



Snowshoeing in the Italian Val Ferret

By Kingsley Jones, International Mountain Leader,
kingsley@icicleUK.com

As the window shutters of the hut creaked open, we were rewarded by the early morning views across the valley to the Italian face of Mont Blanc. It was still dark and the snow glowed in the moonlight. Above the sky was filled with millions of stars, twinkling against the deep blue of the night. A glance at the altimeter showed that the pressure had risen overnight. It was going to be a great day. Duvets were cast aside and slowly the hut room came to life, with six bleary eyed adventurers sitting up and emerging. Six o'clock in the morning is never usually an active time of day, but the room was full of energy and expectation for the day ahead.

One by one the group put on the hut slippers and shuffled downstairs. As we entered the main room of the hut, we were greeted by a strong aroma of fresh coffee and hot chocolate. The hut guardian cheerfully welcomed us into the warm room, and we sat down for breakfast. As we tucked into bread and jam, with cakes and cereals, the old hut dog waddled across to chance his luck with any leftovers. He wasn't disappointed, as several hands disappeared beneath the table with nibbles and crusts.



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Whilst drinking the hot coffee from the big bowls, we discussed the day ahead. Our objective was the Tête Entre Deux Sauts at 2729m / 8953ft, which offers an amazing viewpoint over the Mont Blanc massif. The evening before we had checked the weather and avalanche forecasts, and the day seemed perfect, with only a low northerly wind predicted, and 2 out of 5 on the European Avalanche Index. We helped the hut guardian clear our table, then headed out into the porch area to put on our gear. The still air temperature was about -5°C / 23°F, so we pulled on warm jackets, hats and gloves.



For safety we put on avalanche safety beacons, worn around our bodies, beneath the outer clothes. Even though the avalanche risk was forecast as low, it didn't harm to stay safe. Soon the room was filled with various beeps and squeaks as the beacons were tested, then the staccato clicks of the snowshoe binding ratchets being adjusted and tightened. Poles were distributed and one by one we emerged into the winter wonderland. The snow was well frozen and the snowshoes made a crisp crunch as they gripped the icy surface.

Soon everyone was ready, and our headlamps cast pools of yellow light on the snow. The eastern sky was already becoming brighter with the imminent arrival of the sun, but the first hour or

so would be by torchlight. To test the avalanche beacons we spread out and filtered one by one past a group member with their beacon in search mode. As each person approached, the beeps of the beacon became louder and shriller. Soon everyone was checked, and we set off up the snow slope behind the mountain hut.

There were no tracks from previous groups, due to the snows of the previous week. We crunched steadily upwards, the torch lights focused on the tips of the snowshoes, and the next few



paces ahead. The pace was steady and good, and we all settled into a good regular rhythm. This would be essential for the ascent, as it would take several hours. Everyone was moving at the same speed, each person immersed in their own little world in the pre-dawn darkness.

Ahead of us a dark shape emerged out of the darkness. Soon some of the stronger torchlights picked out the roof of a ruined barn sticking out of the snow, the roof timbers standing upwards, bleached and broken like ribs. The massive stone tiles had slid off, and just the timbers remained. This was part of the long abandoned village of the Alpe Inferiore du Malatra. Soon other ruined buildings came into view, and we wove our track between the walls, and upwards into the higher valley. After another half hour we came to the upper village, and passed it to the right. The villages had not been abandoned due to avalanche risks, but due to the changes in the local economy, with less people working on the land, lured away by easier jobs in the Aosta valley.

It was time to turn off the head torches, as the head of the valley was bathed in golden early morning sunlight. We had ascended onto a slightly flatter area in the upper valley floor. It was still cold, and the frozen breath of each member of the group trailed behind them, as they forged their

way onwards. The snow still was in perfect condition, and the stillness of the early morning was broken by the noises of the six pairs of snowshoes; crunches, clips, crackles, crushes and clacks. High above us on the right rose the Tête Entre Deux Sauts, and ahead the massive headwall of the valley, seemingly impenetrable and austere.

Too soon it was time to head on upwards again, and we zigzagged to reduce the angle. At each corner kick turns were



needed to change direction, and the poles came in handy to give balance. The efforts of the altitude gain were more than compensated by the views of the mountain faces ahead and either side of us. The granite poking through the snow was orange and pink in the sunlight, and the snow crystals glistened far brighter than seemed imaginable.

With the increased altitude and aspect, the snow started to change, and soon we were breaking trail through deep but light powder. The snowshoes gave us floatation, that without which we felt we would have been waist deep floundering in the deep snow. Beneath the surface the



snowshoes remained invisible as they glided through the powder, supporting us step for step. Snow stuck to our gaiters and legs, and onward and upward

we trekked. The sky was lightening by the minute, and was moving from dark to royal blue. The contrast between the white of the snow and the blue of the sky was perfect. Sunlight was still not us,

in the shade of the mid slopes, but it was just touching the upper slopes above and the lure of the warmth drove us on.

To the right, the high pass came into view, and we could see the remainder of the route sweeping around the slopes of the headwall to traverse upwards towards it. Though it seemed a long way ahead, the rhythm of the snowshoeing kept us going, and bit-by-bit we narrowed the gap. As we pushed on we all felt the burn of lactic in our legs, and the chill of the morning air on our lungs, but it felt good and a fitting part of the adventure. After about half an hour the col was just



ahead, with the snowy saddle beckoning as a perfect point to rest before the final ascent. To spur us on even more, we started to move into the sunlight, with first just our heads casting shadows while our bodies remained in the shade, then a few steps later we were all in the sun. The warmth welcomed us, and rewarded us for our efforts. We took the final steps towards the col.

Nothing could have prepared us for the view that greeted us at the pass. As we ascended the Italian face of Mont Blanc came into sight on the far side of the pass. This is one of the largest mountain walls in the Alps, starting at 4810m / 15780ft with the glistening dome of Mont Blanc, and plunging nearly 4000m / 12000ft to the valley floor and the town of Courmayeur. The early



morning sun was illuminating the whole face, and we could pick out all the features; the Kuffner Arête,

Brenva Face, Freney Pillar, Brouillard Arête, and Pueterly Integrale. These names are etched on the annals of alpinism and are associated with some of the most famous climbers the world has ever seen: Lachenal, Bonnington, Rebuffat, Whillans, Bonatti and Gabarrou, to name but a few.

After the obligatory photos, we turned our attention to the Tête Entre Deux Sauts. Initially the summit ridge starts with a steep ascent to a subsidiary summit, then a long corniced ridge towards the main summit. This section looked to be at the absolute limit of what was possible on snowshoes rather than crampons, but the snow was good, so we started on upwards. There were a few patches of wind slab that were easily avoided, then the snow improved and the first summit was reached. From here it was easy to assess the cornices, and we judged the route to take. Keeping well to the windward side, we walked along the ridge, and upwards to the main peak.

Before long we were taking the final steps up to the top. If possible the view was even better than at the high pass, but we knew we couldn't linger long. The sun was starting to get to the snow, and had to get back to the col before the snow deteriorated. Once back at the pass we planned our descent route to the hut. The powder snow was so big an attraction that we opted to return by a similar route to our ascent, but swinging out further into the upper Malatra valley.

We didn't need any encouragement to run down the slopes, powder snow flying up around us. The exhilaration and speed of the descent cancelled out any feelings of fatigue. We all sought out steep bowls to run down into, and up the far sides. The snowshoes seemed weightless, and the



efforts of the ascent were all forgotten. The snow was perfect, and the warmth of the sun on our faces spurred us on further and faster. A glance around and the smiles all over the faces of the group indicated that they were all having as good a time.

Being careful to avoid the avalanche prone slopes and terrain traps, we curved under the headwall and on a descending traverse to beneath the Col du Malatra, and then down into the upper valley. We were still all running through the powder snow, and though no one had said it, we were all racing each other. At the base of the slope was a large boulder, and we converged there,



laughing, gasping for breath, and on a high after the delight of the descent. The key ascent was over and all that remained was the snowshoe back to the hut, and then down to the valley.

Whilst we were still in the high mountains, with no other people or manmade objects visible, we stopped for a break to drink in the view, the peace, and the stillness. It was a completely unspoilt landscape, and it felt as though no one had ever been there before. What made it all the more remarkable was that this valley was only a half hour drive from the thriving ski resorts of Courmayeur in Italy and Chamonix Mont Blanc in France. At the same time as we were enjoying the solitude, thousands of others would be teeming all over the ski pistes, queuing for the cable cars, and crammed in the ski buses. Not us.

Ahead of us was the South face of the Grandes Jorasses, with Pointe Walker majestic at the top. It was time to get moving again, as though we were still high and the snow was great, by the time we reached the valley floor it would be the afternoon and the snow would be slushy. We trekked on down the valley and soon reached the Malatra village again. Snow drifts were banked right up over some of the buildings, and it was possible to walk over the roofs and to jump off the far side into the banks of deep snow.

After another half hour the valley narrowed and we cut over a convex slope, and the hut came into view below us. It seemed a long way down than we remembered, but in the dark of the early morning we had clearly moved quicker than we had thought. Still, another steep slope meant that we all broke into a run again, and it lasted all the way down to the hut door. Here we stopped to gather our breath, and to enjoy the view again, before unbuckling our snowshoes and ducking inside the low hut door again.



It never ceases to amaze how quickly a good hot chocolate makes everyone forget all their efforts, and soon it was time to set off again. We said goodbye to the hut guardian, and patted the well fed dog once more. He padded outside to watch us strap on our snowshoes once more, and then descend towards the tree line down below. Just as the hut disappeared behind the skyline, we could see the dog still watching us, probably missing our treats and snacks already.

The snowy forest smelt of pine and cones lay all over the surface of the snow. Our route wound its way between the trees, but the forest was never too thick to impede our views onto the Jorasses. As we lost height the path became wider and wider. On the left a snowy gully led directly down to the main valley floor. We plunged down it and before we knew it the trees parted, and we emerged into the Val Ferret. In the summer months the valley is busy with hikers on the Tour du Mont Blanc, but in the winter it is the preserve of the snowshoer, and lower down the cross country ski trails make a circuit of the valley floor.

After half an hour we came across some wonderful old stone farm buildings in valley at Lavachey, surrounded by deck chairs and sun shades. Without even taking the time to unclip our snowshoes, we collapsed into the sun loungers, and soon an Italian waitress was taking our drinks orders. There is nothing like a cold beer, sitting in the sun, having reached a snowshoe summit, then descended to the most picturesque valley in the world.



This ascent was undertaken as part of a snowshoeing course with Icicle Guides of Chamonix, who were established in 2000. You can read more about their snowshoe guiding at the following link: <http://www.icicle-mountaineering.ltd.uk/snowshoe.htm>. All the leaders are fully qualified International Mountain Leaders, which is the legal standard required in the European

Alps. Icicle is sponsored by GV Snowshoes: <http://www.gvsnowshoes.com>. The author has lived in Chamonix for over ten years, and has been snowshoeing for twenty years. He is a member of both the British and French Associations of International Mountain Leaders (<http://www.baiml.org> and <http://www.lesaem.org>).