

Mont Blanc via Les Trois Monts 9.-11. August 2021 – A report

At 4810m, Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in the Alps. With its many jagged rock needles, the white head above Chamonix and the wilder side that slopes more rapidly towards Italy and its distinctive ridges, Mont Blanc has always been the strongest attraction in the Western Alps for me. Although the Valais with its high peaks is impressive, as well as the Bernese Oberland, nothing can equal the unique beauty of the Mont-Blanc massif. Every ambitious mountaineer who arrives in Chamonix and looks up to the white summit will feel the strong urge to enjoy the view of the summit from up there at least once. I have already overlooked the Alps from a few peaks, but nowhere else do you feel as free and secluded as on the summit of Mont Blanc.

Several routes lead to the summit: first the *normal route* or *Gôuter route*, which leads to the summit via the mountain station of the tramway Nid d'Aigle, the Gôuter wall and the Bosses ridge, the *Italian normal route* from Courmayeur via the Rifugio Gonella and the Piton des Italiens, the *historical route* or *Grands-Mulets-Route*, which starts at Plan de l'Aiguille and leads over the Bossons Glacier and the Grand Plateau to the summit and finally the so-called *Trois-Monts-Route* or *La Traversée*, which starts at the Aiguille du Midi and leads both over the Mont Blanc du Tacul and the Mont Maudit to the main summit. I have been able to climb Mont Blanc four times so far, three times via the Gôuter route (2015, 2016, 2018) and once on skis via the Grands-Mulets route (2021). In terms of the absolute number of deaths per year, Mont Blanc is still the most dangerous mountain in the Alps, so I can count myself lucky that nothing more serious ever happened on any of the attempts mentioned. The Mont Blanc still deserves respect! I don't think it's enough to climb this summit just once, and especially not via the same normal route over and over again. The Mont Blanc massif has many different facets and if you only follow the normal route, you will get to know the size of the challenge, but you will only see a small portion of the mountain. Admittedly, the normal route is above all a physical and less technical challenge - anyone who can climb to some extent, is more or less free from vertigo and can handle to walk with crampons, will be able to manage this route. That is why I was already curious about my first Mont Blanc ascent in 2015 with my father when, at the first break of dawn at the Vallot bivouac, small lights appeared on the other flank of the mountain, the Col du Mont Maudit, and slowly worked their way to the summit. Whoever masters this route, I thought, will have fully earned the summit.

And although I climbed Mont Blanc three more times afterwards, I haven't gotten the Trois-Monts route out of my head since then. You start at the Aiguille du Midi mountain station and first descend a sharp and exposed ridge into a glacier basin and then climb to the Refuge des Cosmiques (3613m). On the day of the summit, the first step is to climb the 45° steep ice face of Mont Blanc du Tacul and then descend again about 100m to the foot of Mont Maudit. Now the hardest part of the route follows, because you not only walk up the Maudit face in steep terrain, but are also initially exposed to the risk of falling seracs and avalanches. At the end of the Maudit face, there is the key point, also known

as the crux: here an approx. 50° steep ice wall 40m high is climbed, which ends at the Col du Mont Maudit (4354m). After another descent to Col de la Brenva (4309m) you climb the last structure to the main summit and from there you have the choice of either going back on the same route or via the Gôuter route.

Several other four-thousand-meter peaks in the Alps have been added over the years, but this route was the last piece of the puzzle for me. I kept imagining the moment in my head when I would climb the Col du Mont Maudit, cut my axe on the other side of the ridge, and only have the final stretch to the main summit in front of me. If this route was done, I thought, a big stage goal would have been reached. The sport of mountaineering consists of several factors, some of which can be influenced (physical performance, experience, technical skill, choice of team and equipment), while others cannot be influenced (the weather, physical reaction to high altitudes and the conditions on the mountain). The combination of these factors is probably what makes the sport so exciting, but it also makes it a little unpredictable - in short: you always need a little luck. One should therefore not despair if an ascent does not work for various reasons, but rather draw an experience from the situation and use it for the next attempt. The first attempt in June 2020 to climb Mont Blanc via the Trois-Monts route did not work. Despite the actually good conditions, a crevasse had drawn across the wall on Mont Maudit, which made it impossible to pass and only allowed access via a very steep ice couloir to the right of it or the final section of the equally difficult Kuffner ridge to the summit of Mont Maudit. The team (Cedric and Audwyn Ormond from Geneva, my father and I) decided with some resignation that this route would involve too many risks in this constellation. Despite two beautiful tours (Tour Ronde and Mont Blanc du Tacul) we had to leave the mountain behind us this year.

This year I was able to climb Mont Blanc on skis via the Grands-Mulets-Route in June, which is certainly the most beautiful ski tour to date due to the descent from the summit. It was only supposed to be an acclimatization tour for the Trois-Monts-Route, but my tour partner, my father, was then too overexerted to make another attempt. Despite the great success, I was again resigned because it didn't look like there would be another attempt this year in a similarly good constellation. However, when we were recovering from the tour in our holiday home in Le Bettex, my British friend Henry Hart from London suddenly wrote to me asking if I would like to go to the mountains with him again this year. I knew Henry from studying at Imperial College in London, where he was the Trail Captain of the *Imperial College Cross Country and Athletic Club* in 2018 and we had organized a trail running camp together in the Mont Blanc region. Henry was and is an excellent long-distance runner and, despite a lack of experience in the high mountains, was already endowed with such a strong will and a great capacity for suffering that we were able to climb Mont Blanc together using the normal route and without acclimatisation. So you could always win him for all crazy actions in the Alps, even if I thought that it could be risky on some mountains due to the lack of technical experience. Audwyn Ormond also asked me if I had time to climb Mont Blanc again this year. Although he came from nearby

Geneva, he had never climbed it and of course I understood his desire to be on the summit one day. He is the brother of Cedric Ormond, whom I also knew from Imperial College and already has some experience in the mountains, so he was excellent at moving in the snow and just as good at climbing rocks. However, since he would soon be traveling to Mexico, there was only the period between August 9th and 11th to attempt the Trois-Monts route. That would mean tackling it this time without acclimatising, which I didn't like, on the other hand we were all fit and had no altitude problems on the last tours, so it was at least worth trying again. The team was very promising, and the weather forecast for this period was excellent, so I started this attempt with a lot of optimism.

On August 9th I started my car in Freiburg early and picked up Henry at the airport in Geneva and finally Audwyn in Geneva-City and we drove to Chamonix. When everything was packed, we took the cable car to the Aiguille du Midi (3842m), on which you have to go through an ice tunnel to get to the starting point of the ridge. There is only a small gate here, on which is indicated the alpine conditions and the wearing of crampons. Behind it there is only a narrow firn ridge that drops several hundred meters, especially to the left, so suddenly that it turns your stomach at first - you definitely shouldn't make any mistakes here. However, it is safer to walk the site without a rope as the chances of being dragged along are too high. I admit that this short but extremely uncomfortable part cost me a lot of headache before. So we danced with the utmost caution and only with a stick and an ice axe in hand over the thin ridge and I was relieved when everyone had reached the bottom. We climbed up to the Refuge des Cosmiques in a good mood and enjoyed the good weather. With a look at the wall of the Mont Blanc du Tacul, however, it quickly became clear: no one has gone up here in the last few days. The mountain was completely untouched, only an avalanche cone of enormous size lay at the foot of the wall. When we asked the hut keeper, we learned that the weather had been bad all last week and that there was no trace left, especially not on Mont Maudit. The good mood quickly fizzled out and over a beer in the hut we quickly thought about how we could solve the problem. We asked the other teams, but there were neither aspirants for Mont Blanc itself (despite the full hut), nor for at least Mont Blanc du Tacul. The conditions up there were downright wintry, it was said.

However, we stuck to our 3-day plan, namely to ascend on the first day, explore the Trois-Monts route as much as possible on the second day and attempt the summit on the third day. We had the opportunity to move up on Thursday, but that should remain an option in case of an emergency. So we ate our soup with cheese and the curry rice with pineapple and enjoyed the magnificent sunset from the balcony of the Cosmiques hut. Shortly before 10 p.m. we suddenly saw two lights descending the wall of the Tacul - a good sign - because at least there were obviously no avalanches in the wall further up. After the extensive breakfast the next morning at five o'clock, we set off and it quickly became clear that we were actually the only team on Mont Blanc du Tacul. Audwyn was the last on the rope team, Henry was in the middle and I was in front. So I had to find my own way through the Tacul wall, which was quite steep and straight up. Shortly before the

ridge of the Tacul we passed two smaller crevasses, but they could be overcome without any problems. But now a second problem quickly became apparent: the wind. When we got over the first knoll, despite the sunny weather, the wind blew directly into our face at speeds of around 80 km/h and picked up snow, which pelted our cheeks like little nails, so that we always had to turn our face away. If there was no wind again for a few seconds, the next gust came from the right shortly afterwards and you had to duck or at least stop. In this way we worked our way to the foot of Mont Maudit, where fortunately the wind eased a little. We crossed under the large serac and went over the most striking crevasse, where we waited a short while and enjoyed the natural spectacle that the wind with its snowdrifts offered us here. One reason to go to the mountains is to observe extraordinary natural events that you cannot see in the valley. By that I mean, for example, the special red and orange tones in the sky that appear here in the morning. You can take pictures of them and make a rough impression, but you have to see these colours with your own eyes to understand it. Up here on the Maudit wall, the freshly fallen powder snow was blown in small strands by the wind just above the glacier, so that you thought you were walking over a constantly moving carpet of ice. This powder snow was then blown onto the serac above us and then slipped again in small mini-avalanches, only to be blown up again by the wind.

So we were now sure that the further way to the Crux was possible, as the last crevasse could be easily crossed. Despite the heavy wind and fresh snow, we were now motivated that we could do the route the next day, especially since the wind for the next day was predicted to be much weaker. On the descent over the Tacul wall, a couple of teams passed us and asked us about the conditions up there. We asked back which route the teams would take the next day. A Romanian group of three people that we met below also wanted to go the Trois-Monts route the next day. After a picnic on the glacier, we relaxed on the Refuge des Cosmiques and asked the other teams about their plans. Many of them also wanted to try the Trois Monts route, which gave us a lot of confidence. Since we had also heard that it was also possible to abseil at the Crux on Mont Maudit, we agreed to descend to the Aiguille du Midi via the same route. Coincidentally, we were sitting at the dinner table with the three Romanians Eddy, Mihai and Manfred, who were also planning to go back to the Aiguille du Midi the next day. After a good meal we went to bed at 9 p.m. because we had to get up at 2 a.m. the next day.

Both the hut keeper and our weather report had predicted the best weather conditions for the summit day. However, when we stepped out after breakfast at 3 a.m., instead of a starry night, we only saw a few dark clouds over the Aiguille du Midi and the Grandes Jorasses, and occasional lightning, which made the glacier plateau shine disturbingly bright. However, I thought that these clouds would quickly be blown away again by the wind. Henry hadn't brought a head torch, so he was in the middle again, while Audwyn went in the back and I went in front. Due to the clouds, the snow was quite soft and we sank slightly with our feet on the plateau. We set off a little later on purpose so that at least a team of mountain guides would be in front of us. At the foot of the Tacul we roped

up and climbed the first 45° steep ice part. We quickly reached the first French team that we followed. I suddenly heard a "Putain!" from the man in front of me - his crampon had come off his shoe in the steep face and he replaced it with a very old-looking crampon. Then it went up to the ridge of Mont Blanc du Tacul. These first hours of the morning are usually the most uncomfortable on a mountain tour, as you can hardly see anything and most of the way is still ahead of you. It's about thinking as little as possible and just moving on. As suspected, fast gusts of wind awaited us again on the back of the Tacul, blowing snow in the face. The only difference to the previous day was that apart from the red headlamps of the two teams, you could hardly see anything in front of us. On the glacier plateau we stopped behind the French because they had stopped and we couldn't find our own trail from the day before. I was annoyed that I hadn't loaded the route onto my watch beforehand - we could have saved a lot of time that way. Audwyn brought some hot tea and we took a sip to warm up. It was a surreal and uncomfortable atmosphere and I wanted to keep going as soon as possible. Now, however, the two French teams walked around in the dark for a while and went too deep down the glacier to then climb it again to the great Serac. We all walked around aimlessly for a long time until the two French seemed to have found a way. Here I realised that the two were not mountain guides, because mountain guides would have found the way much faster.

It was now steep up the face on Mont Maudit and we passed the large crevasse, however, at a different point than the day before. Here, above the crevasse, a short fixed rope was attached to a wooden fastener on the glacier, into which I hung a quickdraw to catch Henry and Audwyn in the event of a fall (it is still hanging there). It was now about 6:30 a.m., which was roughly the time of sunrise. You could see more, but neither a sunrise nor the surrounding mountains. The storm was still blowing strong and the clouds blocked any view in all directions. The two French at the front were only vaguely recognisable, they were looking for a way to the crux. We followed slowly and our fingers went cold. I asked the other two how they felt and Henry just said "Well let's put it this way, if we continue climbing like this, I'd be very cold". Audwyn managed the situation well, and I was still optimistic that the weather would change suddenly. But it remained foggy and stormy and we were only moving at a very slow pace. Only now and then did the clouds tear open and when I looked down I was speechless: we were standing in the middle of a steep ice wall several hundred meters below us. Here you had to be very sure of your hold in the snow. We had now arrived at the crevasse, which is at the foot of the Crux. However, there was no way of knowing whether the Col du Mont Maudit was actually above us or whether we were in the wrong place. Step by step we followed the two French teams and it got even steeper. In addition, the layer of snow became thicker and more powdery, so that you had to hit the ice axe for a long time with every step in order to find a good grip. The wall was now between 50° and 55° steep and we had to hit the crampons with the front spikes in the snow several times. Again and again we stopped and I talked to the last Frenchman of the front team, who came from Chambéry and climbed Mont Blanc for the first time with his brother and his father. What conditions for the first time! But it calmed me down to talk to him and tell him where we came from.

The two French at the front had already climbed very far and only shouted something down here and there in French. I asked the man in front if that was the Col du Mont Maudit, but he couldn't tell me. I prayed inwardly that one would at least get out of the wall up there, because climbing down here was almost impossible, especially with Henry's experience. You look out of the valley on Mont Blanc and admire its beauty, but if the weather changes and you are on the mountain, it suddenly turns into a relentless monster. I tried to distract myself in order not to let the fear get out of hand. About ten minutes later, however, we saw the two French standing on top of a pass and looking down at us. The person in front told me that it was obviously possible to get off on the other side and I breathed a sigh of relief. This was followed by the steepest point of the whole tour (55°) and to top it all off, just before the pass there was a 10m long black ice passage. The axe was easy to hit in the ice, but my legs were trembling because they only stood on the two front spikes. The Frenchman from Chambéry was already on the Col and cheered me on for the last few meters. Then he gave me his hand and I could finally jump to the other side. As expected, a storm was raging here, but I quickly climbed down a bit, put the rope around a rock and secured first Henry and then Audwyn on the "safe side".

Here we stood and were happy that we had at least left the most difficult technical point behind us. But it was clear that we had climbed to the wrong Col about 200m to the left of the actual Col du Mont Maudit. At this point you had to climb backwards about 50m to get to the main path. The rocks around us had small peaks of ice from the steadily blowing wind and the snow was frozen hard. So at least one could climb down well, the tip of the axe could be beaten like in wax. I climbed ahead and Henry and Audwyn followed. After a slight crossing, however, we were finally freed from the steep terrain and we were able to descend to the Col de la Brenva (4304m). Because of the strong storm, you could hardly see the French team in front of us, only here and there the clouds flew aside and revealed the gleaming white structure of the summit in front of us. We took a short break, drank hot tea and I ate a chocolate bar with all my might and without appetite. I knew that from here it would only be a little hard work to get to the top. I tracked a first steep section and the three French were now behind us. At about 4500m Audwyn moved to the top and first climbed a rather steep passage of about 45° and we slowly but steadily climbed up. Then for the first time we saw something that we had never seen that day: the sun and a blue sky! However, we only enjoyed it for a short time, the clouds were quickly over us again and we were very cold. However, turning around here would have been useless. I counted the meters down on my watch and kept telling Audwyn how far it was. We slowly worked our way forward and finally we met the two French people who were already on their way down and said to us "Bonjour! Le sommet est justement ici!" and indeed, after walking a few meters, we suddenly found ourselves at the highest point. Now I finally recognised the summit and was relieved when I looked down the ridge to the normal route and saw a flawless blue sky on the other side. We reached the summit at 10:15 a.m., just as the last clouds were blown away. Now you could also see Chamonix and the Aiguilles Rouges. I had a better view from the summit

before, but after this exertion, this view was also worth its weight in gold. We hugged and sat in a windstill notch at the summit to have tea and something to eat.

It was already clear to me on the way to the Col du Mont Maudit that it would be extremely risky to descend the same route again, especially with Henry. I wasn't sure whether the rappelling points would be covered by the snow or not, and the afternoon had been predicted to be very hot and the snow would quickly become warm, sticky and prone to avalanches. Apart from that, the way back would have meant a few additional meters in altitude and we felt quite tired at the summit. Although the descent via the Gôuter route would include the Gôuter wall and the notorious Grand Couloir, the risk seemed to me to be much lower, especially with Henry, who already knew the normal route. Audwyn, who would have liked to descend via the Trois-Monts route, was angry with me that I had made the decision almost on my own. However, Henry was also in favour of a descent via the normal route and I shared my assessment of the risks with Audwyn. We had left some things on the Refuge des Cosmiques, and we hadn't paid, so we would have to go up again the next day. But that seemed to me to be a fair price for the reduced risks. As we found out later, the three Romanians and another German team also descended via the normal route because of the risky conditions.

After the three French from Châmbéry had also reached the summit and we had taken a few more pictures, we descended over the beautiful, well-known Bosses ridge, which was a real pleasure in the sun, because the track was wide and the snow so hard that you could get off quickly without any problems. I felt elated now as I looked to the right on the other side of the mountain and observed our route from that morning from a distance. Finally done ! With every meter down, more air came into our lungs and we became a lot fitter again. It took less than an hour to get to the Refuge du Gôuter from the Vallot bivouac, as we partly ran and partly slipped on our bums. Audwyn and I took a little nap in the hut, then we took off our harnesses, grabbed the rope and climbed the Gôuter wall and climbed through the Grand Couloir without incident. We walked and partly jogged the way to the mountain station Nid d'Aigle, so that we got there at around 4:15 pm. At the Le Fayet valley station, two Spanish mountaineers us with them in their van, so that we were back at our car in Chamonix around 7:00 p.m. So we were exhausted, but at the same time pleased that we had survived this great tour and this evening we could enjoy the raclette at Audwyn's parents to the fullest.

Heinrich Hummel

Freiburg i.Br., 16.8.2021



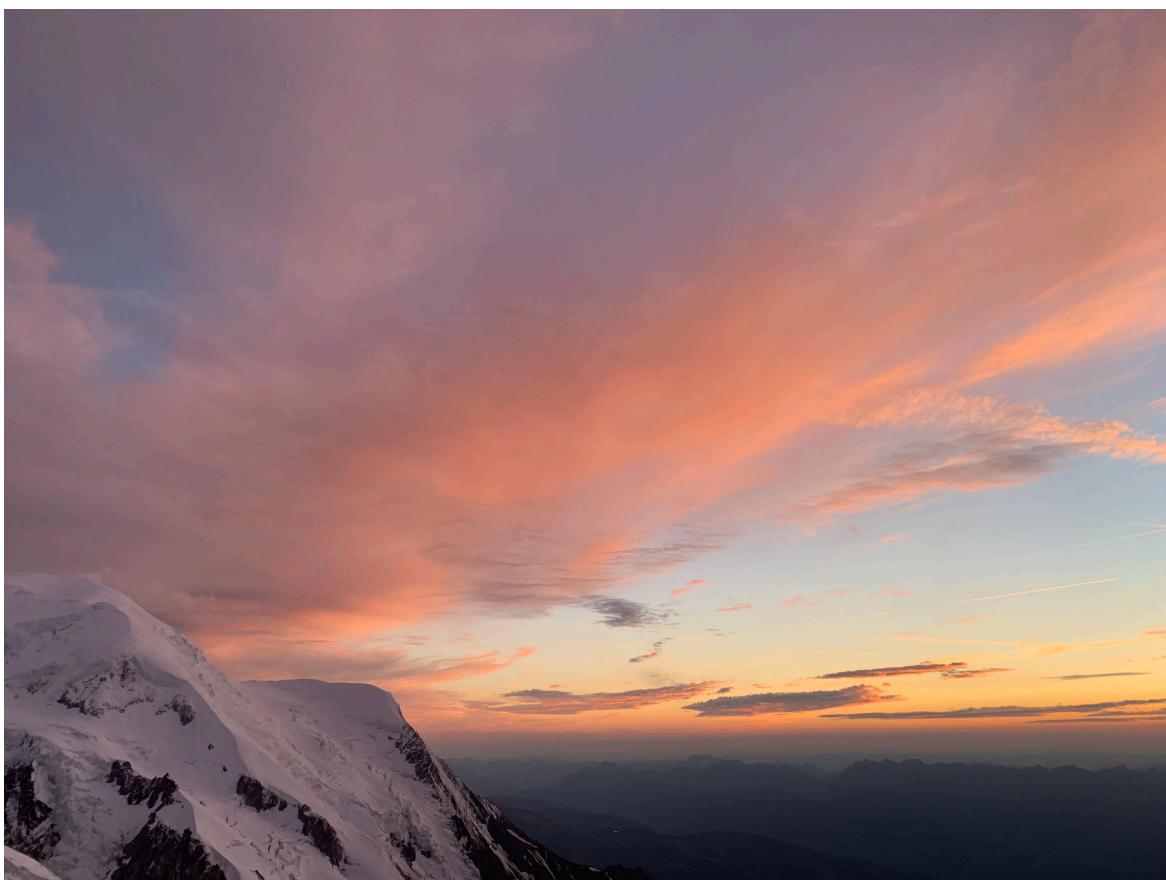
At the Aiguille du Midi summit station



On the way to the Refuge des Cosmiques



Snow ridge from Aiguille du Midi



Sunset at the Refuge des Cosmiques



On the way to Mont Blanc du Tacul



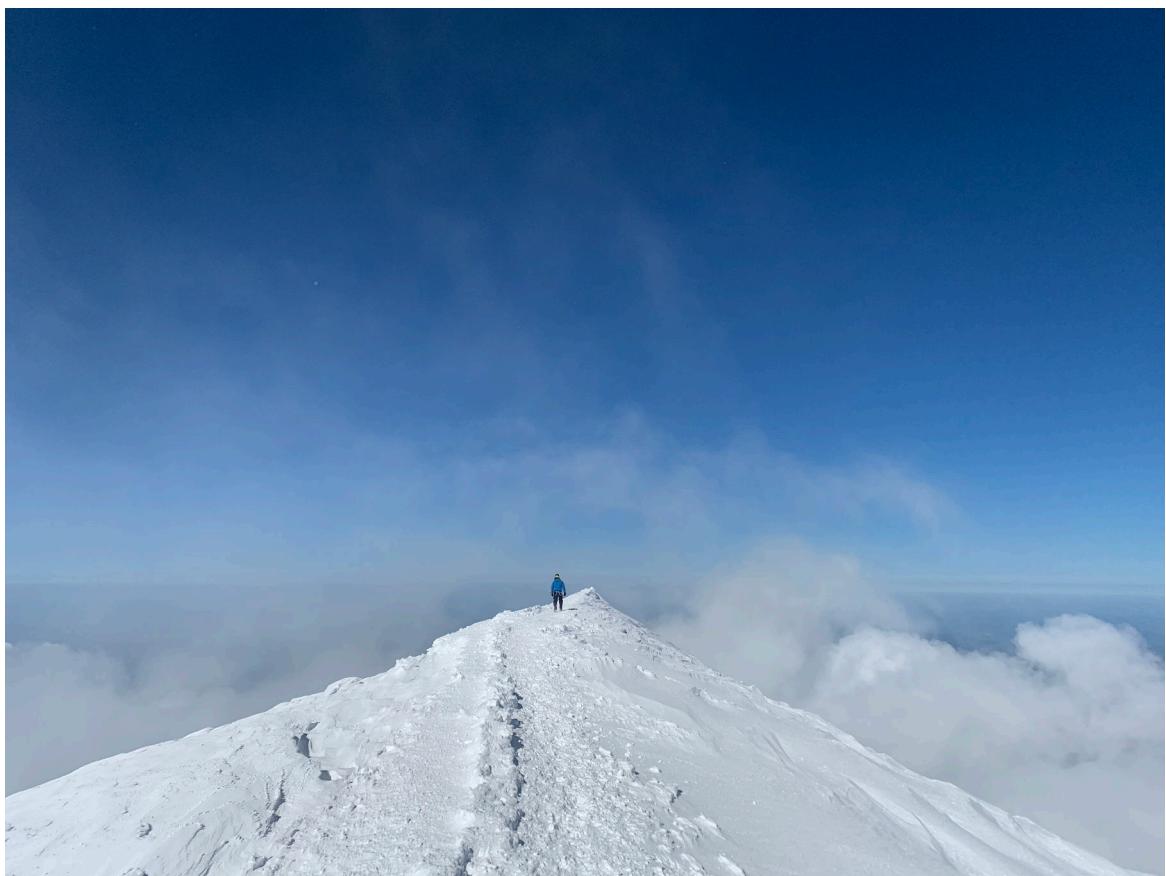
In the Maudit face



Final part to the “Col du Mont Maudit”



Climbing down from Col du Mont Maudit to Col de la Brenva



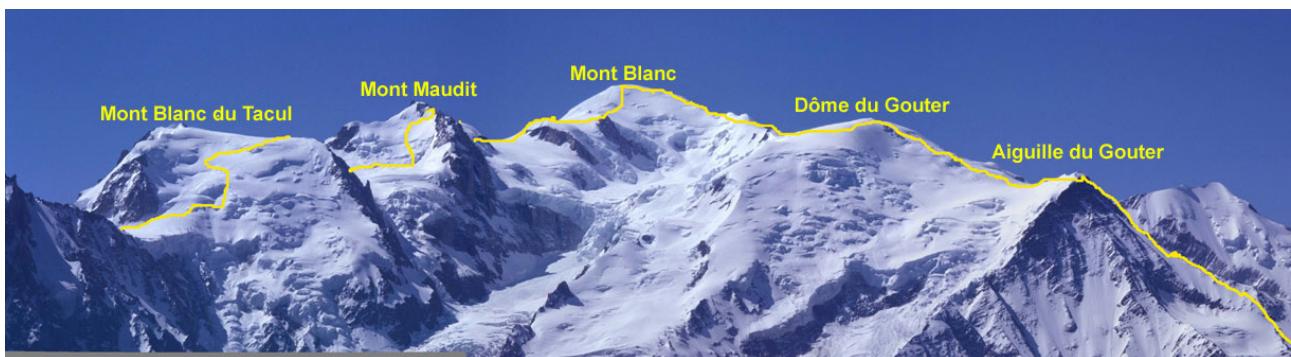
On the main summit of Mont Blanc



Walking down to the Refuge du Gôuter



At the Refuge du Gôuter



The *Trois-Monts-Route* or *La Traversée* with the descent via the *Gôuter-Route*