

# Great Northfaces : climbing the Eiger

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# GREAT NORTHFACES - CLIMBING THE EIGER

*"There can be few alpinists who have not day-dreamed of climbing the north wall of the Eiger."* With these words Les Swindin starts his description of the north face of the Eiger in the Alpine Club's guide of the Bernese Oberland.

So then, why was no one here? No tracks, no climbers, despite a great weather report for the weekend and fantastic conditions in the Alps. According to some reports, up to one hundred climbers had been spotted on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses on a single day and no less than seven had to be rescued from the Schmidt route of the Matterhorn north face on another! Two weeks earlier, in mid-October 2014, my climbing partner Gedas and I had ticked off the Schmidt ourselves. Sort of. We had found the route in fantastic conditions, but our own physical condition had been anything but. Gedas was still recovering from his Himalaya expedition and I got terrible diarrhea right as the technical terrain started. In the end it was enough for "guidebook time" but would this do for the Heckmair? We opt for a two-bivvy strategy, carrying enough food for three days and gas for five. At 7am we start up the first steeper section. An awkward dihedral and the heavy pack is too much of a cold start for me. I climb down and get out the rope. "Sorry, you have to put me on belay." Once up, Gedas follows fast, unties and goes ahead breaking trail underneath the Rote Flue with just enough daylight to navigate the maze of rock, snow and occasional steep ice sections. Soon enough, we traverse towards the Difficult Crack and the rope comes out again. The name proves to be apt but Gedas dispatches it with bravour, although

with our heavy packs "French Free" was the name of the game. After some simul climbing I hear Gedas yelling something about the Hinterstoisser Traverse. He had accidentally traversed it without noticing, the famous fixed rope hidden underneath perfect styrofoam snow. I take over the lead passing the Swallows Nest, up the Ice Hose and over the Second Ice Field, which gets us to the base of the Flat Iron. What a fantastic adventure climb! Every section has its own name and comes with countless stories. It feels like roaming Middle Earth after reading Lord of the Rings! Just when our mood has reached a new high point I have to bail. None of the variations I tried to reach the easy terrain towards the Death Bivvy left me with any feeling of a security margin. I ask Gedas to take over the sharp end again. A single crimp for his left crampon frontpoint turns out to be the key. I hadn't even looked for such features, thinking it should be easier. Trying to make up for the wasted time I storm up only to see both my tools rip through the snow and I'm hanging on the rope. It is 3pm when we reach Death Bivvy and the light is already starting to fade. Given the comfy ledge and great view it is not a hard decision to stop for the day. There are even bolts! The Hilton of the Eiger!

The next morning, I spend wrapped up in my DAS Parka, belaying Gedas up The Ramp. The short sprints up to the next belay station are never enough to overheat. Then we started simul climbing again. Suddenly the rope went tight. Out of my sight a whole corner of ice had broken out, taking Gedas down, way past his last placement. Fortunately he was fine and



Topping out the Waterfall Chimney (photo Gedas)



Checking out the view (photo Gedas)

able to lead the Waterfall Chimney. This pitch turned out to be completely dry and the crux of the climb. Another pitch of thin, sketchy ice and it was time for my block. Running up easy terrain took me towards the Brittle Ledge, which turned out to be filled up with snow. This would not have been such a comfy bivvy here! Next the Brittle Crack. Such exposure, such a fantastic pitch! Then the Traverse of the Gods. What an arena of steep rock around us! When we reached the White Spider it was clear that the way down would lead over the summit. Euphoria. Up the crack system towards the infamous Quartz Crack. Here Gedas is taking over again. The pitch is in great condition, the ice to the left thick enough for crampon placements. Just this moment, the sun - not seen for two days - touches the summit and sends down loads of spindrift. An epic picture. It's 3pm again. Enough daylight to finish the Exit Cracks

and bivvy on the summit ridge? We decide to spend another night on the face. After three hours of cleaning the small sitting ledge from snow and ice, a cold and windy night follows and gives birth to our latest insider joke. "Still more comfy than Corti Bivvy!" is the new mantra whenever we have to endure hardship in Switzerland. Waiting for SBB trains for over three minutes, coldish ski lift rides, you name it. Our weathergirl texts us that bad weather might be coming in the next afternoon. So, in the end I get to lead the Exit Cracks in the black of night - like so many of our heroes before us - but with great ice conditions. Summit snow field, summit ridge, summit - descent. Calves are burning but before realizing it we're back on the train to Zurich. General Abonnement takes you wherever you dream of!

*Frieder Wittmann*

The final ridge (photo Gedas)

