
JON BRACEY

Beyond Reason



The north face of the Aiguille des Pèlerins (3318m) in winter, seamed with ice runnels.



Starting up the *Rébuffat-Terray*. (Jon Bracey)

'Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out just how far one can go.'

T S Eliot

Darkness loomed. The temperature was falling, and the gusty frigid winds penetrated right through to the bone. Our numb fingers grappled with the fiddly shock cord securing headlamps to our helmets. Al Powell, that gnarly and incredibly understated British alpinist of the 1990s and 2000s, was dragging me up a winter ascent of the *Rébuffat-Terray* on the north face of the Aiguille des Pélerins.

I turned the bezel of my Petzl lamp anticlockwise but nothing happened. 'Damn,' I concluded, 'it must have accidentally been switched on inside my rucksack pocket.' I must admit to a small voice inside my head at that moment suggesting that without a functioning light we would surely have to beat a hasty retreat from this miserable world of Alpine winter climbing.

Al quickly disabused me of that idea. If I wanted to get up any decent Alpine routes, he explained, then I had better quickly learn to suck it and suffer. Three difficult pitches later, completed in utter darkness, another lesson from the Alpine school of hard knocks was complete. Half an hour earlier, hanging in my harness from a belay made up of pitons most probably placed years before I was born, a pristine shield of grey granite across to the left had caught my eye. It looked so clean, so beautiful in form, almost



Helliker on the steeper new ground of *Beyond Reason*. (Jon Bracey)

inviting, but at the same time sheer and steep, like a ship's prow and apparently impenetrable. For some unknown reason this vision became etched on my mind.

Years pass by, life speeds up – work, family, expeditions – and people come and go. The climate changes, glaciers melt, recede and even disappear. Conditions for mixed climbing in the Alps have never been so



Bracey climbing thin slabs and blobs of ice. (Matt Helliker)

unreliable. Perhaps this game I love to play is coming to an end. But I don't despair; the optimist will always win I tell myself. A fleeting early autumn storm, then a September cold front hits and then another. Rain, then snow: the 0° isotherm shifts up and then down. My eyes squint again through binoculars at the Pélerins. Excitement builds and the psych returns. Finally, all the stars are starting to align.

My regular climbing partner Matt Helliker never needs persuading and we included in the party the Derbyshire lad Pete Whittaker, world-renowned master of crack climbing. His Alpine experience left a little to be desired, this being his first visit. With the three of us planning a big trip to the Himalaya in the autumn it would be a good opportunity to see whether the young 'wide-boy' was up to much.

Circumstances beyond our control meant we were short on time and instead of an appropriately early start from a bivouac at the Plan de l'Aiguille, we headed up on the first cable car: not ideal given the day's objective. Luckily, I had been up the day before to make a track through recent snow to the base, so we made good time to the bergschrund. We started up the *Rébuffat-Terray* for 200m with impeccable squeaky snow-ice. From here we continued directly up gradually thinning ice runnels towards the rather austere looking and featureless headwall. At this point I started to detect a little uneasiness in the team as we inched closer to the overhanging terrain with not the faintest indication of climbable features in view.

Unlike the others, I had spent hours of my life staring through binocular lenses at this wall of granite and was sure my eyes hadn't deceived me; somewhere there was a line of white dots. But even I was starting to ques-



Bracey climbs a blank section near the top of the route that almost ended their hopes. (Matt Helliker)

tion my own memory when suddenly the mythical line appeared seemingly out of nowhere: a diagonal ramp holding thin ice cutting back left and into the heart of the headwall. I breathed a sigh of relief that I'd not been deceived, and my motivation was bubbling again.

Next up was an awkward looking crack that would look at home amongst some of the nastier horrors of Curbar Edge. Matt and I took one look and without much hesitation passed the rack to the ever-chipper Pete. He danced up the pitch with minimal effort but then stopped above at some slippery snow, unsurprisingly as he was now wearing rock boots. The next section proved to be the crux of the route with thin, technical and slightly run-out mixed climbing, never desperate but taxing on the mind with having to commit to blank-looking terrain full of uncertainty.

Then, just as the jigsaw puzzle of the line seemed to be slotting into place, the way ahead seemed doomed. The snowy ramp we were following thinned to nothing except incredibly bold slab climbing out to the right. That didn't entice any of us. However, there was a slim chance up the rock slab on the left, although it was covered in 10cm or 15cm of powdery snow. I set off on a delicate voyage of shrouded hope and somehow reached the arête on the left, the final key to unlocking *Beyond Reason*.

Summary

First ascent of *Beyond Reason* (ED V, 5+/F5c, M6+, R, 550m) north face of Pointe des Pélerins, or Pointe Migot, 7 February 2020, Jon Bracey, Matt Helliker and Pete Whittaker.