

THE 100 FINEST, 2013

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE!

Given the number of quality climbs that exist today, 'mission impossible' would seem a highly appropriate subtitle for this book.

Gaston Rébuffat's *100 Finest Routes* was a milestone. Despite the constraint of being restricted to just 100 climbs, Rébuffat's book beautifully encapsulated mountaineering in the Mont Blanc Massif, highlighting the incredible diversity of routes to be found in this relatively small area and inspiring innumerable climbers to dream of new heights, to learn, to progress, to gradually 'tick' the famous numbers one by one.

Published in 1973, when climbers such as René Desmaison and Walter Bonatti and North America's big wall specialists were taking mountaineering to new levels, it provided a vivid portrait of alpinism at the time. This period also saw the emergence of new techniques which would revolutionise all aspects of mountaineering — rock, ice and mixed — opening up vast new possibilities in a massif that, for a while at least, had seemed fully worked out. As a result of these developments, the last few decades have seen a veritable explosion of new climbs of all styles. Tackling the abundant gullies, icefalls and blank walls that abound in Mont Blanc's 'enchanted garden', these modern routes are a fitting complement to the more traditional lines showcased in Rébuffat's *100 Finest*.

Given the effect of these changes on modern alpinism, a new compendium illustrating the current state of play would seem to be long overdue. But how could one person produce such a compendium without being crushed by the enormity of the task, especially if they were to stay within the impossibly narrow confines of the magic figure '100'?

One of the area's most brilliant, knowledgeable and multi-talented mountaineers has risen to the challenge. A connoisseur of all the advances in mountaineering that have occurred during the last 40 years, Philippe's experience climbing big-walls shows he is not easily daunted by long and difficult enterprises! For this book, he has adopted the same basic philosophy as the great Gaston, which was not to produce a comprehensive inventory of the best climbs, but to encourage mountaineers to discover, in every sense of the word, the varied facets of the Mont Blanc Massif. To this end, he has extended the book's horizons to incorporate all areas, styles and seasons.

With so many great climbs to choose from it is easy to imagine what a formidable task it must have been to decide which routes to include, even if a number of the climbs, both classic and modern, would be automatic choices on anyone's list. It is also easy to imagine how hard it is to classify such incredibly varied routes by order of difficulty. Well done, Philippe!

Naturally, it is tempting to draw up a list of the other gems that dot the massif like so many shining jewels and which deserve a place in this book. But their absence preserves the element of mystery that fires the imagination, excites curiosity and ensures that quiet corners will continue to exist for those who like to explore and get off the beaten track.

May this book spark ambitions, strengthen passions and inspire dreams...

Patrick Gabarrou



The elegant Rochefort Ridge

01 | MER DE GLACE [approx. 1800m]

Introduction to ice climbing

Difficulty: From easy to extreme, depending on the route
Time: 40 min to get to the beginners' climbs/1 hr to get to the moulins
Gear: Crampons, ice axes, ice screws
Period: Summer for the beginners' climbs, autumn for the moulins
Access: Monteverns station

Right
 Learning how to front point.

Below
 Steep climbing in the tunnels in the tongue of the Mer de Glace.



Twenty years ago, the Bossons Glacier was a popular place for initiating beginners into the art of ice climbing. Unfortunately, the glacier has retreated so far up the valley that its tongue now lies on very steep slopes that are exposed to serac fall. As a result, climbing on the Bossons Glacier has become unacceptably dangerous and the Mer de Glace is now considered the best venue for learning basic crampon and ice axe techniques. However, more experienced alpinists also come to the Mer de Glace because the moulins that form within the glacier are excellent places for climbing very steep ice.

Mountaineers must master the art of using ten-point crampons, and practicing on an easy glacier is an essential step in the learning process. The techniques beginners learn will depend on the types of route they are preparing for. Because most accidents occur on easy ground, and generally when descending, it is extremely important to feel at home when walking down steep ice slopes.

Moulins – shafts in the ice that carry water directly from the surface to the bottom of the glacier – form just below the confluence of the Mer de Glace and the Leschaux Glacier. In the autumn, the colder weather stops the flow from the glacial streams but the magnificent vertical chasms in the ice remain. These are perfect places for practising front-pointing techniques but the climbing is often steep and strenuous and the loud cracking sounds produced by the highly compressed ice can be heart stopping. A single ice-axe blow can sometimes crack the ice for dozens of metres, which is quite stressful. The glacier tongue also contains 'caves' in which it is possible to climb overhanging ice bathed in surrealistic blue light. On severely overhanging walls it is impossible to place an ice screw with one hand, so routes are first climbed using ice screws for aid and then climbed free using the previously placed screws for protection. The teeth on the end of ice axe blades are essential, as the axe is only held in position by the torque between the tip and the top of the blade.

APPROACH

From Monteverns station (1913m), go down the ladders to the Mer de Glace. Go up the glacier towards the ladders that lead to the Charpoua hut. The depressions in the glacier just upslope from the ladders are perfect for practicing classic 10-point crampon and ice axe techniques.

To get to the moulins, go up the Mer de Glace towards the Leschaux Glacier. The moulins usually form just below the confluence of the Leschaux Glacier and the Mer de Glace, generally on the right bank. For the caves in the glacier tongue, follow the path towards the snack bar at Les Mottets, then turn right onto the path down to the glacier.



02 | CLOCHER DE PLANPRAZ [2428m]

AIGUILLES ROUGES

Cocher–Cochon Traverse of the Clochers and Clochetons de Planpraz

Rock climbing in the Aiguilles Rouges has experienced a renaissance with the creation of dozens of modern, bolted routes. Boasting easy access and unbeatable views of the Mont Blanc Massif, these new climbs are of moderate difficulty and well protected. Climbing Cocher–Cochon and then continuing along the original traverse is an excellent way of combining one of the modern routes with a more traditional climb. The first section is fully bolted and follows a line that was dictated merely by the first ascensionists' desire to link the best climbing.

The second part of the route, the traverse, is only partly bolted and was done with the aim of finding the easiest passage. It is a very instructive route for practising a number of rope manoeuvres. For example, you will have to untie from the rope at three points along the traverse in order to set up abseils – unless you know how to tie a mooring hitch. A party with good rope technique should not take more than three hours to complete the traverse. As far as I am aware, it is the only route in the area that requires a Tyrolean traverse. To rig the Tyrolean, throw a loop of rope around a T-shaped peg between the first and second Clocheton, and then pull the rope back through once you are across.

COCHER–COCHON

APPROACH

From the top of the Planpraz cable car, follow the Col Cornu path (15 min). Go up the first cirque on the left, then follow the narrow path on the right towards the south-east spur of the Clocher de Planpraz.

Approaching the top of the first Clocheton; the classic route climbs the crack, the modern route follows the crest of the pillar.



Access: Planpraz cable car

Cocher–Cochon

Difficulty: 6a max. 5b obl.

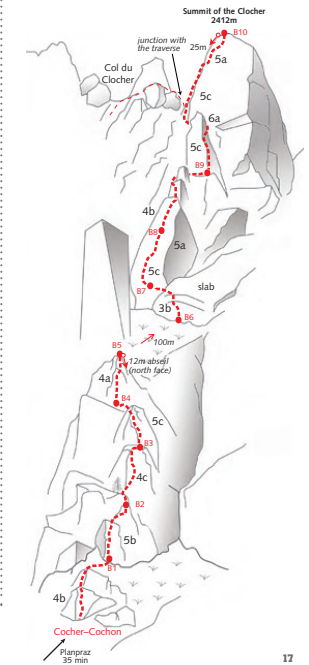
Vertical height: 250m

Time: 45 min for the approach/3 hrs for the route/35 min to get back to the cable car

Fixed gear: Bolts

Gear: 11 quickdraws

First ascent: Morgane and Jérémy Franc, Manu Méot and Christophe Mussat, 19 August 2000





Tyrolean between the first and second Clochetons.

Clochers Clochetons Traverse

Difficulty: I 4c max. 4b obl.

Vertical height: 250m

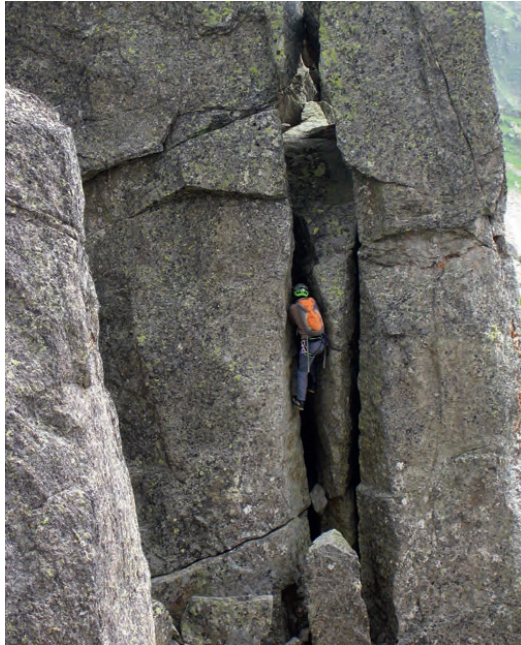
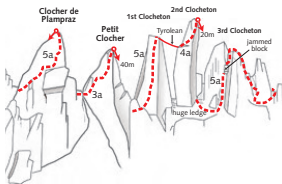
Time: 1 hr for the approach/3 hrs for the route/15 min to get to the Col du Clocher

Fixed gear: Partly bolted

Gear: Omega Pacific cams – purple, green and yellow, slings, four quickdraws

Period: Summer, autumn

First ascent: Miss A. Aguisol, J. le Bec, J. and T. de Lépiney, 31 August 1913



Chimney-crack on the third Clocheton.

CLOCHERS CLOCHETONS TRAVERSE

APPROACH

From the top of the Planpraz cable car, follow the Col Cornu path (15 min). Go up the first cirque on the left to the saddle to the left of the Clocher de Planpraz (path and cairns, 1 hr).

ROUTE DESCRIPTION

Cross the Col du Clocher onto its the north-west side, then go round a flake to a platform. Climb the slab on the west face of the Clocher (4b), then follow flakes to the south-west ridge. Traverse across the south face to get to a series of cracks. Climb the gradually widening right-hand crack to the top of the Clocher (junction with Cocher-Cochon). After a diagonal abseil (25m) to a wide ledge, go up easy ground (3a) to the Petit Clocher. Abseil (40m) to the foot of the first Clocheton. Climb the crest of the pillar to the summit (5a, pegs). Set up a recoverable Tyrolean, traverse across and climb to the top of the second Clocheton (4a). Abseil (20m) to a vast ledge. Climb a chimney below a jammed block (5a) to get to the summit of the third Clocheton, then climb down the slabs to the east. Follow a faint path to go right round the final gendarme, then move onto the north face. Cross scree slopes to the Col du Clocher.

DESCENT

Abseil down the north face of the Clocher de Planpraz to the notch to the right of the Col du Clocher. Go across easy ground to the Col du Clocher path, which is followed to the cable car station.

03 | POINTE LACHENAL [3613m]

COL DU MIDI — TACUL

Traverse of the ridge

Mountaineering requires a wide variety of skills that take many years to learn and master. Today, many alpinists begin their careers at climbing walls, so they tend to be good rock climbers and competent at climbing from belay to belay. However, the easier sections of mountaineering routes are always climbed moving together; therefore, the first skills the budding alpinist must learn are how to walk in crampons and how to manage the rope.

The Traverse of Pointe Lachenal is a short ridge climb that is perfect for practicing basic rope techniques, such as the different ways of roping up for moving along a ridge, walking on a glacier, crossing a bergschrund and tackling a rock pitch. The slopes are easy angled and can be climbed and descended using ten-point crampons. It is ideal terrain for practicing crampon techniques, moving together, taking in coils round the shoulder and becoming efficient at rope work. Mastering these techniques is essential in order to climb safely on the other routes described in this book.

Running from north-east to south-west, the traverse involves alternating sections of snow, ice, mixed ground and rock, during both the ascent and the descent.

Difficulty: II 1 3c

Time: 45 min for the approach/4 hrs for the traverse/1 hr to get back to the Aiguille du Midi

Fixed gear: None

Gear: 2 ice screws, 3 quickdraws, slings, a few cams

Period: All year

Access: Aiguille du Midi cable car

First ascent: Not known





The summit ridge of Pointe Lachenal looks as if it is directly below the seracs of Mont Blanc du Tacul.

APPROACH

From the top station of the Aiguille du Midi cable car, go down to the glacial plateau of the Col du Midi. Take care at the bergschrund, which is generally crossed on the left going down. Go across the Plateau du Midi towards the north-west extremity of Pointe Lachenal (45 min).

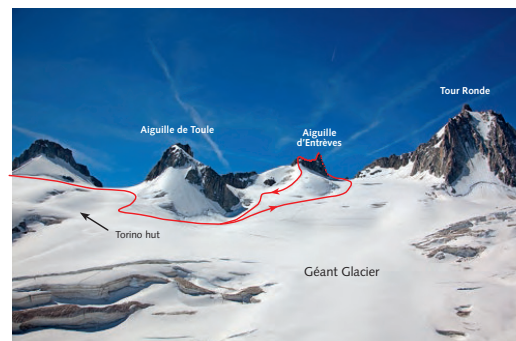
ROUTE DESCRIPTION

Cross the bergschrund and go up the first snow or ice slope (35°) to the ridge. Continue along the crest to the top of the second Pointe. Move onto the south face, then abseil (10m) down the north face to the snow slope. Go past a snowy saddle to a loose chimney. Climb the chimney (3c, 40m), then traverse right to climb a 45° snow (or mixed) slope to the summit. From the summit, continue towards Mont Blanc du Tacul and descend the least steep part of the snow slope without going too close to the area below the seracs on the Triangle du Tacul.

04 | AIGUILLE D'ENTRÈVES [3600m]

COMBE MAUDITE

South-west – North-west Traverse



Difficulty: II 1 5a

Vertical height: 80m

Time: 1 hr from the hut to the Col d'Entrèves/3 hrs for the traverse/40 min to get back to the Col d'Entrèves

Fixed gear: Partly bolted

Gear: Omega Pacific cams – green, red and yellow, wires, quickdraws

Period: Summer

Access: Torino hut (3371m), Italy

First ascent: L. Enzenhofer, L.V. Hibbler and R. Weitzenrock, 22 July 1913

Looking across the summit of the Aiguille d'Entrèves to the Peuteury Ridge.



The traverse of the Aiguille d'Entrèves is a wonderful beginner's route in the magnificent setting of the Combe Maudite. A glacier approach is followed by an easy but airy ridge. It is a short route that allows newcomers to mountaineering to practice their rope work on glaciers and a rock ridge. Numerous rock spikes along the ridge can be used as natural runners by placing the rope on the opposite side of the spike to a potential fall. As will quickly become apparent, this protection technique, which was regularly used by earlier generations of climbers, is much quicker than placing cams and quickdraws. ENSA instructors often use this route to train future guides how to belay their clients. Unfortunately, the traverse has now been bolted, destroying some of the teaching value of using natural protection.

APPROACH

From the Torino hut, go across to the Col des Flambeaux (5 min), then descend below the Aiguille de Toule. Go up towards the Combe Maudite and then head left up the valley to the Col d'Entrèves (1hr).

ROUTE DESCRIPTION

The traverse starts just to the left of the Col d'Entrèves. Follow the crest of the ridge, sometimes on the right, sometimes on the left. Go down the first chimney (3b, 10m) and then up the second (3c, 10m). Continue along the airy ridge and climb a steep wall (5a) to the summit.

DESCENT

From the summit, continue eastwards and go through an obvious notch. Go down a corner to a belay on the right. Abseil (50m) to a notch, then move back onto the crest of the ridge and follow it for 100m. When the ridge becomes too jagged, go along the Italian side for two pitches, then move back onto the French side. Go down the snow slopes on the left to the glacier.

05 | AIGUILLE DU MIDI [3842m]

VALLÉE BLANCHE

Cosmiques Ridge

Difficulty: II 1 3c
Vertical height: 200m
Time: 1 hr for the approach/3 to 4 hrs for the ridge
Gear: 3 quickdraws, slings, a few cams
Period: All year
Access: Aiguille du Midi cable car
First ascent: George and Maxwell Finch, 2 August 1911

The last few metres of the Cosmiques Ridge with the three Mont Blancs in the background.

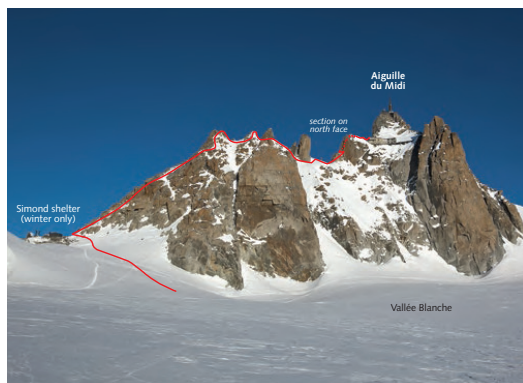


The Cosmiques Ridge is a magnificent route on some of the best granite in the world. It is one of those rare routes that can be climbed all year round and in almost any conditions. Nothing less than a lightning storm or a level-five avalanche risk can stop you attempting it. The type of climbing will depend on the time of year. At the beginning of the season it is a relatively easy mixed route, mostly on snow and climbed entirely in crampons. At the end of the season, especially if the summer is dry, it can be climbed without touching snow and it won't be the same route at all. In very snowy winters, the 3c section can be overcome in one long stride!

The Aiguille du Midi cable car provides immediate access to the high mountains, freeing climbers from the long walk from the valley floor and whisking them in the blink of an eye to the eternal snows of the glaciers. This easy access and almost instantaneous immersion in the high mountain environment has made the Cosmiques Ridge one of the most classic and most popular routes in the massif. Every step of the climb offers breathtaking views of Mont Blanc, the Tour Ronde, the Dent du Géant, the Triangle du Tacul and the Bossons Glacier, and is sure to inspire dreams of future adventures. Almost the entire ridge can be climbed moving together. Being quite short, it is an ideal route for practicing taking in and letting out coils and for perfecting your rope work.

APPROACH

From the top of the Aiguille du Midi cable car, go down to the glacial plateau of the Col du Midi. Take care at the bergschrund, which is generally crossed on the left going down. Pass below the south face of the Aiguille du Midi, then go up to the Simond shelter and the old cable car station.



ROUTE DESCRIPTION

Climb the south flank of the ridge, zigzagging between blocks of granite to get to a small pinnacle. Continue along the south side of the ridge to a second pinnacle. Abseil (bolts) and pendulum across (25m) to a ledge and a second abseil (bolts, 25m) down a chimney-gully. Cross the ledge and climb to a peg belay (3a). Go up diagonally rightwards, then descend slightly to a couloir that leads back to the ridge. Traverse right to a ledge system which is followed to the foot of the Gendarme des Cosmiques. Go up the snow slope to the ridge and follow it to the section of 3c climbing (chipped holds). Traverse the crack-ramp rightwards (20m). At the end of the ramp, fork left to gain a comfortable platform. Move onto the north-west face and climb (3c) two pitches (each 25m), often icy, to the top of the ridge. Traverse horizontally for 15m to get to the ladder which leads to the south terrace of the Aiguille du Midi.

Top
 The fabulous view from the Cosmiques Ridge takes in the summits on the traverse of Mont Blanc, from left to right, Mont Blanc du Tacul, Mont Maudit, Mont Blanc, the Bosses Ridge, the Dôme du Goutier and the Aiguille du Goutier.

Right
 The snowy step on the ridge below the Gendarme des Cosmiques.

