

### C3. AIGUILLE VERTE Couturier couloir 4122 m

- ▶ **Start/End: 3300/1240**
- ▶ **V + D1+D2: 70/1420**
- ▶ **V - D1+D2: 600/2950**
- ▶ **Aspect: northeast**
- ▶ **Slope: sect. 55° ; 50°/500**
- ▶ 3630OT or 1344
- ▶ **Time D1+D2: 1h00+7h30**
- ▶ **Ski: 5.4**
- ▶ **Alpine: D-**
- ▶ **Exposure: 3**
- ▶ **Hut: Argentière**
- ▶ 📄 92, 95, 99, 100, 156

**D1. From the Grands Montets**, descend down the east side and head right, passing below the bottom of **C2**. Continue traversing beneath the north side of the Verte (*do not hang out below the Cordier couloir*) taking care to avoid the seracs and crevassed areas; join up with the Argentière Glacier opposite the hut. (*You can also ski the Rognons Glacier to the Argentière Glacier and then skin up to the hut. Add 150 m and 45 min.*)

**D2. From the hut**, descend to the glacier, traverse it, and then gain the bergschrund at 3200 m. Climb the couloir, 50° for 500 m, and then slant right to reach the summit icecap paying close attention to the serac that has grown over the last few years (*a more direct line to the summit is possible in excellent conditions*). Top out on the summit via the icecap (45° max). (*First descent see commentary*.)

**C3.1.** Aiguille Verte, Cordier couloir (ski: 5.5). Rarely in condition. (*Y. Détry, 06/03/77, 1 rappel.*)

### C4. COL DE LA VERTE Northeast face 3820 m

- ▶ **Start/End: 3300/1240**
- ▶ **V + D1+D2: 70/1120**
- ▶ **V - D1+D2: 600/2650**
- ▶ **Aspect: northeast**
- ▶ **Slope: 52°/700**
- ▶ 3630OT or 1344
- ▶ **Time D1+D2: 1h00+6h30**
- ▶ **Ski: 5.4**
- ▶ **Alpine: D**
- ▶ **Exposure: 3**
- ▶ **Hut: Argentière**
- ▶ 📄 95, 99, 101

**D1. From the Grands Montets**, follow **C3** to the hut.

**D2. From the hut**, follow **C3** and cross over the bergschrund at around 3050 m. Climb straight up for roughly 400 m (50° on average and steeper) and then on your right cross over a hump in order to gain the western branch. Climb up this branch, slanting right and topping out at a small western depression to the right of two spires (*the final pitch faces directly east*). (*D. Potard, J.F. Williot, 10/04/77, topped out directly, on the left.*)

**C4.1.** Col de la Verte, right-side route. (*P. McLeod, T. Husted, E. Moffat, 2001.*)

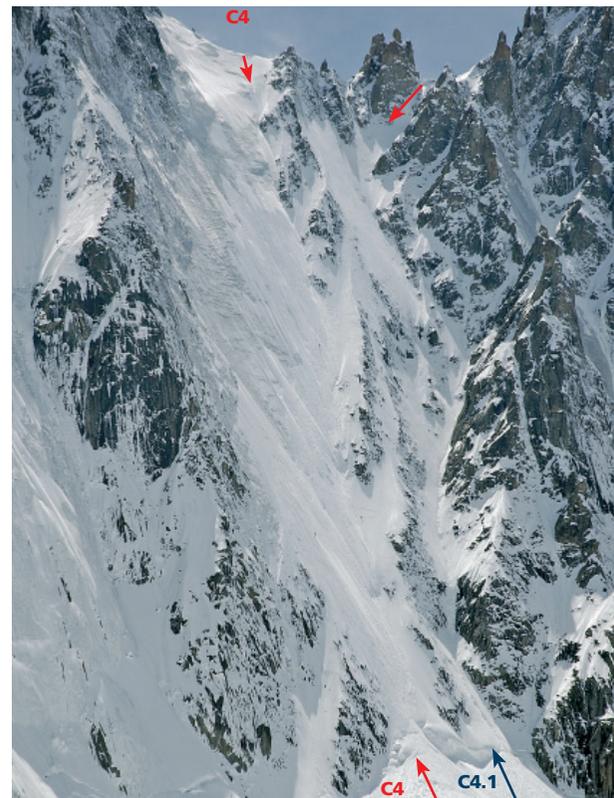
**C4.2.** Col Armand Charlet, northeast side (ski: 5.4). Multiple rappels in the lower section. (*E. Ballot, 14/02/93.*)





In August 1973, Serge Chachat-Rosset, taken by helicopter to the Verté's summit, skied the Couturier. Four days later, A.Baud and P.Vallençant skied down the couloir in one hour after having climbed up it.

"But," recalls Volodia Shabshahani, "The Dauphiné Libéré invalidated the two guides' descent since they started from just underneath the icecap and not from the summit. The journalist, without raising the question of means, concluded: 'the couloir still awaits a second descent.' Not long after in LMA (La Montagne et Alpinisme), Baud and Vallençant responded with a milestone article. Anselme and Patrick defined extreme skiing as a discipline within mountaineering that should respect the generally agreed upon ethics, most notably regarding support. Those who, in the same time period, started making first descents on this type of steep terrain received recognition as being within this group. Until then, as far as



the media was concerned, there was only regard for the "skier of the impossible" (Saudan) whose style (helicopter, porters) as well as the hero-ifying prose stained the early 1970s. This attitude is not specific to skiers. In mountaineering, light "alpine style" solos and link-ups break with the heavy, technology dependent expeditions of "The Glorious Thirty" (1945-1974) and the star-ization of an elite few." The Col de la Verte, skied in April by Potard and Williot, is one of the real jewels of the 1977 "harvest". It is one of the steepest ice slopes in the Alps at this height. Nevertheless, for Roch Mahnuit, the skiing is comparable to that of the Couturier due to its width (point of view shared by Pierre Tardivel, see C7). The right-hand top out is more commonly used since the direct fall line is almost always exposed glacier ice. The extremely steep final pitch faces east and heats up early. Staying a night at the hut is often necessary.

## C5. COL DES DROITES

North face

3733 m

- Start/End: 3300/1240
- V +/- V -: 1030/3090
- Aspect: north
- Slope: 50°/500
- 3630OT or 1344
- Time: 6h30
- Ski: 5.4
- Alpine: D-
- Exposure: 4
- 103, 114

From the Grands Montets, follow **C3** and then ascend left of the Tour des Courtes's north spur. At around 315 m, start climbing a couloir on your right. After 300 m you will come out onto the hanging summit slope (*maximum exposure*). Climb up the left side and then finish either left of the seracs or by traversing to the right. (E. Monnier, 04/07/80.)

**C5.1.** Col de la Tour des Courtes, north face (ski : 5.4). (B. Delapierre, T. Dobbins, P. Tardivel, 20/05/01.)

**C5.2.** Droites, Lagarde couloir. A hanging couloir, it does not top out and requires multiple rappels at the bottom (5.4/TD/E4). (A. Boudet in 1995, multiple rappels at the bottom.)

## C6. LES COURTES

North face, Austrian route

3856 m

- Start/End: 3300/1240
- V + D1+D2: 70/1160
- V - D1+D2: 600/2690
- Aspect: north
- Slope: 52°/800
- 3630OT or 1344
- Time D1+D2: 1h00+8h30
- Ski: 5.5
- Alpine: D+
- Exposure: 4
- Hut: Argentière
- 103, 107, 114

**D1.** From the Grands Montets, follow **C3** to the hut.

**D2.** From the hut, follow **C5** and start climbing up the face on its left side. The slope quickly steepens to, but then never drops below 50°. A first ramp on the right leads to a mixed 55° section (a section always cluttered with rocks, a 40 m rappel on the second descent, the only rappel when the route is in condition). From this point on, exposure is high. Continue climbing straight up until another ramp appears on your right that will allow you to reach the upper snow (or ice) slopes. Come out onto a spur (junction with **C6.1**) and then climb to the summit via the wide-open 50°, often ice, slopes. (D. Chauchefoin, 3 rappels, 03/07/77.)

**C6.1.** Les Courtes, north-northeast face (ski: 5.4). Start via a couloir to the left of the north face, but clearly to the right of the northeast slope. Come out onto a wide hanging glacial slope leading to another couloir that joins up with **C6** in the upper section. (This combines the Cordier route low-down and the Gabarrou route up high.) (P. Tardivel, 11/06/89.)



**C5** and **C6** are the brainchildren of two skiers who have multiple first descents under their belts in the Mont Blanc range as well as in many other ranges. Eric Monnier has multiple first descents most notably in the Ecrins range, including the Center route on the Sirac's north face and the Mayer-Dibona couloir. Daniel Chauchefoin, as voracious in both the Mont Blanc and Vanoise ranges, penned this masterpiece that, in July 1977, was like dropping a bomb within the alpine community. The Dauphiné printed a full-page titled *An Annécien breaks the 60 degree barrier*. "More than that," reports Volodia Shahshahani, "people reacted similarly to those who had followed Beamon's record long jump in Mexico City."

The Austrian route would not be skied again until 1995, this time with a 40 m rappel, by Emmanuel Ballot, Edouard Cottignies and Pierre Tardivel. According to Tardivel, it is difficult to avoid rappelling and, after skiing the Nant-Blanc (**B16**) in 2008, he considers the Austrian route to be of the same order.

**C7. LES COURTES**  
Northeast face 3856 m

- ▶ **Start/End: 3300/1240**
- ▶ **V +/ V -: 1160/3220**
- ▶ **Aspect: northeast**
- ▶ **Slope: 48°/700**
- ▶ 36300T or 1344
- ▶ **Time: 7h00**
- ▶ **Ski: 5.2**
- ▶ **Alpine: AD+**
- ▶ **Exposure: 2**
- ▶ 🏔️ 103, 104, 105, 107, 114

**From the Grands Montets**, follow **C3** to the Argentière Glacier. Ascend the glacier to 2900 m where you will see the entire slope. Start up the left side of the small glacier at the base and then head right towards the bergschrund. Climb up the center of the slope until you reach a snowy saddle near the summit. You can climb to the summit via a ridge on the right (skiable in good snow conditions via a short 50° couloir). (S. Cachat-Rosset, 03/10/71.)

**C7.1.** Courtes, northeast spur. At the bergschrund, immediately head right and top out via the north face (ski: 5.3/E3). (P. Tardivel, 01/07/87.)

*Spring 2006. The steep slopes of the Argenitière basin are packed. Almost every couloir has been climbed or skied or both. A skier from Lyon catches his edge on a rock just beneath the surface. His ski comes off and one minute later he is below the bergschrund unhurt after having cartwheeled down the entire face taking another skier with him, also unhurt. In May 1980, Volodia Shahsbhani witnessed a skier lose an edge on a section of ice, slide within a few meters past him and stop in the middle of the face in deeper*



*snow. In April 2006, while heading over to a supposed untracked side-slope, I found myself on top of bare ice (just thinly covered by two centimeters of new snow); turning very, very carefully I was able to traverse out of danger. Although this legendary face, symbol of the entrance into the realm of “extreme” skiing, attracts more and more skiers each year, it is not to be taken lightly. A fall on this face, with a pitch always greater than 45°, means sliding over the bergschrund and beyond. When the Toponeige rating*

*system was born, the Courtes’s northeast slope was cited as the benchmark for 5.2 alongside the Agneaux’s Piaget couloir (Ecrins). Many of us consider this to be a transitional route between two levels, and due to its consistently steep pitch the northeast face has no reason to be jealous of other higher rated routes. Pierre Tardivel, fan of the original route, considers the Courtes’s northeast face to be the gold standard at this level:*

*“A wide, consistent pitch that allows you to lengthen a turn when necessary. The northeast slope is just a notch below the Whympfer couloir and two notches below true extreme skiing routes such as the Couturier. Using the same reasoning as with the Col de la Verte, extremely steep, but simply not the same level of engagement and complexity as those routes we have rated 5.5.”*

*Indeed the highest rating found today, Tardivel, as with other specialists of the range, see no reason to disagree. To summarize the Argentière basin’s extreme lines from “least” to most difficult: 5.1 = Col des Cristaux (C9); 5.2 = Courtes NE face (C7); 5.3 = Aiguille Qui-Remue (C8); 5.4 = Couturier (C3); 5.5 = Courtes, Austrian route (C6). In any case, enough subject matter for an Internet forum thread or hut conversation. Other than the technical aspect, Volodia wonders to what extent personal preference plays when assessing these slopes:*

*“Personal preference, linked with one’s favorite range, can tip the scale. For some, consistent wide-open faces are boring and not worth the distraction. These skiers (including me – due to my Ecrins upbringing perhaps?) rarely come across ‘crowds’ when skiing winding couloirs with similarly exposed pitches and may, paradoxically, find them to be much less stressful. In the near future, I have no doubt that steep skiing will give birth to the psychoalpinist who will be able to make the distinction between the conquerors of wide-open perfection from those hung up on more uterine-like paths...or something of the sort.”*

