

## **The Haute Route—then and now.**

*Bernard Smith.*

If my memory serves me correctly it all started in a tent in Randa, Switzerland in 1984, not the actual Haute Route of course, but the idea of doing it. We were sitting round a bottle or two of red wine when the talk turned to ski mountaineering. Not that any of us had done very much but we were all young(er) and keen. It was suggested that we start with the Haute Route. Why not? At least we had heard of it. And so it was decided, we would do it next spring.

Information was not all that easy to obtain but I unearthed a copy of Eric Roberts' guidebook in Fishers of Keswick which was studied avidly from cover to cover. The appropriate maps were acquired and we were up and running. At least two of us had transceivers, bought ex-hire from Glacier Sport in Preston. Two shovels were considered to be sufficient, one at the front of the party and one at the back. We had never heard of avalanche probes but were quite confident that our ski poles would do with the baskets removed. Something about fools and angels springs to mind.

Unfortunately, or probably fortunately, when we arrived in Chamonix it was pouring down and of course, dumping snow on the hills. We booked into the Brevent bunkhouse and watched it pour for a few days before deciding to abort the mission and go piste bashing. God was looking after us. The final insult was to find the Les Arcs resort closed "storm bound". We returned home disappointed but unharmed.

After a more gentle introduction to Alpine ski touring in the Silvretta Alps the following season we returned to Chamonix a little more savvy in 1987. Better equipped now, we began with a descent of the Valle Blanche in fabulous conditions and perfect weather. It never occurred to us to book any of the huts and of course we didn't have mobile phones so we just turned up, as you did. We caught the afternoon 'frique up the Grand Montets and skied across to the Argentiere Hut where there was, needless to say, loads of room. My memories of that first trip are all good. The weather was superb for the whole week, the snow was good and we were fit. I remember sitting at the Col de Chardonnet watching other parties descend. Techniques varied from abseils to short swings. We settled for somewhere in between using the sideslip perfected in Scottish queues together with a handline. The ski down the Val d'Arpette was brilliant and we arrived in Switzerland to find that we had forgotten all the Swiss

money. Eurocheques came to the rescue as none of the huts took plastic and there was no ATM in Bourg St. Pierre. We shortened the next day to the Valsorey Hut by mistakenly following another party who were going to the Velan Hut. We liked this hut and it was quiet so we decided to stay. Other memories that remain are the warden of the Valsorey refusing to serve breakfast until the yellow snow was removed from the terrace, a German guide with the strange name of "Eckey" whose client was a blacksmith of traditional stature and was getting by with snowplough turns. It was he who persuaded us to miss the Vignettes hut and use the Bouquetin instead, a hut of which we were blithely unaware. It was a good move, shortening the final day significantly. But my everlasting memory is sitting in the sun on the Col de Valpelline with the Matterhorn and the whole Mischabel range in view, enjoying a pipe of tobacco and knowing that it was all downhill to Zermatt.

Many years later I was being pestered by my daughter Claire, who was now a much more accomplished skier than her parents, to take her along the Haute Route. I was most reluctant, knowing the difference in skill and fitness levels between the generations, especially as the trip had to be at the busiest time of the year, Easter. In the end I relented as usual, provided she booked all the huts and organised the logistics. The huts were booked in January. Even so we were still only on a reserve list at the Vignettes. How things had changed.

Seven members met in Chamonix where, needless to say, it was raining. Some things never change. We warmed up with a day skiing in zero visibility at Le Tours. Even the girl at the caisse asked us if we really wanted a ticket. On the way back, based on an optimistic meteo, we bought tickets for the Grand Montets teleferique for tomorrow, and booked a 7am. taxi from Nigel's apartment.

On arriving at Argentiere we found a JCB clearing the snow. Things didn't look good. Having failed to book the Argentiere hut in January by failing to answer "yes" to the crucial question "do you have a guide?" we needed an early start to make the Trient hut in a day. The bad news was that the lower section may open at 9am and the upper section maybe tomorrow. A phone call confirmed that the Argentiere hut was "complet". We were snookered. As we had only three days of decent weather forecast we needed to be off immediately, so it was decided to start the tour from Bourg St. Pierre. During the drive over the Col de Forclaz Claire was busy on the phone rearranging the hut bookings, the upshot of which was that we now had beds at the Vignettes hut. We stayed at a lovely chambre d'hote in Bourg St. Pierre and were away early the next

day to the Valsorey hut. There were no mistakes this time. We made sure we went to the right hut. It just seemed an awful long way. The long skin up the final, steep approach set us up nicely for a beer or two. Whilst enjoying it on the terrace we noticed a sign prohibiting the formation of yellow snow, so breakfast seemed assured. We were told that a guided party had failed to make it onto the Plateau de Couloir on the previous day due to large amounts of unstable snow, so it was with some misgivings that we set off on our second day. It was touch and go at times but all was well and we passed this crucial section safely and in good time. The two descents down the Sonadon and the Durand glaciers were superb in fresh powder with only one party in front of us to put in tracks. The Chanrion hut was very quiet as the crowds must still have been waiting in Chamonix or setting off from Verbier as many guided parties seem to do. As we now had a reservation at the Vignettes hut the logical route was over the Pigne d'Arolla. We had used the Otemma Glacier as a route to the Bouquetin hut in 1987 but the ascent of a peak appealed to our younger companions on this occasion. Encouraged by a friendly guide who volunteered to put in the track, this was to be our route. It proved to be a long day with the final descent in very poor visibility. This was where we met the crowds. The place was rammed full of guided parties doing short trips from Arolla. The ski room was total chaos and Claire was forced to take whatever ski poles were left as hers had disappeared, although I think she came off best in the end. This was to be the end of the window of fine weather, but Zermatt was close and the morning dawned fine. Only three other groups headed for the Col de Brule and Zermatt but we decided to go for it anyway. The weather held until the approach to the Col de Valpelline when it suddenly started to snow and all visibility disappeared, along with the rest of the team. Within minutes all tracks vanished and although we were not far apart by LMC standards it was with some difficulty that we regrouped. We now went into serious navigation mode with GPS, compass and very careful skiing. We were eventually joined by one of the other groups and between us we managed to cross the final ridge.... somewhere near the Col de Valpelline! The descent under the Matterhorn is not straightforward but although all previous tracks had disappeared it was sometimes possible to feel them under the fresh snow which was somewhat reassuring. We eventually emerged from the cloud to enjoy the final run down the Zmutt glacier into Zermatt. It had been a totally different experience from the first trip a quarter of a century ago but nevertheless just as satisfying. We had managed two thirds of the HLR. It was as much as the conditions allowed, you can't do more than that.

*Cast: Act 1. Roger Gott, Richard Toon, Bernard Smith.*

*Act 2. Dave & Julie Sudell, Bernard & Josie Smith, Duncan*

*Scattergood, Claire McClellan, David Toon.*



**Ascent to Plateau de Couloir 1**



**Ascent to Plateau de Couloir 2**



**Climbing the Col du Mont Brule 1**



**Vignette Hut 1**