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# PERFECT STORM



# THE DREAM TRAVERSE

*Text by Simon Richardson for Alpine Journal 2019*

*Dreams can be dangerous things I reflected as I slowly made my way up the debris strewn Miage Glacier on the south side of Mont Blanc. Very dangerous, especially when the dream has been twenty-five years in the making.*

One hundred metres ahead of me Micha Rinn was making an excellent job of finding a way across the moraine-covered ice. The Miage is the longest glacier in Italy and the scenery was more reminiscent of the Karakoram than the Alps. Over 700m wide and hemmed in by the steep walls of the Aiguilles de la Tré la Tête and Punta Baretto the scale was huge with the summit slopes of Mont Blanc glistening with fresh snow 3000m above. Our packs were heavy with food for five nights and the weather forecast was good for the next three days. I was nervous and apprehensive, but little did I know that we were heading for one of the most momentous climbing experiences of our lives.

I first passed this way in August 1993. Guy Muhlemann and I had climbed the Bonatti route on the Red Pillar of Brouillard, before continuing up the Brouillard Ridge and bivouacking below the final slopes of Mont Blanc du Courmayeur. We arrived at the summit early next morning and left the crowds on the Bosses Arête on the descent to the Col de Bionnassay. The weather was perfect and our route was the grand finale to a superb couple of weeks of Alpine climbing that included a long sought after ascent of the Walker Spur. We were fit, moving smoothly and felt completely at home in the mountains. Why did we have to go down, I thought. Wouldn't it be wonderful just to carry on climbing? And why go to the Greater Ranges when you can have long multi-day adventures on Mont Blanc itself? Ahead the East Ridge of the Bionnassay beckoned, but instead we dropped off the col and headed down the Miage Glacier to our car and the long drive back home to Scotland.

The dream of a Greater Ranges experience on Mont Blanc stayed with me, and I resolved that next time I climbed the mountain, I would not hurry back down. The logical extension was to traverse the Aiguille de Bionnassay and continue over the Dômes de Miage to Les Contamines. The big question was what ascent route to choose? For aesthetic reasons it had to be something on the Italian side. The Peuterey Integrale was the obvious choice, but instead I was intrigued by the Miage Face. Over 1100m high it is often referred to as the forgotten side of Mont Blanc, but there is good reason for its neglect. Apart from the Tournette Spur, which was the original route on the Italian side of the mountain, the other routes on the face are rather unappealing and threatened by huge seracs.

On the right side of the face however, there are three 700m-high pillars running up the west face of the Brouillard Ridge. Similar to the better-known Brouillard Pillars above the Eccles Hut on the east flank of the crest, the upper third of the pillars transition from granite to schist. Incredibly, the left-hand pillar was first climbed by the Gugliermi brothers way back in 1901. During their groundbreaking three-day expedition, they gained the untrodden Pointe Louis Amédée (4460m) and continued along the two kilometre-long Brouillard Ridge to the summit of Mont Blanc. (Their ascent has faded into obscurity – modern guidebooks credit the first traverse of the Brouillard Ridge to Young, Jones, Blodig and Knobel who started from Col Emile Rey, but most of the ridge had been traversed by the Gugliermi's ten years before.)

It was over 80 years before the pillars were visited again. In April 1984, Gian Carlo Grassi climbed the Fanta Couloir (TD), the deep cleft to the right of the triangular central pillar and later that year he climbed the prominent Red Pillar (TD-) to its right. Grassi descended the Fanta Couloir after both these climbs. Two years later, the irrepressible Patrick Gabarrou ascended the prominent gully of Lune de Miage (TD) to the left of Gugliermi's pillar, and continued to the summit of Mont Blanc. Gabarrou was back in January 1989 to attempt the thin ice line to the right but retreated in a storm near the top. Although the route was incomplete it was called Himalamiage and graded ED1. As far as we



knew, these climbs were unrepeated, and nobody had set foot on the face for over 29 years. Between these routes lay the untouched triangular central pillar. In some ways it is the most logical line of all - a tapering tower of granite leading to a slender prow of schist rising all the way to the summit of Pointe Louis Amédée. It was a priceless piece of real estate – a perfect unclimbed line high on the Italian side of Mont Blanc.

So what better than to combine this pillar with a traverse of the Brouillard Ridge to the summit of Mont Blanc followed by a descent over the Bionnassay and Miage? I called the project the Dream Traverse and had little difficulty in selling the idea to Micha Rinn from Germany. Micha and I had struck up a strong partnership in recent years with new routes in the Alps, Scotland and Canada, and I knew the plan would appeal to Micha's sense of adventure. We both knew that the Dream Traverse was an ambitious undertaking, and more difficult than anything we had done together before. It would demand a unique set of circumstances – fitness, acclimatisation, snow-free conditions on the pillar and a long spell of settled weather. We reckoned that early August was the best time for an attempt, and the Dream Traverse became our focus for summer 2018. It was a bold plan, not least because we were putting all our climbing eggs into one basket and there were so many factors that could lead to failure. Fortunately, Tom Prentice was happy to help me out on the fitness and acclimatization front, and during July we had two glorious weeks mountaineering in the Valais, climbing a multitude of 4000m peaks. And Micha, as part of his instructor work for the German Alpine Club, made sure of his acclimatisation by climbing the Gouter Ridge on Mont Blanc.

Planning is everything, and Micha and I talked long and hard about the optimum tactics for the Dream Traverse. We estimated that with some inevitable bad weather along the way, the trip would take us seven to eight days. At first we thought that if we were trying to reproduce a Greater Ranges experience, we should eschew the use of huts, and take a tent. The advantage of a tent was that we could stop any time (assuming we found somewhere to pitch it), but in the end we decided it was more practical to use bivouac huts. Only the Durier Hut (situated between the Bionnassay and Miage) is guarded and would offer any possibility of a meal and restocking supplies.

There is good reason why the West Face of Pointe Louis Amédée is neglected and nobody had been there for nearly 30 years, and as Micha and I branched off the Miage Glacier early in the morning on 10 August we soon understood why. Glacial retreat means that access to the Quintino Sella Refuge has become one of the most difficult in the Alps. The hundred-year old bivouac hut is spectacularly positioned on a small ledge on a rocky spur 1400m above the Miage glacier, but the problem is reaching the rocky spur itself. We had two choices – front point up the steep and chaotic lower glacier, or climb the spur from its foot. We chose the latter but were soon challenged by unprotected by glacial-polished slabs of dirty schistose rock. Two long and lonely pitches eventually led to an exposed scramble up grass, rock and rubble, and eight hours later we arrived at the spectacularly positioned hut. Even though the refuge only receives three or four visits a year it has recently been restored by a helicopter-supported building team. A new roof and outside walls protect the original interior with scribblings by the Italian pioneers carefully preserved on the walls.

We had not seen our route close up, so the next day we climbed the ugly glacial snout guarding access to the upper Mont Blanc Glacier where we had a full view of the Miage Face and Pointe Louis Amédée. The approach to the pillar is threatened by huge hanging seracs high on the face, but fortunately they did not look as dangerous as we feared, and there was only one ice fall avalanche track across the glacier. Global warming, which is decimating the Alps at an alarming rate, had worked to our advantage and made the largest seracs recede. Across the glacier, our pillar looked enticing with fresh snow from the recent storm burning off in the mid-morning sun. A line of cracks ran up the right side of the granite section, but it was difficult to assess just how difficult the upper schist prow was going to be. It looked very steep, but we just hoped that was an optical illusion.

We left the hut at 4am next morning, and crossed the bergschrund below the pillar at dawn. Our momentum was slowed by some awkward route finding over glacier-smoothed slabs low down, but once we gained our line of cracks we made fast progress up stretches of perfect granite to where the angle steepened after 200m. I climbed a hanging groove and traversed left below an impending corner and handed over the rack. Now Micha is an excellent



rock climber, so I was a little alarmed when he ground to a halt a few metres above, at the foot of a rounded and unprotected crack. He came down, and silently I took the gear and started up a hidden groove to the right. It was steep and difficult to protect, but it was a typical British rock climbing pitch that weaved from left to right and accepted the odd wire or two. Above it was still steep, but the rock was more featured, and Micha shot up through an overhang and galloped up the wide cracks above. I joked that he had made the 6b crux pitch look easy, which was something of an exaggeration, but at least we were now moving again.

Pitch followed pitch, and as we climbed higher we had to dodge verglas and streaks of ice. By late afternoon we were hopping across snow patches to gain the upper schist prow. We were hoping this would not be as formidable as it looked, but fortunately the rock was surprisingly solid and well furnished with holds. After six long pitches I found an abandoned pair of gloves and a series of abseil slings - it later turned out, that these originated from Gabarrou's descent after his Himalamiage attempt in 1989.

Near the top, the prow reared up in a 40m-high vertical headwall of impenetrable schist. It was crackless and appeared to be completely unclimbable. Micha probed up to the right and ended up perched on a knife-edge ridge staring down into a black void. By now it was nearly dark and the wind had become very strong, so I had a look below the headwall and found a small levelled rock platform (Gabarrou's high point and bivouac site), but it was exposed to the full force of the gale. A little lower we found a slightly more sheltered spot. I settled into a buttock-sized seat and Micha perched on a larger downsloping ledge. In the howling wind there was no chance of melting snow so we burrowed deep into our sleeping bags and made the best of the situation.

The wind was worrying. We knew from the outset that we would not encounter eight perfect days, but the forecast had promised another 24 hours of good weather. This would allow us to complete the pillar, traverse the Brouillard Ridge, climb over Mont Blanc and descend the shelter of the Vallot Hut.

Micha had a tough night on his sloping ledge but I managed to sleep a little. Every time I woke I peered nervously through a crack in my bivouac bag to check if the sky was still clear. The stars had lost their twinkle when we started to pack our sacks an hour before dawn. Rather ominously, the wind was even stronger, the sky was starting to cloud over and it was cold. We climbed back up to the knife-edge ridge to the right of the headwall and abseiled down an overhanging wall to a ledge. Micha traversed a hanging shelf on the right and I set off up an overhanging groove of precariously jammed blocks. I whimpered with relief when I gained a platform near the crest of the Brouillard Ridge. We had climbed the pillar but it felt a hollow victory. Our route was far from over, and by the time Micha came up it had started to snow.

The scene changed from summer to winter in a matter of minutes. Everything was draped in white. The bad weather had come in a full 12 hours early, and we were now caught in a major storm on the most remote and committing place on the mountain. But there was nothing for it but to press on over the summit of Mont Blanc and down to the safety of the Vallot Hut. I set off in the lead, but the snowed up rock slowed our pace, and it took an hour to reach the summit of Pointe Louis Amédée. By now the entire ridge was covered in 15cm of snow and the wind was howling. Visibility was reduced to 50m, but I felt at home - it was just like winter climbing in the Cairngorms on a bad day.

The ridge narrowed and we abseiled into a notch. Further on the way was barred by a smooth rounded crest. With dry rock it would have been a breeze, but draped in powder with a buffeting wind it was a different matter. After some humming and hawing, I found a way up a steep cracked wall on the east side of the crest. It was a pitch that would have been at home in the Northern Corries in December. Beyond, the ridge seemed endless. In the limited visibility each obstacle arrived out of the gloom as a new surprise. Eventually we reached a spectacular rime-covered pair of pinnacles. I vaguely remembered this abrupt obstacle from 25 years before, and knew that there was no alternative but to climb up and over them using sharp edges and deep cracks that had to be dug out from beneath the snow.

Micha was becoming disorientated. "I can't see anything anymore," he complained as he stared directly into the horizontal blowing snow. I was surprised that he was not positioned with his hood into the wind. "Just look the other way," I advised. "What on earth are we doing here?" he wailed. I'd never seen Micha falter before in the mountains



before, and his distress alarmed me. Was this the first sign of hypothermia? “We need to carry on,” I replied firmly. I tried to give the impression that everything was completely under control, but Micha’s sentiment was absolutely correct. We had gone beyond the point of no return. We were now completely committed and our only option was to reach the Vallot Hut that day. Our clothes were damp and we were becoming dangerously cold and tired. Surviving a night out in this maelstrom was inconceivable.

The ridge continued over more steep rock steps interspersed with easier snow. The wind became stronger, the snow deeper, and the visibility less. By late afternoon and we were on the upper part of the ridge and searching for the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur. I had been here three times before, but each occasion had been in good weather. I remembered a broad open summit area and then an easy romp to the top of Mont Blanc, but instead we appeared to be traversing along a corniced edge. With visibility now down to a few metres it was impossible to find the true summit.

I sheltered behind a granite bluff and waited for Micha to join me. “We need to take a bearing,” I screamed into the wind. I opened the zip on my rucksack, but my gloves were so frozen that it took me a full five minutes to pick up my compass and hold it securely in my fingers. All of a sudden I realised that it was now me who was getting close to the edge. We hadn’t eaten for two days and I was cold, tired and thirsty. But above all I was mentally exhausted. I’d led through the storm for a full ten hours and now my concentration was slipping away. It would have been easy to guess the way to the summit of Mont Blanc from here, but despite my fatigue I knew we had to be disciplined and navigate properly. Our survival depended on finding the Vallot and we could not afford to make a mistake.

Great mountaineering partnerships succeed when the leadership seamlessly passes from one climber to the other. This was such a moment. I was completely spent and Micha knew it. Now was the time for him to take control. Somehow he managed to extract his mobile phone from his jacket, take off his gloves and turn on the GPS.



Micha located our position, took a bearing from the screen, and set off breaking trail into the whiteout bound for the summit of Mont Blanc.

The snow was knee-deep and it was further than I remembered, but eventually we reached a flat area and realised we were on the summit. It was so different to before when there had been crowds of people all around. This time there was no sign of anything at all – we could have been on a remote mountain in the middle of Antarctica for all we could see. But worst of all, there was no beaten track in the snow indicating the way down. Micha's GPS led us to the start of the Bosses Arête, which was well defined at first, so we knew we were on the correct path. The route veers north-west 150m below the summit, but disorientated in the wind and snow, we left the ridge a little too high and started descending its northern flank. The slope steepened and twice we nearly walked over serac walls. Around us slopes were avalanching and the light was beginning to fade.

Micha checked our position on the GPS and shouted we were close – it was only 700m in a direct line to the hut. But we couldn't descend directly from where we were and had to traverse horizontally across the slope to avoid a series of ice cliffs above the hut. Micha remembered them from three weeks before. Laboriously we contoured west through thigh deep snow to regain the correct track. I was extremely cold and tired. I'd been continuously wiggling my fingers and toes the last few hours to keep them alive, but I was now beginning to lose the fight. My energy reserves were almost spent, and I knew that determination and will power alone were not enough. My body was running on empty. It was a terrifying feeling, and I now know what it means to be staring into the abyss.

Every time Micha stopped to check the GPS the hut was always 700m away. "Surely we can go down now?" I pleaded, but Micha was steadfast in continuing our slow wading traverse through the nightmare of blowing snow. Eventually his GPS told us that we were back on the correct track, and thankfully we could start heading down. Minutes later the aluminum box of the Vallot loomed out of the storm. As we wearily climbed up the metal ladder to gain the door of the hut my mind was numb. I was too far gone to register any emotion. Once inside it was clear that we were in a terrible state. Our Gore-Tex jackets were covered in a 3cm-thick layer of rime and the shafts of our ice axes had

swelled with ice to the size of marrows. It took 20 minutes to untie the icy ropes and take off our harnesses. We were too tired to eat or drink and we collapsed into our sleeping bags on the floor.

An hour later the emergency radio crackled into life asking whether we had seen three Italian women who were missing somewhere on the mountain. Later we learned the awful news that they had perished on Mont Blanc du Tacul that night. The storm raged for another 36 hours. It was below freezing in the hut but a brief lull allowed us to thaw our gear, eat, drink, and enjoy the delicious sensation of being safe and secure.

Most climbers would have been happy to call it quits at this point. We had climbed a magnificent new route on the south side of Mont Blanc and traversed the Brouillard Ridge in a storm. But Micha is no ordinary climber, and he knew as well as I, that our job was still half done. To complete the Dream Traverse we had to ignore the temptation of the descending via the Gouter Hut and continue over the Aiguille de Bionnassay.

The storm finally blew itself out late on the second night. It was our sixth day on the mountain, and we were happy to leave the confines of the hut that was rapidly filled with climbers en route for the summit of Mont Blanc. By the time we left it was 8am and rather late to start climbing the Bionnassay, but the sky was blue and temperature was still low after the bad weather. We climbed the spectacularly corniced East Ridge in 45 minutes but quickly dispelled any illusion of competence by losing the route when descending the South Ridge towards the Col de Miage. We had telephoned the Durier Hut over a week before to say we expected to be passing this way, and we arrived to a marvelous welcome. We gorged ourselves on a huge lunch and then surprised the young gardienne by explaining that we planned an early start next morning as we were not descending to the valley as our route was still not yet complete. We were out of supplies so she gave us two loaves of bread and a huge chunk of cheese.

The connection between the Durier Hut and the Dômes de Miage is long and rocky and it soon became clear that we were tired and moving slowly. But there was no rush. We had been told the Dômes traverse had recently been declared impossible due to badly iced ice slopes on the descent to the Col de la Bérangère, which meant we had the mountain to ourselves. We carefully downclimbed the 'impossible' section on steep hard ice and arrived at a deserted Conscrits Hut for coffee and cake early in the afternoon. To prolong the experience we spent the night at the Tré la Tête Hotel, walked down to Les Contamines next morning, and by a combination of hitchhiking and numerous buses returned through the Mont Blanc tunnel to retrieve our car from Val Veni.

It has taken me several months to come to terms with our adventure on Mont Blanc last summer. I was bang on the mark when I reflected at the beginning of our outing that dreams could be dangerous things. But the Dream Traverse will live in my memory as one of the most profound experiences of my climbing life. On the surface it was a brilliant technical success, and we certainly achieved our goal of a Greater Ranges experience. But deep down I still feel a little troubled, as I know we were pushed to the very limit. We made some good mountaineering decisions along the way, but ultimately it was the strength of our partnership that saw us through. To succeed through strength and fitness is one thing, but to win through due to shared trust in your partner is something else. The rewards are infinitely greater.

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### **Summary:**

An account of the first ascent of Perfect Storm (ED1 700m) on the West Face of Pointe Louis Amédée followed by a traverse of Mont Blanc, Aiguille de Bionnassay and the Dômes de Miage, 10-17 August 2018.