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You are humbled by the vastness of nature here amid Western Europe's highest peaks © David Windsor

BACK DOOR VALLEE BLANCHE

YES YOU CAN SKI THE VALLEE BLANCHE FROM ITALY. NO, IT ISN'T 'EASY'. YES IT'S DANGEROUS. YES YOU SHOULD/MUST TAKE A GUIDE. MINE WAS MARCO TAMPONI, A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETÀ GUIDE ALPINE COURMAYEUR, THE OLDEST ALPINE GUIDE'S BUREAU IN ITALY AND SECOND ONLY TO CHAMONIX IN THE WORLD. BY DAVE WINDSOR

I rendezvoused with Marco at 8.45am at the *Caffè delle Funivie*, for a café and chocolate croissant brekkie, a weather check (an unseasonably 6°C up top & windy) and then it's up to Rifugio Torino Vecchio at 3,329m. A quick squizz, another café, some happy snaps and we climb precisely 232 steps up a steel tunnel through 40 vertical metres (say 13 stories). Fortunately, gear is ferried up in an inclined lift. Thank God I don't smoke. We reach the top, site of the new €110m funivie station due for 2016. Although I have Marco to myself, there's another 3 guides and 15 guests, the first Aussies I've seen for weeks, Italians, Swedes and a 12 year old. Ready to ski? No, first we have a 400m hike along a pretty safe ridge into the face of a nasty wind. One step at time. Slowly. Use the foot print in front. Stop and breathe. Take a photo. Swap skis to left shoulder. Overtake two guys. Are we there yet? Perspiration builds. Stop again. Swap skis back to right shoulder. Are we there yet? Bone deep exhaustion. Zumba classes when I get back. How much longer? Finally, we arrive at Col des Flambeaux at 3,407m. Excitement gives way to heavy breathing, sculling water, and popping chocolates. It's all good, 18 kms to go and there's like 20 of us and that's it. The winds have shut down the Cham side, so we've got the enormous eerie expanse to ourselves. It's incredibly vast, empty and silent - what I imagine the poles might be like. Off we go and down we fall. Not all, but enough to amuse the guides and make me

wish I had fatter skis. Warm conditions and overnight rain had turned the shin deep snow crusty on top and heavy underfoot. Two stacks later I catch up to Marco and apologise for being a hack. He asks for my skis and tightens the bindings, "Better to do your knee than lose a ski. It's a long walk out." Thanks for that Marco, no pressure! Suddenly the guides start yelling and screaming, in Italian of course. My panicked mind reels, AVALANCHE! But no, it's a runaway snowboard. Marco and his mate dart after it, but the board's running sweet and smooth. All eyes fall on the sheepish knuckle dragger scratching his head. His options are bleak: (a) find the board; (b) walk out; or (c) call the French heli service to pick him up. Marco and I venture forth in search of the needle in the white haystack. We stop and look, drink in the magnificent views and peer into the bleached abyss; nothing. We stop again; nothing. Marco makes a quick phone call to update our progress. We go again. We stop, we scan, we squint. What's that speck in the shadowed hollow 200 metres away? Could it be? I whip out zoom and make a closer inspection. I think it is. Marco phones in and his colleague has to ski off course to retrieve it and then schlep it back on course. This isn't the place to lose a ski, or board. With that behind us the adventure continues. Marco takes the lead with me in hot pursuit. He's keen to get separation from the gang. The skiing is challenging but not terribly taxing, it's the concentration and care around the crevasses, both shallow and deep, and

sticking in Marco's tracks like a train on rails that focuses most of your energy. The cruise down the Mer de Glace is a wonderfully surreal experience through a sea of frozen stillness. We circumnavigate azure coloured monoliths of solid ice, skate through sticky slush and surf through a frozen wave embedded in the belly of the glacier.

We ski as low as we can go and it's planks off, unbuckle the boots and then a mighty climb up 95 vertical metres along a frigid goat track to reach La Bouvette, where we take 5 while my pumping heart thumps away the weariness of the climb. Back in the day it was possible to ski to La Bouvette, but the receding glacier now denies us. The ski down to Chamonix - a 6km skier cross course through the tree line - spat us out at Cham's Les Planards ski area.

It's skis off for a short walk into town to the popular Elevation 1904 for a hard-earned burger and beer before jumping on the bus back through the Mont Blanc Tunnel to the La Palud carpark at Courmayeur.

Aussie physio Uki Inoue sums up the day nicely, "I think the Vallee Blanche experience was the highlight of our trip and we would definitely do it or a trip like it again." For me it provided a deep quiet satisfaction to conclude my six outstanding weeks in Italy.

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