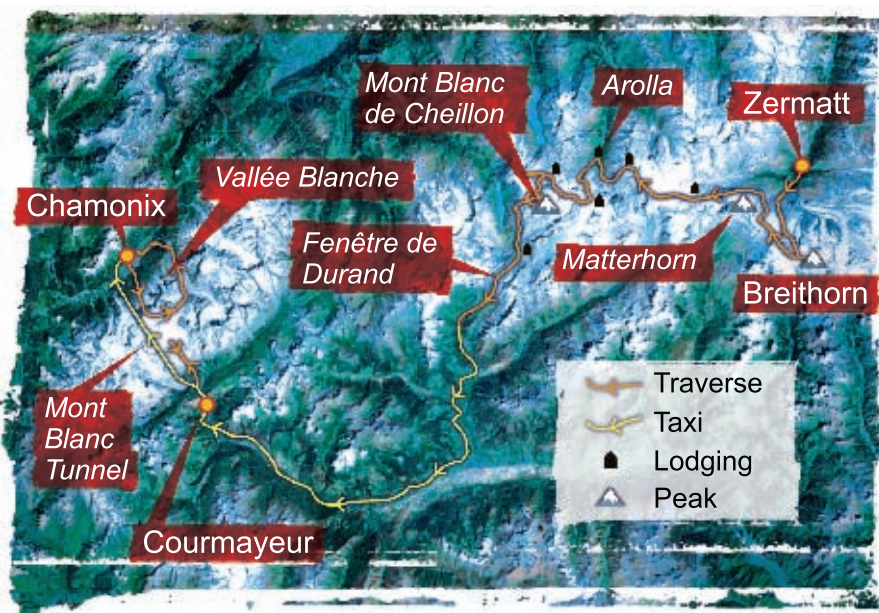


STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON BAUER
MAP ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN MACEACHERN

HAUTE



The European Haute Route is a true classic in the world of ski-mountaineering. In gaining experience for organizing my own backcountry trips, I completed an Haute Route tour in 2000 with Swiss-Canadian guide Ruedi Beglinger. Since then I'd been looking for the opportunity to return with a small group of friends and soak up more of the European alpine environment. In the past five years I'd been touring in western Canada each winter with a longtime friend, New Zealander Neville Mallett. Our experience had us prepared for completing the Haute Route as a twosome, but we then learned that Scott Tyler, a friend I'd made on a Mount Logan expedition, would be on sabbatical in Switzerland during the winter of 2006. Scott's wife Connie's apartment in Lausanne made a perfect staging point. And Scott was able to convince his friend Garth Pinter of Nevada to make our group even more international.

The Swiss, French, and Italian alpine hut systems are steeped in the history of the sport, making ski touring a vastly different experience from what is available in North America. In many ways, it is a luxury option among backcountry experiences. Many of the huts have keepers who provide meals, including the option of beer and wine, and bedding is provided, which means that one can tour for many days with a very light pack.

Although traditionally attempted from Chamonix, France in the west to Zermatt, Switzerland in the east, there are countless variations for completing the Haute Route. In our case, we chose an east-to-west option starting in Zermatt, skiing into Glacier, Italy and then finishing the tour with a ski of the Vallée Blanche into Chamonix. The route included five Swiss Alpine Club huts, plus a night in the Swiss village of Arolla, one in the Italian town of Courmayeur, and another in Chamonix.

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PURSUIT

Four friends
soak up Europe's
alpine classic

Cabanne des Vignettes from partway up the ascent to Pigne Arolla. The precarious outhouse location and a tiny portion of the long drop are visible to the right of the main building. A heli-pad lies to the left.





Garth Pinter laying down some beautiful telemark turns in the powder snow above Cabanne des Dix (visible far below on a rock knoll). After reaching the hut about mid-day, we made our way up to the summit of La Lulette after ditching most of our gear. It was a hot climb, but working our way around to a north-east aspect for the descent made the effort worthwhile.



After ascending in blue-sky weather from Cabanne des Vignettes, the upper reaches of Pigne Arolla were suddenly engulfed in clouds. Although only about 60 meters from the summit, we elected to give it a pass and make our way down to Cabanne des Dix. Here Scott Tyler and Neville Mallett are reviewing our descent route on the map, while Garth Pinter gets some extra shell layers on.



The whiteout situation at Pointe Helbronner made our ski descent of the Vallée Blanche from the Italian side into Chamonix impossible. The route is heavily crevassed and requires at least moderate visibility. Although we waited for about four hours and occasionally saw a tiny hole in the upper cloud cover, we decided to descend and make our way to Chamonix through the Mont Blanc Tunnel.



Could there be a more spectacular location for a high alpine hut? Cabanne de Bertol throws one more challenge for ski-mountaineers at the end of a long day.

They must leave their skis and poles behind, shimmy across a snow ledge holding onto a fixed chain and then climb the next to vertical ladders up to the hut.



We rode the Aiguille du Midi téléphérique (cable car) to the start of the Vallée Blanche. Care must be taken descending on foot from the docking station. A tumble down the north face (left in the image) would be terminal and only moderately better to the right. The view was spectacular with pockets of clouds filling some of the lower areas.



The end of the nine-day Haute Route Tour, from Zermatt to Chamonix via Italy. With a lack of snow further down, here skiers exit the west side of Mer de Glace and climb the stairs to catch the Montenvers cog train into Chamonix. The train and stairs give tourists the chance to get up close and personal with a glacier. [ml](#)



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“I like these cold, gray winter days. Days like these let you savour a bad mood.”
 —Bill Watterson

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