

The Voie Petit;

GRAND CAPUCIN

Mont Blanc



Caff turns the roof on the crux pitch



Caff on the final cracks of the crux pitch on his successful redpoint

An account of the third free ascent

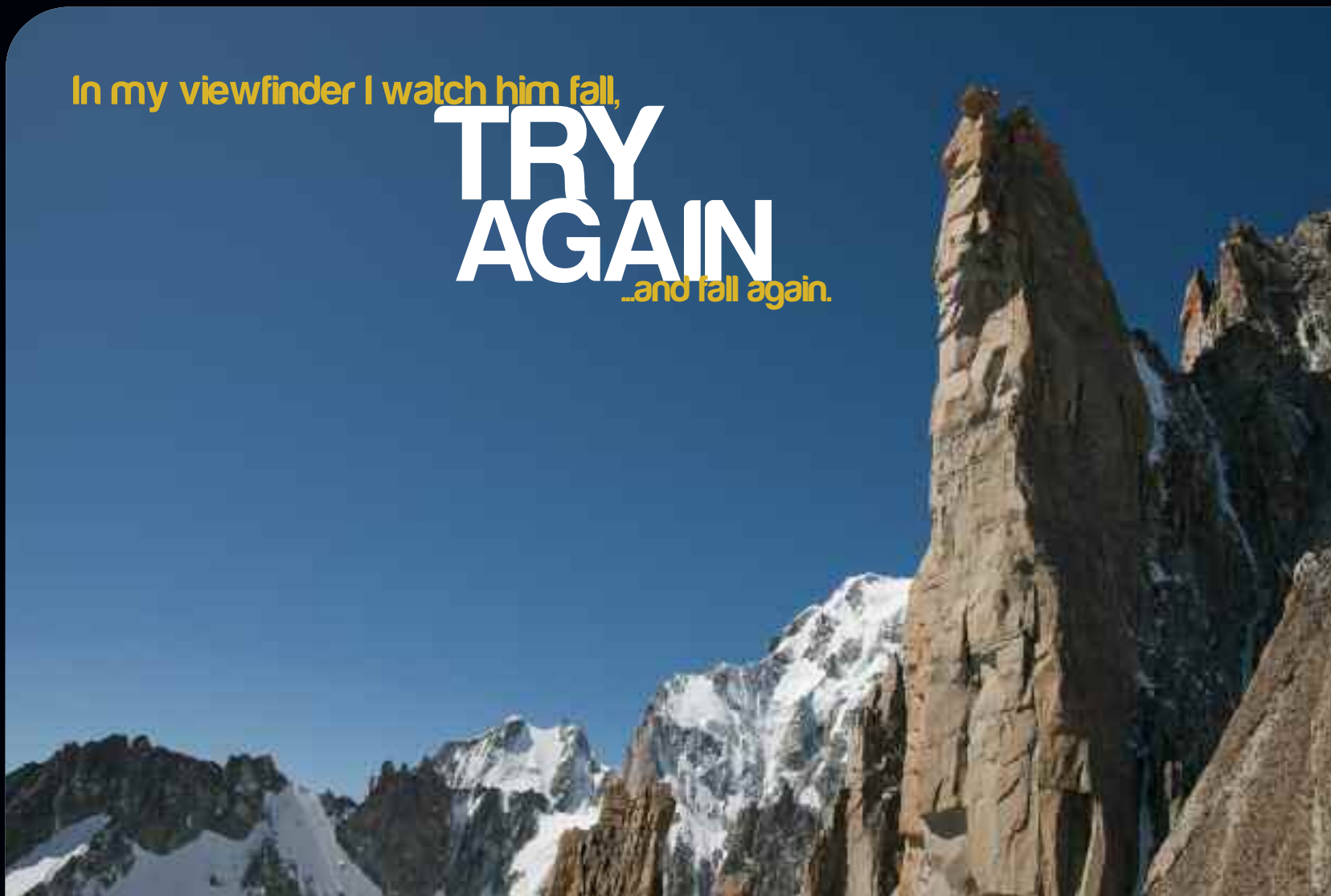
by Adam Long

Dawn, but only just. The tent seams slowly show dark against the panels, and I listen as Ben and Caff force on their frozen boots and crunch off into the darkness. Two hours later, as the sun finally crests the Jorasses and strikes the tent, I pack my camera and follow them. It's our fourth day on the mountain, and today is 'the big one'. Above camp, I skip across the two small crevasses either side of the crest of the Col du Flambeau, and start the steady descent towards the Cirque du Maudit. Ahead of me the low sun rakes across the south face of the Tacul, casting gullies into shadow and picking out its clustered towers and soaring ridges. In the centre the biggest pillar stands proud, its golden granite aflame with light – The Grand Capucin, perhaps the finest piece of granite in The Alps. >>

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TRY AGAIN

...and fall again.



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breathing hard, I lean against my poles, steady my binoculars, and trace the line of the *Voie Petit* up the right-hand side of the face until I reach two dots - the boys nearing the top of the fixed ropes. I straighten up and look around. Mont Blanc glitters bright against a dome of deepest blue. No clouds, no wind. So far so good.

Originally opened by Arnaud Petit and Stephanie Bodet in 1997, the *Voie Petit* was freed by Alex Huber in 2005. It was big news. Heinz Zak's incredible photos made the covers of both *Climb* and *Alpinist*, showcasing fantastic rock, a dramatic alpine setting, and desperate climbing that, to quote Alex, 'may be the hardest at this altitude in Europe'. Poring over the magazines, we had all been immediately inspired. Having



The Grand Capucin takes centre stage on the south face of the Tacul

between us travelled to California, Patagonia, Canada and Madagascar to climb alpine-scale granite, it was a wake-up call of what we have on our doorstep in Europe. This summer things finally came together and Ben Bransby, James McHaffie and I travelled out to take a look.

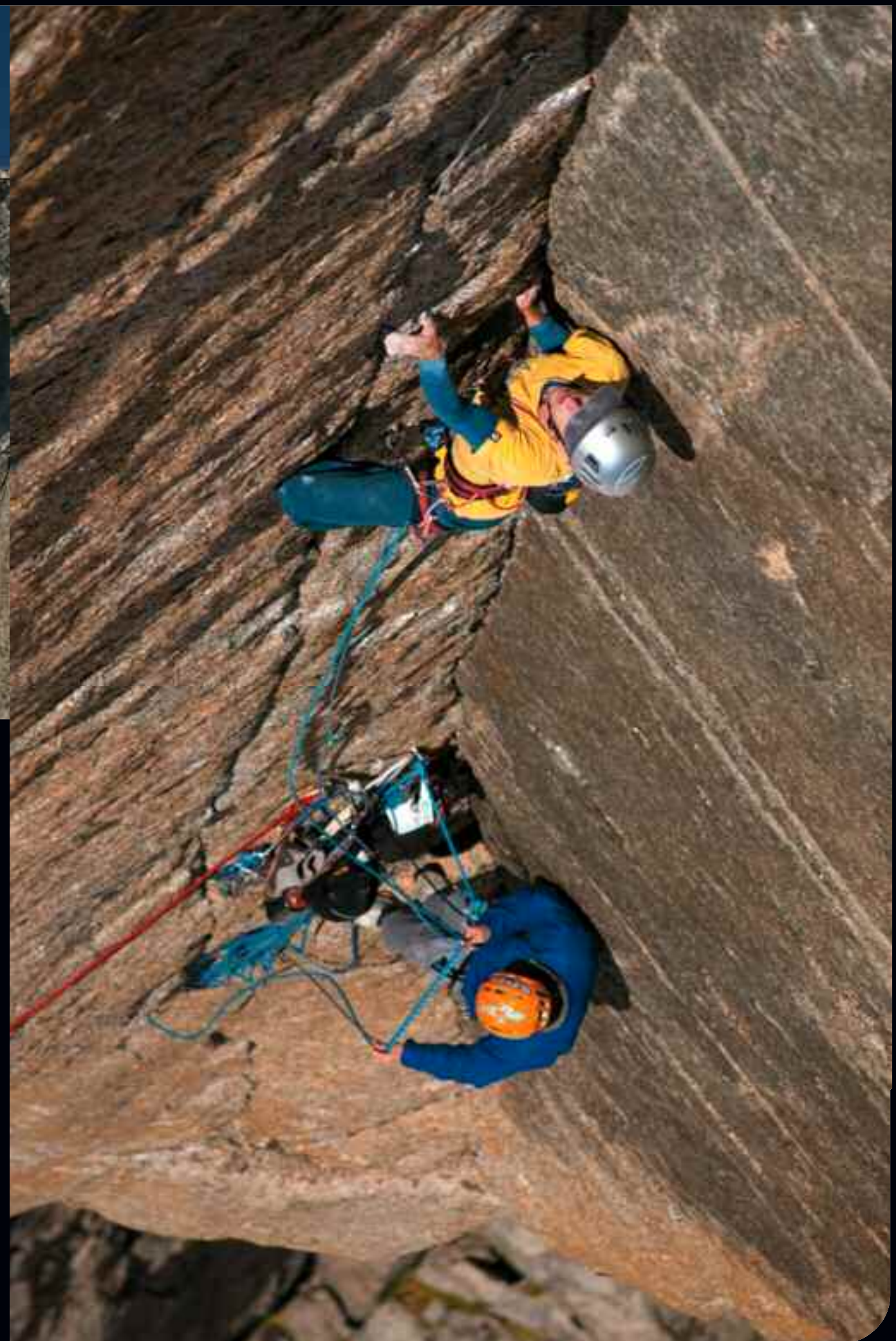
The focus of the route's lower section is a beautiful square-cut corner capped by a roof. Graded by Huber at French 8b, it's the crux of the whole route and took us the first two days just to reach and attempt, a bold E6 slab on pitch two giving a particularly harsh start to day one. After two days in the valley waiting out a storm, on our third day we climbed back up the corner and Caff narrowly missed redpointing it on his first attempt. On his second he made no mistakes, made it through the roof and jammed up the cracks to the belay a happy man. Ben seconded it free bar a rest, and then efficiently worked and redpointed the F7c pitch above. On our descent we fixed the ropes from the top of the crux pitch

back to the floor. Today the effort and preparation will hopefully pay off, and Ben and Caff can have a decent crack at making the third ascent. To let them go as fast as possible I've stayed behind, although for the first three days we'd climbed as a three, with me photographing as well as taking a share of leading and seconding.

I cross the valley, make the steep slog up to the base of the Petit Capucin - to the right of the Grand - swap mountain boots for sticky trainers, and start climbing what I hope will be an easy scramble. Looking across, I can see the boys have started climbing too. >>



Team fixing ropes, l-r Caff, Ben, Adam



Caff storming up the crux corner on his successful redpoint

he is struggling though, so much that even the apologizing has stopped



Ben: 'Back at the top of the F8b I re-lead the F7c pitch from last night. At the belay I am getting soaked as the cracks of the next F7b pitch are dripping onto me – this is not what we want. These pitches have to be climbed fast to give us more time above. Caff smoothly seconds the pitch clean and takes the lead.'

'Sorry about this, it's all a bit wet... I'll give it a look in a sec.'

I shouldn't have worried; Caff is up it in a few minutes and a short VS pitch lands us on the bivvy ledge and an early lunch.'

Over on the Petit Cap, I reach a comfortable notch which gives a grandstand view of the boys and settle in. Through my telephoto I watch Caff lead an easy pitch off the ledges, and then Ben sets off on the F8a arête above, in an incredible position.

Ben: 'I give it everything first go, keen to even things up a bit and have Caff second me on this one. The initial crack goes okay and then I get to the arête, a section Huber described as 'very technical', and the move which stopped his first in-a-day attempt. But the bolt in Huber's photos is just a stud, and above is a new bolt, which I can't reach. Now before I can try the move I've got to do a harder one just to clip.'

In my viewfinder I watch him fall, try again, and fall again. After four falls he lowers back down. Things are finely balanced. With more hard pitches above getting this done quickly is crucial. It is so high on the tower that it's unlikely we'll have the time or energy to return for a redpoint.

Ben: 'It makes sense to give Caff a blast. He doesn't suffer the same problem – I watch his fingers clamp onto the crimp I was struggling to hold and the bolt is clipped. He is struggling though, so much so that even the apologizing has stopped. 'Out right Caff, a good flake!' A quick slap and he is at a shake out, 15ft of E5, a big yell and he is at the belay – F8a on-sight at 3,750m.'

Our shouts of celebration mingle across the gap between the towers.

'On paper the top is close but the reality is tougher. My right arm continually cramps up on the next pitch and what we hope will be a nice short F7b turns out to be about E6 necky slab climbing. Thankfully we make no mistakes, the final independent pitch is mine and it is one of the best on the route. A perfect orange granite arête, overhanging the dark East face. A bit like Silly Arête but with three bolts. I try to savour the climbing, but I am more focused on reaching the top and my cramping arm puts pressure on me to climb fast. A final easy pitch for Caff and we are on the top with only the abseils to go...'

Alex Huber places great emphasis on what he believes constitutes a free ascent - one climber must lead all the pitches free, ideally in a single day. Whilst this might make sense for a superstar who needs to keep his personal brand in the public eye, it isn't really in the spirit of how climbers typically tackle alpine rock. As with the Czech climbers who made the second ascent, Ben and Caff climbed as a team. Between them they led all the pitches free, all but two on-sight, in sequence from bottom to top, over four days. Perhaps not comparable, but Huber's continuous ascent took him three trips. Last word to Caff:

'Yeah, I think that's the second time I've burned Huber off.' ■

GRAND CAPUCIN factfile

LOCATION

On the south side of the Mont Blanc du Tacul, Mont Blanc massif. Courmayeur, on the Italian side, is a slightly better base for access than Chamonix, with a shorter walk-in and less crowded lifts. Fast travel to Chamonix is straightforward with daily budget flights to Geneva and frequent minibus transfers. Needing a little more luggage, we drove out in Ben's camper-van for a more environmentally friendly option. Allowing two days makes for a fairly relaxing journey and the possibility of catching the last lift up on the day you arrive.

ROUTES

The most sought after routes, from left to right, seem to be *O Sole Mio* (ED, F6b+, ~E3), *the Swiss route* (TD+, F6a/A0, ~E1), *Gulliver's Travels* (ED+, F7a, ~E5) and the *Bonatti route* (ED, F6c+, ~E4). However, from what we saw of the wonderfully featured rock on the Grand Cap, there isn't a route here that wouldn't be worth doing. The neighbouring spires of the Trident, Chandelle and Petit Capucin offer plenty of easier, shorter options for warm-up routes, though can be crowded.

Unfortunately there isn't a current guidebook – photocopies of the most recent are available from the Guides' office in Chamonix, or search online for topos.

APPROACH AND TACTICS

Being within an hour's walk of the Helbronner téléphérique (or 2 hrs from the Midi) its quite possible to do a route in a day from the valley catching first and last lifts. However the routes are long and you'll need to be very fast at both walking and climbing. By far the better approach is to plan on camping for a night or two and allow a full day to savour the route. You can camp on the glacier below the Capucin or nearer the respective lifts at the Col du Flambeau or Col du Midi.

All the approaches are across crevassed glaciers and require familiarity with techniques for safe travel on such terrain – the Midi approach in particular crosses a very confused area – ropes are essential. Later in the season crossing the bergschrund may be difficult, and with snow levels retreating every year accessing some of the routes on the left (which traditionally start up the gully) may require a couple of rock pitches rather than a snow plod.

The main face gets the sun all day – at this altitude very intense but a welcome alternative to the frigid shade – the routes on the right progressively losing the sun from mid-afternoon onwards.

DESCENT

The gullies either side are dangerous places to be in the afternoon, meaning abseil descent of your respective route the most sensible option. Most belays are equipped with tat if not bolts, making this fairly straightforward, and there are enough routes that taking a different line is unlikely to be a disaster.

Ben attempting pitch 10, 8a arete

