

M&MS, PIG FAT AND BABY FOOD

MODERN IDEAS AND PRACTICES IN SHORT TERM ALPINE FOOD

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Let me define what I mean by alpine food. Basically, any food that's lightweight and easily prepared, with a minimum of fuss, effort, in sometimes very difficult circumstances. This article is applicable to any alpine climbing, from Fitzroy to Hunter, Troll wall to Trango, aimed at climbers genuinely interested in a lightweight approach to alpinism. I admit it's biased towards my own experiences and tastes, but it does include a few new, interesting and obscure ideas on modern alpine food.

Chamonix January '93.

Inexperience coupled with heavy sacks and deep snow turned the shortish walk to the Jorasses into a two day marathon. Half way to the Shroud we collapsed into the snow, exhausted, nothing left to give. Our cheap diet of bread and Bosan just wasn't enough for winter alpinism. The cold was horrible, with very little fat in our diet. Our feet froze before we set foot on the mountain. We turned round while we still could and hurried back down our trench to Chamonix. Two skiers stopped us on the Mer de Glace, concerned at our appearance. 'Are you Polish?' they asked.

Pre climb food

Eat a lot and eat well before you climb. Cheese and pasta is still the best, providing plenty of carbohydrate and fat. On easily approachable routes, take lots of nice foods to eat before you start, things like pasta, tasty cheeses and fresh bread plus plenty of cakes, buns and chocolate. Buy fresh pastries as breakfast before you start, enjoy the time before the climb, good food helps you relax and sleep. Take bottles of water to cook and brew up with and make sure you're completely hydrated before you start and lay off the red wine.

A good example is your typical Patagonia diet. Noel Craine and Simon Nadin spent one and a half months waiting for decent weather windows trying a new route on Paine, most of which was spent cooking with the occasional day climbing to break up the washing up rota. Their stables were garlic dhal, pancakes, chapatis and porridge.

If morale and sanity is going to survive the trip, enjoyable food is essential. Better to start out a little fat and happy than lean and mean, because after four days you'll be very

lean anyway except maybe not quite so keen. But don't overdo it, it's vital to be and feel as fit as you can.

Morning food

For a climber like Mick Fowler, breakfast is usually a simple affair – tea and a Toffee Crisp – but if you like your creature comforts try Marc Twight's Power Bar washed down with the milky contents of last night's hot water bottle. Mmmm, nice. If you're trying to move fast, or you're bivvied in a difficult or uncomfortable position, this meal is crucial. Get it wrong and you lose time and energy. Get it right and you start the day as you mean to go on. Best way to save time and fuel is to forgo a hot drink. Down one or two cups of cold fruit tea or a carbohydrate drink and you're racked up and packed up by dawn, saving time and fuel.

On Alpine routes fluid is king. Even on hard multi day routes your body can keep on climbing on a couple of Trackers a day if it has to, but dehydrate it and you're dead. If you're running short on fuel, drink cold, barely melted water with carbohydrate drink instead of solid food. Melting snow inside your sleeping bag or clothing with your Nalgene bottle also saves vital fuel. Solid food is best found in the likes of easily consumed muesli style bars. Two are usually equivalent to a typical serving of porridge or muesli. You save fuel and the bars can be eaten inside sleeping bags or during packing. I usually add a packet of peanut M&Ms to this meal, stashed away to eat on the first belay.

If you want a more traditional taste to the day individual packets of Alpen are perfect – just add water or a little powdered milk. Personally I try to avoid normal tea and coffee because it's a diuretic, preferring fruit teas. But if you can't go without the Earl Grey or Nescafe, never mind – as with all

things, it's good to break a few rules.

So you're off. The sun comes up as you finish the first pitch, only thirty seven left to go!

Chamonix January '94

We sat at each end of the hut, French and British, a million miles apart in our equipment, attitude and, more importantly, food. Tea, boil in the bag rice and curry followed by custard for us. Instant cappuccino, cheese, sausage and bread followed by soup, noodles and a bowl of chocolate for them. In the morning we lumbered while they flew. We expected the worst. They knew better.

Day food

This is entirely up to personal taste. Some like dried bananas, nuts and sunflower seeds, others prefer chocolate, salami and jelly babies. Try not to get too bogged down in calorific nonsense, just take what you like to nibble on, and make sure you do – if it has a high calorie content, that's a bonus. A mix of savoury and sweet works very well. Boiled sweets are the old favourite, revitalising dry mouths, especially mixed with a little snow. Why not go down to your local pick'n'mix? As they say, variety is the spice of life. No doubt you'll wish you'd brought more liquorice torpedoes and fewer chocolate eclairs, but it's great fun digging around your sack for hours on end in a futile attempt to find that last cola cube! Try to avoid any power type bars that require lots of water to digest. Enough said.

Chamonix, January '96

We climbed up the face for three days, every bivvi sitting hell. Our tiny 30 litre sacks, with only sleeping bags and duvets, offered no hindrance although, after the first day, the added burden of a bit more food wouldn't have troubled us too much. Two days ultra minimalist food

stretched to three. Eight Tracker bars, four hot chocolates and six cuppa soups just weren't enough to stop us wrenching on each belay. We topped out in a violent storm with nothing left to give. My partner later gave up climbing. It had just stopped being fun.

Evening food

Modern alpine food is easily split into two categories – high tech and low tech. The introduction of Powergel from America is set to revolutionise alpine food. Instant carbohydrate energy (300+ Kcal), it's squeezed into the mouth from a foil packet or tube and needs very little water to digest. It's light, it doesn't need cooking and is available in various strange and tasty flavours, including vodka.

Powdered baby food is another high tech option used by a fanatical few, providing easily prepared highly nutritious and easily digested food, although price and taste make it very hard to swallow. Speaking of vodka, a great example of low tech alpine food is the Russian alpine diet of pig fat, dry biscuits and vodka. Makes your mouth water, doesn't it? They're also mad on condensed milk, as a drink or meal in itself – or turned into a solid block of caramel by boiling in the can.

Low tech alpine food can be cobbled together using just about anything. Adam Wainwright and Paul Pritchard survived on Christmas stuffing on Nameless Tower, while Stevie Haston soloed a new route on the Nant Blanc face of the Verte carrying only an apple and a banana.

A typical meal for me goes like this. First I have a litre of cold energy drink, usually a mixture of High 5 and Isostar. Cold water saves a lot of fuel and gets liquids to the body quickly. This is followed by a hot cuppa soup. No cooking is done in the pan, as the