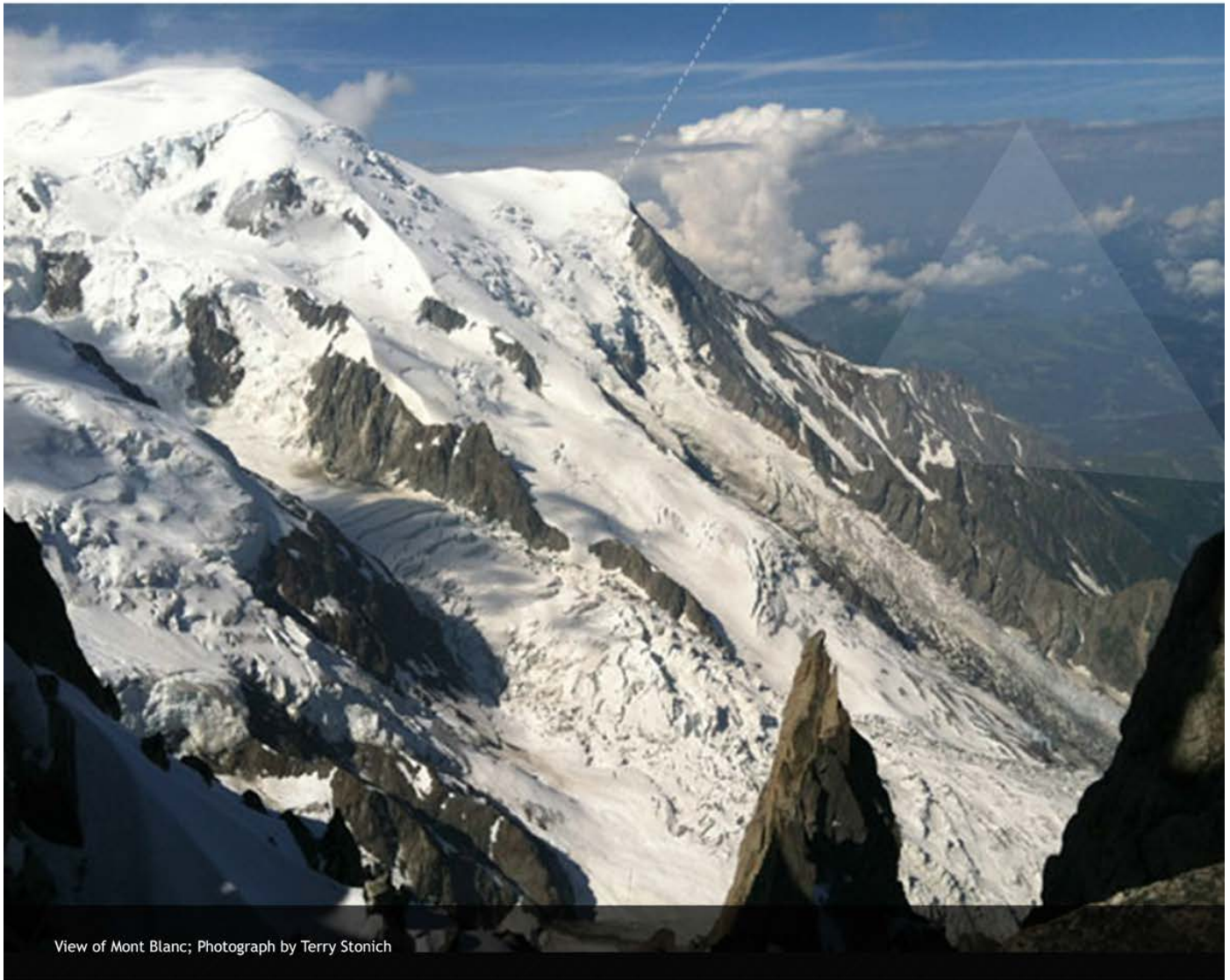


Climbing Mont Blanc

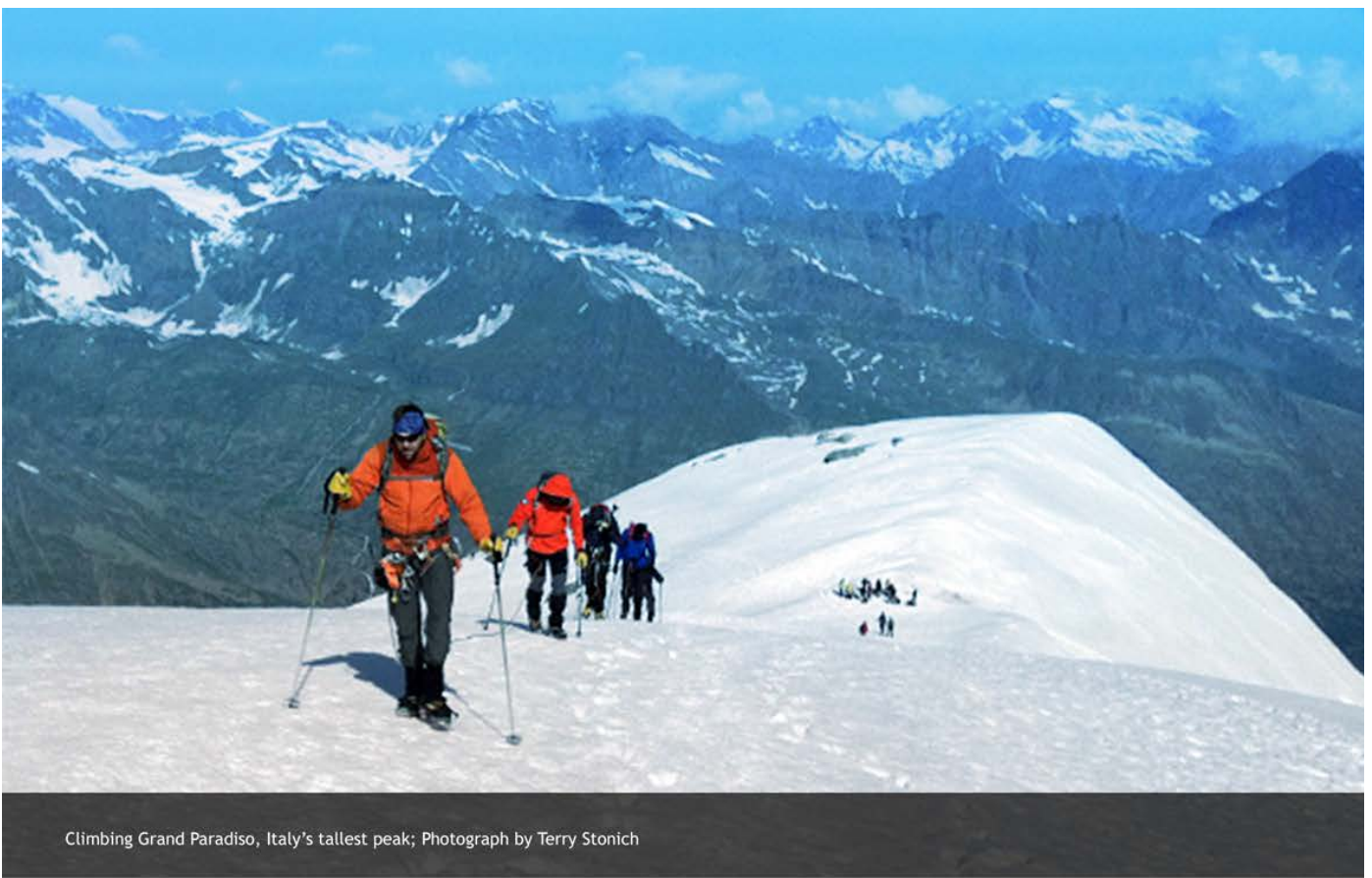
The Mountains Make the Rules

Avery Stonich



View of Mont Blanc; Photograph by Terry Stonich

As any mountaineer will attest, it's a tough pill to swallow when you set your sights on a goal and prepare for months, only to be denied. I just returned from an attempt to climb Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in western Europe. Bad weather thwarted my ascent, which is a bit of a letdown. But I've come to realize that just because I didn't make the summit doesn't mean I failed. There's so much more to it than that.

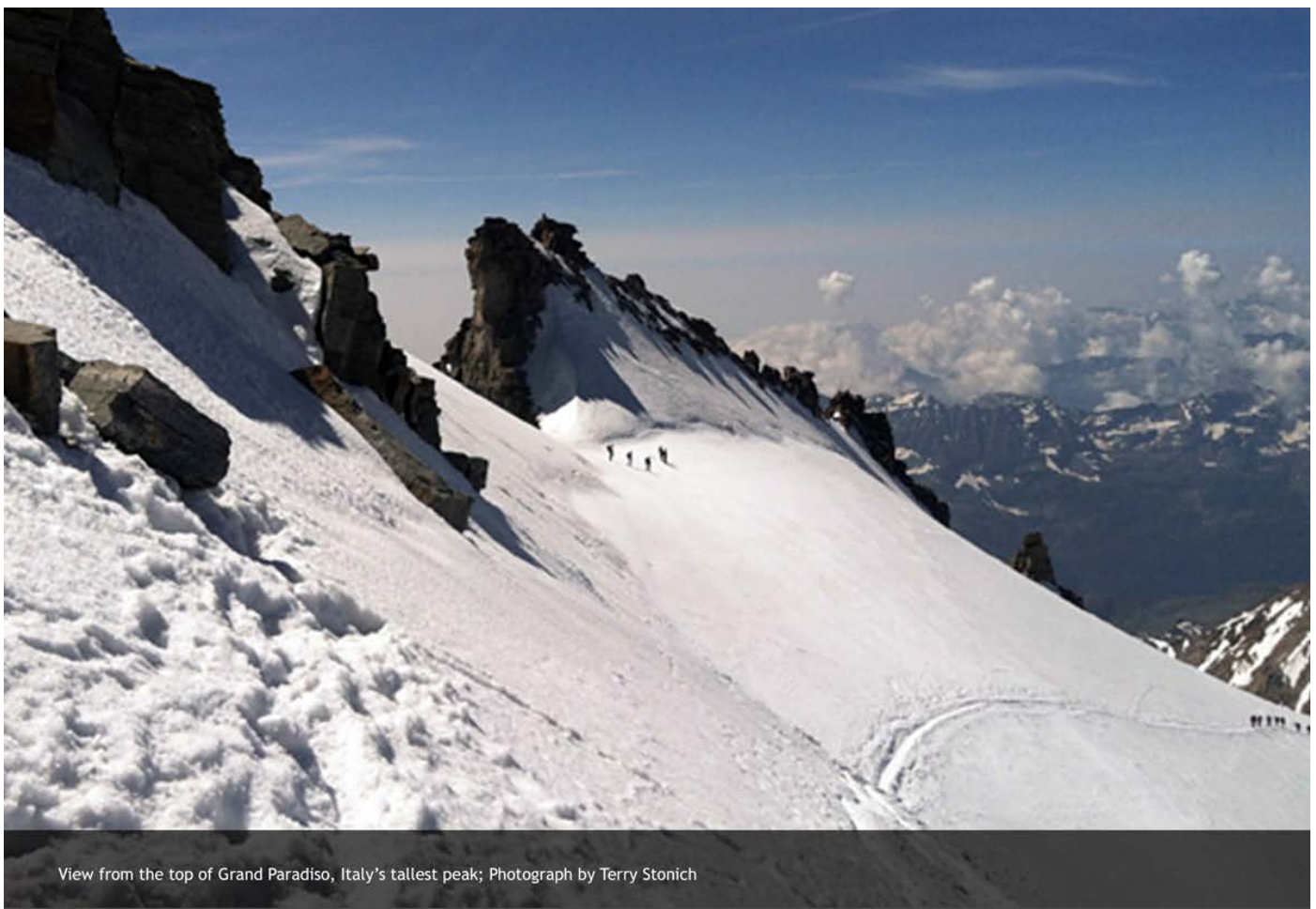


Climbing Grand Paradiso, Italy's tallest peak; Photograph by Terry Stonich

My journey began three months ago when I signed up for a six-day mountaineering course in Chamonix, France. I don't know who in their right mind decides to take up mountaineering at my age, but my love of the outdoors inspired me to explore new frontiers. After all, life's mighty boring if you paint yourself into a box.

To get ready, I took an introductory mountaineering course, did a practice climb, and sweated through a lot of training (think 5:30 a.m. gym visits, interval workouts, dawn trail runs, and many weekend peaks). I carefully checked the gear list and made sure I was equipped. But nothing could prepare me for the emotional roller coaster ride on Mont Blanc. She toyed with me, teased me, reeled me in—only to reject me in the end.

I was giddy with anticipation the moment I set foot in Chamonix. Outdoor heritage oozes out of every cobblestone and shop window in this charming town. Many consider the Alps the birthplace of mountaineering, and it's no wonder why these mountains beckoned the first explorers. Jagged, snow-capped peaks kiss the sky as they tower over lush, deep valleys. Glaciers spill down the mountain flanks, twisting and warping into contorted waves of ice. The promise of adventure is tantalizing—even for someone like me who has just started dabbling in technical alpine pursuits.



View from the top of Grand Paradiso, Italy's tallest peak; Photograph by Terry Stonich

The first three days of our course involved tacking Italy's highest peak: Grand Paradiso, whose glaciated slopes and rocky top provide a suitable training ground for beginner alpinists. We trekked up to the Chambod Hut at the mountain's base to bunk down for the night. The next morning at 5:00 a.m., with the stars still on full beam, we began the ascent, our headlamps resembling a ribbon of ants crawling along the mountainside. It was a long, methodical climb up a glacier, where we practiced our crampon, rope, and ice axe skills, carefully navigating a few yawning crevasses that threatened to swallow us whole. And finally, we reached the peak—an exposed rocky ledge with stunning, expansive views of France, Italy, Switzerland, and Germany. We shared a giddy climber high, blissfully unaware of the emotional challenge that lay ahead.

It hit us that evening, back in Chamonix, as we prepared for Mont Blanc. Huddled in a briefing, we heard the news: the weather outlook was grim. It was unlikely that we would make it. My spirits sank.

We nevertheless set out for the Tête Rousse hut the next day, picking our way up a rocky ridge, where drifting fog obscured our view of the lofty peak. We walked in solemn silence, our unspoken words shrouded by the damp, misty air. Was the forecast right? Would the storm stop us? I struggled to cling to a shred of optimism. Because you never know what the weather might do.

The news came after dinner: the forecast had worsened. The summit attempt was cancelled. After trying to remain hopeful all day, I could no longer mask my disappointment. Feeling glum, we went to sleep, crammed four in a row along a top bunk.

The next morning, a partial blue sky teased us out of bed. The storm was delayed and the forecast had improved! There was a chance we could hike three hours to another hut and try to summit the next day. My hopes soared. We scrambled to get ready, then dashed off, feeling clever, like we could outsmart the storm. But no, Mother Nature had other plans. The weather degraded, and after about an hour, we were forced to turn back.

The mood was deflated as we retreated, the scent of the peak drifting away like dreams lost to whimsical wafts of wind.

On our last day, our guides suggested we tackle the Cosmiques Arête, a classic climb up the craggy rock spires that surround the top of the Aiguille du Midi tram just above Chamonix. This is where my heart began to really sing.

We rode the tram up the mountain, then traversed a steep snowfield to make our way to the route's cosmic ascent. For four hours, we climbed rock and snow, through chimneys, up walls— hand over feet. It offered far more technical challenge than Mont Blanc, surpassing my wildest expectations. This was the perfect consolation prize. What better way to drown our sorrows than to blow our minds navigating thrilling terrain?

In the end, I don't care that we didn't climb Mont Blanc. Because the sum of all the journey's parts was worth more than the summit could ever be.

And so, in the end, the mountains make the rules. The wise words of my guide ring true: "When you dance with the mountains, they always lead." And if you follow their lead, you might just find a graceful waltz that opens a world of adventure and lets your spirit soar.

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