

Chock Full o' Nuts

Fall
2007

The newsletter of Women Climbers Northwest

Climbing in Europe—Part 1: The French Alps

By Nancy Kim

Our tiny VW Polo sagged under the weight of all the gear as we rolled into Chamonix on a perfect September day. Colleen Hinton, a U.S. citizen from South Africa temporarily residing in Denmark, and three other WCN members—Sonja Bring, Barb Buys and I—gingerly extricated ourselves from the overstuffed Polo and headed into town to get camping information and a bite to eat. Getting in and out of this under-sized sedan without toppling the olive oil, cheap Bordeaux or LuLu biscuits, became a thematic challenge from Chamonix to Zermatt, and throughout the Dolomites of Northern Italy. The climbers' campground in Chamonix, Camping Les Arolles, was our home base for a week. Like the typical European campground, Les Arolles' creature comforts included

flush toilets (but no toilet paper), hot showers and sinks with hot water for washing dishes. Colleen and Sonja shared a tent while Barb and I shared another, a pairing decided by rounds of Rock, Paper, Scissors with the ultimate victor landing me as a tent mate. Our climbing objectives in the Alps were undefined, but an attempt of Mont Blanc, the roof of Europe at 4807 meters (15,770 ft.) above sea level, was a possibility. Colleen had attempted it with her partner, Reg, via Les Trois Mont Blanc route, a long, aesthetic route accessed from the Cosmiques hut and Aiguille du Midi téléphérique (cable car). That unsuccessful summit bid meant unfinished business for Colleen who was keen to try again.

Tuesday Sept. 5, 2006 marked our first day of proper climbing and the afternoon saw blue sky and mercury rising into seventies. A quick drive up valley (north), near the town of Argentière brought us to our trailhead. We hiked a stretch of the Tour du Mont Blanc to access bolted Gneiss in a climbing area called Les Chéserys. We lengthened our approach by taking the wrong spur, a lovely mistake that put us on an exciting trail with several fixed ladders to downclimb. The

scenery across the valley was dramatic with hanging glaciers and angular summits rising high above the town. When we arrived at the Aiguillette d'Argentière, two French women were climbing a 5c route while Babou, an adorable old dog belonging to one of the pair, was pacing at the bottom of



Climbing Cosmiques arete, Mont Blanc du Tacul in background

the tower wondering where the hell these women had gone. Several mountain goats had joined us later in the day and the sure-footed beasts effortlessly scaled all our routes.

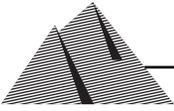
The rock guide book we relied

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Upcoming Trips for Winter 2008

New Year's Ski Trip Mary Yocom is planning to hold her annual New Year's Ski Trip at Mt. Bachelor, hosted at her home in Redmond OR. *If interested, please contact Mary at MYocom6689@aol.com*

Methow Valley Hut Trip The annual Methow Valley Nordic hut trip is tentatively scheduled for the first weekend in February. *If interested, please contact Clare at clarep@drizzle.com*



About the club: **Women Climbers**

Northwest is a nonprofit organization formed in 1983 to promote climbing and other wilderness activities among women. Our roots are in rock climbing and mountaineering, but women of all outdoor persuasions are welcome. In other words, girls really do want to have fun!

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Climbing in the Alps, continued

upon was "Plaisir West," written in German with French translations. Colleen read the German, I read the French and we occasionally came away with similar descriptions of the routes.

Wednesday Sept. 6 yielded more sun and warm temps. Money can't buy everything, but it can buy altitude, and so we did, purchasing a lift ticket to Brévent in the Aiguilles Rouges (the red needles) for some multi-pitch climbing on Gneiss. The route we chose was Crackoukass, 5b, which I led with Barb following while Sonja and Colleen swung leads. The first pitch was a bit of a strenuous ass-pincher, the difficulty of which was not apparent at first blush. At some point the skies turned, spitting out a thin rain, but we soldiered on and the precipitation passed without incident. We capped the day with a round of Mont Blanc lagers on the terrace before catching the last return lift. Our post-climb routine consisted of grocery shopping, checking the latest weather report at the guides' office, cooking dinner and thumbing guide books to decide on the next day's agenda. Barb checked her email daily at the Internet café in town. Colleen text messaged Reg in Copenhagen to get the weather if we missed it in town, or if I couldn't translate it well enough to keep us out of danger.

Thurs, Sept. 7. The four of us hiked up to Les Chéserys again and climbed "Voie Blanche," multi-pitch sport climbing on Gneiss.

Friday Sept. 8. It was time to acclimatize more at higher altitude if we wanted to attempt Mont Blanc, so Colleen suggested a couple days in the Vallée Blanche. A base for many popular climbs, this valley is accessed via cable car, the Aiguille du Midi lift which takes climbers to 3842 meters. A short jaunt down a knife-edge ridge with dizzying exposure took us past the Refuge de Cosmiques and then a bit further down to our camp site. The Cosmiques is a modern, cozy shelter, one of many such huts throughout the Alps where climbers sleep in dormitories and eat hearty, hot meals at community tables. The huts also serve beer, a great luxury many a spent alpinist can appreciate. The hut system makes it possible to spend long periods in the mountains with just a small climbing pack, without the extra weight of camping gear, food and water. Our plan was to forgo the hut this time and

camp on the glacier, making us rogue climbers as camping is prohibited by whichever body of bureaucrats oversees the whole business. It was painfully obvious on the cable car that we were the only ones camping because of the slender size of everyone else's pack. Only one other party had flouted the no-camping regulations, which meant we had this vast stretch of flat glacier practically to ourselves. Just as we suspected, everyone else in the cable car headed to the Cosmiques hut. Colleen



Below the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul



toiled over dinner: soup, a cous-cous dish, and chocolate for dessert. Incidentally, Colleen's grossly exaggerated idea of a single serving became readily apparent when I saw the convex mass of cous cous brimming over my bowl. Much to my surprise, my small South African friend had consumed her entire portion. I declared, "Colleen, you have a tapeworm. I shall call her Hortense."

Saturday Sept. 9. Three a.m. came early after fitful rest. The good weather seemed to be holding, though white flashes of lightning lit up the adjacent valley. We headed south toward Mont Blanc du Tacul, a glacier climb with slopes to 40 degrees, and a rock summit topping out at 4248 meters. My cast iron legs felt the altitude. We made slow but steady progress. The route's steepest section required some front-pointing and the rock summit offered some challenge in crampons. We made it to the top around 10 am and returned to camp at 12:45 pm. After post-climb naps, we hiked up to the Cosmiques hut for a beer.

Sunday Sept. 10. 5:30 am seemed positively reasonable for the revelry call. We were the first party on the Arête de Cosmiques, a popular mixed climb that finishes on the terrace of the Aiguille du Midi cable car. I tied into the sharp end, with Barb following, for what would be my first lead of a committing, backcountry climb. Unlike the French, I opted out of crampons and stashed them in my pack. If you don't enjoy the sound of metal scraping against rock, the French climbing scene is sure to put you off because it's Gallic tradition to wear down one's crampon points on snow-free terrain. The arête is low fifth class with one point of aid, highly exposed, scenic and a zoo with the United Nations of guides and climbers riding your ass, passing you, stepping on your rope, and occasionally making fun of you for placing gear. Often, Barb was out of earshot

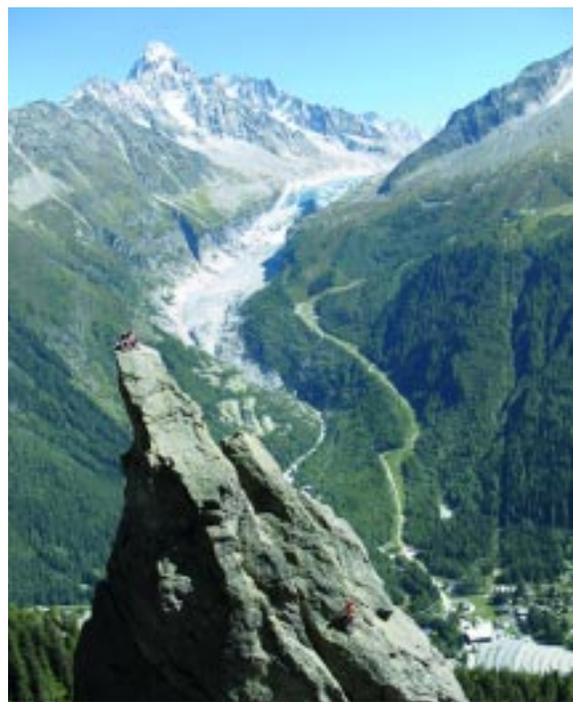
and I had to belay her in some awkward spots. One major bottleneck on this climb, comparable to I-5 in Tacoma, is the rappel point to descend a tower in order to gain the next one. It's a game of hurry up and wait coupled with a clusterfuck of ropes. Thankfully, we had superb weather so we weren't cold or wet during our layover. It was nearly 5 pm when we finished, and most of the guided parties were long gone, likely back down in the valley. Having missed the last cable car down to Chamonix, we headed back to camp for a third, unplanned night of camping. Desiring a warm shelter for the night, Barb stayed in the hut, so I had a tent to myself. Since we had no dinner for a third night, we dined at the Cosmiques hut and broke bread with some British climbers who were planning to climb Mont Blanc via Les Trois Mont Blanc.

Monday Sept. 11. We broke camp in a snowstorm with a few flashes of lightning to keep things interesting. When we descended into the valley, it was sunny and warm. We left Les Arolles for another campground, one slightly more posh, with laundry facilities and...toilet paper. As a break from our typical routine, cooking at the campground, we had dinner in town at Le Bivouac, a typical Savoyard restaurant, where I ran into a woman named Jo, my old neighbor from Ballard. She recognized me, despite my shaved head.

Tuesday Sept. 12. Sonja and Barb took a rest day while Colleen and I hit a climbing area near Vallorcine, north of Argentiere. We climbed a five-pitch sport route and returned in time to visit Snell's, the climbing shop, before packing for Mont Blanc. Sonja and Barb had dinner waiting. Colleen and Hortense were delighted.



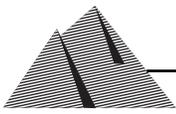
Ice tunnel on Aiguille du Midi



Climbing at Les Chéserys, Nancy on lead lower right

Wednesday Sept. 13. We got up at 5:30 am and crammed ourselves into the Polo. Compact? More like an iCar Nano with four chicks and climbing gear. Destination, Les Houches, a nearby town down valley where we would catch a lift, then an electric train which would deposit us at Le Nid d'Aigle (the eagles's nest), elevation 2300 meters, the starting point

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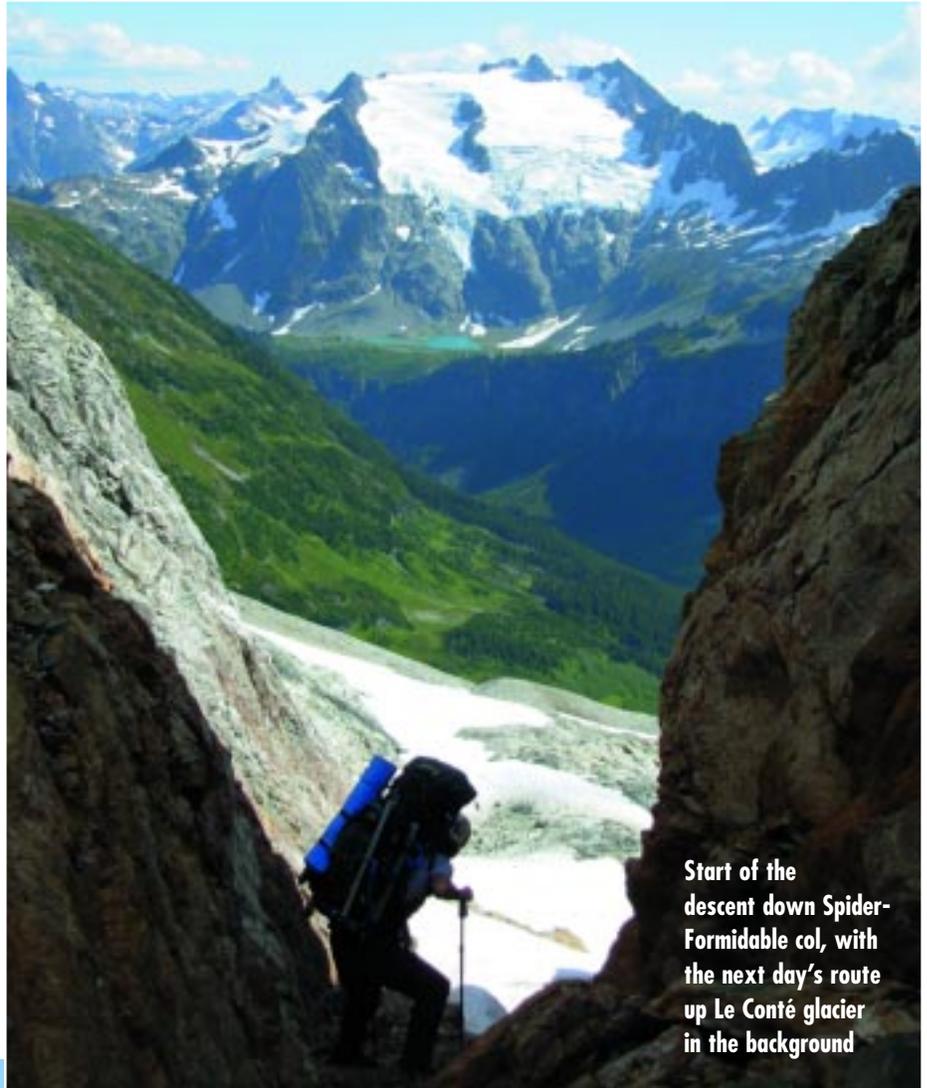


The Famous Ptarmigan Traverse

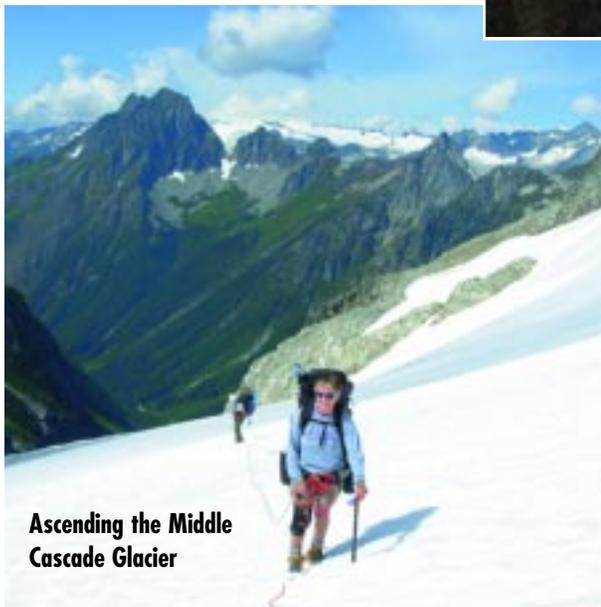
By Dawn Chapel

Last summer Clare Parfitt, Dawn Chapel, and Dena Peel, with support from Lovorka Knezevic and Mary Yocom did the Ptarmigan Traverse; a 30 mile traverse through the high mountain passes of the North Cascades. Apparently the road up to Downey Creek has since washed out, now making the trip an extra 20 miles to hike out. The following account was taken from my journal that I kept during the trip.

We arrived at trail head to Cascade Pass on August 10, 2006 in clouds and rain and made a wise decision to postpone departure for Cache Col until the following day. We headed back to Marblemount and rented a double-wide trailer for the evening (yes, that's what I said, a double-wide trailer), where we proceeded to drink beer and unpack our packs trying to find things to leave out to reduce the weight. We each brought enough for 7 days. Though the trip could be done in 5, we wanted to give ourselves enough time in case we wanted to do a climb.



Start of the descent down Spider-Formidable col, with the next day's route up Le Conté glacier in the background



Ascending the Middle Cascade Glacier

We took one glacier rope, ice axes, harnesses, pickets and a couple pieces of rock pro and then camping gear and food. I'm convinced my pack weighed close to 50 pounds. We would take turns carrying the rope. Although I wish we could have cut it in thirds and shared the load.

The next morning was still a bit overcast, but with a forecast for at least a 3-day window of calm

weather coming up, we were ready. We all hiked up to Cascade Pass where we said goodbye to Lovorka and Mary who would meet us at Six Mile Creek campground on the other side in 5 to 6 days. Clare, Dena and I proceeded up the steep traverse to Cache Col in the fog. Halfway up we met a group coming down, bailing on the traverse because of the rainy weather. They'd been holed up in a tent for two days. They didn't know about the 3-day window. We followed their tracks up the glacier to the Col. The pass at the col was cold, windy and still fogged in. We scrambled down steep talus (one

of many to come) to Kool Aide Lake—a small rock ledge holding a little lake up on the side of a steep valley. We met some other nice folks at the lake who were also on their way out because of bad weather, but camping one more night at Kool Aide. I was beginning to see our good luck with the weather window. The camp at Kool Aide was beautiful, with a deep glacier carved valley feeding clouds up the slope towards us and the craggy peaks above. Rays of sun would break through occasionally, or the clouds would open up and show a peak of the next ridge. We also saw two bears feeding on the blueberries on the slopes. There were no trees so we decided to cache our food under some rocks and hope the critters would stay away. The view of the traverse for the following day (the red ledges) looked steep and daunting from camp.

The next morning broke with sunshine and a family of goats galloped down the hill through camp. We soaked up the sun and some coffee and packed up and headed for the red ledges. The ledge, somewhat narrow and exposed, would be easy to climb up and traverse—that is, without a 50 pound pack on. Once traversing the ledge and scrambling some block fields of talus we came to the Middle Cascade Glacier. Here we roped up and ascended past deep crevasses up towards the Spider-Formidable Col. The col was like a portal to the next leg of our trip. The snow below the col was steep and we had to step down facing the slope. Once down, we had a long traverse across the basin of yet more blocky talus and snow fields and finally to Yang Yang lakes. It took us 7.5 hours from Kool Aide to Yang Yang—it was apparent that traversing the talus in heavy packs was going to slow us down and tire us on this trip. The view of the route for tomorrow up La Conte Glacier from camp again looked steep and daunting, but the views were spectacular.



On Itswoot ridge, Dome peak in the background

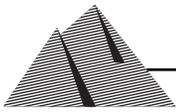
The following day we headed straight up some heathery cliff bands, where we had trouble finding the path, but once we did, the fist full of heather hand-holds pulled us up and over 1000-ft to the ridge below La Conté Glacier. We traversed a lot of snow and some rock before roping up on the glacier. A few large crevasses had to be crossed but were fairly easy. We crossed some blue ice which was melting out at the surface so that there were numerous rivulets of water flowing in little icy melt channels that would all of a sudden drop down a melt-hole into the glacier and disappear—very cool. It took us 4 hours to reach the col at the top of the glacier then a long traverse across snow and ice where Clare fell waist deep into a crevasse. Wedged in up to her hip she had to dig her whole leg out (with the poop shovel) to extract herself.

Afterwards we traversed more steep talus down to South Cascade Glacier. The views at this point were simply stunning. They just kept getting better and better. We walked un-roped across the South Cascade glacier with views that looked and felt like one of the most remote alpine places I've ever been. At the head of the glacier we came to Lizard Col. From the portal

of Lizard Col we could see Dana glacier oozing off the rock wall of Dome and Sinister Peaks—a hanging expanse of blue icefall all crevassed and mangled—one of the most steep valleys of vertical rock, snow and ice I've seen. We were high up. We made our way down to White Rock Lakes camp on steep talus again. The days' traverse took 9.5 hours to cover barely 4 miles. At this point it was clear that doing the traverse this time of year was all about climbing up steep snow and talus to a glacier, through a col, and then down steep snow and talus to the next lake, which would look so close from the col, but take hours to get there. Clare's motto for the trip was "I hate this steep talus shit." Dena's was "But it's right there"—referring to the lake. My motto was "my feet hurt when I stand on them." All three of us had plantar fasciitis and knee trouble, but our spirits were as high as the peaks that surrounded us.

White Rock Lakes was the most beautiful camp yet. Watching the sunset on Dome and Sinister was breathtaking. The lakes sit up high nestled in a series of rocky knobs of glacier smoothed white granite. We had the whole site to ourselves. In fact we

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Rock Climbing at Squamish

By Laurel Fan

Nancy, Dawn, Clare, Mary, Pam, Shelley, Adrienne, Christin and Laurel took a few beautiful July days to sample the granite delights available at Squamish, BC.

Clare and I arrived several hours after the first group. There was a note on Pam's van saying they were at Octopus Garden "somewhere along the way." We managed to ignore signs and maps, Clare and I walked right past "somewhere along the way" and Octopus Garden, and took the grand tour of the back side of Smoke Bluffs and the nearby residential neighborhood. Fortunately, the road map in the guidebook and a hospital sign by the highway led us back to the car.

The navigational challenges weren't over though. After arriving at Klahanie campground, it took a while for us to weave through the semi-permanent RV compounds and drunk teenagers to find our three miraculously secluded wooded campsites on the edge of Klahanie campground.

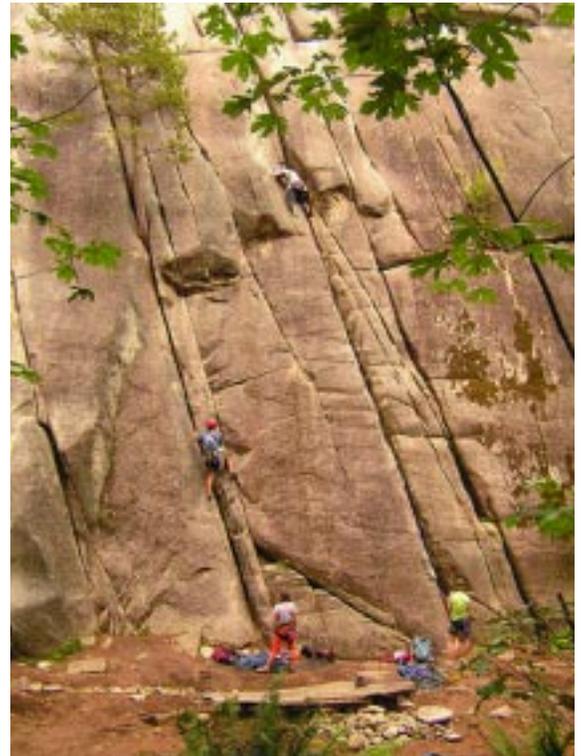
The next morning was a fresh start, as we had breakfast and coffee on a patch of grass shared with the bold campground rabbits.

Of course we did some climbing too: the next few days featured sun warmed granite cracks at Penny Lane, Octopus Garden and other Smoke Bluffs walls, hiking to the top of the Chief for some of us, and interesting sport climbing at Cheakamus Canyon (where we had an encounter with a parking lot dwelling troll walking his cat in the woods).

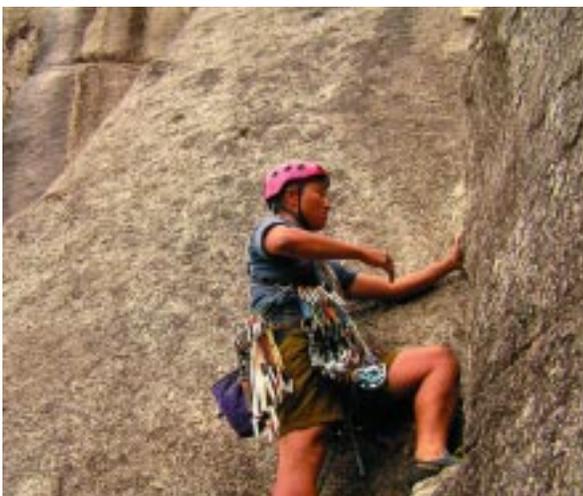
We had some nice dinners and good beers at the Howe Sound Brewery, but the most memorable meal was back at the campground. Mary conjured an entire kitchen out of the trunk of her car, including a large box of broccoli (labeled "Broccoli" of course), individually sealed packages of cheese, pine nuts, and pasta, and multiple pots and pans. To finish off the evening, Dawn brought a sack o' harmonicas and initiated more of us into her harmonica cult.

Nancy's brain teasers were almost as popular, so here's one for everyone: At

the bottom of the stairs there are three light switches, one of which controls the light bulb in a room upstairs—but you don't know which one. Can you do something with the switches, then go upstairs once and figure out which switch controls the light?



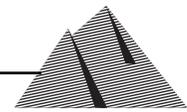
At Octopus Garden



Nancy attempts a hand jam



Belay slaves



Ptarmigan Traverse, *continued*

hadn't seen anyone since our first day at Kool Aide. Apparently the bad weather had swept the whole traverse clean for our own private trip. It was pretty weird actually not to see any other parties on the whole trip. It made the trip feel even more remote and sort of timeless. The route for tomorrow looked scary and steep and pretty much almost impossible (like the face of K2 or something), but the trip report assured us it's doable. That night the stars were bright, beautiful and encompassing. We chatted as we lay in our tents gazing at the stars. Later the moon came out and it was simply magical.

The next morning we loaded up our packs, sad to leave such a special place and headed for the vertical rock face that supposedly had a doable route up onto the glacier. The path was steep, but like before not as bad as it had looked from camp. We made our way up a snow tongue to the Dana Glacier and roped up and began our long ascent. The views of Chickamin glacier on our left were spectacular. The views just got better and better the higher we got. At the top we came into a remote bowl of snow and ice right up to the jagged mountain ridge. Here we saw insects actually on the glacier—a lady bug, butterflies, and beetles. Did they fly all the way up here or get blown up here by the wind? We also saw fresh goat tracks that lead us straight to Spire Point Col (Elevation 7800-ft). I guess the goats use the same alpine portals to traverse the alpine crags.

As I looked over the other side of Spire Point Col I could see Cub Lake down below, yet another steep stretch of snow and talus lay before us. We had lunch at the Col before scrambling down what ended up being the steepest and most loose talus we'd encountered yet. I began to expect we were off route when we entered a very steep exposed

gully that was pretty sketchy going down with the heavy packs, each of us sending rocks and scree flying down below. Finally we got out of the precarious gully, but still had an endless field of talus to traverse—where does all this rock come from?? Feet and knees were sore, but the outstanding views filled our spirits as we clambered over the boulder field of rocks. Dome peak was off to our left and I thought I could see two climbers on route high on the glacier. We decided to camp down by Cub Lake rather than the ledge. The flowers and meadows on our way to the lake greeted us. Blueberries were in abundance. We camped near the outlet of the lake.

We were very happy and fulfilled as we ate our 900 calorie backpacker dinners, listening to the piping pikas in the surrounding rocks, and glowing from having completed the traverse. Tomorrow we would hike down the "brushy" Bachelor Creek to meet up with Mary and Lovorka at Six Mile Creek campground. We didn't do any climbs on the trip; traversing the talus every day was tiring enough. Maybe earlier in the season would be easier with more snow and less talus. We really lucked out with the weather though, and the lack of crowds. The trip would not have been possible to do in bad weather. I highly recommend comfy camp shoes in the evening. Keeping the pack weight down is recommended too. Though Clare, with the heaviest pack, did have the best food: cheese, cookies, chocolate, cheese-its (yummy!). Oh, and also, Clare is quite talented in that she can pee with her heavy pack on. And Dena has a way of smashing her glasses everyday, but managed to twist them back in to shape—yet she can keep her chocolate chip cookies whole, while mine had quickly turned to crumbs by the first day. We did well as a group.

Dena and Clare let me take most of the lead route finding and did not get mad at me when I led them down that steep scary gully at the end.

The next day we broke camp and headed for Six Mile. On the way out we ran into other people for the first time in four days. A man and woman who'd attempted Dome Peak yesterday—likely the climbers I saw. Our



All smiles at the end of the trip.

descent led through thick bush and downed trees—with Dena and I giving preference for going under logs and Clare giving preference for going over logs. The brush was so thick I felt like I was walking through a salad of vegetation. We had to pass a huge avalanche of trees by going off trail, but it was well worth it. We finally hit Downey Creek and all of a sudden there were Mary and Lovorka, camp set up and waiting for us with fresh fruit, chips and wine. Mary and Lovorka had spent the days doing day hikes, including Green Mountain which they said gave a great view of the whole traverse. Laughter, hugs, and stories followed. The North Cascades are truly rugged, wild, and beautiful as are good friends to share the experience with.

Climbing in the Alps, *continued*

for the standard route up Mont Blanc. The Gouter route begins with the approach to the Gouter hut at 3700 meters (n.b. lower than the Aiguille du Midi), mostly a high-altitude hike with plenty of fourth class scrambling. Interestingly, this first section features the biggest objective hazard of the climb, crossing the so-called Death Gully, a couloir notorious for rockfall. Numerous rockfall fatalities occur on this route, contributing to Mont Blanc's high death toll, more than 100 each year. Perhaps Barb had been thinking about this. Just as we suited up, donning harnesses, crampons and tying into the rope, Barb turned to us and announced she was retreating. She had been nervous all morning, not feeling quite right, and wanted to hike back to the train station. Colleen slipped the car key to Barb and we bid our fourth farewell, then marched on

toward the Death Gully. We crossed the gully without incident and scrambled up a long rock ridge. We all felt the altitude. It was a little before 4 pm when we reached the Gouter hut and we had left Le Nid D'Aigle just before 10 am. We dropped our packs, removed our climbing boots and eased into a pair of hut shoes, plastic communal affairs with a look meant to dissuade theft, clearly. It was a frenzy of mountaineers in house slippers.

Thursday Sept. 14. Colleen got up at 2:30 am after a restless night of wind whipping against the shelter. White-out conditions prompted the hut managers to postpone 3 am breakfast to 6 am. No summit bid in these conditions. Sonja and I were disappointed, but Colleen was more so as this was her third attempt. Sadly, we resigned ourselves to heading down. It was a bit dicey, often tedious, climbing down the snow-covered ridge in crampons. We were

passed by a large group of French soldiers from the mountain brigade training on Mont Blanc. Dressed in winter camouflage, they lumbered down with extra-heavy, extra-large packs strapped to their backs making them look manly, especially for Frenchmen. We chatted with some of the boys while waiting for the train. One of them loved Sonja's helmet emblazoned with "Girls Kick Ass," a feminist credo which sounds very non-threatening in a thick French accent.

Friday September 15–Monday Sept. 18. The weather had turned in the valley as well as in the mountains and the forecast for the next few days spelled crap. We spent a day shopping for gifts and said goodbye to Barb who headed back to Seattle on Saturday. The next leg of the trip was an exploration of Italy's Dolomites, a limestone range in the north east, Tyrol region of 'the boot.'

To be continued

Women Climbers Northwest

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