

Grand Combin

4314 Meters

22-23 July 2019

Guides: Rüttschi Pollinger and Thomi Zumtaugwald

Situated east of the Mont Blanc massif, west of the Matterhorn, north of Aosta and south of the Rhone, Grand Combin is not among the most prominent, but is certainly one of the more remote peaks on the Swiss-Italian border. We accessed the area from the St. Bernard Pass road. After you turn off at Bourg St. Pierre and head into the countryside, it's a long hike through winding valleys to get to the hut, Cabane de Valsorey.

Our hut-climb day is very hot. We and our guides have driven from the Saas Valley in 2 cars. There is very little roadside parking. Rüttschi and Thomi park their car in a farmyard, right at the trailhead. Here's JC setting off above the farm.



The walk from our parking spot at 1850 m to the hut at 3037 m takes about 4 hours. The whole 6.5 km are in unrelenting sun. We allow ourselves one short snack break and a longer lunch break just 45 minutes from the hut.

Our Grand Combin tour tomorrow will include two separate 4000 m peaks, connected by a snow ridge. Reaching the first peak - just visible under the cloud here - requires a long stretch of rock climbing, some on bad and some on good rock. You can see the rock section, rising sharply from left to right; the hut is above us to the left.





And here is the whole tour! We will leave the hut (not visible), climb the Arete du Meitin to the first peak (Combin de Valsorey, 4184 m), and finally the steep snow ridge to the second peak (Combin de Grafeniere, 4314 m).



During most of the approach the actual mountain is obscured by the curve of the valley and the steep terrain. Here is the Valsorey hut, nicely positioned on an overlook.

The wardens give us a friendly welcome - in particular Thomi, who was here just a couple of days ago. MS digs into a late lunch of Rösti (what else!?), and JC orders soup.

Here is an evening view from the hut's terrace, looking toward Mt Blanc. The snow flanks blend in with the bright sky.

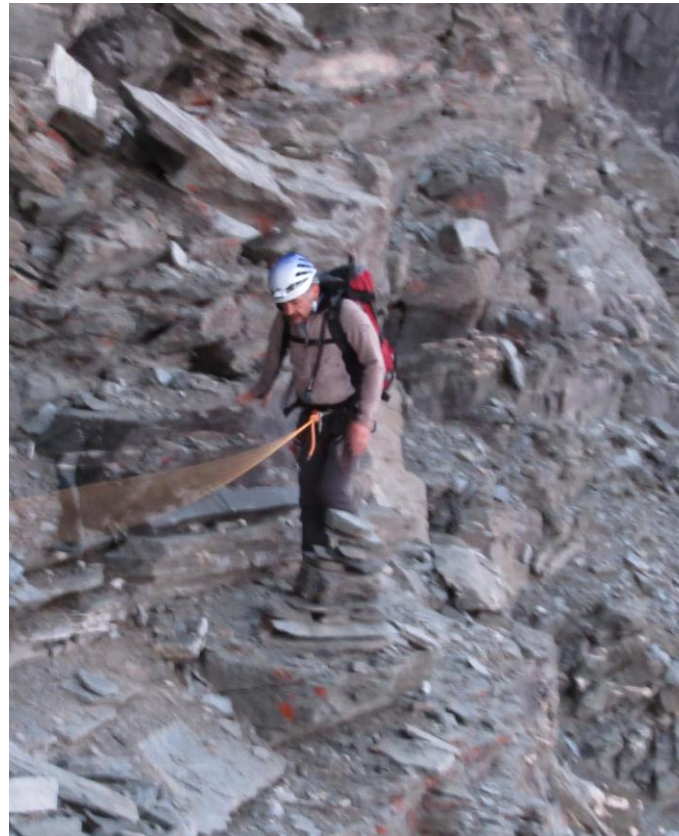




We check out tomorrow's first challenge – the entire ridge line rising on the left. It is still very bright at 2000/8PM, and as usual, not easy to fall asleep when we would like, at 2100/9PM!



After a quick breakfast we set out at 0320/3:20AM. The long slog up through unstable scree snowmelt is difficult with headlamps. Here is JC at 0550, in the crumbly terrain of the lower rock climbing section. He climbs very skillfully, particularly in contrast to M's hesitation.



Another climber navigates the narrow route beneath the overhangs. Loose rock everywhere; ugh.

The most dramatic incident is M's multiple falls when the rope between her and Thomi gets stuck in a crack and she is repeatedly yanked off a narrow shelf. Unfortunately, we have no pix of her swinging in space and cursing (☺).



Mt. Blanc in the morning sun, just after 0600/6AM.



By 0700/7AM, we are at the first summit, Combin de Valsorey, at 4184 meters. The mountains in this shot lie to the northeast, toward the Rhone Valley.

After some quick refreshment, we descend briefly and then head back up, climbing nearly 300 metres on a very steep snow/Firn slope pictured here. You see the arched, snowy summit of Combin de Grafeniere.

We move fast, having switched to “mindless chug along” mode.





By 7:45 we are at the highest point, 4314 meters! Here is a view back down to the cirque we just rounded. It turns out the party ahead of us is here for some paragliding. One of them is visible, scraping by the opposite peak.



This is a view from the summit looking west, The Matterhorn, on the right looks strange from this angle. From the left side of the photo the lineup includes 'our' local Saas peaks: Allalin, Rimpfisch and Strahlhorn.

Looking beyond the Matterhorn further to the southwest, we can see the Monte Rosa massif and several frontier peaks superimposed on it (Breithorn, Castor, Pollux and Liskamm).



M is a happy camper, nearly 1400 meters above the hut, where we started just 4.5 hours ago.





Here is the fearless foursome:
Thomi, MS, JC and Rüttschi.
Altitude 4314 m, at
0745/7:45AM. Yipee!!

(And watch out for those
wicked cornices about a metre
behind us!

We make good time returning to the first summit (Combin de Valsorey), arriving there just an hour after we left Grafeniere. The long rock climbing section beneath Valsorey is much easier to navigate in broad daylight, although we must concentrate on the safety of those beneath us, in this loose stuff.

These sections are ideal for Abseilen/rapelling - a welcome change of pace!

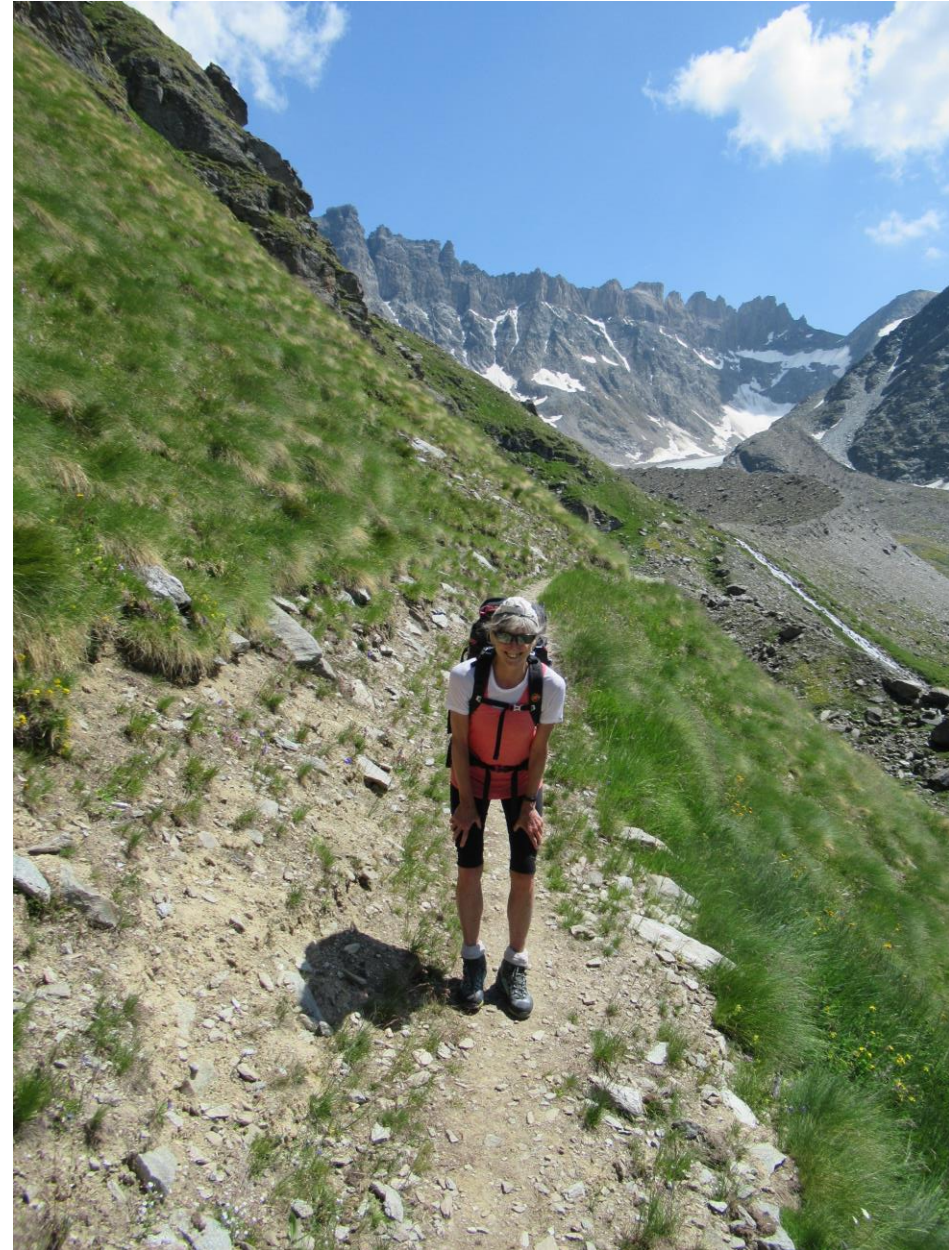




Beneath the rock towers, the rest of our long descent alternates between down-climbing and “down-sliding” on soft snow. We are reminded never to underestimate the return trip! At just 1130/11:30AM, we are back at the hut after a 6 km round trip to the summits and 1384 vertical meters of climb and descent. Total time needed: 8 hours and 10 minutes.

Next is a long break for a hot lunch, some birthday cake for Rüttschi and chats with the hut wardens and other guests. At about 13:00 our guides depart (they have another job tomorrow!), and by 13:45 we're heading down ourselves.

After the initial descent from the hut's "Podest" through steep switchbacks and boulders, we turn the corner to follow the long trail back along the valley flank. It is grassy with pretty flowers and an amazing panorama, but we feel dazed by the heat and the exertion of the morning, and often we are more focused on the next cool drink than on the views.





What did not get captured on film is Jeff's slip and fall, at 1430, on this lovely trail. He twists his ankle trying to catch himself and snaps his fibula (the outside ankle bone). This is the infamous Weber-B Fraktur we will hear so much about in the weeks and months to come.

Instead of strolling briskly back to the car in about 90 minutes, which was our plan, we need nearly 3 hours to hobble back down the remaining 5 km, with heavy packs in the heat and with every step hurting for JC.

And here is the sorely tested mountaineer,
3 days later, expressing his opinion on
having to wear a heavy rigid boot and use
crutches.

But... this does not diminish our memories
of this fantastic tour!

Others are thrilled with the tour too! See this YouTube video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eyx1PD8wWus>

