

# MOUNTAINEERING IN THE MONT BLANC RANGE

CLASSIC SNOW,  
ICE & MIXED CLIMBS



Jean-Louis Laroche & Florence Lelong



**MOUNTAINEERING IN THE**  
**MONT**  
**BLANC**  
**RANGE**

CLASSIC SNOW, ICE & MIXED CLIMBS



VERTEBRATE PUBLISHING

**Note for the English language edition:** This guidebook describes 36 classic, lower grade climbs in the Mont Blanc Range - the busiest, highest and in many ways the most challenging of all the western Alpine ranges. The climbs have all been climbed or checked by the authors in the aftermath of the very hot summer of 2003 when major topographical changes took place in the range. The climbs are grade F (**Facile**) to AD (**Assez Difficile**) with three climbs of D (**Difficile**). Though of easy to middling 'technical' difficulty it should be noted that all of these climbs are on high and complex Alpine peaks that can become very difficult and serious in the event of poor weather or deteriorating snow and ice conditions. All require a high level of Alpine competence with night-time glacier approaches, use of crampons and ice axes, belaying and self-arrest skills, abseiling proficiency and crevasse rescue knowledge. The climbs are listed below in their various grades (with their last recorded Alpine Club grades in brackets). A good, well-compacted snow cover tends to make the climbs easier.

<b>F</b>	<b>Aiguille du Tour:</b> Traverse (PD)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Tête Blanche:</b> North Face
<b>F</b>	<b>Tête Blanche/Petite Fourche:</b> (PD/PD+)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Aiguille du Chardonnet:</b> Forbes Arête (AD)
<b>F</b>	<b>Mont Tondou:</b> Normal Route	<b>AD</b>	<b>Aiguille d'Argentière:</b> Y Couloir (AD)
<b>PD</b>	<b>Petite Verte:</b> Normal Route (PD-)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Aiguille d'Argentière:</b> Flèche Rousse (TD-)
<b>PD</b>	<b>Tour Ronde:</b> Normal Route (PD)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Petite Verte:</b> North-West Face (PD)
<b>PD</b>	<b>Mont Blanc:</b> N. Ridge of the Dôme (PD+)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Aiguille de Rochefort:</b> Rochefort Ridge (AD)
<b>PD</b>	<b>Mont Blanc:</b> Aiguilles Grises (PD-)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Tour Ronde:</b> Gervasutti Couloir (AD)
<b>PD</b>	<b>Mont Blanc:</b> Gôûter Route (PD-)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Aiguille du Midi:</b> Cosmiques Ridge (PD+)
<b>PD</b>	<b>Mont Blanc du Tacul:</b> Normal Route (PD-)	<b>AD</b>	<b>Aig. de Bionnassay:</b> South Ridge/Traverse
<b>PD</b>	<b>Dômes de Miage:</b> Traverse	<b>AD</b>	<b>Tré-la-Tête/Dôme de Neige:</b> Traverse
<b>PD+</b>	<b>Aiguille d'Argentière:</b> Normal Route (PD)	<b>AD+</b>	<b>Aiguille du Chardonnet:</b> Migot Spur (D-)
<b>PD+</b>	<b>Les Courtes:</b> Traverse (PD+)	<b>AD+</b>	<b>Petite Verte:</b> Chevalier Couloir (PD+)
<b>PD+</b>	<b>Pointe Isabella:</b> Normal Route (PD)	<b>AD+</b>	<b>Les Droites:</b> Normal Route (PD)
<b>PD+</b>	<b>Mont Blanc:</b> Tacul-Maudit Traverse (PD)	<b>AD+</b>	<b>Aguille du Plan:</b> Midi-Plan Traverse (PD)
<b>AD-</b>	<b>Aiguille du Tour:</b> Table Couloir (PD)	<b>AD+</b>	<b>Mont Blanc du Tacul:</b> Contamine-Grisolle
<b>AD-</b>	<b>Aiguille d'Argentière:</b> Whymper Route (PD+)	<b>D-</b>	<b>Tour Ronde:</b> North Face (AD+/D-)
<b>AD-</b>	<b>Aiguille de l' Eboulement:</b> SW Couloir/Traverse (AD-)	<b>D</b>	<b>Tour Ronde:</b> Crampon Fûté (AD+/D-)
<b>AD</b>	<b>Aiguille de la Lex Blanche:</b> North-West Face	<b>D(4)</b>	<b>Mont Blanc du Tacul:</b> Chèrè Couloir

*See contents on page 4 for page numbers*

**Cover photo:** Dent du Géant. **Back cover photo:** Mont Blanc du Tacul. All photographs in this work are by Jean-Louis Laroche and Florence Letong. All diagrams and watercolours are by Florence LeLong (except the general map on page 5).

Although a few English words have been added, the map/diagram annotations remain mainly in French to match the proper names on local maps and also with rimayes and rappels for the bergschrunds and abseils of the main text.

Thanks to François Damilano, Françoise Rouxel, Guillaume Bernole (PGHM), Pierre and Evelyne Allain, Monique, Patricia and Sylvia (OHM).

First published in 2006 by Éditions Glénat.

Title of the original French edition: Alpinisme plaisir dans le massif du Mont-Blanc

© 2006, Éditions Glénat, 37 rue Servan, 38008 Grenoble, France.

First English language edition published jointly in Great Britain and the U.S.A. in 2007 by Bâton Wicks Publications, London and Menasha Ridge Press, Birmingham, Alabama.

This edition first published in 2014 in the UK, Europe, India, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand by Vertebrate Publishing.  
**Vertebrate Publishing** Crescent House, 228 Psalter Lane, Sheffield S11 8UT, UK. [www.v-publishing.co.uk](http://www.v-publishing.co.uk)

All trade enquiries for this edition to:

Cordee, 11 Jacknell Road, Dodwells Bridge Industrial Estate, Hinckley, LE10 3BS, UK.

Copyright © 2014, Éditions Glénat.

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means - graphic, electronic, or mechanised, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems - without the written permission of the publisher, authors and editor.

ISBN: 978-1-906148-81-2

Adapted from a translation by Blyth Wright.

Produced by Rod Harrison, Vertebrate Graphics Ltd, based on an original design by Éditions Glénat. - [www.v-graphics.co.uk](http://www.v-graphics.co.uk)

**MOUNTAINEERING IN THE**  
**MONT**  
**BLANC**  
**RANGE**

CLASSIC SNOW, ICE & MIXED CLIMBS

**Jean-Louis Laroche & Florence Lelong**

Adapted from a translation by Blyth Wright



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield

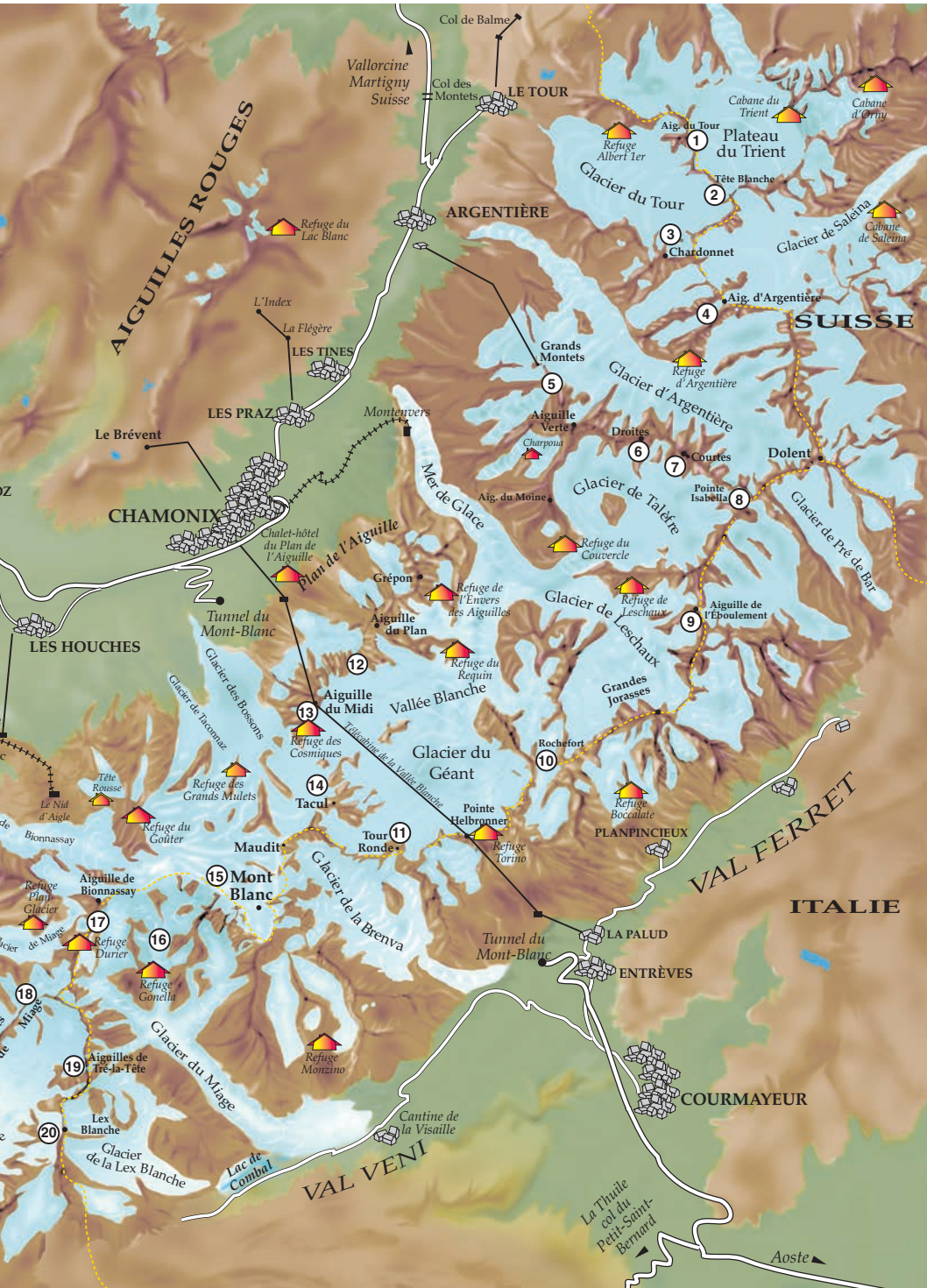
[www.v-publishing.co.uk](http://www.v-publishing.co.uk)

# CONTENTS

	<b>Introduction</b> .....	6
<b>1</b>	<b>Aiguille du Tour:</b> Traverse and Table Couloir.....	10
<b>2</b>	<b>Tête Blanche (North Face) and Petite Fourche</b> .....	14
<b>3</b>	<b>Aiguille du Chardonnet:</b> Forbes Arête and Migot Spur ...	18
<b>4</b>	<b>Aiguille d'Argentière:</b> Normal Route, Whymper Route, Y Couloir and Flèche Rousse.....	22
<b>5</b>	<b>Petite Verte:</b> Normal Route, North-West Face and Chevalier Couloir.....	28
<b>6</b>	<b>Les Droites:</b> Normal Route.....	32
<b>7</b>	<b>Les Courtes:</b> Traverse .....	36
<b>8</b>	<b>Pointe Isabella:</b> Normal Route .....	40
<b>9</b>	<b>Aiguille de l'Éboulement:</b> South-West Couloir and Traverse .....	42
<b>10</b>	<b>Aiguille de Rochefort:</b> Rochefort Ridge .....	46
<b>11</b>	<b>La Tour Ronde:</b> Normal Route, North Face/ Crampon Fête and Gervasutti Couloir.....	50
<b>12</b>	<b>Aiguille du Plan:</b> Midi-Plan Traverse .....	56
<b>13</b>	<b>Aiguille du Midi:</b> Cosmiques Ridge .....	60
<b>14</b>	<b>Mont Blanc du Tacul:</b> Normal Route Contamine-Grisolle, and Chéré Couloir.....	62
<b>15</b>	<b>Mont Blanc:</b> Goûter Route, Tacul-Maudit Traverse and North Ridge of the Dôme .....	68
<b>16</b>	<b>Mont Blanc:</b> Aiguilles Grises.....	76
<b>17</b>	<b>Aiguille de Bionnassay:</b> South Ridge and Traverse.....	78
<b>18</b>	<b>Dômes de Miage:</b> Traverse .....	82
<b>19</b>	<b>Aiguille Nord de Tré-la-Tête, Lex Blanche, Dôme de Neige:</b> Traverse .....	86
<b>20</b>	<b>Aiguille de la Lex Blanche:</b> North-West Face.....	90
<b>21</b>	<b>Mont Tondu:</b> Normal Route.....	92
	<b>Practical information, hut access</b> .....	94



See also detailed sketches  
for each route description





# INTRODUCTION

The climbing possibilities in the Mont Blanc range are seemingly inexhaustible. Each year, new routes are created, others join the ranks of the classics, and some fall into disuse. The 30 or so routes described here are ideal for becoming attuned to the magnificent Mont Blanc Range. They are on snow or mixed ground and are generally no harder than AD in standard. Distributed among the main glacier basins, they will enable you to visit a representative selection of summits along the full length of the range. Among them are some of the finest classics, which have enjoyed the same popularity down the years.

Yet this selection has an urgent modern emphasis as the mountain environment itself is changing due to global warming, which is affecting routes considerably.

Peaks of medium altitude (up to 3,500m) are particularly afflicted. Some of the granite faces have been collapsing spontaneously because the ice that bonds them has disappeared. Some slopes have turned into ice before melting and revealing a base of unstable scree; glaciers have receded and some bergschrunds have widened.

The art and practice of Alpine sports is thereby changed. Activities are no longer confined to the summer alone and hinge on two linked factors: ground conditions and weather. More than ever, one has to study snow distribution closely, to plan as conditions permit. You choose a route guided by the state of the mountain and not because of some longheld ambition or guidebook recommendation. Even at the height of summer, a big snowfall can sometimes fill up a gully or a bergschrund and the snow can thaw and re-freeze overnight. The only rule is choose the right conditions for your climb. Ensure the snow is firm and stable with the temperature below zero, start at night, and take the safest variants even if they are harder.

Before starting, study maps and guidebooks, get information from professionals or places such as the Office de Haute Montagne in Chamonix, take note of the weather forecast and get up-to-date reports from climbers who have just done your proposed route.



Aiguille Verte with the Drus in the foreground. On the Petit Dru, the rockfalls due to warming at altitude are clearly visible on the photos taken at a ten-year interval: 1995 (left) and 2005 (right).



The south-east side of Mont Blanc du Tacul and its rocky satellites, with the Aiguille du Midi in the background.





# INTRODUCTION

## MAPS

The whole of the Mont Blanc range is covered by two IGN maps: CHAMONIX 3630 OT and SAINT-GERVAIS 3531 ET, TOP 25 series, scale 1:25000. The contour spacing varies along the frontier zones and is indicated on the map used. In Switzerland and Italy the spacing is 20m and in France 10m.

## START POINT

This is the starting point of the climb, from the hut or cable car (for approach from the valley, see p94).

## GRADE

It is just as important to be able to judge the context of a climb according to the risks associated with high altitude as to know the technical ability required to accomplish it. These two criteria are taken into account in the two-tier grading system: seriousness grade, and technical grade.

## SERIOUSNESS GRADE

This is indicated by a Roman numeral from I to VII, and takes into account the seriousness, commitment, accessibility, length, approach and descent difficulty, continuity, number of difficult pitches, gear in place, objective dangers. Any or all of these may define the overall grade:

**I:** short route, accessible, easy descent.

**II:** longer or slightly more technical, descent that may require some care, little objective danger.

**III:** long, sometimes remote, tricky descent, possible objective dangers.

**IV-VII:** climbs in these categories are not covered in this guide.

## TECHNICAL GRADE

Indicated from **F** to **D**, then from 1 to 7, this describes the most difficult sections and the hardest pitch:

**F (facile):** no technical difficulty.

**PD (peu difficile):** requires competence in use of crampons, ice axe and belaying of the leader or second.

**AD (assez difficile):** route with steep sections (45–50°).

**D (difficile):** sustained high-angle slope with steep sections (50–60°), requiring safe technique

and a good knowledge of belaying.

**1:** long sections at 60°.

**2:** sections at 70° but good belays.

**3:** sections at 70–80° generally on good ice. Steep sections alternate with good resting places and belays.

**4:** sections at 75–85° sometimes with a short vertical section. Ice generally good with good belays.

## TIME

Given for a party with members of equal technical standard, competent at the grade, in good conditions. Keeping to time is an important safety factor. If your progress is slow be prepared to retreat, before the point of no return.

## CONDITIONS – BEST PERIOD

In this high massif at the exposed south-western end of the Alps, weather conditions are subject to constant change. One must learn to observe and make judgements, read and interpret. You can climb all year, as long as conditions are good: enough snow, stable slopes, correct temperature.

## GEAR

Specific gear for a party of two is indicated. Basic personal gear is also required.

## OTHER ITEMS

**Rope:** We state the length necessary for abseils or the minimum distance between belays.

**Ice pegs:** These should never be absent from the gear-rack when on a glacier (in case of a fall into a crevasse); take two per person.

**Nuts:** Usually a full set from 1 to 10.

**Friends:** 2, 2.5 and 3 are best.

**Note for UK Edition:** Most climbers will have both technical axe and ice hammer (with curved or banana picks), though the easier climbs could be done with less. Ice pegs (or screws) are per party assuming, for ice pitches, a minimum of two per belay and two for running belays. A few rock pitons might be taken, for though nuts will usually suffice a solid piton to secure an escape abseil is often valuable. It is assumed that all climbers will have helmets, headtorches, goggles and glacier cream. Abseil lengths for descents or bergschrunds may suggest taking both a normal rope and a lighter abseil rope.

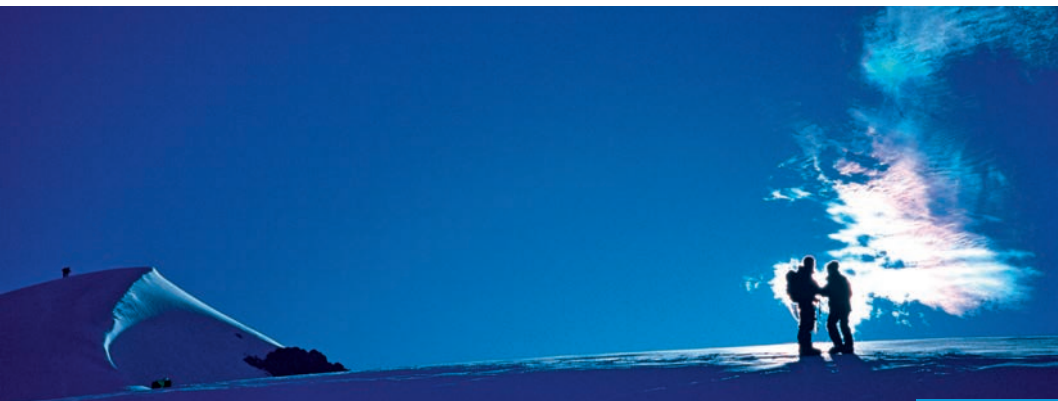


**Above:** The Trient plateau.



**Left:** The Mer de Glace – the approach to the Couvercle Hut.

**Below:** Comradeship of the rope on the Dômes de Miage.



# AIGUILLE DU TOUR (3542M)

## TRAVERSE/TABLE COULOIR

**STARTING POINT:** Albert Premier (1<sup>er</sup>) Hut (2702m): 1hr 30mins from the Col de Balme. Approach p94.

**Keen alpinists, hurry up and climb the Aiguille du Tour! If climate change continues, the descent from the Normal Route may terminate in a gaping bergschrund, unless someone puts a step-ladder up it! Mountaineering these days is done on an opportunistic basis. You need to watch the weather closely and know when to start when the time is ripe.**

The traverse suggested starts from the Albert Premier Hut and has the advantage of a rarely used approach by the Col du Midi des Grands that is less frequented than the traditional southerly approach. The surroundings are wilder and the route crosses two successive cols to the north of the peak with fine views of a high-altitude landscape looking across to the nearer parts of the Swiss alps. Once you are on the Trient plateau, don't miss the opportunity to visit the Fenêtre du Pissoir, with its secret charm. One then crosses the Trient Glacier below the North Peak rather than crossing its summit as the rock of its North Ridge is now too loose, particularly on descent.

Several ways of climbing the South Peak are now possible, depending on the state of the bergschrund and the queue!

The summit platform, suspended between Switzerland and France, offers an astonishing panorama, the stuff of innumerable future adventures.

Regarding suitable conditions – although these lower peaks lose their snow rapidly when it gets hot, they also allow very rapid ascents if there is snow. A snowfall in mid summer sometimes consolidates in 24 hours. So the Table Couloir, facing south-west, can be climbed if you make sure that there is stable consolidated snow, that has been re-frozen overnight. The uniform-angled slope barely steepens before giving out on to the gap above the pinnacle that bears the big rock table, which gives the route its name and is easily seen from the hut. Above this follow the rocky ridge, usually mixed at the start of the season and quite exposed, with some blocks that require care. The route along the ridge permits some variation so as to take advantage of the natural protection offered by passing the rope behind rock spikes. It is best to follow the Normal Route.

## TRAVERSE

**GRADE:** II/F. Glacier travel (slopes of 40°) and mixed (easy rock), bergschrund sometimes tricky.

**TIME:** From hut to summit, 3–4hrs; descent 1½hrs.

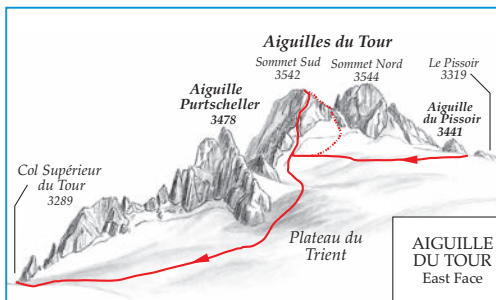
**HEIGHT GAIN:** 840m.

**CONDITIONS:** Better at the start of the season. Otherwise, make sure there is enough snow.

**GEAR:** Crampons, axe, rope (possible 50m abseil at bergschrund), 2 ice pegs, 3 slings, 3 karabiners.

**FIRST ASCENT:** C.G. Heathcote and M. Andermatten, 18 August 1864.

On the Traverse, above the Pissoir.



### APPROACH CLIMB BY THE COL DU MIDI DES GRANDS

From the Albert Premier Hut, follow the route eastward (boulders, snow, cairns), to the Tour Glacier (20mins). Start up east and at the top of the steep slope which goes round the Signal Reilly (2883m), go straight up to the north-east to climb the left bank of the valley which opens up on the left of the West Ridge of the Aiguille du Tour. It leads out on to the Col du Midi des Grands (3235m). Climb the slope (sometimes rocky) diagonally from right to left. Traverse east to reach the gap between the Aiguille du Pissoir and the Pissoir, which enables you to set foot on the Trient plateau and the eastern flank of the mountain. From there, traverse south up the snow slopes below the Aiguille du Pissoir, passing below the North Summit of the Aiguille du Tour to join the Normal Route to the South Peak. 2½hrs from the hut.

An interesting variation in the approach is possible in good, stable snow conditions (more likely at the start of the season). From the Col du Midi one can climb the west aspect of the Fenêtre du Pissoir (100m, a little harder than the more northerly route, 35–45°). This shortcut brings one to 3410m on the Trient glacier, between the Aiguille du Pissoir and the North Peak of the Aiguille du Tour.

### ASCENT

Cross the bergschrund and gain the rock where crampons/axes can be left if it is clear of snow.

Three ways are now possible:

- (a) Follow the natural ledge which crosses diagonally the whole of the east side of the Aiguille. It leads to a small gap on the North-East Ridge where, after a little mantelshelf, the summit is soon reached (20mins).
- (b) Climb the short gully between the two peaks (keeping to the east side), then take the crest of the ridge on the left to the summit (25mins).
- (c) Follow the crest of the ridge as directly as possible, on its right – moves of 3b, sometimes steep and exposed, but with good holds (30mins).

### DESCENT BY THE COL SUPÉRIEUR DU TOUR

Return to the bergschrund and from there, heading south-east then south, cross the slopes of the Aiguille Purtscheller (3289m) – steep for 50m – to the Col Supérieur du Tour. Cross it heading west (a few metres on rock). Descend the wide and fairly steep slope leading to a basin (3120m) at the foot of a fine reddish, granite buttress. After a slight rise to the north-west, the approach route is rejoined. Go down the big slope north of the Signal Reilly and follow the path to the hut. 1½hrs from the summit.

**Note:** The traverse can be done in both directions and each route can obviously be done as a return trip. The Aiguille du Tour also may be done from the Trient hut, crossing the plateau of that name.

The two Aiguilles du Tour and the Trient glacier seen from the Tête Blanche.



# AIGUILLE DU TOUR

## TABLE COULOIR

### TABLE COULOIR

**GRADE:** II/AD-. Snow gully at 40–45°, then an airy rock or mixed ridge, depending on the time of year.

**TIME:** Approach 2hrs. Ascent 2hrs. Descent 1½hrs.

**HEIGHT GAIN:** Hut to summit 840m (300m for the couloir).

**CONDITIONS:** Being south-facing ensure the snow is well frozen.

**GEAR:** Crampons, ice axe, one hammer-axe per party, rope (possible 50m abseil for the bergschrund on the east side), 2 ice pegs, a selection of slings, 3 quickdraws.

**FIRST ASCENT:** Date and party unknown.

### APPROACH

After climbing for 20 minutes on a very rough path (boulders, snow patches, cairns) reach the Tour Glacier. Go up (eastward) passing to the north of the Signal Reilly (2883m). After traversing south-eastwards, go diagonally south, then go up more steeply. As you approach 3100m, turn sharply north-east so as to enter (outflanking big crevasses) the glacier basin under the south side of the Aiguille du Tour. Go up northwards to reach the foot of the couloir, which is now obvious. 1½–2hrs. Colour sketch p15.

### ASCENT

Start toward the right-hand side and soon cross to the left of the channel which usually runs from top to bottom. Go up the right bank (to the left looking up).

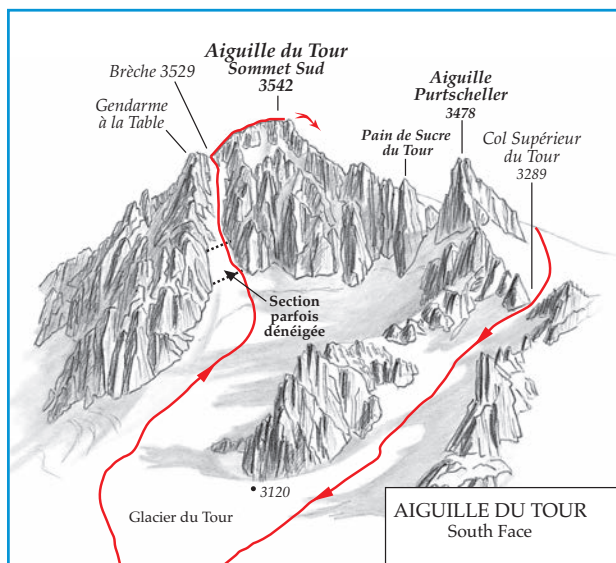
The slope steepens a little before leading to a gap at 3529m on the West Ridge (loose blocks, take care not to cause stonefall). 1hr. Go up right to reach the summit by the ridge, rock or mixed. 3–4hrs from the hut.

### DESCENT ON THE EAST SIDE, BY THE NORMAL ROUTE

Climb down the North-East Ridge for 60m to reach a little gap, then follow a good ledge to the right (this slants across the East Face) and after a short slope, cross the bergschrund. From there, reach the Col Supérieur du Tour and the hut, by the route previously described.



# TOUR



Above: At the exit from the Table Couloir with the Table Gendarme in the background.