

4000 m Peaks of the Alps

Normal and classic routes

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The Matterhorn, Weisshorn and Bishorn, photographed from the Lauteraarhorn (ph. V. Cividini)



6 • MONT BLANC 4810 m

Rounded and pale like a full moon, at 4810 m Mont Blanc dominates the vast and featured microcosm which forms the eponymous massif. The evocative snowy summit is the tip of a huge structure which, in terms of size and complexity, is unparalleled in the Alps. The rugged glacial expanses of the north side, with the long tongue of the Glacier des Bossons still lapping the entrance of the Tunnel du Mont Blanc; the complex crown of surrounding peaks, all easily surpassing 4000 metres; the high walls of ice and red granite on the Italian sides; no matter what the angle, this huge structure displays shapes and dimensions which are incomparable with the rest of the Alpine range.

The first ascent of Mont Blanc was made more than two hundred years ago when a single party of pioneers, J. Balmat (a *crystallier* (crystal hunter) and game hunter) and M. Paccard (physician and botanist), reached the summit on 8 August 1786, crossing the Grands Mulets and the north side of the summit's dome. In the late nineteenth century, improvements in technical equipment led to important changes in the normal route; from the Grand Plateau onwards the route moved further right until the Col du Dôme, then followed the Bosses Ridge - a steeper but less dangerous alternative to the northern slope. Consequently and due also to the changing glacial morphology, the route over the Glacier des Bossons and the Grands Mulets was abandoned during the summer season in favour of less complex itineraries (such as the Bosses Ridge from the Dôme du Goûter and, following the construction of the Aiguille du Midi cable car, the Trois Monts route). This historic route has long been used as a ski-mountaineering ascent, although the current state of the seracs which threaten the Petit Plateau push more and more ski-tourers towards the Dôme du Goûter north ridge, saving the old route for the descent to minimise the exposure to seracs.

As well as the ascent routes described here (see also the Péuterey Ridge and the Brouillard Ridge), there are another three classic routes for experienced climbers to reach the summit with optimum elegance: the Brenva Spur with Güssfeldt variant, an entirely glacial route which winds through the middle of the eponymous slope; the Cresta dell'Innominata (Nameless Ridge) on the south-east side above the Col Eccles and finally the Tournette Spur on the south-west face – once the easiest route on the Italian side (before the discovery of the Aiguilles Grises route, route 5b) and today transformed into a long and complex journey across one of Mont Blanc's most impervious sides.

6a • Bosses Ridge

6b • Trois Monts Route

Bosses Ridge



FIRST ASCENT: On 29 July 1859, E. Headland, G.C. Hodgkinson, C. Hudson, G.C. Joad, M. Anderegg, F. Couttet and two other guides climbed the Bosses ridge, approaching via the historic Grands Mulets (now a ski-touring descent). On 18 July 1861 L. Stephen, F.F. Tuckett, M. Anderegg, J. Bennen and P. Perren took this route from the Aiguille du Goûter (current route from the Goûter hut)

GRADE: PD

ASCENT: 570 m from Col du Dôme

SUPPORT BASES: Goûter hut, Gonella hut, Grands Mulets hut (ski-mountaineering route)

CHARACTERISTICS: glacier ascent and ridge, narrow in places

EQUIPMENT: for glacier travel

6a



Gazing over Mont Blanc from Chamonix it is possible to make out two twin peaks to the right of the main summit. Perched like a camel's humps, these are the two Bosses (literally meaning "humps") which characterise the north-west summit ridge of Mont Blanc. These features are climbed by hundreds of climbers every year, heading for Mont Blanc via the most popular normal route. The Bosses ridge has three main approach possibilities: an approach from the Aiguille du Goûter and the nearby Goûter hut is the most convenient and popular choice during the summer; the Aiguilles Grises/Papa route from the Gonella hut is particularly interesting from the Italian side, and finally the ski-mountaineering route which develops along the north ridge of the Dôme du Goûter.

APPROACH

• **From the Goûter hut:** ascend route 5a until nearing the summit crown of the Dôme du Goûter. Avoid the summit, passing between it and Pointe Bayeux (4258 m) then descend gen-

tly down wide slopes in a south-westerly direction to reach the Col du Dôme (2 hours). This is the most accessible and popular route during the summer.

• **From the Gonella hut:** follow route 5b until the small plateau below the summit crown of the Dôme du Goûter. Climb this, leave the summit on the left then head E towards the Col du Dôme (5 hours).

ROUTE

From the Col du Dôme (4237 m), ascend SE up a short slope (bergschrund) to reach the Vallot shelter (4362 m). This can be a useful refuge from high winds or intense cold but it is not suitable for an overnight stay and is intended for emergency use for climbers in danger. After a short plateau begin the descent of the first of the two snowy "humps": the Grande Bosse (4513 m). Follow the snow ridge carefully, descend slightly to a saddle then continue on the ridge to reach the Petite Bosse (4547 m). After another short descent continue along the ridge with alternating wider and narrower sections

until reaching the summit (2-3 hours from the Vallot shelter).

DESCENT

Reverse the route. It is also possible to traverse towards the Aiguille du Midi, reversing route 6b (check conditions beforehand).

FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS

The summit of Mont Blanc by far surpasses the height of the other alpine four-thousanders. Consequently, potentially dangerous weather conditions become much more extreme, including exposure to intense cold (even in high summer), sudden changes in weather and strong winds (up to 150 km/h). Conditions can worsen dramatically beyond the Vallot shelter and it is imperative to avoid this route in uncertain weather, strong winds (upwards of 50 km/h) and fog. Pay close attention to the weather forecast: the Bise wind can cause impossible conditions beyond the Vallot shelter even on a calm day (cold wind and difficulty in moving along the ridge). The Föhn wind is just as dangerous in that it often causes the formation of clouds (l'âne du Mont Blanc) which engulf the mountain down to the Col du Dôme or the Grand Plateau, causing serious orientation issues.

OTHER OPTIONS

There are two possible traverses of 4000 m plus ridges, combining some of the suggested routes. By linking routes 6b+6a+5a the Aiguille du Midi-Aiguille du Goûter traverse is made possible (also possible in reverse). This is a very interesting and popular route which is nonetheless physically demanding, requiring physically

able climbers and excellent weather and snow conditions. The second option is even more elegant from a mountaineering point of view: the famous Aiguille de Bionnassay-Mont Blanc traverse (routes 4a+4b to the Piton des Italiens, then routes 5b+6a). This route also requires excellent fitness, stable weather and good mountain conditions.

ON SKIS

The ski-mountaineering route to Mont Blanc takes route 5c to the Dôme du Goûter then route 6a along the Bosses ridge. Follow route 5c until Pointe Bravais then ascend towards Pointe Bayeux. At the gentle slopes below the summit of the Dôme du Goûter traverse left (SSE) and descend slightly to the Col du Dôme (keep skins on). Ascend to the Vallot shelter and leave skis here. Continue on foot along the Bosses ridge, in summer climbed in both directions. Return to the Vallot shelter, put skis back on and descend to the Grands Mulets hut along the historic route of the Grand and Petit Plateau as described for route 5c.

The ski ascent of Mont Blanc is effectively a mountaineering route. Most of the climb is made with skis over the shoulder and crampons underfoot. The snow is almost never perfect for the entire descent. The best conditions are generally between May and July, bearing in mind the advice given in "Favourable Conditions" in terms of the winds. Ski grade BSA, mountaineering grade AD (the north ridge of the Dôme).



Next page: A spring ascent of the Bosses Ridge
(ph. M. Romelli)





58 • DUFOURSPITZE 4634 m

59 • NORDEND 4609 m

The two highest peaks in the Monte Rosa group are located in the northern part by the upper section of the Monte Rosa Glacier. The elegant cusp of the Nordend naturally owes its name to its northerly position. The Dufourspitze, or Punta Dufour, formerly known as the Höchste Spitze (Highest Peak) was renamed in honour of the founder of the Swiss Federal Office of Topography G.H. Dufour. The Dufourspitze was one of the last peaks to be reached in the Monte Rosa group. All the first attempts took place between 1847 and 1854 and confronted the difficult and verglas-strewn rocks above the Silbersattel, now equipped with fixed ropes. Many climbers reached the edge of the ridge between the Grenzpfel and the Dufour but could go no further. It wasn't until 1855 that the pioneers changed their strategy and attempted a route over the west ridge, which now forms the current normal route.

As well as the normal route, other itineraries worth mentioning are the famous and popular Rey Ridge to the Dufour, exposed to the south above the Grenz Glacier and the difficult S. Caterina Ridge to the Nordend which is accessed from the Città di Gallarate bivouac on the Jägerhorn. Decidedly less advisable but all the more fascinating for that reason are the historic and modern routes which follow the high east side of the two peaks, which linked with the Zumstein and the Signalkuppe form the infamous East Face of Monte Rosa. The fame of this vast face is somewhat foreboding: its long mountaineering history began at the end of the 1700s (the first attempts via the Marinelli Couloir) and is still unfolding with the relatively recent addition of new routes, however this history has been blighted by numerous avalanches due to the easterly aspect and the presence of many collapsing seracs.

From the left, Nordend, the Dufourspitze and the Zumsteinspitze (ph. V. Cividini)



Normal Route to the Dufourspitze



FIRST ASCENT: J. Birbeck, C. Hudson, C. Smyth, J.G. Smyth, E.J.W. Stevenson, U. Lauener, J. and M. Zumtaugwald, 1 August 1855

GRADE: PD+

ASCENT: 1750 m

SUPPORT BASES: Monte Rosahütte

CHARACTERISTICS: Long glacier traverse culminating in a ridge traverse

EQUIPMENT: For glacier travel

Good tracks above the Sattel (ph. M. Romelli)



58a



The ridge route to the highest summit in the Monte Rosa group is enjoyable, rarely too challenging and offers some amazing views. Unfortunately it is preceded by a dull and heavily crevassed approach which in summer will make you long for skis.

APPROACH

From the hut head NE over the moraine and follow it until an area of rocks and scree at 3109 m. Continue on a path leading decidedly more to the east and continue onto the Monte Rose Glacier to the right of spot height 3303 m (1 h 30).

ROUTE

Follow the glacier due east, almost immediately coming to a semi-flat area with numerous lateral crevasses (take care; these can be delicate with unstable snow). The terrain then becomes steeper but less rugged: overcome a rise to the right of the rocks at 3827 m and then follow a ramp between two seracs to the left of the "Sholle" area. At a shelf at around 4000 m bear south aiming for the snowy Sattel saddle. Ascend on the steepening slopes of the Satteltol and overcome the bergschrund to reach the saddle. Here the enjoyable section of the climb along the west ridge of Dufourspitze begins. Ascend this steeply on snow or ice until a shoulder at 4499 m. Traverse over rock to reach the next col then ascend a second steep snow slope (be careful when icy). From here the ridge becomes rockier and semi-flat. Follow it (I-II) moving right around a small gendarme until a notch. Overcome the second rocky rise via a couloir on the left (II) and rejoin the ridge to reach a second notch below the summit. Climb a chimney

Next page: the elegant profile of the Nordend viewed from the summit of the Dufourspitze (ph. M. Cheli)

on the left to reach the summit, occasionally equipped with a fixed rope (one move of III). 2 hours from the Sattel, approximately 7-8 hours from the hut.

DESCENT

Reverse the route.

FAVOURABLE CONDITIONS

Usually possible throughout the summer. The section on the lower part of the glacier above the Obere Plattje is always quite delicate due to crevasses and only gets worse with poor re-freezing conditions or a sharp rise in daytime temperatures. In terms of the subjective conditions, bear in mind that the route's difficulties, although limited, are encountered after many hours on the route and at a high altitude. Excellent physical condition and experience of high altitude environments required.

ON SKIS

As for the summer route. A great classic, BSA, possible from April to May and occasionally until June. Leave skis just below the Sattel.



The Dufourspitze summit ridge seen from spot height 4499 m (ph. M. Romelli)

