



# Mountain School

Planning your first alpine climbing trip? Get yourself on a Jonathon Conville course – alpinist and Mountain Guide Andy Cave wishes that he had.

The thought of climbing in the Alps can be daunting. It's a big step up, even if you've survived a winter season in Scotland: the terrain is bigger, you'll spend a lot of time travelling on glaciers, the weather systems are different and, of course, there is the altitude. Lacking the appropriate skills means that you're more at risk and this will probably affect your self-belief – you may feel reluctant to venture beyond the valley rock climbing.

There are numerous good books out there (and the BMC Alpine Essentials DVD is highly recommended) but there is no substitute for a mentor. But just where do you find a knowledge-bearing mentor? Perhaps in a bar or on a campsite – I picked up lots of vital information like that as a youth. Just make sure your source is trustworthy.

Rumour has it that, on a crowded Chamonix campsite, two fresh-faced climbers overheard what they believed to be an alpine aphorism: "When the mountain wears a hood, the weather will be very good." They duly set off and started up the Walker Spur on the Grande Jorasses. Unfortunately, the lenticular cap-shaped cloud is often the harbinger of a storm and halfway up, the greenhorns encountered a monster. They survived the ordeal, returning to the campsite exhausted and confused. "You idiots," said an older, wiser alpinist. "The rule is that when the mountain wears a cap, the weather will be f\*\*\*ing crap!"

The gang I first hit the Alps with were very good technical climbers, with huge ambition, and we achieved a lot. But on reflection, we made countless basic mistakes and had huge gaps in our basic alpine knowledge, (although we did know what cap-shaped clouds meant). On easier ground, unable to move roped together safely, we often just soloed. Not knowing how to rope up properly for glacial travel we just walked 50 metres apart and hoped for the best – we certainly didn't know how to perform a crevasse rescue.

But what if you don't find any reliable mentors? Hiring an IFMGA British Mountain Guide would be a good idea; these folk are gurus on climbing safely in the Alps. But what if your coffers are low? There is an answer: if you're aged between 18 and 30 you can apply to the Jonathon Conville Memorial Trust for a three-day alpine skills course for just £70. This course is exactly what we needed during those early days – I wish I'd known about it during the mid-1980s – but, last summer, I finally had the privilege of going on a course, working as a mountain guide.

After checking over equipment, the group divided into four teams, each with a guide, and then headed up the Grand Montets lift above Argentiere. We spent the morning practicing moving over snow and ice, perfecting footwork – the bedrock of any alpinist. We refined these skills, then looked at climbing safely but quickly on moderate alpine terrain. Judging when to stop and belay or to keep moving together with a shortened rope takes time to master fully, but this was a strong group, and within a couple of hours our four teams were moving to the summit of the Grand Montets. The debutants took it in turns to lead, the guides alongside mentoring. As we approached the summit, clouds suddenly engulfed our team and within minutes electricity sparked

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along the crest of the ridge. The storm broke and we raced into the telepherique station, our cheeks pelted by rain, the debutants delighted with such an exciting day.

Alongside gaining practical skills, the course allows you to ask as many questions as possible. Day in, day out, guides have to make difficult decisions, making judgments on conditions and their team. They can articulate the subtleties of being adventurous, while limiting the risks. Next was a two-day trip to climb the Aguille du Tour (3405m). During the two-hour walk to the Albert Premier Refuge, we stopped a couple of times to chat about weather, tactics, acclimatisation and alpine huts. One of the guides, Simon Hale, even pointed out many of the alpine plants we encountered en-route. By the time we reached the hut, a good sense of camaraderie was sweeping through the group, an essential ingredient of any successful team. After a quick refuel we descended to the glacier, practising safe glacial travel and looking at crevasse rescue scenarios. Everyone got the chance to perform at least one crevasse rescue (including one turn at being the victim). Having a system in place for worse case scenarios is very empowering for a climber. Afterwards, back at the hut, we heard that a team of three climbers were in trouble below the Chardonnet. Descending late – the snow soft and snow bridges weak – someone had fallen in to a crevasse. This just underlined the validity of everything we were doing.

The following morning, at sunrise, we were well established on our route, kicking our feet rhythmically up steep neve towards the col. The view at the col was special: the Pennine Alps arcing to the east, a long line of adventure. Beyond, above the bergschrund, climbing on the final rocky crest, the team took turns to lead, practicing their new skills. Before long, we negotiated the final airy ridge to the rocky summit, gloved hands clawing at icy granite, the valley a long, long way below. The sense of achievement was captured in the smiles. The Aguille du Tour is a great summit, ideal for learning.

Back in the valley that afternoon, boots off, the guides spent time suggesting next steps. An important part of the Conville course is that you can meet likeminded people and, hopefully, feel equipped to then try something under your own steam. As we left, we wished them safe

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times in the mountains. Walking away, I reminisced about my times in the mid-1980s – unprepared on the glaciers and descending notorious slopes too late in the day. If only we'd got ourselves on to a brilliant course as this, we could have learnt even faster. Sure, there is a limit to what you can learn in three days, but it's the best start you'll get. Many years ago a young lad named Rich Cross completed the Conville alpine course. He is now one of the UK's leading alpinists and a British Mountain Guide. Spread the word.

Andy Cave is a writer, climber and IFMGA Mountain Guide. See [www.andycave.net](http://www.andycave.net).

## Further information

### The Jonathon Conville Memorial Trust

The Trust was set up by the family of Jonathan Conville after he died on the North face of the Matterhorn in the winter of 1979/80, aged 27. The Trust's aims are to encourage and assist individuals to train for and pursue outdoor adventure in the spirit which Jonathan followed during his life. The trust encourages safe and enjoyable practice in mountaineering, by operating subsidised alpine and winter climbing training.



### Alpine mountaineering courses

In 2010 the Trust is offering a number of subsidised three-day Alpine courses in Chamonix, co-ordinated by Plas y Brenin and the Mountain Training Trust. The intention is to provide a top class introduction to alpine mountaineering at the lowest possible cost. It's not possible to cover alpine mountaineering in great detail over three days, but basic considerations, like use of equipment, glacier travel and crevasse rescue are covered. These courses are run at a ratio of one guide for every three trainees. Each place costs approximately £200, yet trainees are charged only £70. This year the Jonathon Conville Memorial Trust will provide over £13,000 to subsidise the courses, and the BMC and the MCofS provide additional financial support.

Find out more and apply at [www.pyb.co.uk/courses/conville.php](http://www.pyb.co.uk/courses/conville.php)