
BEN TIBBETTS

The Ultra Royal Traverse



The west face of Mont Blanc at sunset from Semnoz. (*Ben Tibbetts*)

For many years I had been interested in extending the *Royal Traverse* (Dômes de Miage-Bionnassay-Mont Blanc) into the ‘Ultra Royal’: an end-to-end traverse through the centre of the Mont Blanc massif. Starting on 21 April 2018, Colin Haley and I finally made the ‘first ascent’ of this route in a 32-hour non-stop push from Champex to Contamines, filming and photographing the project as we went. During our long day out we skied and climbed 89km with 6,800m of height gain. This epic route can also be broken down into five or six reasonable stages of ski mountaineering to provide an extraordinary journey between comfortable refuges, through the heart of the massif.

Katherine Richardson first explored the crucial passage of the *Royal Traverse* to Mont Blanc. In the summer of 1888, guided by Emile Rey and Jean-Baptiste Bich, she made the first crossing of the Aiguille de Bionnassay. The *Alpine Journal* recorded in 1889: ‘It has been reserved for a lady to accomplish the traverse of an arête which had hitherto been found impracticable, and to prove that it is possible to pass from the S. ridge of the Aiguille de Bionnassay over the summit of the peak straight along to the Dôme [de Goûter]. Thus a splendid high-level route has been opened up, which has long been aimed at.’ At a time when misogyny was widespread, the editor had the good grace to acknowledge that Richardson’s ‘ascents are, perhaps, the most noteworthy events of the past season in the Alps.’



Sébastien Montaz-Rosset and Colin Haley skinning up the Argentière glacier.
(*Ben Tibbetts*)

Three months previously, while training for this project, I was caught in a massive avalanche. After skiing an open slope, across the valley from Mont Blanc, I was waiting on a blunt rib, a spot that I thought was safe, as my friend Lara followed me down the same slope. Everything above us released in an avalanche 300m wide. I was swept into a tree and buried upside down under two metres of snow with a dislocated shoulder. Stuart, Lara's husband, found me and dug me out within minutes, though my airway had been blocked and I was already losing consciousness. Lara was swept 400m but unhurt.

This event haunted me throughout that winter, posing dark questions about my motivations in the mountains. No matter how significant a project might seem, that accident had cauterised my appetite for risk. I had no interest in setting some record time for this line across Mont Blanc but the aim was still to complete it non-stop, a goal that in itself carried quite enough risk. Moreover, my desire to record our odyssey was nearly as strong as my wish to finish the story and to that end I carried a substantial camera. This, as Colin noted, weighed more than all our safety equipment put together.

We reached our starting point, the little chapel above the lake at Champex in Switzerland at the northern end of the Mont Blanc massif, just before midnight. The scene was lit by the dull orange glow of a street lamp. I put the camera on a wall and set the video to record. Colin shifted

uncomfortably from foot to foot as I read out a poem: 'Wild Geese' by Mary Oliver. You do not have to be good, she says. 'You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves.' It was as close to a prayer as I would allow myself. The sense of this poem had shifted for me several times in the 15 years since I first heard it. Now the words echoed with me through the first lucid hours of toil, imploring me to question my motives.

*

'I had some very good moments and some very bad moments back in 2012,' Seb Montaz said, looking across to the Aiguille d'Argentière. He had met us in the middle of the Argentière glacier and now Colin, Seb and I were clustered on the Col des Cristaux, seven hours after leaving Champex. Colin was getting cold and seemed anxious to carry on, but while we were in sight of the fateful location I was curious to hear Seb's memories about a similar traverse that Kilian Jornet and Stéphane Brosse tried in 2012. They had left Contamines at the southern end of the massif early on 16 June with the aim of reaching Champex that night. However, when they reached the south face of the Col des Cristaux in the afternoon they found the snow was already too warm and decided to stay the night in the Requin hut. They set out early next morning. 'Kilian and Stéphane wanted to meet me at the top of the Aiguille d'Argentière at 7.15am, and as usual they were exactly on time. I could see them skiing down there [on the glacier] and they arrived at 7.15. We had a short stop. I remember this bird, it was a bit like a symbol, it was flying around us for a long time. We left walking in crampons. They were walking sideways and I was looking at them. Kilian was to the left. I saw this really nice ridge going up into the blue sky. I thought, oh I need to shoot that ... so I stopped. From where I stopped I noticed that it was all overhanging. Kilian saw me stopping so he turned around and suddenly realised he was walking on empty stuff. I think the cornice was 10m over the south face, it was enormous. Two seconds after he said to Stéphane, "Come here!" At this precise second a break went between them ... and I'm afraid Stéphane was on the wrong side. He fell with the whole cornice. Unfortunately I was recording that, but probably the camera saved my life that day. I don't know which track I would have taken ... Stéphane's or Kilian's?' Though I met him only once Stéphane was an inspirational figure, not only in the close-knit world of ski-mountaineering racing but also for the ambitious projects he achieved in the high mountains. It was his idea to traverse the Mont Blanc massif and the beautiful logic of the line inspired me.

In June 2013 Misha Gopaul and I climbed from Chamonix, over the Dôme du Goûter and descended toward the Piton des Italiens. We were heading over to Bionnassay, for the second time, to try and recover the skis and sacks we had abandoned when we were rescued by helicopter a month earlier. On the ridge we crossed paths with a friend, Bastien Fleury and a young star of French steep skiing, Vivian Bruchez, as they prepared to descend the vertiginous north-west face of the Piton. Back then I had rarely mustered

the courage to ski steep slopes and I was blown away by their precision and tenacity as they made short jump turns down the face and disappeared out of sight. It never occurred to me that I might ski with Vivian in the future, let alone descend new lines or once again try the Ultra Royal traverse.

A month earlier that year, on 15 May, Misha, Ally Swinton and I set off from Contamines at 2am with the hope of traversing the Dômes de Miage and Bionnassay to Mont Blanc. Our initial objective, the classic *Royal Traverse*, was preparation for the longer project once conditions improved: to finish in Champex, the line inspired by Kilian and Stéphane's attempt. In the spring of 2013 however, good stable weather never arrived. We were frustrated by relentless weeks of difficult conditions. On 7 May, Ally and I had managed to sneak up the *Lagarde* route on the north face of Les Droites but the weather window was only a matter of hours and on the summit we were enveloped in the brooding clouds of an oncoming storm.

Around 13 May we saw another weather window developing, not quite as long as we hoped, but adequate for an initial attempt. We set off on 15 May, initially making good progress. By the time we arrived at the Durier hut however, nestled in the col between the Dômes de Miage and the south ridge of the Bionnassay, we were already several hours slower than planned, having broken trail in variable snow much of the way. The weather was not as good as forecast and a rising wind was blowing plumes of spindrift off Mont Blanc. We reached the summit of Bionnassay at 12.30pm already tired. As wisps of cloud began to gather on the ridge ahead we started to accept we might only make it to the Dôme du Goûter. Ally set off breaking trail down the east ridge towards the Col de Bionnassay. Misha and I rested a few minutes longer before setting off. I took an image of Ally, far along the ridge beyond us, and then he moved out of sight behind a spur of rock. We followed in his tracks for a couple of hundred metres until they ended at a small step in the snow. I stopped and looked at the step for a few moments before I realised what had happened.

'I could see the ridge was a cornice,' Ally recalled, 'so for obvious reasons I stayed a few metres below that. The snow had a very slight crust on top, but the consistency felt fine. Silently and unexpectedly I fell onto my side, and for half a second I couldn't grasp what was happening. I then immediately noticed the slope I was lying on was cracking up and the crest of the ridge was moving away from me. In these first few seconds I tried so hard to crawl and swim my way to the top of the slope that was going with me, the top was only a metre away and even though I gained some ground it was too late. After these few seconds I knew I was going down. I was then thrown off a cliff band and into the air. All I could see was white. Whilst freefalling, in this white room, I remember actually feeling gutted that this was the way I was going to go. I knew something was about to happen and that it was going to hurt, and I wasn't really looking forward to it. I banged into some sections of rocks, and kept thinking that something worse was about to come. After hitting the rock section I was dragged down and washed around. My mouth filled with snow once and I can remember spitting it out



Haley approaching the Col des Cristaux at sunrise. *(Ben Tibbetts)*

and it immediately filling up again. I had to put my fingers in my mouth to unplug it. Suddenly it was all over and I was sitting upright looking around at my new surroundings. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. I couldn't stop swearing at myself, and just being quite angry with what had happened.'

Misha and I stayed on the ridge and had enough reception to call the rescue services. It was a terribly long 20 minutes though before we saw Ally staggering down the glacier 600m below us and realised he had survived the avalanche. We waved and shouted and could see that he was okay but it was another 30 minutes before we heard the spine tingling sound of the helicopter rising up the valley to pick him up. We considered whether we should reverse the route or try to protect ourselves with a rope along the remaining delicate ridge. Then, as the weather began to deteriorate rapidly, the helicopter returned and winched us off.

*

The evening before we departed for Champex I was preparing food and charging batteries, checking and rechecking forecasts. All predicted unseasonable temperatures. I hadn't slept the previous night and the mental haze compounded my anxiety. Though our timing was meticulously planned around snow stability there still seemed too many unknowns; too much

potential for marginal decisions that, on such a long route, would leave us wide open to 'human bias'.

Colin Haley and I left Champex on the stroke of midnight and settled into a sustained rhythm, skinning up the long Arpette valley, over massive snouts of recent avalanche debris, and up to the Col des Écandies. For the previous five years I had been interested in trying this traverse again, but variable and thin spring snow-packs had always put the project on hold. It was only a couple of months earlier that I had the idea of reversing the route and trying the project from north to south to allow us to traverse the most crucial slopes: the Col des Cristaux and Bionnassay, in frozen conditions. From the beginning of winter I had been discussing the idea with Colin and hoped he might join me on the project. Though he is best known for his long and hard ascents in the Greater Ranges, he is also an excellent ski mountaineer. Though our ideas on risk and safety equipment were slightly different, I thought his laconic humour and quiet determination might be a good foil to my nervous and obsessive character.

Crossing the Trient plateau, a steady breeze kept us moving. We chatted intermittently, slowing only slightly to unwrap a bar or adjust boots. The moon had already sunk below the western horizon and we moved under a vast canopy of stars towards a notch in the mountains that we could barely discern. At the Fenêtre de Saleina, Colin stopped to take off boots that were already giving him sores. I twitched impatiently as we were already a little behind schedule: Seb Montaz planned to meet us below the Argentière hut in just 30 minutes. At the Col du Chardonnet we forfeited crampons for the sake of speed and dragged our way up a fixed rope, our boots groping and slipping on little steps in the steep icy slope. We crossed the border back into France and carved lazy turns down the icy slopes, the lamp-lit surface rushing towards me quicker than my drowsy faculties could comprehend.

Teams were already starting up the great north face climbs. There were headlamps on the *Lagarde* and *Czech* routes on Les Droites, and several parties in the *Couturier* couloir on the Verte, each buried in their own games and struggles. Seb had left the village of Argentère at 2am to ski up in the dark and join us for the first half of the day. Just after 5am we met him in the middle of the glacier by a prominent rock. He had picked up three bottles of water from the refuge and was now upon us with the camera, asking a few questions and taking clips of video. Colin took off his boots to adjust his socks again. As we set off up the glacier the half-light of dawn filtered over the walls around us. I skinned in circles around Seb and Colin taking a few photos and clips of video. I quickly realised I should have left this to Seb as the slight extra exertion left me smashed with fatigue for the next hour. We climbed slowly onto the steep slopes of the Col de Cristaux and finally crawled into the sunlight halfway up.

At the Col, Colin, Seb and I discussed whether to ski or climb down the south side. Given our fatigue, my marked lack of lucidity and the hard crispy snow, we decided it would be safer to down-climb the slope. Colin headed off quickly and I followed. The snow had a hard crust and I rushed



Drawn map of the Ultra Royal route from Champex to Les Contamines.
(Ben Tibbetts)

down until unexpectedly my foot plunged through a crusty layer and with my downward momentum I almost somersaulted down the slope. Colin was moving like a lizard and had already darted out of sight. I stopped for a moment to calm myself, looking at the cliffs below before setting off again more slowly.

We gathered once more on the glacier and then skied out into the sunshine and onto the Mer de Glace. It was now 9.30am and as the temperature rose, battalions of skiers poured down the Vallée Blanche. At 12.30pm we reached the Col du Midi and found Vivian Bruchez basking in the midday sun, surrounded by eight litres of water, a litre of coke and a stash of cold pizzas. It was our only resupply of food in the whole traverse. Until this point we hadn't stopped for more than 15 minutes at a time; the effort and dehydration were catching up with us. Colin and I gorged ourselves whilst stripping off our boots and drying our fetid feet in the sun. Colin grum-

bled about his sores and muttered something about stopping there. I didn't really believe what he was saying so made some manipulative appeals to his tattered pride. We dressed our heels with new bandages and over an hour slipped by before we finally began to move again. Seb left us to return back to the valley and Vivian assumed the role of shepherd, and the tiring business of recording pieces of video that we might later piece together.

Into the evening the long icy summit slopes of Mont Blanc poisoned my well of enthusiasm. There was a cool breeze from the south-east that was irritating and I was appallingly tired. Nineteen hours into the adventure and I could barely move 10 paces before collapsing, my lungs rasping on the brittle air. Throughout the day tiredness had come in waves, each one overwhelming me more vigorously than the last. On the final few hundred metres to Mont Blanc I seemed to develop narcolepsy. We had breezed up the same slope – literally, with 80kph of wind – just three days earlier on a recce. This time, I bent over my poles, closed my eyes and the whole world dissolved into a miasma. After half a second, or perhaps half an hour, I would wake with a start. I peeled my eyes open to see my boots and crampons on a blinding bright golden surface. I turned my head upwards. Vivian and Colin were still just several paces ahead of me, each buried in their own struggle.

By the time we had rushed and stumbled down past the Vallot hut the sun had set most beautifully but I barely had the energy to appreciate the vibrant hues or the incredible view. This wave of lethargy subsided as we lost altitude but I could feel how deeply I had already pushed my body. I looked over to Bionnassay and the Dômes de Miage beyond, and in the gathering magentas of dusk it now seemed almost impossible that we could still make it to Contamines. In the gloom their jagged ridges seemed far higher and more fearsome than I remembered. Colin expressed some doubts, striking a chord with my own, but I heard myself wittering on about how the ridge would be fine in the dark. I had been over Bionnassay four times previously and should remember the way. We put a rope on to pass a few crevasses and then dropped down past the Piton des Italiens as the light failed.

From the Col de Bionnassay I broke trail for a spell, stamping footsteps into the narrow snow crest. We were likely the first people that year and it was tough work. As I slowed Vivian took over and continued for another hour to the summit. Colin seemed to be trailing some way behind, his lamp-light weaving from side to side in the darkness. When he caught up I shoved the camera in his face and he muttered vacantly 'definitely not the chilled ascent I would like right now.' He was struggling with the aggressive waves of fatigue I had on Mont Blanc. With steep slopes on both side and a knife-edge to walk on, it wasn't a great moment to fall asleep.

With nightfall our progress had slowed dramatically and when a breeze picked up I was soon cold. At the summit I noticed, with disembodied concern, that one of my crampons had almost fallen off. I slowly carved out a platform to refit it, muttering to myself. We began the descent slowly but soon found ourselves peering into the dark trying to work out where we should go. Though both Vivian and I had been there several times previously,



Ally Swinton below the rock step on the south ridge of Aiguille de Bionnassay, first climbed by Florence Crauford Grove et al in 1865. (*Ben Tibbetts*)

the darkness and a veil of tiredness made it tricky to find the correct line. We eventually found the top of the steep rock step and the rappel anchor. I gingerly clambered down, vaguely remembering the circuitous route down the buttress. Vivian and Colin began to descend on our 6mm rope with a 4mm tag line. At each rappel they seemed to take an age to untangle the lines and I got cold and frustrated waiting for them at the bottom. Down the ridge towards the Durier hut I looked across at the looming mass of the Dômes de Miage ahead of us. I couldn't work out why it looked so huge. They started to tower above us in ghastly shapes. I watched my conviction waver as firm reference points began to crumble. Sleep deprivation was pulling apart any coherent sensory experience of the world. Sound and sight were becoming separated in time and space; voices echoed around my head well after they occurred and in the dark the rocks and snow began morphing into animals, buildings and great machines.

At the Durier hut we found a couple sleeping. Despite our hushed tones they woke and offered us the use of their stove. My head swirled with broken ideas as to how we could or couldn't climb the massive 300m that remained. In 20 minutes we made several litres of hot water but were all still shivering despite having all our clothes on. Colin murmured that he wanted to sleep a little. I wanting nothing more but insisted we carry on before we lost the plot.

We left the Durier hut at 3am and made our way, ever so slowly, up the crenelated Miage ridge. Over the next few hours my senses became madly disoriented and reality and memory blurred. When Colin or Vivian spoke I had to focus all my attention to catch the words and juggle them into



Misha Gopaul on the south ridge with Mont Blanc behind. (*Ben Tibbetts*)

meaning. It felt akin to the first moments having woken up after a general anaesthetic, staring up, once again, at the bright lights of a hospital ward. These long distance challenges provide a kind of mental and physical experience that I can barely access in normal life.

As I denied myself sleep for yet another night, mind and body seemed to have become temporarily liberated into another dimension. The risks, though, associated with moving along steep ridges and faces in the dark whilst deeply fatigued, are all too obvious. Perhaps, however, these risks, for some of us, are crucial in reinforcing an urgent desire to hold on to the dear earth, to stay alive, to purge complacency and cherish every quiet moment of valley life. Up high, with the mind burning brightly along crests of rock and ice, it seems our stupid conceits can sometimes be sublimated through suffering. For in those rich, painful hours they become metamorphosed into self-knowledge by that powerful alchemy of deeply lived experience.

When we finally reached the valley the sun had risen again on another clear day. It was difficult to express any joy at our achievement as we hobbled up to the church in Contamines 32 hours after leaving Champex. The only liberation was from slow relentless suffering, from movement. It took two days of sleep for my senses to recover and it was several more before the experience sank in and amnesia washed away the pain. I actually felt content, for once, that we had closed the story.



Vivian Bruchez cast a pool of light on the Col de Bionnassay, with the Aiguille ahead of him. (*Ben Tibbetts*)

Summary

Ultra Royal Traverse (6800m, AD, III). From Champex head up the Val d'Arpette to Col des Ecandies. Traverse the Plateau de Trient and Fenêtre de Saleina to the Col de Chardonnet. Descend to the Argentière glacier, passing under the refuge and then climbing up the north-east slope of the Col des Cristaux. Descend the south-west slope and down to the Mer de Glace, depending on conditions either on skis or via the path and ladders under the Courvercle hut. Pass under the Requin hut and up the Vallée Blanche, highly crevassed in summer, to the Col du Midi. Climb the three Monts to Mont Blanc, descend the Arête des Bosses, pass under the Dôme du Goûter down to the Col de Bionnassay. Ascend Bionnassay via the east ridge. Descend the south ridge to a steep rock step. Down climb or rappel this and continue to the Durier hut at the Col du Miage. Climb the north-east ridge of the Dômes de Miage: one rappel if heading south to north. From the Col des Dômes descend the Tré-la-tête glacier or, if conditions allow, via the Armancette glacier and paths down to Contamines.

- This article forms a chapter in the new book from Ben Tibbetts, *Alpenglow: the Finest Routes on the 4,000m Peaks of the Alps*. See www.bentibbetts.com/alpenglow for more information.