

Mont Blanc 2002

PF Louw of the Johannesburg Bar conquered Mont Blanc

During the July vacation, I found myself at the back of a rope party struggling up and down the 4808 m of Mont Blanc.

Sean Disney led us. He is a superb climber and will be the senior member of the 2003 SA Everest expedition. (In 1996 he and a few deviant friends attempted Everest from the Nepal side, because Nepalese tickets were cheaper than Tibetan tickets. They had no money. They almost made it to the summit. But their failure did not faze them because none of the other, rich teams from the Nepalese side made it that year. Not making it cheaply is certainly better than not making it expensively.) Behind Sean was a talented young climber, Richard Beek. He was followed by Deshun Deysel. (She was on the official 1996 Everest expedition, but thanks to the curious machinations of Ian Woodall, she was prevented from summiting. She is on next year's ticket with Sean.) I supplied the gravitas at the back end of the 10.5 mm single dynamic kernmantel rope.

Sean and Deshun were there to train for next year's attempt on Everest. Richard was there to tick off yet another high peak for his tally this year. I was not sure what I was doing there.

When I returned to the monotony of life in chambers after my adventure, exuding spiritual well-being and basking in post-cathartic rapture (also called procrastination), I told everyone who came within earshot that I was going to give it all up to become a mountain monk. Wasserman SC heard this and when he later discovered some unfilled space in this edition, he ordered me to write 'n *Opstel oor jou vakansie in die berge*. Mr Pravin Gordhan has not yet allowed me to give it all up, and he probably never will. So I am stuck with my memories which I gladly write down as a sorry excuse for reliving them.

The trip started in Chamonix. We stayed in the Gustave, a slightly frayed old hotel, just across the street from the railway station. In between teaching me the finer points of front pointing and ice screw work on a blue glacier, Sean told me one morning that the greatest alpinist of our Bar and gastronome of note, Beckerling SC, had discovered that a Michelin chef

holds fort in the Hotel Gustave and that was why we were staying there.

Chamonix proudly, on huge billboards, proclaims itself to be the *Capitale Mondiale du Ski et Alpinisme*, which means, in plain English, *Death Sport Capital of the World*. In winter it is a chic but edgy ski resort with 57 lifts providing the widest possible range of downhill thrills, from nursery slopes to the most hair-raising of piste runs where untamed Frenchmen practise *le surf extrem*. In summer it really is the climbing capital of the world. Sitting in the Place Balmat or strolling down the Rue du Dr Paccard (Dr Paccard and M Balmat made the first ascent of Mt Blanc in 1786), one cannot but be amazed by the large numbers of nimble young bodies, dressed in haute montagne outfits made of Lycra and Gore Tex with brand names like *Arcetrix*, carrying day packs with snakes of rope slung over their shoulders, smoking Gittannes and heading off for a day of fun on one of the *extrêmement difficile* test pieces in the area. But it is not only the young and nimble who impress. Every route has a spattering of older and odd-shaped Frenchmen (and French women) who huff and puff up the improbably steep slopes.

We went up the du Goûter route. It is one of the classic routes and in hindsight not really technically demanding or even that steep. But that is of course only in hindsight. The route can be done in two days, but it usually takes three. We took four days because of a storm.

The route begins in Les Houches, a hamlet in the valley. By the grace of God, a *téléphérique* and a tramway, we were whisked to the Nid d'Aigle (2372 m). There the climb proper started.

The first day is spent traversing the Desert de Pierre Ronde and ends at the Refuge de Tête Rousse (3167m). It is a tough walk. Alpine climbing means that you have no support and that you, yourself, have to carry everything which you might need on the mountain. And, invariably, a lot of heavy stuff that you never need. We camped on the edge of the Glacier de Tête Rousse, overlooking a deep glacier hundreds of metres below. We basked in the mellow late afternoon sunshine, sipping *bas Armagnac*.

Then the storm came. Out of nowhere and in no time, it seemed. Gale force winds from all directions competed to blow our tents away, preferably, so it felt, over the edge of the glacier and into an oblivion where even the gallant *Peloton de Gardarmerie de Haute Montagne* would never find our broken bodies. We were tent-bound, for to relieve our tents of our weight would surely have turned them into kites to be blown far, far away. The storm carried on right through the night. The next morning only the tips of our tents stuck out through a thick layer of virgin snow. There was no visibility, there was no horizon and it was difficult to tell the top from the bottom. So we stayed in our tents in a trance-like state, somewhere between consciousness and oblivion. Just before we really got bored, the clouds lifted. If we moved quickly we could make the Refuge du Goûter before nightfall.

The climb from Tête Rousse to the Refuge du Goûter is an almost vertical scramble. It is about as long (approx 900 m) as it is high (approx 800 m). Carrying a 25 kg pack over huge outcrops and forcing it through minute fissures, all the while watching out for pebble sized



Louw on the summit of Mt Blanc.

missiles swooshing towards us, was not pleasant. We eventually, before sunset, arrived at the Refuge. The plan was to get up at 02h00 to have an early morning summit. But during the night the wind returned with all the ferocity it could muster and at 02h00 it would have been madness for us to leave. Others did not share our fear of mental instability and set out into the blizzard – only to return later in the morning with tales of how they had to crawl for miles to avoid being blown to Spain. At 09h00 the wind died down, for the time being at least, and we emptied our bags of everything that was unnecessary and heavy, roped up, put on our crampons and off we went.

We climbed over ancient glaciers and around awe-inspiring crevasses. Always higher, and higher. We stopped for a few minutes at the unmanned Refuge Bivouac Vallot (4362m) and then pushed up and on. The going was slow. It was at this point that the two ugly sisters of high altitude climbing, flatulence and forgetfulness,

struck us. These – fortunately temporary afflictions – cause problems of a scatological nature that render you incapable of pondering the eschatological problems which the mountain demands.

And then miraculously all that remained between us and the summit was a narrow ridge, about one meter wide which looked like a tightrope tied between two pyramids and covered with a large white sheet. The wind was gusting and as we slowly made our way along the tightrope, with almost sheer drops on either side, it seemed that, should you slip or spike yourself, this world would grant you only one last choice: fall to the right and die in Italy, fall to the left and die in France.

Nothing marks the summit. You simply cannot go any higher.

We returned to the Refuge du Goûter. There was place for us in the dormitory. We dined in the Refuge at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe. The Refuge is run by a troika of escapees from the French Foreign Legion. They are flown

in by helicopter and stay in the *Refuge* for three months at a time. They clean the gut-wrenching lavatories and stir pots of steaming uncertainty which they dish up with some aplomb, calling it soup or stew, depending on the day. The pirate in charge was a ferocious fellow, but the life of the place was a dead ringer for Mike Choate. Not only in appearance, but also in irreverence.

The slog down was hard but uneventful.

It took days, if not weeks for the experience to settle in. Right after the climb everything was a blur. Then the difficult bits of the climb were forgotten. What remained etched in my memory are the majesty of the mountain, the serenity of the solitude and the awareness that this life takes up very little time and space.

Back in Chamonix I read an interview in a mountaineering magazine with a famous leggy, blonde climber. The interviewer asked her the hackneyed question: *Why do you climb mountains?* She said: *To lose weight, Silly.* 