ANUMC Ski Mountaineering Expedition

Classic Haute Route

2010 ANUMC Expedition Fund Application
By Andrew Gough
Introduction:

The Haute route (or “High Mountaineers Route”) is one of the worlds most famous mountaineering challenges. The classic Haute route was first completed as a summer alpine route in 1861 by members of the Alpine Club (UK). It was later completed as a winter ski mountaineering route in 1911 by French mountaineers.

The route winds 180 km through the high passes along the western alps, through 3 countries, from Chamonix (France) in the shadow of Mt Blanc, to Zermatt (Switzerland), below the summit of the Matterhorn. The classic route was a popular ski mountaineering route in the 1970's, but has been growing steadily more difficult as the 13 key glaciers recede. These days there are many variations on the original line to avoid difficult glacier crossings, and make use of newer cable cars and other infrastructure. Despite this, less than half of the attempts on the route are successful.

ANUMC Expedition:

The aim of this expedition is to complete the Classic Haute route unassisted, on skis. It is envisioned that a party of 4 to 6 ANUMC members, all with some skiing and mountaineering experience, complete this route following the classic 1911 line where possible, and avoiding the use of Chairlifts, cable cars, underground trains and cars that have been used in more recent years to make the journey easier. The group will still make use of the fine well stocked huts along the route, which in turn saves significantly on the weight carried.

The Haute route provides one of the classic ski tours of the world, however the difficult terrain combined with long distance and large climbs mean that it is a major undertaking requiring more than just basic touring skills. With the high passes and glacier travel requiring experience with skills that would be considered more in keeping with traditional mountaineering, such as roped glacier travel, abseils and complex route finding both through alpine passes and across heavily crevassed glaciers. While challenging this route will provide an excellent opportunity for participants to develop and extend skills difficult to acquire in Australia.

The attempt at this route will provide inspiration both for the participants and a great demonstration to the general membership, through post trip slide shows (tales and trips) about where the skills developed in the Australian Alps can take them. The week of touring and preceding training will allow the group cohesion to develop that is imperative for moving effectively through the mountains. It will also provide an excellent opportunity for potential trip leaders to gain the confidence to lead more challenging trips and hopefully help reinvigorate the “mountaineering” part of the club.

During the period spent in Chamonix waiting for an appropriate weather window, time will be spent practicing skiing skills and general mountain craft, through climbs and descents in the surrounding mountains. It is also envisaged that the participants will undertake to run several trips in the Australian Alps during the preceding months to ensure that the appropriate skills have been developed, these trips will be open to general club members providing an opportunity for the skills and experience to be shared with others, hopefully encouraging more people to gain the skills required to run trips.

This route would require good snow. Sections of the route can only be crossed in early spring (northern hemisphere) due to avalanche conditions. The proposed date is in March/April 2011.
Logistics:

Ideally the group will be between 4 and 6 people. At this time, the following people have expressed interest:

- Andrew Gough
- Clancy Pamment
- Georgia Pulsford
- Gabriela Scheufele

This will leave at least two places for other club members. The trip is expected to be challenging, the requirements for all potential members will be:

- Some basic mountaineering skills for glacier and ice travel, such as from a previous technical mountaineering course.
- Snow specific mountaineering skills, an understanding of avalanche risk and avoidance.
- Reasonable skiing skills, preferably both alpine and cross country (or previous alpine touring experience).
- A high level of fitness. This route will involve some extremely long climbs, up to 3000 vertical meters in a day, and travel of long distances, over 30 km per day.
- Language skills. At least one member of the team should speak some basic French, Italian, and German (Swiss German). Everyone on the team will need to learn enough to be polite and order meals and accommodation.

The group will meet in Chamonix in late March 2011. The scout group (Clancy and Georgia) will have already made many of the arrangements in the way of accommodation and hut bookings, as they will have been in Chamonix for several months at this stage.

Members will be expected to find their own way to Chamonix. From their, transport to the start of the trip and the return to Chamonix will be using the available train services.

After several mandatory group training days, we will begin the trip in the first suitable weather window. Note that unfavorable snow conditions (high avalanche risk) or weather could significantly delay the start of the trip.
Classic Haute Route Itinerary:

The Classic Haute Route is based around 5 huts in the high alps. Given good weather and indestructable participants, it would be done over 6 days. However certain sections require suitable snow conditions to avoid avalanche risk, and other sections require suitable temperatures to speed up travel over the ice. Rest days may become necessary due to minor injury. At minimum of 7 days is expected, although up to 2 weeks is quite possible. There are several quick exits from the route if we are delayed much beyond this.

The below schedule assumes that no delays are encountered, an unlikely scenario. Training days are not included, as the number required will depend on the exact make up of the group. For example, it may be deemed necessary to join a formal avalanche safety training course before departure.

Day 1

Start from the small village of Argentiere, in Chamonix, France. We will carry skis up the side of Aig Verte to the snow line, then proceed to skin up the north arm of the mountain, crossing on to the Argentiere Glacier. Traverse east up the Glacier and climb up to Col de Balme, where we cross into Switzerland. From the Col we cross the Fenetre du Saleina to Trient hut. Due to the large climb involved, this is expected to be the hardest day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Distance:</th>
<th>18 km</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Climb:</td>
<td>2900 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Descent:</td>
<td>800 m</td>
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Day 2

From Trient hut, a short ascent to Col des Ecandies leads to the first long downhill, as descent the Val d'Arpette to the town of Champex. Then a long walk along the highway to the town of Bourg St Pierre, or if conditions allow a ski crossing of the Tsavre range can cut off some distance.

- Total Distance: 31 km
- Total Climb: 900 m
- Total Descent: 2300 m

Day 3

A long climb from Bourg St Pierre up the south side of Grand Combin to the Valsorey hut. From the hut there are several possible side trips, including an ascent of Grand Combin (4314m), or a ski route along the Corbassiere glacier.

- Total Distance: 9 km
- Total Climb: 1900 m
- Total Descent: 0 m
Day 4

From Valsorey hut, over the Plateau du Couloir and descent down the Glacier du Mont Durand to Chanrion hut. This shorter day can be supplemented by side trips either north onto the Boussine Range, or south onto Mt Avrill, and into Italy.

Total Distance: 10 km  
Total Climb: 300 m  
Total Descent: 1000 m

Day 5

From the Chanrion hut there is a long climb up to Vigette hut. There are several possible routes, either climbing up the Otemma Glacier to Col de Chermotane and to Vignette hut, or if weather allows, then a long winding climb through Les Portons and several minor peaks toward Pigne D'Arolla (3708). It is then short steep descent to Vignette hut.

Total Distance: 10 km or 13 km  
Total Climb: 800 m or 1400 m  
Total Descent: 0 m or 600 m
Day 6

The longest and most spectacular day of the trip. Starting from the Vignette hut, traverse through Col de l’Eveque, Col du Mont Brulé and Col de Valpelline to the Zermatt Glacier. This traverse Weaves from Switzerland into Italy several times, passes several 4000+ meter peaks. The day finishes with a long descent of the glacier under the shoulder of the Matterhorn, to the top of the Zermatt ski resort, and then descent it’s slopes into the town of Zermutt.

- Total Distance: 33 km
- Total Climb: 600 m
- Total Descent: 2400 m

Day 7

This would be a planned spare day to be spent resting at some point of the journey, depending on how the party goes. If the group is moving well and all goes to plan, then this day could be spent on an extension of the route to Saas-Fee over the Adler Pass, or climbing the ice slopes on the Matterhorn (4485m).
Costs:

It is not expected that club members would travel to Europe only for this ski tour, but that they would make this adventure part of a larger European journey. The most substantial cost of this adventure would be the airfares to a European city, however this trip plan assumes that the trip members would meet in Chamonix for the start of the adventure, making their own way to and from Chamonix.

Equipment costs

Although most eligible club members would have some of the required equipment already, and the club can provide more, the technical ski equipment required is very different from the Australian Telemark gear. Alpine touring skis, full skins, light plastic boots and AT bindings would almost certainly be required. Of the club members who have expressed interest in this trip, two have suitable AT gear already. Other participants would probably rent this gear in Chamonix. There might also be additional avalanche rescue equipment required.

AT ski equipment rental (10 days) : 200 euro, approx $300.

Accommodation

Accommodation within Chamonix itself would be required for training days. On the route Alpine huts are available. Accommodation in Zermutt would be more expensive. Club members have managed to get significantly cheaper accommodation in the past in Swiss huts by using their ANUMC membership.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accommodation Type</th>
<th>Cost per Night</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hostel in Chamonix</td>
<td>20 euro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpine huts</td>
<td>20 to 40 euro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodge in Zermutt</td>
<td>50 euro</td>
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Approximate total for 14 Days: $600.

Other

Other costs can be quite variable. The huts will sell meals and drinks, but can be quite expensive. Ski passes for training days are cheaper than Australia, but still considerable. Transport from Zermutt back to Chamonix can be reasonable. An approximate budget of 400 euro would be required.

Other costs: approximately $600.

This means the absolute minimum cost would be about $1500 per person, It could easily cost more if there are significant delays due to weather, or additional training days are deemed necessary with expensive lift passes.

The intention would be that this trip would be self funded by the participants. If an expedition grant is awarded, then it would go toward group costs, such as food, accommodation and transport on the expedition. Equipment purchased for the group using the grant (if required) would remain property of the ANUMC.
Outcomes:

This trip is aimed at gaining experience within the club in ski-mountaineering, something which is difficult to do in Australia. It is hoped that further club trips are run in the coming years in other locations, such as New Zealand. The European alps are probably the best place to develop initial skills, due to the high level of infrastructure in the mountains.

On return from this trip, members would be expected to participate in spreading this experience to other club members. This would involve not just the expected presentation, but also running workshops on ski-mountaineering skills, like the trips we have run in recent years for mountaineering skills, but with a focus on the particular skills required for ski mountaineering. Examples are:

- Avalanche safety and awareness.
- Avalanche rescue.
- Glacier crossing with skis, minimizing crevasse dangers.
- Rope skills for glacier travel and crevasse rescue.
- Travel in the European alps.

Effective sharing of these skills would require not only a presentation, but also rope skills sessions and a multiday snow trip in the Australian winter.

These training sessions would be open to all club members, and hopefully foster the next group of keen ski mountaineers.