

My Alps Trifecta to Support KIPP Charter Schools

By Whitney Tilson, 9/2/17

(The latest version of this pdf is posted at: www.tilsonfunds.com/TilsonAlps17.pdf)

Last week I climbed three challenging Alps peaks, the Eiger, Jungfrau and Mönch, to raise more than \$100,000 for my favorite charity, KIPP charter schools in NYC, and support the thousands of KIPPsters climbing the mountain to college (if you'd like to add your support, the donation page for my climbs is [here](#)). Here's a picture of these three mountains:



If you don't have the time or interest to read my entire write-up, I suggest skimming it to see the pictures and watching [this](#) 3:43 video with the highlights of my Eiger climb. I got some great heart-stopping footage!

Background

In July 2015, my wife and I spent a week hiking the famous Haute Route from Chamonix, France (the base of Mt. Blanc) to Zermatt, Switzerland (the base of the Matterhorn), mostly glacier trekking for 8-10 hours every day, staying in alpine huts. It was a grueling but magnificent experience, but in one way it left me dissatisfied: every day, as I looked up at the iconic peaks, I felt that I wanted to be *on top of them*, not in their shadows!

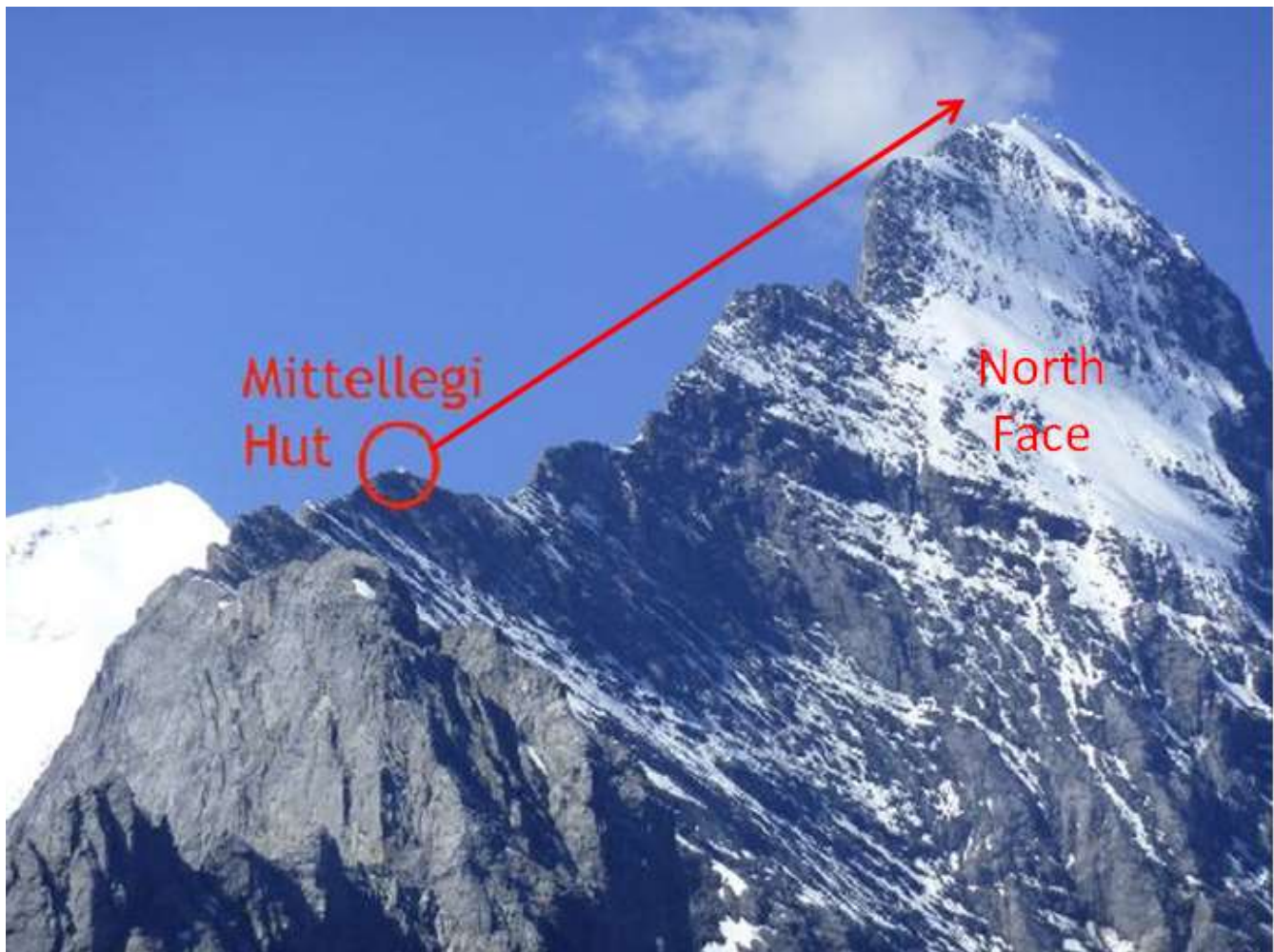
So I vowed to myself to come back and summit both Mt. Blanc and the Matterhorn and, having decided to do so, had the idea to tie this adventure to raising money for my favorite charity, [KIPP charter schools](#) in NYC, on whose board I've served for 15 years (the donation page for my climbs is [here](#)). KIPP, the Knowledge is Power Program, is a non-profit network of 209 college-preparatory, public charter schools in 20 states and DC that serve almost entirely low-income, minority students (click [here](#) for more information). I have seen with my own eyes – and numerous independent studies confirm – that KIPP gives children a far superior education than the nearby traditional public schools, resulting in college graduation rates *five times higher* – in short, it transforms lives. One of KIPP's primary mottos, which appears on the walls of every school, is "climbing the mountain to college," so I couldn't think of a better way to support and honor the 6,000+ hard-working KIPP students in NYC than to actually climb two big mountains.

I successfully summited both peaks (see my pictures from and descriptions of my climbs [here](#) and [here](#)) and fell in love with mountaineering. The combination of experiencing some of nature's most spectacular beauty, the physical and mental challenges, the adrenaline, the feeling of accomplishment, of

going places that very few people ever go (there are no shortcuts; you can't take a tram or chairlift to the top of these mountains) – it's just an incredibly intense rush! Also, it feels great to raise a meaningful amount of money for my favorite charity – over \$100,000 each of the past two years.

This summer, to top last year, I decided to both climb an even more difficult mountain, the Eiger, and also tackle two more peaks, the nearby Jungfrau and Mönch, which are slightly higher but not as difficult to climb. (The Jungfrau is 13,642 feet and the Mönch is 13,474 feet; somewhat ironically, the most challenging climb of the three, the Eiger, is “only” 13,015 feet.)

The Eiger, famous for its menacing north face, has captivated the interest of climbers for more than a century. That route, however, is beyond my abilities (for now anyway!) so my guide from the last two years, Geoffroy Arvis, and I instead planned to hike to the Mittellegi Hut and then summit via the Mittellegi Ridge, a very challenging, narrow route, as you can see in this picture:



The Start of My Trip

I flew to Zurich overnight on Friday, Aug. 28th and took the train the next day four hours to Grindelwald, which sits in the shadow of these three peaks (you can see the Eiger in this picture, but not the other two, as they're behind the Eiger):



Geoffroy and I had planned to hike to the hut on Sunday and summit early Monday morning, but the weather forecast was lousy for Monday, so he decided that we should delay by a day.

Mountain Biking

With an extra day to kill, I rented a mountain bike, took a bus ~30 minutes and 3,100 vertical feet up the valley, biked up another 1,000 vertical feet, saw a beautiful lake and viewing walkway built into a cliff, and then went bombing down the mountain through the woods on some narrow hiking trails, past some cows, all the way back to Grindelwald (see pictures below). In the center picture, behind me are the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau, from right to left:



I probably shouldn't have expended so much energy right before my climbs – biking up to the lake was a real leg-burner – plus it would have been easy to take a fall and hurt myself, but the magnificent scenery was worth it!

Climbing the Eiger

[I've posted two videos of our Eiger climb, a [short one](#) with just the highlights (3:43) and a [long one](#) with all of the video clips I took (15:40).]

The forecast was great for Tuesday, so on Monday Geoffroy and I took the cog railway halfway up the mountain (elevation: 10,300 feet) and got out on the glacier. The two-hour hike/trek/climb to the Mittellegi Hut (elevation: 11,000 feet) was surprisingly challenging (read: hairy)! I posted a video of the hike [here](#), and here are some pictures:



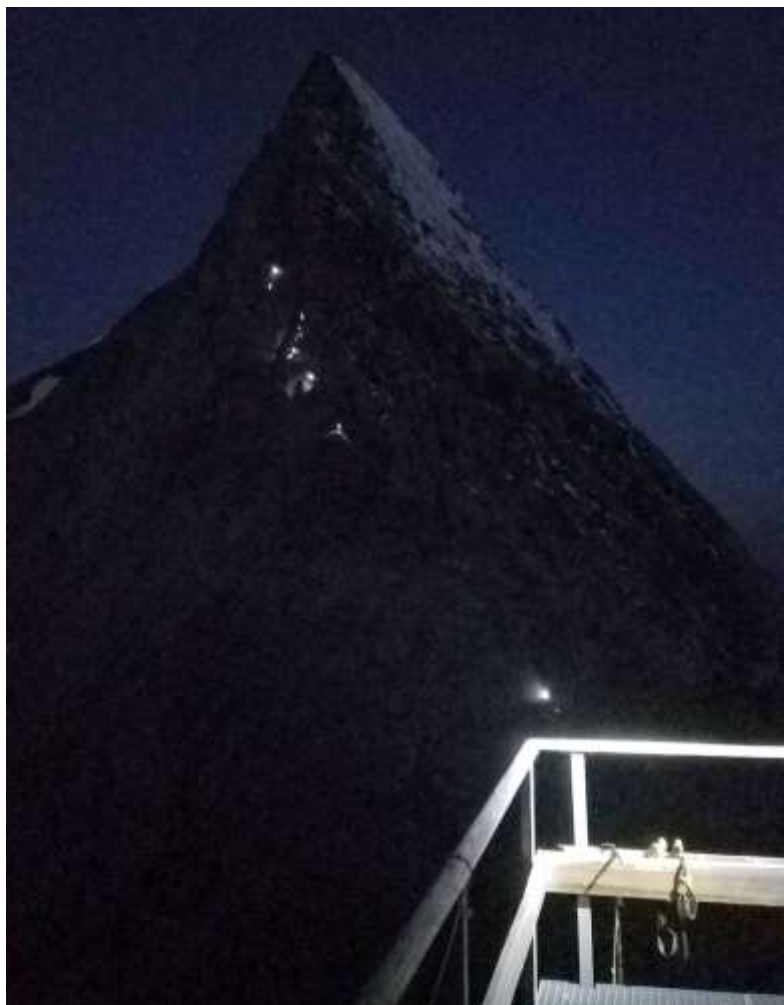
Here are some pictures of the hut, and the Eiger and Mittellegi Ridge behind it. As you can see from the pics, the views are amazing (quite a scenic toilet on the outside of the hut)!



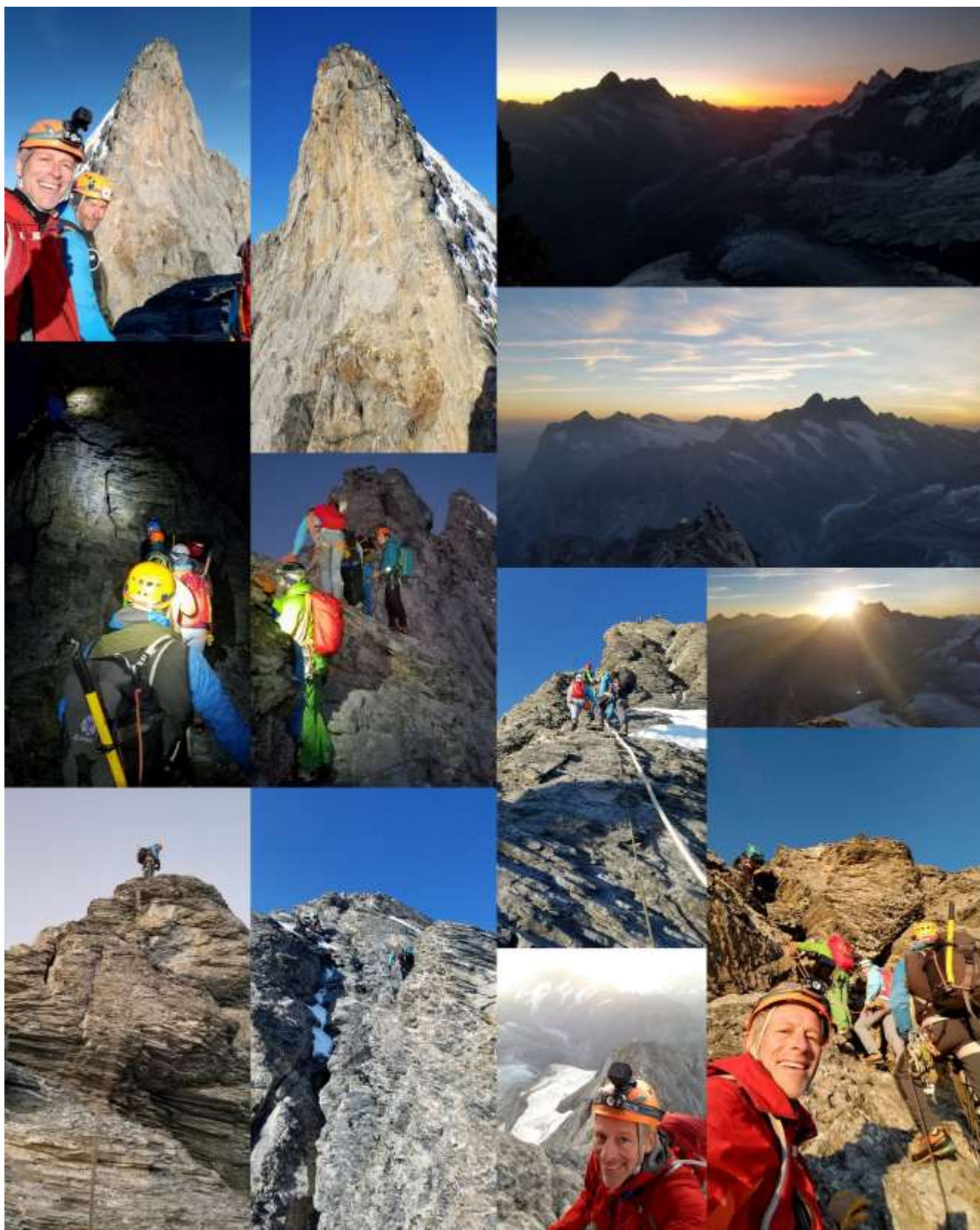
The next morning, we woke up at 5am and, after breakfast, began climbing at 5:45am. Here we are about to start:



And here is what we saw as we set out – the headlamps of climbers ahead of us:



It was a tough, heart-pounding climb of 3,000 vertical feet, which took us 3:45 (it should have been closer to three hours, but we got stuck in traffic a few times), so we summited at 9:30am. Here are a dozen pictures:



Here are two pictures from the summit (note the KIPP t-shirt, the Mönch under my armpit and the Jungfrau above Geoffroy's head in the first picture):



My biggest mistake was schlepping way too much water and food, turning what should have been a ~12-pound backpack into a ~25-pound one – I was really feeling that extra weight! Thank goodness for the fixed ropes in a half dozen places or I wouldn't have been able to climb it at all. And kudos to my stellar guide, Geoffroy Arvis!

After a few minutes at the top, we began a long downclimb, which wasn't too bad until we encountered another challenging nearly-one-hour climb up a nasty ridge (with no ropes) that I wasn't expecting! Once we got to the glacier, I celebrated by stripping off my shirt off and lying in the snow (funny pic below). From there, it was a bit under an hour of trekking across the glacier to the next hut, the Mönchsjochehutte (elevation: 12,000 feet), at the foot of the Mönch:



At that point (around 1pm on Tuesday), I bade adieu to Geoffroy, who had to get home. It was too bad we were delayed a day, but fortunately he was able to find me another guide, Simon Wahli, a 22-year-old apprentice guide. He and his father, also a guide, were guiding clients up the Eiger with us and Simon was available on Wednesday.

Climbing the Jungfrau

[My video of climbing the Jungfrau and Mönch is [here](#) (3:48).]

Because the weather forecast was awful for Thursday, I asked Simon if he'd be willing to guide me up both the Jungfrau and Mönch the next day. I could tell he was skeptical – each mountain is normally an arduous full-day climb and he'd never heard of a rank amateur like me doing both in a day – but he was willing to try, so we woke up at 2am and left the hut at exactly 3am to tackle the Jungfrau, the more difficult of the two. Here I am as we headed out (carrying much less weight, thankfully!):



Simon anticipated that getting up and down the Jungfrau would take seven hours (4½ up and 2½ down), which would give us just enough time to do the Mönch (an estimated 3 hours up and 2 down), for a total of 12 hours. He said we had to summit the Mönch no later than 1pm or it wouldn't be safe doing the super narrow traverse at the top of the Mönch due to soft snow.

I'd heard/read that the Jungfrau and Mönch are not nearly as challenging as the Eiger, so I was expecting two long climbs, but nothing particularly hairy. Boy, was I wrong! Indeed, they were neither as long, technically difficult, nor frightening as the Eiger – but they were both *much* tougher than I expected, with plenty of lung- and leg-burning and heart-stopping parts (a few of which were flat-out *hairy* – details about three of them below).

To get to the Jungfrau, we had to walk downhill for more than half an hour, losing 1,000 vertical feet, before we got to the base to start climbing it – what a bummer that was, turning a climb of 1,700 vertical feet into one of 2,700! Nevertheless, we made good time and summited the Jungfrau at 6:23am (3:23 after we'd started).

It was a fairly challenging climb overall, with two particularly hairy parts. The first was less than an hour in, when we were going across a very steep (~60 degree) snow field. We had to cross two 40-foot-wide areas in which the path in the snow disappeared and instead the surface was very hard and crusty, which made it impossible to make much of an indentation with your boots or ice ax (and, needless to say, the slope went down hundreds of feet into the pitch black).

Since we were in a hurry, Simon didn't want to take the time to have us put on (and then have to take off) our crampons (metal spikes we attach to our boots), so he carefully walked across the two-inch-wide icy traverse and set an anchor to catch me if I fell. I'm not sure I breathed as I walked across, trying to dig my ice ax into the snow/ice near my right shoulder to provide some balance. It felt like walking a tightrope or slackline. A few yards past the first traverse was a similar one, so we repeated the same process, again successfully.

In reality, I wasn't in any danger, as Simon was well anchored and kept the rope tight, but it was super freaky nevertheless.

Then, two hours later, as we approached the summit of the Jungfrau, there was a nearly identical snowfield: super steep, a huge drop below us, only an inch of crusty, icy snow, and it was still very dark (though no longer pitch black). But instead of traversing it, we had to go straight up it. This time we were wearing our crampons, so Simon went first, pounding his toe (with two crampon spikes) into the icy snow each step, with a little help from his ice ax, and then, maybe 100 feet above me, establishing an anchor and belay for me. It was easy for him because he's an experienced ice climber, but I've never done it, so it was a new and unnerving experience to climb up this steep slope with no handholds at all – just relying on each foothold and hoping the snow/ice didn't give way.

(Interestingly, I don't recall any particularly hairy parts of the Eiger climb – maybe because *the entire climb was so hairy!*)

I don't have any pictures from the ascent because it was dark, but got some spectacular ones from the summit, as the sun was just rising (the first is my favorite from the trip, in which I'm silhouetted, with the Mönch (center) and Eiger (left) behind me; the second is moments later in the other direction, with the sun in my face):



We headed down at 6:30am and arrived at the Top of the World (a big tourist attraction – the highest railway station in Europe, at 11,300 feet – in the center of the lower right picture below, with the Mönch behind in the center and the Eiger further back on the left) at 8am, exactly five hours after we'd set out and two hours ahead of schedule. We were really flying! (To put this in perspective, however, Simon said he'd done the round trip in under *two hours*!):



Climbing the Mönch

We used the facilities, refilled our water bottles, and 23 minutes later were hiking back up the hill toward the hut (at 12,000 feet, it's 700 vertical feet above Top of the World), where we would start climbing the Mönch. It was important for us to get going because the first train each day arrives at 8:30am, with lots of climbers and their guides ready to tackle the Mönch – and you don't want to be on the top of that mountain with anyone else given the wildly hairy traverse to the summit. Here's a picture right before we started up the mountain:



Again, we made good time and summited in less than two hours. It was an easier climb than either the Eiger or Jungfrau...until the last 15 minutes, the final traverse across the ridge to the summit, which was the hairiest part of the day (you can see it above me in the picture at the top of this page, as well as in the earlier picture of me lying shirtless in the snow). It's a very narrow path, with nothing for our hands or ice axes to balance, with 1,000+-foot drops on either side, as you can see in these two pics (also see 1:30 and 2:04 in my [video](#)):



I've never been so focused in my life! To the extent I was doing any thinking, it was: a) "Damn, the Mönch was supposed to be easy – and this is really scary – no fair!" and b) "If I fall one way, will my guide really jump the other way to save both of our lives?" (Answer: Yes, he would, if only for self-preservation. He's done this many times in training, but told me he's never had to do it for real; his father, however, also a guide, has had to do it for real **THREE TIMES** in his ~25 years of guiding!)

Here are pictures from the summit:





And here are pictures from the climb:



We were back at the hut by 11:45am, 3:22 after we'd left the Top of the World and about an hour ahead of schedule.

We summited both peaks and still got back to the hut before noon – that's quite a half day! It also gave us time for a long, leisurely lunch before we walked back down to the Top of the World and took the train down.

Reflections

My body held up surprisingly well (nothing more than mild soreness all over), given that I rarely exercise for more than 90 minutes at a time. I estimate that climbing up and down the Jungfrau – five hours of pretty constant movement – was the physical equivalent of running a marathon – and then, after a 23-minute break, immediately running a half marathon (and this after another marathon-equivalent the previous day on the Eiger)!

Then, consider the altitude, which, while only half that in the Himalayas, is no joke. Fortunately, it doesn't seem to affect me as much as most amateurs, plus I get an assist by taking Diamox, a drug that reduces/prevents the symptoms of altitude sickness).

But what really made it exhausting wasn't primarily the physical exertion, but the mental. For example, I burned more calories and put my body under greater stress when I competed in the World's Toughest Mudder last November, completing 75 miles in 25 hours, 12 minutes (for details, click [here](#)). But it wasn't very challenging mentally, as I did 15 laps of the exact same course. By the second time through it, I knew exactly what to expect in terms of the terrain and the 20 obstacles, so I was basically on auto-pilot for the last 20+ hours (though getting powerful electric jolts pretty much every lap at freakin' Operation raised my stress level!).

In contrast, over the three climbs last week (and the two in the Alps I did last summer), I could rarely go on auto-pilot for four main reasons:

- 1) It was all new terrain for me and I have very little mountaineering experience;
- 2) My guides were usually setting the pace, which is stressful, plus I had to work very closely with them, following instructions, etc.;
- 3) The fear factor is pretty crazy: these are BIG mountains and during large parts of the routes, the drops on either or both sides, often only inches away, can be thousands of feet (I'd guess 2/3 of the Eiger route, 1/3 of the Jungfrau's and 20% of the Mönch's are like this) (in reality, there's little difference between a 50-foot and 5,000-foot fall, but there's a big difference in the amount of adrenaline it produces!); and
- 4) The challenges are constant and highly variable: you use nearly every muscle in your body; you get winded quickly due to the altitude; the wind can be strong, which can quickly chill you, knock you off balance, and make it hard to communicate with your guide; climbing up is very different than going down (muscles used, balance, my guide is leading on the way up, whereas I'm leading on the way down, etc.); using crampons, especially on rock (try rock climbing – or, worse yet, downclimbing – on hard rock with 1.5-inch metal spikes on your boots!); controlling your body temperature (one moment you can be freezing and then five minutes later, after a tough pitch, you're sweating like mad); the terrain varies widely: snow, ice, gravel, solid rock, and brittle shale-like rock, where your handholds and footholds can easily break off; keeping the rope tight and not snagging on things; using the ice ax appropriately, etc.

You get the idea – you have to be totally “on” and focused nearly all of the time you're on the mountain, so this, combined with the physical challenge, is incredibly draining after many hours and days.

I'm pretty pleased with my climbing, especially since I only started doing this two years ago and I climb very infrequently (last year, I climbed Mt. Blanc in July (see description and pics [here](#)), the Matterhorn in August ([here](#)), and Mt. Kenya in December ([here](#))). I felt very comfortable up there (though there were a few especially hairy moments!) and didn't have any falls, just a few stumbles.

Thanks for taking the time to read this and for supporting KIPP! (If you haven't and would like to, the donation page for my climbs is [here](#).)

Q&A

Here are my answers to some questions I'm often asked:

1) Was it as dangerous as the pictures and video make it look?

No, though there certainly was some element of danger (what would be the point of doing it otherwise?! ;-). Indeed, some of the pictures and video clips make it look like I was one misstep away from certain death – which is, in fact, true. There were dozens of times during the climbs when an uncontrolled fall would surely have been fatal, but here's the key: *I was roped to my guide at all times*. That means the only way I could die is if I fell at the wrong point *and* failed to catch myself (self-arrest) *and* somehow caught my guide by surprise and pulled him off the mountain with me, a scenario that guides are trained (and highly incented!) to avoid. For example, on the very narrow ridge near the top of both the Eiger and Mönch, with sheer drops on both sides, if I started falling, he has me on a very short rope and would pull hard to stabilize me, but if I fell, he'd jump off the other side and the rope, stretched over the top, would save us both. (Definitely something to avoid, however!)

I've looked closely at mountaineering deaths, especially in the Alps (which max out at 15,800 feet on Mt. Blanc, so the high-altitude risk of, say, the Himalayas, the so-called "death zone", isn't an issue) and the vast majority are because people are climbing without local, highly experienced, superbly trained professional guides. These guys (they're 98% men) are unbelievably good and in a million years I would never have tried any of the five peaks I've done in the Alps the past two years without being roped to one every second I was on the mountain. Because of this, from a purely statistical standpoint, I'm taking far more risk of death/serious injury every time I ride my bike in the streets of Manhattan (which I do almost every day of the year).

2) What did you learn/would do differently?

a) Buy food and water at the huts – just pay the damn usurious prices! – rather than try to carry three days' worth. Go light!

b) Don't ever f**king drop your ice ax! I lost mine twice – a *major* rookie mistake, which can be fatal on some mountains. (At numerous points, climbers tuck it between their back and backpack to, for example, climb a rock face in between snowy areas.) Mine came out once on the Jungfrau when I forgot it was there and took my pack off; the second time was 10 minutes from finishing the Mönch when I was leaning forward on a steep downclimb and it shot out right over my head. Simon was nice about it, but I could tell he wanted to kill me!

- c) I stupidly forgot warm ski gloves (fortunately I was able to buy a pair right before we set out on day one – a wasted \$50, but worth it). I only had thinner gloves, perfect for climbing, which I used 90% of the time, but really needed the warmer gloves 10% of the time.
- d) I'd never used a buff before (I was using [this one](#)) and found it very useful in light of how quickly I'd go from being cold (when I'd pull it over my face, ears and hear) to overheating (when I'd pull it down around my neck)

3) Why did you make such good time?

I didn't think we were going particularly fast on the ascents, but were keeping up a steady pace and rarely had to stop for more than a few seconds. After a tough section, when I was really winded, I was able to take 3-5 deep breaths and continue.

I think we were much faster on the descents, where the primary issue is being sure-footed. I think I've benefitted from all of the obstacle course and occasional trail races I've been doing the past few years.

Lastly, we cruised by doing more tandem climbing than lead climbing. There are two general ways to climb a mountains like this with a guide: in lead climbing, the guide climbs first, goes up 25-100 feet, and establishes an anchor of some sort: clips or loops the rope onto some fixed gear or wraps it around a rock, and then calls down for the client to come up, pulling in the slack as the client ascends (belaying). Lather, rinse, repeat, all the way to the top! It's safe, but also slow.

Tandem climbing means you're climbing together, with about five feet of rope between you. It's much faster because you're both moving all the time, but also obviously less safe because nobody is anchored: if you fall, you'd better hope your guide can instantly establish a good foothold or handhold or you're both in trouble. Guides only tandem climb if they're certain the client isn't going to fall, or if you're in a place (like trekking across a glacier) where there are no consequences of a fall.

My guides and I did a combination of both: when we encountered very steep (often vertical) faces, where there was a chance I could fall, we'd lead climb: he would climb up and tell me to follow him as soon as the rope tightened. But I'd guess that 90% of the time we were tandem climbing, whereas my observation was that most others I saw were tandem climbing maybe 70% of the time. My guides had confidence in my climbing abilities/surefootedness and thus felt more comfortable taking a bit of extra risk to speed up our climb and make it more fun for both of us.

4) What conditioning/experience is needed?

It depends on which mountain. Anyone in reasonable shape (say, run a half marathon in less than 2½ hours) who doesn't get altitude sickness and isn't afraid of heights could do the Mönch (and Mt. Blanc). I put the Jungfrau, Matterhorn and Eiger (in ascending level of difficulty) in a different category. For these, you need: a) a *very* high level of fitness (this is 8-9 hours of pretty sustained effort, so you should be able to run a marathon in under five hours; ideally four); b) a high degree of athleticism (in order of importance: balance, lower body strength, upper body strength (10+ pull-ups), and flexibility); and c) fearlessness.

If you have these three things, then you need to get some mountaineering experience. In June 2016, in preparation for Mt. Blanc and the Matterhorn, I did five days of private training on some challenging cliffs in northern Vermont at the [Petra Cliffs](#) mountaineering school, which I highly recommend. I also started last year by tackling a less technical mountain, Mt. Blanc, first.

5) What did you eat during the climb?

I had a good breakfast at the hut and then just ate some Snickers bars and peanut M&Ms. I don't tend to drink a lot of water: for the Eiger, I drank a liter of Coke and Tailwind (like Gatorade); for the Jungfrau, 750ml of Tailwind; for the Mönch, 500ml. Liquids are heavy, so don't overdo it!

6) How much does it cost?

This isn't cheap. Gear (one time cost) is maybe \$1,000-\$2,000, depending on whether you already have good jackets/layers (ski gear works fine) and want to rent vs. own (mountaineering boots alone are \$500-600; you can rent them, but I don't advise this). Airfare, trains, meals, lodging – it adds up, and Switzerland is a very high-cost country (the first two nights in Grindelwald, I stayed in a youth hostel for \$47/night; huts are maybe \$100/night, including dinner and breakfast (you pay for your guide as well)). Lastly, guides are ~\$700/day, which is actually pretty reasonable in my opinion (a private ski instructor at a major ski area is \$600/day) – this is not an area to skip or go with the cheapest option!

7) What am I going to do for an encore?

I'm not sure – but am definitely going to continue mountaineering. Lots of folks have (tongue in cheek – I think!) suggested Everest, K2, and Meru, but I don't have a death wish nor can I disconnect from my business for more than a couple of days. Geoffroy is going to come back to me with some ideas.

Simon, who has climbed the truly death-defying North Face of the Eiger *ten times* said that if I did some ice climbing training, he'd guide me up this route. I'm not sure that's a very good idea, but let's just say the seed has been planted...

And the bulls in Pamplona have been beckoning for a while...

8) I've posted the reports of my Garmin watch here:

- Eiger (part 1): <https://connect.garmin.com/modern/activity/1952419208> (one hour and 34 minutes into the climb, my watch reset – grrrr!)
- Eiger (part 2): <https://connect.garmin.com/modern/activity/1952419219>
- Jungfrau: <https://connect.garmin.com/modern/activity/1952419245>
- Mönch: <https://connect.garmin.com/modern/activity/1952419259>