

Mont Blanc, 15,744'

September, 2016

By

Jeff Fisher

Participants; Jesper Schou, Elisabeth Guggenberger, Jeff Fisher (author)

I had been thinking about Mt. Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps, for a few years. Jesper Schou and I climbed Ojos del Salado last January, and when we were discussing another trip, I suggested Mt. Blanc. With Jesper living in Göttingen, Germany now, the logistics were easier. Jesper had arranged for reservations at the Cosmiques hut to go up the Trois Monts route to Mt. Blanc. We had hoped to go up the normal route via the Gouter hut, but that being the most popular and easiest route, that hut was all booked up way in advance.

Sept. 5. I flew in to Frankfurt, arriving on Sept. 6. I was looking to connect to wifi, in order to communicate with Jesper, but there he was standing at arrivals. We left and headed straight for Switzerland, staying the night in a nice hotel near Rhonequelle.

Sept. 7: Next day, we set off on an acclimatization climb of Lagginhorn at 4,010 m. (13,156ft, and the lowest 4,000 m peak in the Alps). I believe that Lagginhorn is the only 4,000 m peak in the Alps that can, at times, be done without significant travel on snow or ice. We went from Saas Grund via 2 gondolas to Hohsaas at 3,101 m. Once there we put on our gear, which for me meant double plastic boots, and started up the mountain by heading down from the tram, crossing a gully and up a set of beaten paths of dirt and rock. We got to the icy and crevassed area and with my new boots and thin socks, my feet were taking a beating, so we did not make it that high up the mountain before turning back.



From Old Cosmiques hut looking toward the new hut

Returning to the tram station, we got a snack, enjoyed the beautiful view and then took the tram down. Next we drove to Reichenbach im Kandertal. Part of the trip involved driving our car onto a train car for a 15km (9 mile) ride through the Lötschberg tunnel. Cost about \$27US. We arrived in Reichenbach im Kandertal, and later that night Jesper drove to Bern to pick up his friend Elisabeth Guggenberger, who had arrived by train from Vienna.

Sept. 8. The following morning, the three of us were on the auto train on the way to climb Allalinhorn 4,027 m (13,211ft.). This was an interesting peak for me. We took 2 gondolas up the mountain, then transferred over to an underground tram that took us to the Mittelallalin top station at 3,450 meters. This leaves only 600 m gain, making Allalinhorn one of the easiest 4,000 m peaks in the Alps. The climb was very straightforward, following the beaten path in the snow around some crevasses. It took us about 3.5 hours to summit.



Jeff summiting Allalinhorn

I was still in a lot of pain from my boots, and Jesper and Elisabeth performed much better.



Elisabeth climbing Allalinhorn

Off we drove to France, staying at the Hotel Arveyron outside of Chamonix. We had been keeping track of the conditions on the mountain and the success of climbers on the Trois Monts route. There had been no successful summits using

that route for several days due to icy conditions, which worried us. So we brilliantly decided to check the bunk availability at the Gouter hut and we were lucky and found 25 bunks available. There must have been a big group that cancelled out. We quickly made a reservation for three.

Sept. 9. We decided to do a hike on the Mt. Blanc circuit. Our goal was to have an easier day and rest my feet. We hiked up past the Refuge de la Pierre à Bérard, where we had lunch. All told it was a very pleasant day. We spent the night at Hotel Les Mélèzes outside of Chamonix.

Sept. 10. After breakfast we went over to the parking area and took the Bellevue cable car from Les Houches and then the very interesting cogwheel Tramway du Mont Blanc to the Nid d'Aigle (2,372 m). From there it is about a 1,450 m climb to the Gouter refuge (3,817 m). The first section is easy walking on a well established path. Just after the Tête Rousse refuge, we crossed the infamous Gran Couloir where there is often substantial rock fall, and we did indeed see rocks come tumbling down. Rumor has it that 30% of the people who get killed going up that route (or is it all people going all the routes?) get killed in the Gran Couloir from rock fall. There was a beaten path across the couloir and most people practically ran across it. The last 550 m from there is 2nd and 3rd class scrambling rather than walking. It is not always easy and one climber succeeded in falling on Elisabeth. It took about 6 hours to get to the hut. Elisabeth kicked our butts going up the steep scramble.

Jesper lagged behind due to intestinal distress, presumably from having eaten something bad. I was mostly carrying my boots up to the hut so my feet were not getting any worse. We spent the night at the Gouter hut, which is not cheap: 55 Euros for a bunk, 30 Euros for food and 5 Euros for a 1.5 liter bottle of water. All told I figure it cost us each about 100 Euros (\$107) to spend the night there.

Sept. 11. We got up early, geared up and were out the door around 4:30 am. Due to my slow gearing up, I think we were the last people out of the hut. Leaving the Gouter hut there is glaciated terrain and we had on our crampons, harnesses and rope. Most of the ascent is a long slow plod without any steep ground. Jesper was feeling the after effects of the intestinal problems and turned around after about an hour. Elisabeth and I hiked past the Vallot shelter at 4,362 m (14,311 ft), an emergency bivouac. The word is that you **do not** want to stay there unless desperate. We then climbed along the Bosses ridge. The two bosses (humps), which from a distance look steep, are steep. Toward the summit the ridge is exposed and I was being cautious crossing it. Luckily, despite there being a lot of climbers on the mountain, we did not have to pass any group coming down at that point. It took us about 4.5 hours to reach the summit.



Elisabeth and Jeff on the summit of Mont Blanc

While we were there we saw two parasailors take off on what must have been a very exciting and cold trip back to Chamonix.



Parasail taking off from Mt. Blanc summit for a quick and exhilarating, but cold, ride down.

We had to cross one bergschrund on the way up and down. There was a fixed rope on it and steps cut on the uphill side. There was one scary step getting across a deep crevasse at that point. Other than crossing the bergschrund, the descent was easy. We made it back down to the Gouter hut and because there were bunks available we decided to spend another night there and cross the Gran Couloir at a safer time. (*Presumably Jesper was waiting for you there?*)

Sept. 12. Next morning we ate and started our descent. Descending the 2nd/3rd class trail was slow going for me, and Jesper and Elisabeth had to wait for me at different spots. While Jesper was waiting at the Gran Couloir there was a rock slide that seemed to go on for about 5 minutes. Jesper said he saw several meters of the use trail across the couloirs being covered by the rocks. With my slow pace and a canceled tram departure, we had to wait over an hour before

going down. With a quick change of clothes we were off and heading to Göttingen, which is where both Jesper and Elisabeth live. I was able drive on the autobahn in Jesper's VW. He wanted me not to go over 150kph (a little under 95mph). However, I caught myself at one time doing 175kph (108mph), and cars were still passing me. We arrived in Göttingen after midnight.

Sept. 13. Jesper went to work and I did a walking tour of Göttingen, which I enjoyed. It's a university town, and looks like a great place to live. Jesper lives in a building that he thinks was built in the early 1700s. It has been subdivided into apartments and modernized, but you can still see some of the hand hewn beams and posts uncovered.

Sept. 14. Jesper drove me to his place of work at the Max Planck Institute for Solar System Research, and gave me a tour of the place, which I thank him for. Then he lent me his car and I drove to Torfhaus, and climbed the Brocken, or Blocksberg, Located in Harz National Park, this is a rounded mountain and the tallest for a long way around, at 1,141 m (3,743 ft). It has a very good view and is where the northern European witches meet. The Soviets built a large installation there to pick up western radio signals, but it is now a tourist attraction with steam locomotives going to the top. I did a 15 mile hike and it was a very enjoyable day.

Sept. 15. Jesper drove me to the train station, I took the train to the Frankfurt airport and I was on my way home.

Ski Trip to the Eastside

December 28 - 30, 2016

By

Julius Gawlas

Between Christmas and New Year, 2016, Linda Sun and Julius Gawlas (scribe) managed a quick ski touring trip to the East Side. We met on Tuesday late in Bridgeport with vague objectives of finding decent snow for touring. We stayed for 3 nights in Virginia Creek Settlement - highly recommended. (We had stayed there on another spring ski trip in 2015.)

Dec. 28

We drove to Virginia Lakes, the road was plowed until about half a mile from the lakes. We decided to go up towards Black Mountain (11,797 ft), through Red Lake bowl. It was a beautiful sunny day, with fresh fluffy snow and nobody around.



We went up on the small ridge and then traversed to the main bowl leading towards Black Mountain. At around 10,800 ft we decided that the snow was getting crusty and windswept, so we decided to ski down in the trees. It was great fluffy powder all the way to the lake. We repeated that 3 times and skinned out back to the car. One could not ask for a better moderate tour.



Dec. 29

Hearing about all that great snow in Mammoth, we decided to try the Mammoth Crest. One of the easiest runs there is Red Cone Bowl and it turned out to be a good choice. We drove to Tamarack XC in Mammoth, walked on XC tracks (it is okay, as long as you stay on the side) for a few miles and then started climbing past west side of George Lake on obvious ridge towards the Crest. Once we got a bit higher, great views opened in all directions: no wind, just blue skies and snowy mountains as far as the eye could see. Shortly after we were on the top of Red Cone Peak (~11,400 ft), with tracks going further along the Crest. We were not familiar with the details of the descent - so we simply skied down the bowl,

than headed right into the woods above Horseshoe Lake. Tree skiing was good, albeit tricky at times to avoid occasional gullies or denser patches of trees. Once at the lake we were back on XC resort trails. It was another great touring day, somewhat strange to go to backcountry starting and finishing at something resembling a city park. Very different from the day before!



Dec. 30

This was a short day, since I was driving all the way home. We went back to Virginia Lakes, this time towards Mount Olsen (11086 ft). We skinned up to the saddle and decided that there was not enough snow coverage (or time) to go to the top, even though we were just few hundred feet below the summit. Going down we were rewarded with the same powdery snow in the trees, and we were surprised how easy it was to find a fresh, virgin line. Full outing to Mount Olsen will have to wait for another day - but it is a great moderate destination, perhaps later this spring?

One peak and three days of excellent skiing!