



Ice climbing school on the Mer de Glace



Training Days

Name of course:
Alpine Skills Introduction

Venue: Chamonix, French Alps

Price: From £529, including meals, accommodation, instruction, lift passes and equipment hire

Dates:
June–September

Contact:
Action Outdoors
www.action-outdoors.co.uk

ALPINE SKILLS

Katy Dartford enjoys an action-packed few days in Chamonix honing her alpine mountaineering skills

Now I really wasn't prepared for this; as I pulled over the top of the vertical face to reach the rocky summit, instead of being hit with an overwhelming sense of exposure, I was greeted with... a plastic cup of wine.

And what better way to celebrate summiting a peak in the Alps? Besides, didn't the alpinists of the Golden Age of climbing often carry six-course dinners with wine and other warming liqueurs with them on expeditions?

Not that this is standard practice for an introduction course to alpine mountaineering, but then I was climbing the Aiguille Crochues with a group of students from Sweden. And they intended to take a bottle on every peak we climbed that week – followed by a beer in the sauna. Standard practice in Sweden apparently.

NEW SKILLS

Although I come from south London, I've done a fair bit of rock climbing, particularly the Southern Sandstone crags around Tunbridge Wells, but up until now very little in the big mountains, so I signed up for a week's introduction to alpine mountaineering with Action Outdoors in the climbing mecca of Chamonix. Chamonix is home to some of the most famous peaks in the Alps; the Grandes Jorasses, Les Drus, Les Droites and of course Mont Blanc, but there are also some classic glacier walks and easy alpine accents, like Mont Tondou and Aiguille du Tour that any enthusiastic walker with some training and a Guide can do.

I had initially been a little put off as I considered mountaineering a sport mostly for gnarly old men who took it all very seriously, but meeting the team at the UCPA building (www.ucpa.co.uk), based right in the heart of Chamonix, I saw immediately that this wasn't the case. The UCPA's aim is to make outdoor sports accessible to young people, who may not usually be able to afford a course in mountaineering, without overemphasis on performance, but more a concern for personal development.

After settling into our dorm room, we were given all the equipment we needed, including crampons, ice axe, boots and harness, and divided into groups based on

our experience level. My rock climbing experience meant I was in a slightly higher group as I just needed to refresh skills such as walking in crampons, moving as roped partners and using ice axes.

Pierre, our tutor for the week, greeted us. Tall and lanky and extremely calm and relaxed, he handed me a booklet to log what we learnt and provide us with some basic knowledge and understanding of safety in the mountains. The communal living made it almost feel like being back in the girl guides again, with the UCPA providing great canteen meals with food such as chilli and even calamari and, of course, lots of cheese. It was great fun, with lots of entertainment from our bongo-playing chef and piano-playing guide and, after a day of activity, it was a relief to have it all there ready for you, requiring no effort on your part.

SNOW AND ROCK.. AND ICE

The week turned out to be a superb mix of rock climbing, snow and ice techniques and general travelling in the mountains, which was as suitable for the absolute beginner as those with a little more experience. The first day of the course dawned warm with blue skies, so we went rock climbing at Les Gaillards, just a couple of kilometres away in the direction of Les Houches. The crag near a small pretty lake is a great place to chill out, have a BBQ or set up a slackline. It also has lots of easy routes and very friendly bolting. The first climbs were put up there in the 1930's with the intention of creating a place where alpinists could learn to climb. At the time the project was considered revolutionary. There are some great single and multi-pitch sport climbs here – some shaded and some in the sunshine.

Pierre taught us how to set up belays for multi-pitch routes and, although I already knew how to do this, there were several techniques I'd not used before, such as a belaying from an anchor in the rock that's not directly attached to you; so when you bring up your partner, if they were to fall, you wouldn't have to hold all their weight yourself. After practising on some single-pitch routes we tucked into our



Heading up to the Crochures for a day of multi-pitch climbing



ALPINE ESSENTIALS

Top 5 tips for staying in **mountain huts**

Overnighting in a mountain hut can be an interesting experience, especially if you're not used to being packed like sardines in your bunk beds. Here's a few pointers that Katy found useful for surviving the experience:

1. Make sure you lay all the clothes you need out at the end of your bed, ready to be put straight on in the morning. You could even sleep in some of them. Don't bother taking any make-up as there aren't any mirrors.

2. Don't forget your earplugs. There will always be someone getting a better night's sleep than you and keep your head torch by your pillow just in case you need to get up in the night.

3. It's always a flurry of activity in the morning so make sure your bag is ready the night before to avoid a mad rush and panic. Don't bother setting an alarm either; there is always someone who has done this already, earlier than you, and they won't keep quiet getting ready.

4. Bring a book or a Kindle to the hut. Often people head off to bed early so it will give you something to do.

5. Turn off your iPhone, or shut down all the apps, wifi etc as this drains the battery. Keep it warm by putting it close to your body, as the cold makes it die quicker. You can then post photos straight away when you get down from your summit.

packed lunches provided by the UCPA, then ticked off several multi-pitch routes. Hanging off a ledge as my partner climbed up, I looked out over to Mont Blanc glimmering in the sunshine – more than enough inspiration for the next few days' activities – and I wondered if one day I would be climbing it myself.

The next day we put our rock techniques into practice on a multi-pitch route on the Aiguille Crochues, (meaning 'hooked') set in the heart of the Aiguilles Rouge on the north side of the Chamonix Valley. The route follows a sharp ridge that although airy, offers amazing views across to the big peaks to the south. It was chilly as we left the Flegere cable car and ascended on the Index chairlift to 2400m, but soon I was dripping with sweat again as we headed up to the base of the climb.

Pierre explained to those in the group who hadn't used trad gear before how to make the placements, and then we moved off in groups of two. He led first and on any harder sections, hung a knotted rope down for us to pull on if needed. We started making a short traverse across to the access gully at the foot of the Crochues. The climbing, on gneiss rather the granite of the Chamonix Aiguilles, while interesting, wasn't too difficult and was a great route for learning to move efficiently on exposed

but easy alpine rock terrain. Once we were up the gully the technical climbing began up a short chimney, probably the crux of the route. This led to easier climbing right on the crest and all the way to the summit, climbing over most towers. The route took only a couple of hours, so there was no fraught, end-of-day dash for the last cablecar. Pierre explained the techniques in a way that didn't over-complicate details and he wasn't particularly surprised when we reached the top and cracked open a bottle of rouge to celebrate and enjoy the views of the larger peaks of the Mont Blanc Massif.

ICE SCHOOL

The fine weather continued the next day for 'ice school' on the Mer de Glace (Sea of Ice), where we learnt how to put crampons on, move together across the crevassed terrain and climb the ice of these huge crevasses. Heading up on the Montanvers railway, we climbed down a series of metal ladders to reach the glacier. First we learnt different methods of walking in crampons; traversing or going straight up. To traverse we practiced rolling our ankles so that our crampons were flat on the ice and stamped firmly to make sure they stuck. Going straight up was more tiring as we faced

GEARING UP

Essential kit for alpine mountaineering

HARNESS

■ For alpine use, lightweight takes priority over comfort or bells and whistles. They're easy to step in and out of, but are dependable when they need to be.

ICE AXE

■ For classic alpinism a general mountaineering axe is perfect, while only for more advanced routes will you need a pair of technical axes.

CRAMPONS

■ Again the terrain will depend what you need in the way of crampons, but a semi-rigid crampon is ideal for all but the most demanding (vertical ice) routes.

HELMET

■ There are plenty of lightweight helmets now available, and these are ideal for the fast and light ascents you'll make in the Alps.



Rock climbing in Les Gaillands



Relaxing at the belay at Les Gaillands

directly up the slope, walking in a herringbone step as it steepened to help keep our feet flat. Even more tiring was the 'front-pointing' technique, driving the front points of the crampons into the ice.

Pierre then showed us how to set up a belay in the ice by twisting an ice screw into place, and then clipping in a karabiner and running the belay rope through the karabiner. He then lowered us down into the crevasse, where, one by one, we slashed and thrashed our way up the ice with our axes and crampons. My adrenaline really was coursing by this point as it all felt rather tenuous to me – I couldn't quite trust that the pick would hold me. I certainly couldn't imagine leading an ice climb, yet moments later we did exactly that on a slightly easier-angled line. We were all pretty euphoric by the time we'd had a few goes and celebrated with more wine on the glacier, admiring views of les Drus (3754m) and les Grandes Jorasses (4205m) surrounding us.

CHANGE OF WEATHER

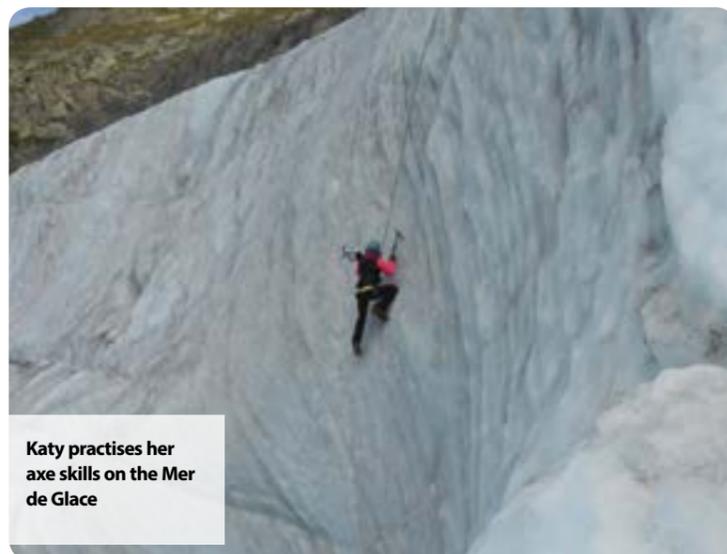
Ominously, after a day of relatively warm conditions, it started dribbling with rain as we waited for the Monteverns train to take us back down the valley. After a dinner of BBQ pork and a slideshow of the day's climbing, Pierre put a notice up for us that we were to be ready to climb the Petite Fourches ('Little Forks' at 3520m) the next day and its neighbour, Le Tete Blanche. These peaks aren't very demanding, but need the right mix of skills to climb so are a good training ground for beginners. The next morning when we were due to walk to the Albert Premier hut it started chucking it down though, so we headed to the indoor climbing wall, with its massive overhanging lead wall, in Les Houches, then returned to the UCPA for a session on crevasse rescue.

That afternoon, confident in our ability, Pierre led us up to the Albert Premier Hut, on the right bank of the Tour glacier. We took the Col de Balme cable car up and made our way as quickly as we could in the rain past the Charamillon lake and the Bec du Picheu until we reached a moraine on the bank of the Tour glacier, where we slowly trudged up to the hut, welcoming a very hearty dinner and an early night.

The next morning dawned with a dusting of snow across the mountains and at 7am (not too early!) we scrambled to get ready and get going on the route. From the hut we walked up the glacier and headed up to the Col du Tour, to the left of the Tête Blanche. In clear weather, we are told, the summits can easily be seen, but now the snow began to fall even harder until we could barely see in front of us. Pierre decided it was too risky to try and climb the Petite Fourches, so we made our way to the top of the Tete Blanche, an easy scramble on loose rocks, took what photos we could and retreated back to the hut. This time we waited until we were safely back down in the valley before we popped open a celebratory bottle of wine. All this snow and it was only August the 31st! T&M



Rope team crossing a snow bridge over a deep crevasse



Katy practises her axe skills on the Mer de Glace

ALPINE SKILLS

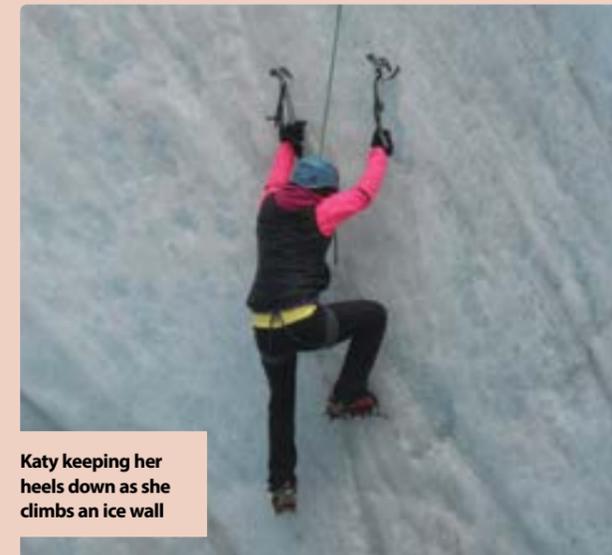
Putting it all into practice on the ice



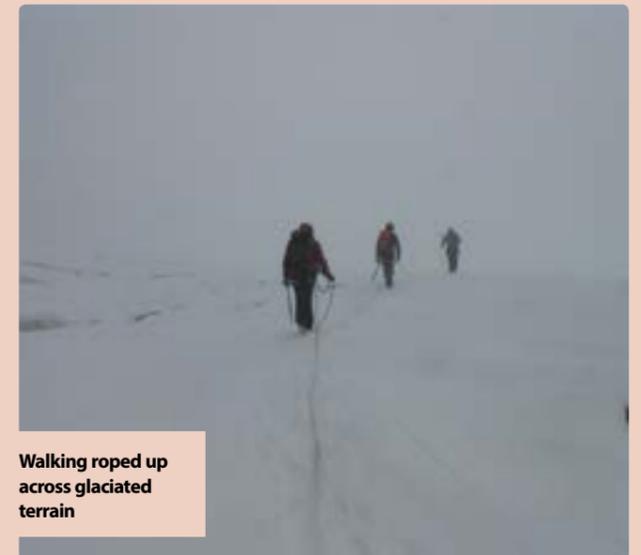
Practising using the crampons' front points on steep ice



Getting ready to head to the summit of Tete Blanche



Katy keeping her heels down as she climbs an ice wall



Walking roped up across glaciated terrain



Katy belaying another climber on the Mer de Glace