. The climbing was tricky and became more technical, a thin veneer of ice overlying chossy rock and slabs. I was grateful for my size and weight and tackled my way on up, knowing that a wrong hit would leave nothing to bite into.

As I worked to the top of the ramp I felt happier; the harder climbing should be coming to a close and I would soon be able to motor. But this was not to be. On the upper slopes fresh snow still lay in over-plentiful supply and, although the angle eased, the climbing didn't. I was tired, mentally and physically. I was now in the cloud with still a long way to go ... at last the summit. I wanted to feel relieved, but there was thunder rumbling around and I could pick out flashes of lightning rolling in from Italy, and still I had to get down. I glanced at my watch and wondered about the time: 5½ hours I had been on the face, all that time in deep concentration. It was longer than I had hoped for, but the conditions had been much more awkward and time-consuming than I had anticipated.

The Eiger

A couple of days' rest and we drove to Grindelwald. Just to be awkward the weather improved, but the face was plastered with snow and ice – lots of it. Why not use such conditions and instead of retracing my previous success on the 1938 route go for a route up the Lauper side of the North Face? There was easily enough snow there and all it needed was a good freeze.

I decided to give it time and kept fit by running up hills and doing other routes. Rain now, and snow down to 1500m. The holidaymakers were



7. Alison Hargreaves soloed the Croz Spur of the Grandes Jorasses on 10 November 1993; she had already soloed the Big Six north faces during June-August. (*Dave Sharrock*) (p16)

upset, the campsite awash, and for nearly two weeks we kept up our dampened spirits with family walks and long mountain runs. As families came and went, so did the rain showers.

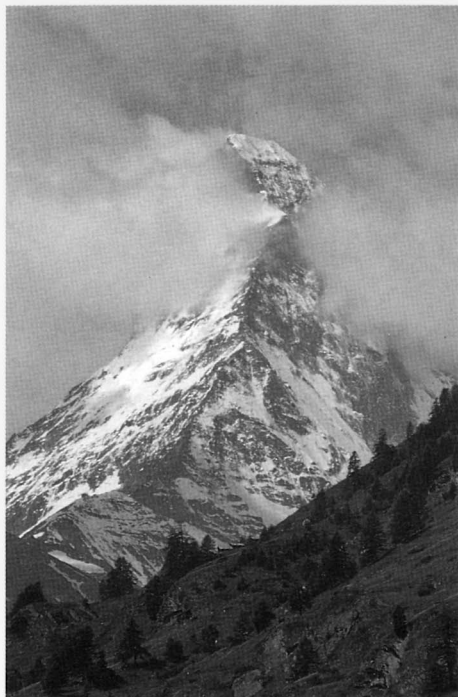
On 22 July we checked at the weather station and there was a storm forecast; then, in a familiar pattern, it would go cold for a day, and this time might even stay cold for a further day, before it warmed up and another storm moved in. The nights of lightning had been impressive, but so too was the forecast, with so much low/fresh snow and a night of cold temperatures. Maybe this would be just the time for a route on the Lauper face? But it had been in cloud for ten days, so really I had no idea of its condition.

I packed my sack and hiked up to find a bivvy spot under the face. As the clouds teased around, I half slept and half wondered. I was fit and through the breaks in the clouds I could see that the snow was there – but would it freeze? I started breakfast in the dark but waited until dawn to leave my bivvy kit and amble up towards the start of the face. I felt no rush. I didn't want to climb in the dark and I had all day. There was only 1600m to climb and on my own I could just keep moving ...

The normal Lauper route traverses in from the right, continues way left and then back right again to finish at the heart of the face. I varied the route by continuing straight up the ice slope of the Hoheneis to its neck. A waterfall poured down the back wall and so, moving a little to the right up a precarious ramp and up through the next rock band, I stepped left to arrive directly above the neck of the Hoheneis. Straight up an icy ramp, and I was level with where the Lauper traverses across right and heads up to a gully at the left of a triangular rock buttress. Again the way didn't look the best and I decided to continue straight on up. I could see a line through mixed ground and, after a precarious mixed gully, I was into a ramp/gangway that led me quickly and directly up the face.

Although the conditions were poor and a bit unconsolidated, my line felt good and the higher I climbed the more the snow/ice improved. The wide rock band stretching from the Mittellegi was now above me. To cut through I would have to steer right a little and once through the narrows onto the Lauper Shield it was spacey and exposed. The ice was good now and all I had to do was keep climbing, motivated by the warmth of the sun that would soon put the face into degeneration.

I could see a vague gully line through the rock buttress above me and, moving slightly to the right to pass bad ground, I was soon established directly in the line and straight on up to a snowy arête leading up from the knob crack on the Lauper original finish. Unfortunately the summit ridge was a less than welcome sight, since all the recent snow and winds had built up huge cornices and it was going to be time-consuming to pass them all safely. But I set to work and crossed slowly towards the summit. The sun was blazing on the snows of the W flank. It was 2pm and time to go down. It was to be a very unnerving descent.

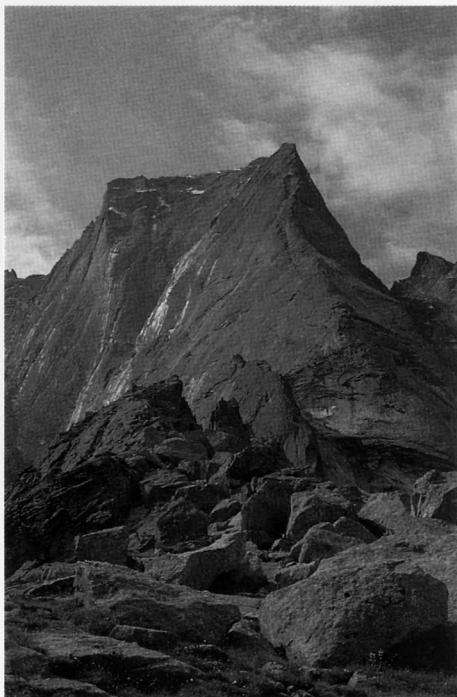


Left

8. Matterhorn N face. Alison soloed the Schmid route on 29.6.93. It follows the obvious snowfield from right to left, followed by the ramp. (Dave Ballard) (p16)

Below

9. Piz Badile. Alison climbed the central classic N face route on 10.8.93. (Alison Hargreaves) (p16)



The Piz Badile

In 'Perkins', our 30-year-old Land Rover, we slowly chugged back to Chamonix, but the North Face of the Dru looked as if there was still too much snow on it for my liking. I wanted the granite cracks as clear of ice as possible so, leaving the crowds to fight over the routes around Chamonix, we fled south to the Bregaglia. Here we found a quiet campsite in the charming ancient village of Bondo, and there were fewer people, fewer climbers and less hassle. Climbers have written their history into the place and it felt as if the numbers have not been too great to ruin local inquisitive/helpful interest. The guardian of the village-owned campsite, who also owned the local milk co-operative, was only too keen to advise and help on weather and conditions.

Two days later I was at the Sciora hut. Spike and Suds, old Scottish friends, were resting after a great day's climbing and Steve Holland was with me to explore the area. With a reasonable forecast yet a cloudy start, 10 August saw me crossing to the N ridge to reach the start of the route. Rock boots on, down a ramp and across a brutal ice/snow slope bergschrund – then wobbly up to the start of the first corner. There were no pegs as mentioned in the topo, but slight doubts about the route were soon put to one side as the climbing became interesting and my self-confidence returned.

The next few pitches were a delight. My worries about granite slab climbing were totally unfounded and, after passing some of the early bivouacked parties in front, I was soon at the site of the 'snow patch' and the start of the main difficulties. Above me was a team of Germans, one of them stuck in the depths of the corner, while his lower mate, looking decidedly embarrassed, waited impatiently and kept shouting words of encouragement! I sat quietly on a fine ledge – and waited and ate and waited.

Nearly an hour passed before he was out, the third man raced up behind and I started to organise myself to set about the chimney/crack. Although steeper than the rest of the climb, the rock was solid, and as I negotiated my way up under the roof I was very careful to keep my back well out and avoid the downfall of the German lad with his jammed sack. At the belay ledge they were still there, muttering and uneasy. Happily they let me pass and I headed on up the slabs and cracks to lead to the base of the rightward series of chimneys. Passing the time of day with a delightful pair of contented-looking climbers, I set on up the crack and chimney. As I moved up, the clouds started to move down and, as the back of the cracks got wetter, the temperature dropped. I used both sides of the chimney or, when it widened too much, opted for the least slimy side of the green back wall. Once I had emerged from the chimney the wall dried out and after a few more feet I was able to follow a fine traverse line left onto an exposed nose, and so to finish up a brilliantly situated wall to the top. As the clouds turned damp and the lichen-covered rock turned a luminous green, I sat and thought a moment of the many parties down below with still a long way to go.

The Dru

Bondo was great, but we couldn't stay for ever; the weather was fine and, once again, the Dru was calling! Back to the crowds of Chamonix, and the *meteo* now boasted its first *beau temps* of the year. After two days of storms it would turn into four or five days of hot and sultry weather.

I decided to reduce weight by sleeping in the valley, catching the first téléphérique and, after doing the climb, descend to the Charpoua hut the same day. Bumping into Marc Twright, an old friend from Nepal in 1986 who was intent on doing something on the Aiguille Sans Nom, we traversed from the Grands Montets together and, bidding him '*bonne chance*', I left him to his route and descended the glacier to the foot of the Dru.

Three Bulgarians were still thrashing around on the awkward first wall and cracks leading off the ice. They had bivvied under the face and were not in too high spirits. To the sound of their curses, I headed up the horribly loose couloir and then, exchanging boots/crampons for rock boots, set off up the start of the Allain. The narrowing man-trap of a chimney gave food for thought until I decided to climb without my sack and then, assuming neither it nor I had fallen off, haul it up from above. That worked well, although elbows and knees were battered from a loss/lack of technique. I was soon on up and finishing the famous Lambert crack. After the body sucker of a chimney below, it paled into insignificance.

Another steep pitch through roofs and cracks and then a gully line led towards the bottom of the *niche*. After some chat and conversation with two English lads, I decided it was time to finish being sociable and carry on back to work. I had stuck on boot shells and crampons for the *niche* and now, at the top of a snowy couloir, I dispensed with them once again and aimed back towards the steep chimney above. I stopped a minute on the ledge to look down the huge walls of the W face below and, suitably impressed, I traversed left and set off up.

Working up and left I was soon at the base of the famous Fissure Allain. Deciding to use the much preferred Fissure Martinelli, I descended right and managed to get myself well and truly stuck in the Letterbox. Some entertainment later and I was free and contentedly at the top of the Martinelli, up a couple of steep pitches, more grooves, and finally the quartz band and the slab pitch to the hole and the notch. Exchanging photos with some Dutch lads from the American Direct, we set off down.

The descent was fun. We joked and laughed and teamed up again with two Americans, Dan and Dave, who were a little the worse for wear after two days on the Bonatti Pillar and without a sack of bivvy gear dropped on the first day. Once at the Flammes de Pierre, day began turning to night and, without bivvy gear, I raced on down since I wanted to see the descent to the hut in daylight.

But the hut was packed full to the brim. I was offered a can of coke and two blankets to cover me whilst sitting outside! The guardian had finished cooking and people were going to bed. I did likewise. Laid out on a flat grassy ledge, I shivered and star-gazed till the first of the early risers left and I could sneak into their warmed beds.

Back in Chamonix there was no time to rest on my laurels. I had to be in Munich for a trade fair at the beginning of September and, before that, I was keen to try and complete a route on the last of the Big Six.

The Cima Grande

So 'Perkins' was loaded up again, we chugged merrily across Switzerland, through Austria and after a hot climb over the Brenner descended into northern Italy. Soon we were heading excitedly towards the last area we had come to explore – the Dolomites. As we finally ground to a halt in the car-park of the Auronzo hut, we breathed a sigh of relief that our vehicle had made it. And now, through the clearing mist, our reward was spectacular views of rocky peaks and magnificent spires. I felt content and happy to be there.

But I had yet to see my goal: the magnificent North Face of the Cima Grande. On a walk round to look at the base of the great North Face of the Tre Cime, I wondered if I was being over-ambitious, but mentally the commitment was already made and two days later I was on the Comici on the Grande.

I had done the first pillar, which was loose and unpleasant, and now I was faced with a chimney-crack to gain the start of the climbing proper. I felt nervous, the commitment was not yet there, and I could still climb quite easily. But no – a job had to be done and, taking stock of the situation, I continued up to a ledge and the start of the difficulties. I studied my topo (traced from a recent German guide) and after two attempts I finally established myself well into the first pitch and past the hard move. I felt wooden and awkward, the climbing was not flowing, and it was going to be a slow job. As I worked up the next couple of pitches a rhythm asserted itself and my climbing began to flow. A steep corner-crack, graded as hard as any pitch on the route, went well and I began to feel more positive and confident. As my rhythm returned, my outlook changed and, once more, I felt happy and relaxed at the way things were going. Now there were only a couple more hardish sections to the Kasperek bivouac and easier ground. Things were looking good, the hard climbing was over, but there was still a long way to the top. I studied the topo again and made sure I was on course. The route led into a huge corner system, but there were a couple of options and I was keen to make the right choice. Before long I was well up the corner and getting closer to where the route traverses left above roofs.

But now the way looked less obvious. I had come up a wet corner-crack and I was on a small cave-like ledge in front of a hideous slimy crack/roof above me. The way looked unlikely. I consulted my topo again, but surely all modern traffic didn't come up this wet and slimy corner ... or did it? Up and to my left was the lip of the roof. If I didn't traverse now I would have to go back down and traverse underneath it. But although I could see odd pegs and slings, the rock was poor, so surely they were wrong. A descent and lower traverse seemed unappealing, so I decided I would brave the slime and traverse here.

As I moved up the crack, to my relief a peg appeared and my route-finding was proved correct after all. I gained the arête above and then traversed left on a series of mini-ledges. The situation was exposed and brilliant, the climbing interesting and now I was really getting there. Just a shame about the rain. Whilst the clouds had closed in above, there was still enough clarity to see the floor several hundred metres below – an amazing situation.

The rain increased and my pace started to quicken. As the large spots soaked into the rock, I gained the edge of the traverse and climbed up the last easy pitches. As I crossed to the south side the wind was waiting to greet me; the clouds rolled, the wind roared and spots of rain turned into a torrential downpour.

But I was on my way down. All that mattered was to get down safely. As there was no thunder nor lightning, I took my time and descended with caution. The route was just as the German topo showed it, and I weaved my way, down climbing across the face to the final rock band and gully system to the screes below. As the rain turned to hailstones, my pace quickened again and before long I was bouncing lightheartedly past the sodden tourists towards 'Perkins' and my family.

Epilogue

The first part of my summer's work was over. I had set out to solo climb a route on each of the six great north faces and with the help of many other people I had achieved it. Moreover, I had climbed the routes in a total climbing time of under 24 hours, so I would be able to use my friend Steve's suggested title for my book: *A Hard Day's Summer*.

1993 was to end on a high note. When the manuscript of my book was finished and the summer drew to a close, I was tempted to do one more climb. After renewing my fitness on a route up the N face of the Midi, I waited for a window of good weather and, in November, became the first woman to solo climb the Croz Spur on the Grandes Jorasses. To me the mountains had been gentle; to many others, not so. I was fortunate enough to travel home at the end of the year and to make plans for future dreams and aspirations.

ROUTE INFORMATION

Mountain	Route	Date	Climbing time
Grandes Jorasses	Shroud	17.6.93	2hrs 30 mins
Matterhorn	Schmid	29.6.93	5hrs 30 mins
Eiger	New Route	24.7.93	5hrs 30 mins
Piz Badile	Cassin	10.8.93	2hrs
Dru	Allain	17.8.93	4hrs 45 mins
Cima Grande	Comici	24.8.93	3hrs 30 mins
Grandes Jorasses	Croz Spur	10.11.93	6hrs

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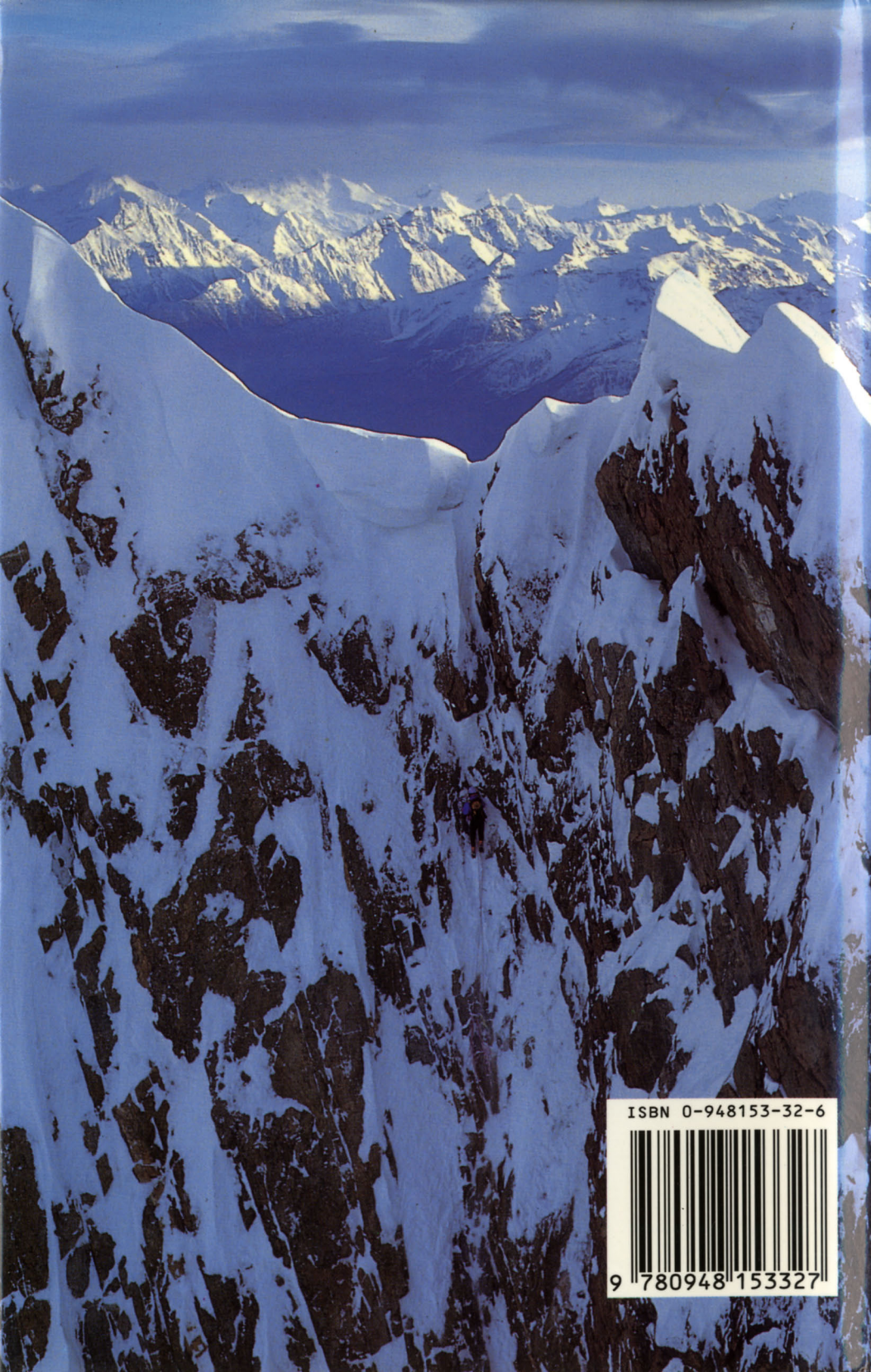
Full details of membership can be obtained from:

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Jacket photographs:

front, K2 from the Godwin Austen glacier (Roger Payne);
back, the Croz Spur of the Grandes Jorasses, soloed by
Alison Hargreaves on 10 November 1993 (Dave Sharrock).

ISBN 0 948153 32 6



ISBN 0-948153-32-6



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