

Traditional mountaineering is in decline

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Traditional mountaineering roped together in a group is no longer so popular among people who enjoy alpine sports

Traditional mountaineering is in decline

Traditional mountain climbing is undergoing a transformation. Faster mountain pursuits, such as mountain-biking and trail running, in addition to climate change, are altering the face of Alpine sport

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Who wants to set off for two days or more into the Alps with climbing partners to scale a long-coveted peak after waiting weeks for good conditions on the ascent? The traditional culture of “slow” mountaineering is losing ground to increasingly varied and fast-paced activities, such as trail running – running events or mara-

thons in the mountains – and mountain-biking.

A well-known figure in the mountain scene in Geneva, Bernard Wietlisbach, the owner of the Cactus Sports store, has been observing these changes since 1986, when he set up his small business in a garage. “A lot of the equipment we sell here could be used to climb a mountain –

Mont Blanc or a 4,000-metre peak. 95% of the time, our gear is bought for sport climbing,” explains the mountaineer, who has scaled the Grandes-Jorasses.

But there is a huge difference between climbing a rock face or an indoor wall and a north-face expedition. In Bernard Wietlisbach’s view: “The change is rooted in our society.”

“We are living in an age where everyone wants everything instantly. People are no longer willing to wait for good conditions on an ascent. A lazy mentality has set in which refuses to accept uncertainty and the possibility of defeat.”

Less spirit of adventure

The notion of climbing without a map and route description has almost become heresy. “If there is no information available on the route or if details cannot be accessed online, it is almost as though it does not exist,” remarks the climber. He has no doubt that the number of people mountaineering is falling sharply. However, there has been a significant rise in the number of people embarking on one single ascent in the mountains over the years. There has also been a ten-fold increase in hiking, ski-touring and snowshoeing.

“Swiss Review” enquired about the decline in mountaineering on www.camptocamp.org (“C2C”) – an international mountaineering website of Swiss origin which has over 44,000 contributors – prompting almost 100 responses or comments (Link to the online forum at the end of the article). In this historically masculine sport, which some have seen as the height of manliness, it was a woman who was amongst the first to express her views.

Easy routes preferred

Violette Bruyneel, a French physiotherapist, has been mountain climbing since the age of ten. She first states that mountaineering is becoming concentrated in certain locations which are easy to access and well-documented online. Ascents with short approach routes are becoming increasingly popular. “Today, mountaineers like to have a good balance between the approach route and



Hörnlihütte

“People are mountaineering less,” remarks Kurt Lauber, who has looked after the Matterhorn hut for 21 years

Born in Zermatt, 54-year-old Kurt Lauber completed his 21st season as the warden of the Hörnlihütte in September 2015. Lauber, who has taken part in 3,000 mountain rescue operations, talks about the Matterhorn and the change of mentality in mountaineering.

“The mentality has changed greatly in the 30 years I’ve been climbing mountains. The first thing that strikes me is a tendency to pass the buck. If something goes wrong on the ascent to the summit of the Matterhorn, whether it is rockfalls or the weather turning bad, a third party is always blamed, even though that is absurd. This attitude did not exist in the past. Another change is in the perception of danger. Twenty years ago, journalists presented this ascent as being easy and the number of accidents was high. That has changed, which is a welcome development, as the Matterhorn has killed between 500 and 600 people since the first ascent in 1865 and is one of the hardest peaks in the Alps. Today, the number of ascents embarked upon with a guide has doubled, reaching 80 % of attempts on the summit. This is helping to reduce the number of accidents.

“I believe the number of people participating in mountaineering is falling overall, although this is not the case with the Matterhorn, which sees around 3,000 ascents a year. It’s a general trend in sport in an age in which parents and children spend more time in front of a computer than in the outdoors. The figures on the use of the huts do not tell the whole story because lots of people who stay in them do not go on to climb a summit.

“Finally, the approach adopted by professional mountaineers has completely changed over the past ten years – climbing has become a race with flag-bearers like Ueli Steck, Dani Arnold and Kilian Jornet (who climbed the Matterhorn in under three hours setting off from Cervinia). This approach to climbing is not bad in itself but I’ve told the three of them that they have to make it absolutely clear to the public that this is reserved for professionals. The reality is that traditional mountaineering involves risks. One way of reducing them is to climb with a guide, but it’s expensive – that’s the dilemma people have to deal with.”

Located on the north ridge of the Matterhorn, the Hörnlihütte was renovated as part of the 150th anniversary of the ascent of the Matterhorn. As it is more comfortable (it has showers) and more expensive than before, with 130 beds compared to 170 previously, it will restrict the number of ascents to the summit. According to the hut’s managers, this will improve climbers’ experience of the mountain.





Mountain bikers on the Monte Rosa circuit



Mountain marathon on the Eiger Ultra Trail 2015

technical challenges. They are more apprehensive about unknown factors and physical exertion than before," she believes. Most mountain climbers today want "moderate terrain in terms of safety but also perfect weather conditions and ideally a comfortable mountain hut which provides information about local conditions online", says the Frenchwoman. She also points to a certain amount of male chauvinism in the mountains. "I've lost count of the number of times when leading a rope team, I've received unpleasant remarks or have been confronted by men wanting to explain techniques to me that I'm already familiar with."

Old-style mountaineering has apparently had its day. "My uncles embarked on some incredible challenges in the 1950s with a rope tied around their stomach and a bottle of red wine in their backpack and they didn't even consider themselves mountaineers or hikers, they just enjoyed walking in the mountains," re-

counts one "C2C" user. The perception or acceptance of danger has changed. "Even if practised carefully and correctly, this sport entails the acceptance of a certain element of risk," says another. As a result there has been a decline in mountaineering as well as the time dedicated to it. "Visiting a climbing rock with in situ protection 15 minutes away from the car park where 4G internet access is also available is much more in keeping with the current age," says the same website user, who ironically refers to himself as an "old fogey".

The appeal of "a light load" and gliding and sliding

Proclaiming his love of ski-touring and ice climbing, another participant points out that "these pursuits can be enjoyed in a day or a half-day in splendid scenery with slightly less risk than mountaineering". The adventurous version of this sport combines technical and psychological challenges. "The

Huts and figures

The use of mountain huts remains steady

Most mountaineering ascents go via a hut. However, by no means all those staying overnight at huts are on their way to climb a summit. In Switzerland, the number of nights spent in huts, which can vary significantly depending upon the season, has remained above 300,000 a year since 2003. The Swiss Alpine Club has never had so many members (over 143,000 at present), but the growth rate fell below 2% in 2014 for the first time in 10 years. Furthermore, there has been a slight fall in the number of young people in the club and 46% of its members are aged over 50.

Another figure: the number of deaths in the mountains has fallen in line with "the improvement in equipment, weather forecasting and rescue operations", according to Ueli Mosimann, who is responsible for the statistics on distress situations at the Swiss Alpine Club. "More people are visiting the mountains but they are not necessarily mountaineering," adds Mosimann. In 2013, this sport saw 21 fatalities in Switzerland compared with 71 in 1985 and 40 in 1994. By comparison, 39 people died while hiking in 2014, a figure close to the average number of deaths in this activity over the past 30 years, which stands at 44.

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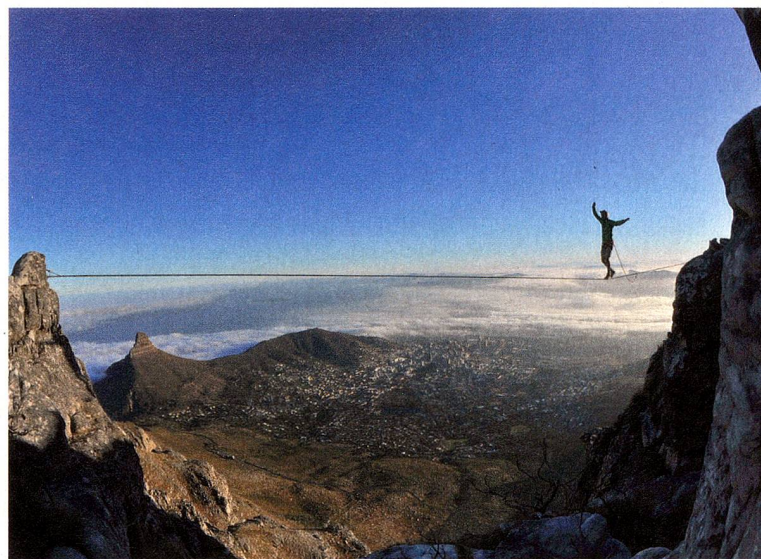
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Ueli Steck, a Swiss extreme mountaineer, trail running on the Eiger



Slacklining on a tubular tape is the latest trend in the mountains

actual risks of the mountain – crevasses, falling seracs and falling rocks – are greater than in sport climbing,” underlines the same mountain enthusiast. Another obstacle is the physical fitness and acclimatisation required for the long traditional ascents which can take 10 to 15 hours. “Mountaineering at a certain level requires experience, equipment and readiness to cope with the vagaries of the weather,” says another “C2C” member.

More profoundly, the change in mountain pursuits is “related to the surge in lightweight activities offering direct emotion without the complex logistics of mountaineering” according to one climber. “Who wants to spend a week organising everything, getting agitated and dealing with a whole host of finicky equipment issues and then start over again at the weekend to embark on an ascent?” This approach is becoming increasingly less acceptable for a large number of people who enjoy scaling peaks.

Global warming is having a major impact on the mountains

Finally, there is the impact of climate change. On the Mer de Glace in the Mont Blanc massif, for example, the descent on ladders to the glacier has

completely changed over 20 years, having a significant impact on access time. Routes have changed everywhere: exits have become longer or more complex and thawing permafrost is increasing the number of rock falls. These changes in the Alpine region are encouraging mountaineers to undertake tours earlier in the season or in winter to find suitable snow and ice conditions. “Retreating glaciers, ice disappearing from rock faces, landslides and rock falls have all emerged in the space of a generation. It is incredible and may put participants off,” remarks one website user.

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Link to the online forum: www.camptocamp.org/forums/viewtopic.php?id=280238

New types of sport

Faster and lighter – the appeal of the new sports

A large number of users who voiced their views on the camptocamp website more or less agree that there has been a decline in mountaineering (see figures opposite) but opinion is split over the reasons why. One of the major changes observed is an increase in the types of sport practised in the mountains, starting with trail running, which involves lightly equipped participants running up hills.

Climbing itself has divided into a raft of specialist disciplines – sport climbing in a sports hall or along a via ferrata, climbing in crampons on icefalls or on mixed routes, not to mention canyoning and slacklines suspended over a void.

The mountains are now also explored by mountain bikers. The Swiss Alpine Club has equipped some of its huts for this activity and has just published a dedicated route guide.

Slow climbing “devalued”

Sports involving sliding or gliding, such as paragliding, para-mountaineering, speed-flying, wingsuit jumping, base-jumping, free-riding and ski-touring, are growing rapidly. What these sports have in common is not necessarily the level of risk. “The extreme trail running trend, with minimally equipped runners practising their sport on their own, is devaluing amateur mountaineering, as it is no longer perceived as an elite discipline but is instead seen as using heavy and cumbersome equipment to achieve the same goal,” explains one “C2C” user. “One reason for this decline lies in the very nature of mountaineering – its isolation and the need for mountaineers to be able to cope alone in an unfamiliar environment,” states a respondent called Fredoche.