

CHALLENGE

Words: **Sophie Radcliffe** • Photo: **Dean Alexander**
Location: **Dufourspitze, Switzerland**

My lips are blue, I'm trying to eat a snickers bar, but my jaw isn't working and the chocolate is rock solid. 'Let's go down,' I plead to Charley. He can see desperation in my eyes. Putting his hands around my face he pulls me towards him. Like that, close and eye to eye, he tells me there is nowhere he'd rather be than right here, climbing this mountain with me.

We are standing on the summit of Dufourspitze, at 4,634 metres the highest mountain in Switzerland. It's Day 15 of the Alpine Coast to Coast, our expedition to climb the highest mountains in the eight alpine countries and cycle between them over the course of a single month. Minus 18°C on the summit was not what we'd been expecting in August and it caught us a little unawares. My gloves failed to keep out the chill hours ago and my jacket feels like a feeble windshirt. I have been shaking for hours. Doubts have been plaguing my resolve ever since setting out from the Monte Rosa hut at three in the morning.

In the dark it can be a challenge to control your mind. The world becomes so small; all I can see is the light of the torch on the snow in front of me. I yearn for the beauty of the alpine dawn to distract me, and for those first rays of sunlight to warm my body. We stop to put on extra layers and close off all exposed areas of skin from the bitter wind. We climb fast to stay warm and I repeat to myself: 'I feel confident, I feel strong, I feel positive'. I have to get through this climb, not just to the summit, but also back to the hut

and I'm the only one who can make it happen.

Sunrise takes an eternity, but eventually I look up to catch the first rays of colour streaking across the horizon. Slowly at first, then gathering strength; nature's unrivalled artistry in the sky warms my soul. We can see why the range we are climbing in is called Monte Rosa – an incredible glow illuminates the massif, a chain of 4,000 metre peaks around us. In this moment, my fears and doubts fall away and I know everything is going to be just fine.

When I look back at this climb and the moment I arrived at the summit, I feel something inside approaching peace. The raw emotion of the place for me, married to its natural beauty, makes Dufourspitze stand out. There was so much clarity in all the decisions we made there. Minor decisions, such as not bringing the right kit and forgoing the weight of a flask with a warm drink, were suddenly loaded with significance. The cold sapped my strength, but I was not beaten; the strength I felt between Charley and I held me together. Even though I suffered on Dufourspitze, I learned that everything passes with time; you can get through that pain you feel along the way. I learned something new about myself, and to respect my environment and limitations. But at the same time, I still want to test and push those limitations. For a life lived to the full and in search of our true potential – that's why I challenge myself and why I love it. It's all there to play for, we just have to make those first steps, go for it and don't stop when it starts to hurt.

@ChallengeSophie // @DeanAlexander87

