

66. West face of Gasherbrum IV (7925m). In 1985, after making the first, highly committing, ascent of the 3000m face, Voytek Kurtyka and Robert Schauer descended the left skyline, exhausted and on totally unknown ground. (*Oriol Baro*)

to have become more important than how it is played.

Why we climb is completely personal, how we climb is communal. How we climb defines the future of mountaineering and also the mountain environment. Leave no trace, alpine style, doing more with less: many people can see intuitively that even if they can't climb this way themselves, it is progressive mountaineering – the way to go.

Part of this essay formed a presentation given at the 2010 International Trad Climbing Meet in Orco, northern Italy. It examines 'traditional values' in climbing; from Great Britain through the Alps to the Himalaya.

ROB COLLISTER

Cri de Coeur From The Alps

How many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see? – Bob Dylan

The Aletsch Glacier, which flows out of the Bernese Oberland into the Rhone valley in western Switzerland, is the longest glacier in the Alps. It is fed by a number of ice streams emanating from peaks like the Äbeni Flue, Jungfrau, Mönch, Fiescherhorn and Grünhorn, most of them over 4000 metres. The point at which these tributaries merge to form the Aletsch is a plain of snow two kilometres wide known as Konkordiaplatz. At the geographical heart of the Bernese Oberland and of a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site, it has attracted mountaineers since the middle of the 19th century. The first hut was built here on a rock shelf a few feet above the ice in 1872 and it has been periodically enlarged and re-built ever since to cater for growing demand. Nowadays it accommodates up to a hundred people a night, especially during April and May when it is a popular base for ski mountaineers, and the term 'hut' is something of a misnomer. Materials for the original building would have been carried all the way up from the Rhone valley by porters or, conceivably, mules. Now, it is re-provisioned on a weekly basis by helicopter, and for the hut guardian and his family it is only a 30-minute ride on a skidoo uphill to the Jungfraujoch where the railway from Grindelwald terminates.

However, the biggest change has been to the glacier. There is nothing new about glacial recession: it has been going on for 150 years, but the process has accelerated recently. In the case of the Aletsch, the glacier has not actually retreated very much, but its surface has dropped dramatically as its volume shrinks. Konkordia in the summer becomes by midday a swamp of rotten snow cut by rushing melt-water streams. Where once climbers could walk onto the ice, there is now a metal staircase zigzagging almost 100 metres up a vertical rock face. At the end of a long day, it comes as a sting in the tail, especially at 2800 metres above sea-level. Every few years, as the glacier level falls, the Swiss Alpine Club is obliged to fit a new section of staircase. In the 30 years since I first visited the hut, the ice has dropped as much as it did in the previous 100. This is not my imagination. At bends in the staircase small signs indicate the year in which this was the surface of the ice. About 10 years ago I counted the number of steps out of curiosity. There were 360. Two years ago I counted again. This time, there were 433, 450 including a ladder lashed to the bottom. It is a graphic illustration of the effect of global warming on the landscape, but it is far from unique. The same story is being repeated all over the Alps, indeed all

over the world. Many small glaciers have disappeared completely; others have become no more than snow patches. Elsewhere, what used to be a smooth surface of snow has become a ridge and furrow of ice covered with rock debris. Access to and from larger glaciers becomes increasingly problematic, with treacherously loose moraine walls or ice-polished slabs to negotiate.

For most people in the West, climate change is not urgently present in their lives. It is still something to be read about in the papers, something that will affect other people, at some time in the future. But for mountaineers, one would have thought, the reality of global warming cannot be denied. The evidence is before our eyes every time we set foot on a glacier. Yet many, if not most, do appear to be in denial. The adventure travel industry is booming; the number of climbers and hikers jetting off to Greenland, Antarctica, South America and the Himalaya on a regular basis shows no sign of diminishing. easyJet and Ryanair continue to post handsome profits; the heli-ski industry, though banned in France and Austria, flourishes in Italy and Switzerland; weekend jaunts to the Alps for both skiing and climbing are very much in vogue. Climate change? What climate change?

Satish Kumar, a former monk and editor of *Resurgence* magazine, who once walked 8000 miles from India to Washington via Moscow, Paris and London on a pilgrimage for peace, with no money and nothing but the clothes he stood up in, believes that, in relation to planet Earth, we are all either tourists or pilgrims. We regard the Earth either as a resource available for our gratification or as a miracle of beauty and complexity to be marvelled at, valued and protected. One would expect mountaineers to be pilgrims. Mountains have been, and still are sacred in many cultures. Traditionally, even in the West, they have been sources of inspiration, symbols of aspiration and metaphors for personal quest. The early alpine climbers were, for the most part, pilgrims, entranced by what they saw and found, revelling in the discomfort and effort required. They were mountain travellers, excited by crossing a col into a different valley as much as by reaching a summit. Significant numbers were clergymen and academics seeking validation of a faith undermined by Darwin. Today, the notion of mountains as natural cathedrals, proposed by Ruskin, is deeply unfashionable. Respect, reverence even, has been replaced by a view of mountains as commodities to be marketed for the benefit of local communities and as trophies to be collected by visitors. It is an attitude to be found at all ends of the mountain spectrum from Everest to Snowdon. In the Alps it has resulted in rack-railways, cable-cars and chair-lifts to make life easier for skiers in winter and climbers and walkers in summer, in fixed ropes to make climbs of the Matterhorn, the Eiger and countless other peaks more accessible and, most recently, in the metal clutter of *via ferrata* that have sprouted on the cliffs behind every alpine village, it seems, to provide thrills without the need for skills.

There is a paradox at the root of mountaineering that was expressed succinctly many years ago by a French alpinist, Jacques Lagarde and quoted by Lindsay Griffin in his Introduction to an AC guidebook:

Ever since man has been drawn to the mountains by a love of wild nature, rigour, solitude and the unknown, all of which he found in that final refuge, he has done everything to eliminate precisely what he sought.

Today, comfort and convenience, those twin pillars of consumerism, have prevailed in the mountains as they have everywhere else. Duvets, hot showers, beer on tap and freshly-baked bread are becoming the norm in huts, diminishing the delicious contrast and sense of appreciation that return to the valley used to bring. Bolts, GPS, radios and mobile phones have removed much of the uncertainty, and with it the adventure, of alpine climbing and ski mountaineering. Digital cameras, BlackBerries, iPhones, heart-rate monitors, and altimeter wrist-watches to record every conceivable aspect of progress, all ensure that the modern mountaineer, festooned with electronic equipment, is only fleetingly, if ever, truly in the present. And if all this displacement activity should prove insufficient, we can always plug in to an iPod to avoid hearing whatever the mountains have to say. There is little time or space for that 'sense of joy, awe and wonder' of which Satish Kumar speaks and which has been described so feelingly over the years by mountaineers as diverse as John Muir, Eric Shipton, Bill Murray, Arne Naess and Jim Perrin.

However, it is easy enough to venture off the tourist's beaten track. We have but to leave the gizmos behind to emerge from a cocoon and be at once more acutely aware of our surroundings, more in tune with the mountain world and, as a result, probably safer also. To visit the Alps out of season when the huts are closed apart from a 'winter room' (more than half the year in fact) is to quickly re-discover 'wild nature, rigour, solitude and the unknown'. I would not wish to deny that there is value and enjoyment in the exercising of skill, judgement and experience to overcome difficulties and achieve a goal, be it a summit or a journey, or that there are plenty of occasions in the Alps when weather or snow conditions dictate that speed is of the essence. But to travel sometimes in a spirit of quietude rather than bent on accomplishment, as explorers rather than conquistadors, is to allow mountaineering to become less a matter of success or failure, and more an opportunity to notice, to observe and to be absorbed into a marvellous world. We might then come to feel more readily a part of the mountains ourselves and to feel wounded by what has been done to them and what is happening to them. We might even find it in our hearts to comprehend the plight not just of glaciers but of the whole planet and of those millions, if not billions, less fortunate than ourselves.

These sentiments may resonate with some members of the Alpine Club. Others will ridicule them as the ranting of a hair-shirt killjoy. Yet ultimately we are talking not about how we choose to spend our holidays but about social justice as well as conservation in its widest sense. Over the last few years, through a mixture of concern, self-interest and coercion most of us have made changes to the way we live our everyday lives. We recycle

our paper, glass, tin and plastic; we are learning to turn off lights, TVs and computers when not in use; we see the sense of insulating our lofts and excluding draughts from windows and doors; we share transport when we can. Nobody is perfect but most of us are trying. Mountaineering, however, seems to be a compartment of our lives exempt from wider concerns. The mountaineering community needs to accept that its activities do impinge seriously on others and that changes in behaviour and life-style do make a difference, even if only by adding momentum to a very slowly rolling ball. We need to ask questions about how we travel and how frequently, about how and where our clothing and equipment are made, and from what materials, and how often does it really need to be replaced. We need to make choices based on human and environmental cost rather than on pounds or dollars. Perhaps a start would be some form of carbon-rationing, which would have to be self-imposed as government has shied away from the idea since the recession. (Is there a role here for the AC?) An approach of 'less is more' to all aspects of our travelling and climbing could actually be enriching, enabling us to rediscover a simplicity and authenticity that used to be at the core of mountaineering. We could even find ourselves again on the pilgrim path which, returning to Satish Kumar, 'is to be on a path of adventure, to move out of our comfort zones, to let go of our prejudices and pre-conditioning, to make strides towards the unknown'.