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White Magic

Boarding off Mt Blanc



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Adam Kelly rides deep powder on his first day training and acclimatising for his Mt Blanc adventure.



Natural highs on Mont Blanc

Two years ago, Outsider's triathlon editor Adam Kelly got into his head that he wanted to climb Mount Blanc and snowboard off its summit. He may be a personal trainer and triathlete, but he has limited climbing experience and considers himself just a mediocre snowboarder – so it was going to be an epic challenge. For months he bored his friends and family with his plans and his fascination with the mountain. He then pestered these same people for sponsorship when he decided to use the adventure to raise funds for the Special Olympics in Ireland. This is the account of his trip which finally took place last year. To check out his video, visit www.outsider.ie and click on Outsider TV.

Cruising down the Vallee Blanche after the crevasse incident.



Even though I knew that climbing Mt Blanc and snowboarding off it was a serious undertaking, it was really brought home to me when I got a call from Wilderplaces, the adventure company that was helping me organise everything. My guide had been changed. The original guide had just got caught in an avalanche and had torn his cruciate ligament. I am sure he was delighted to only come away with that injury as well as his life.

And so when I arrived at my hotel in the centre of Chamonix I met my new guide – an American called ‘Farmer’. He did a gear and equipment check and all was in order. Just as well, I thought as my snowboard bag had weighed 30kg at Dublin airport and it had taken a fair bit of sweet talk to avoid being charged.

It was at this point that I got some bad news. It was looking doubtful that we would make it to the summit of Mt Blanc with the snowboard. Rather we would have to leave it two hours down the mountain on the shoulder and walk to and from the summit. Apparently it is extremely rare that people can actually ski from the summit. Conditions have to be absolutely perfect and some locals have been waiting years for that special chance!

I felt like a bit of an idiot. Why didn’t I do more research before telling everybody at home that I was going to snowboard off the summit and raised sponsorship on the back of the claim.

I awoke early the next day to fresh snow. Farmer said that up to half a metre of snow had fallen overnight and, better still, that the weather was set to become more settled as the week went on. This was music to my ears considering the news I got the day before. He said nothing however about boarding off the actual summit. As far as I was concerned we would be boarding off the shoulder, if we were lucky.

We then hit the empty powdery pistes with preparation, acclimatisation and equipment testing on our minds. While I was having lots of fun, the first thing I noticed was that the weight of my pack was compromising my balance. Considering it contained snow shoes, crampons, shovel, probe, water, ice axe, harness, karabiners, cameras and extra clothing, it shouldn’t really have been a surprise! I also had an avalanche transceiver strapped to my body and add my snowboard to the total weight and the pack hit about 20kg! That day we climbed up in fresh powder snow to simulate what Mt Blanc itself could be

like, but also to find fresh powder tracks for an incredible descent! Wow was it worth it. Although visibility was poor, I reckoned that was what it was like to float in the clouds!

The day’s exertions were somewhat like doing a triathlon or a five-hour training spin with my heart rate elevated most of the day, due to the exercise intensity and the lack of oxygen in the air. I also lost a few litres of fluid and later used some electrolytes sachets to help restore my body’s electrolyte and hydration balance. Oh and some red wine because I was in France and it went well with my rare steak. Vive la France!

The next day’s plan had me “psyched” as Farmer would say. We were aiming to ski to Italy across the famous Vallee Blanche to stay in the Torino hut at 3,400m on the Italian/French border. This is the proven way to help the body acclimatise to the lack of oxygen.

Ciao Italia

We started the day with a trip on the Aiguilles du Midi lift, one of the highest cable cars in the world. With a clear sky, everything was panning out perfectly

“That day we climbed up in fresh powder snow to simulate what Mt Blanc itself could be like, but also to find fresh powder tracks for an incredible descent! Wow was it worth it. Although visibility was poor, it did simulate what it must be like to float in the clouds!”

until I inflicted a fat and bloody lip on myself! Basically I was whooshing myself along on a flat section using ski pole (the norm when you're in backcountry terrain) and I managed to whoosh myself in the face with the handle. Clever!

However we soon settled down into some smooth boarding through the breathtakingly white, almost lunar landscape of the Vallee Blanche. Until I fell into a crevasse! These cracks in the glacier are often covered by snow bridges but they can collapse when you travel over them. That's why it's essential to be roped together and properly equipped – as we were. Staring into the abyss, I was pretty frightened but Farmer took it all in his stride and calmly talked me through getting out. He even managed to take a photo!

After my little ordeal, we proceeded to climb to the Torino hut where it was all 'ciao's and good coffee. I was told to expect an awful night's sleep along with headaches and nausea. While normally I wouldn't even touch paracetamol I had brought Diamox, a drug which is supposed to lessen the affects of altitude sickness, but Farmer told me to forget it. Apparently if you need to take Diamox, you are up too high and need to get down quick. The drug only buys you time by simulating what one can do naturally – consciously breathing deeply and steadily to get more oxygen in. I stuck to the natural method. As it turned out, I didn't suffer at all and had a great night's sleep.

On day 4, we woke to another splendid morning with panoramic views of Italy, France and Switzerland. We headed down a huge off-piste area towards Courmayeur in Italy. After a coffee it was back to work and up

Donning crampons in the dark for the Mt Blanc summit attempt.



the Aosta Valley again and back into France. I was quite surprised at the huge physical effort that even snowboarding downhill was taking thanks to the lack of oxygen and of course my heavy pack. We then proceeded on down the Vallee Blanche towards the comfort of my accommodation in Chamonix. The heat of the sun meant I had again lost a couple of litres in fluids so I spent the evening rehydrating and getting in as much food as possible.

The next day's plan was to climb up to the Grand Mulets hut, which is about a quarter of the way up Mont Blanc. At this stage we still didn't know if it'd be possible to even make a summit attempt. That decision would be made by Farmer when we were in the hut and would be based purely on safety.

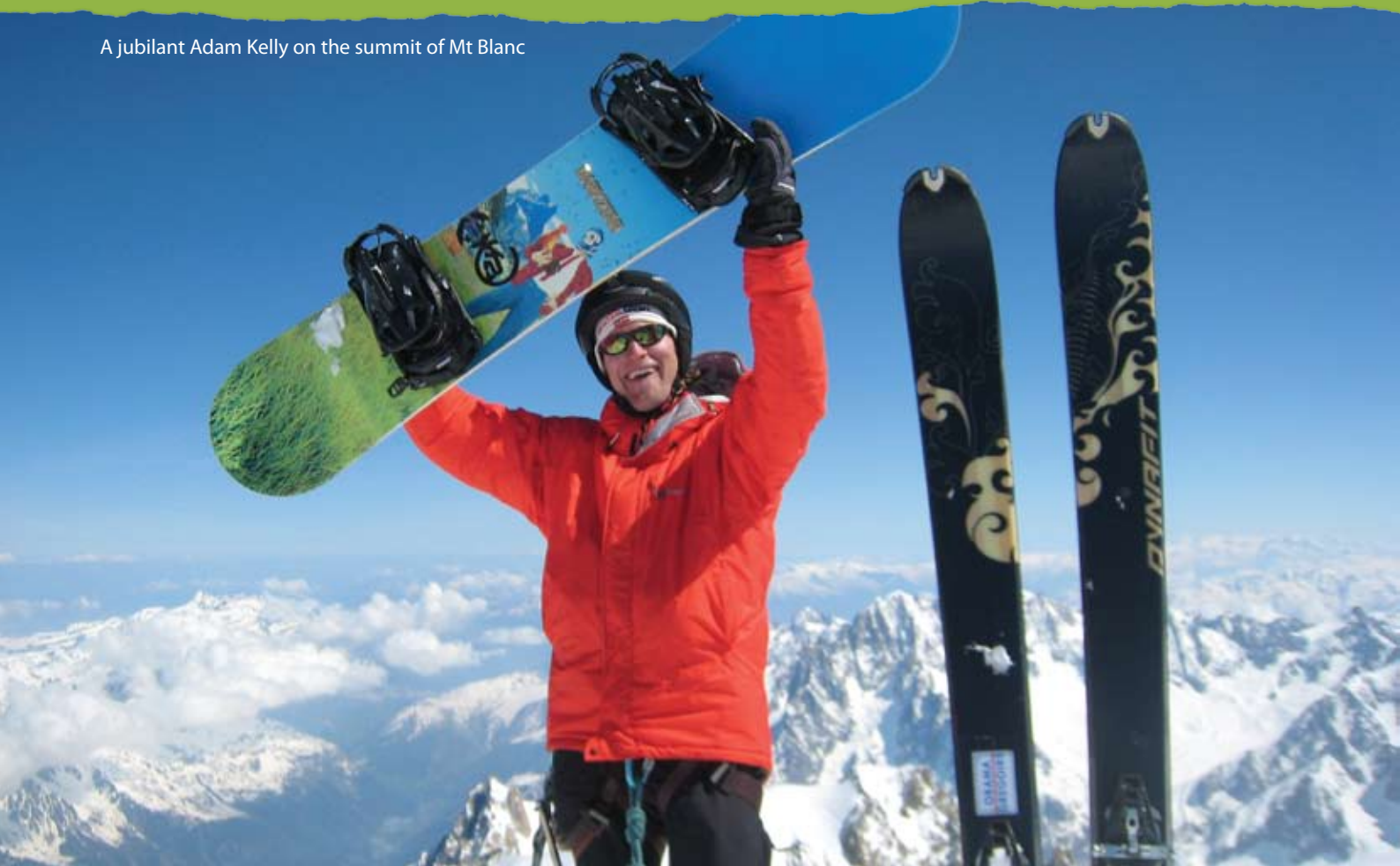
And so on day 5 we set off to tackle Mt Blanc for real. With bright sun, conditions were hot and, to make matters worse, my lip had decided to swell up and take on a life of its own. It was catching the sun and baking nicely

as well as touching the tip of my nose; I looked like Eddie Murphy' in 'the Nutty Professor'. But I didn't care because I was on my way to climbing Mont Blanc at last.

Although we left early in order to cross the snow bridges over the crevasses before the sun got to work on melting them, I was still nervous after my last experience. However, we made it across the Bossons glacier safely and arrived up at the Grand Mulets hut in four hours. Perched on a rock face, we had to climb just to enter it. "This will be fun in the dark at 2am tomorrow morning," Farmer joked.

Throughout the day, the hut steadily filled up with folks with fit, gaunt faces – all planning to summit Mt Blanc. We hadn't made a booking so we claimed a corner in the eating area and prepared to spend the night on the floor. Just before dinner, we got news that two beds had become available which was great, even if we were only going to get four hours sleep before getting up

A jubilant Adam Kelly on the summit of Mt Blanc



“At this point I was really feeling the effects of altitude. It had been seven hours of non-stop very steep climbing and I felt nauseous, had a splitting headache and was wobbling sideways with dizziness. Farmer suggested that we take a good break in the hut.”

before me all day for fear of falling or slipping. This was it, what I had been planning for, for so long. We spent some time on the summit recouping and taking some photos.

Another team arrived and started calling their loved ones to say that they had made it. Farmer and I both looked at each other as if to say, “Mate, you certainly haven’t made it until you are back at the bottom safely, especially if you suckers are walking down!”

It was surprisingly warm up there with very little wind. These conditions were absolute perfection and extremely rare on Mont Blanc. Also the snow that had fallen a few days earlier had

Snowboarding down the north face of the mountain



coated the north face of the mountain with a fresh lick of paint which made for amazing powder conditions. The combination of these made for a potentially perfect descent!

Before long, I strapped my board on, set my head cam to record mode and that was it. We cruised down through the powder stopping regularly, to check the terrain ahead. It was thrilling. A small number of other lucky skiers had descended the north face only minutes before, making fresh tracks which guided us down easily. Just 45 minutes later we were back below the Grand Mulets hut. Nine hours up, 45 minutes down!

Now that is just class. I felt like true pro at last. 🏆

How to organise

Adam Kelly organised his trip through Wilderplaces, run by Irishman Robbie Fenlon. Fenlon has been a UIAGM guide for the past 12 years. Based in Chamonix, Wilderplaces specialises in adventure skiing, ski touring and ice climbing during winter. In summer they focus on alpine training courses, classic ascents and Alpine walking holidays. Wilderplaces trips are skills oriented, adapting itineraries and teaching levels to suit your level of fitness and ability. For more details, contact Wilderplaces, tel. +33(0)6-15-72-07-88; email: info@wilderplaces.com; web: wilderplaces.com