

food is mixed or stewed in a large insulated plastic mug, an invaluable piece of alpine equipment. As more snow is melted and boiled I usually try to relax and drink my soup, adding croutons or stuffing mixture to add a bit of bulk. Take lots of different soups because you can soon tire of one taste. The main course is usually one and a half packets of super noodles, crushed into the mug and boiling water added. Stir, replace the lid and, within two minutes, you've got a litre of noodles, filling, nutritious and extremely lightweight. Another alternative is potato powder.

This is followed by more fluid in the form of a square of fruity jelly or carbohydrate drink, then maybe custard, semolina or hot chocolate. Salt is a vital part of the meal, reducing cramp and muscle spasms, and I take individual packs of bran biscuits and cheese, a nice accompaniment to a meal.

This may seem a very spartan diet, but it's incredibly lightweight and easy to cook, using only one 100 epi gas cartridge or less per day between two. If you plan on taking 4+ days on a route or feel uneasy taking so little food, you can flesh this out with various items mentioned earlier, or just say to hell with it and take some heavy luxuries. Even hard men like Brendan Murphy and Dave Wills couldn't ration themselves less than one packet of chocolate Hob Nobs a day while attempting Latok. If you're prepared to work that little bit harder then take it.

I do try to keep the carbohydrate level high, with fat close behind, although the higher you climb, the harder the body finds it to break fat down. Sugars are high in calories but technically make poor mountain food. Chocolates and sweets are there only to improve morale.

Night food

There may come a time when you're forced to keep on climbing through the night. Adrenaline will suppress the appetite and food may be the last thing on your mind but you should try to eat through the

night. Tomorrow's breakfast of Trackers and M&Ms and those cheese and biscuits you'd stashed for dinner become perfect belay food. If you're out of water, I'd probably lay off the food in order to avoid using up vital body fluid digesting it. Some climbers carry Pro Plus as a mild stimulant in order to stay awake (a real problem while belaying) while some American climbers carry chocolate covered coffee beans to chew. Either are only for real emergencies as caffeine may cause more problems than it solves.

Chamonix January '97

We sat, all three of us huddled together on the tiny ice ledge, feet buried in rucksacks, mindful not to drop anything into the black void below. Even in this precarious position we produced a feast, Spicy Mexican soup mixed with instant noodles followed by fruit tea, High 5 and yet more Tracker bars. It doesn't look much now, but back then it felt just right. Laughing at our predicament, we swapped chocolates limes for Refreshers, and took turns balancing the stove on each other's knees.

The following day we flew, because finally I knew better. So there you go, this system is primarily designed for multi-day alpine routes where extremely difficult climbing has to be done with the added burden of a sack. But you could be bivviing on the Cuillin in winter or climbing the Moonflower buttress in Alaska. It doesn't matter, as long as you want to go lightweight, quickly and enjoyably. If this system is used on extended routes, weight loss is inevitable. Once you return to civilisation try not to pig out too much, best stick to a high carbohydrate, high exercise diet until you feel back to normal. Hard alpine climbing can be an incredibly grim, tense and scary affair, so don't compound it with poor food. Give your mind and body a break and remind yourself of one of the good things in life.

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