

TWO MOUNTAIN HOLIDAYS

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THE following is an account of two short holidays, spent with a friend in well-known, widely separated mountain areas in Europe. I think I should make it clear at the outset that this article is not for the mountain purist or confirmed rock-climber, who will find in it no account of ascents hitherto regarded as impossible nor of any technical problem peculiar to his craft. Nor will the botanist or specialist in any other of those sciences peculiarly associated with mountains and mountain-landscape add in any way to his store of knowledge. This account is written primarily for those who delight in wandering, rucksack on back, amid the high places of the world, not disdaining the path which has been trod by human feet or the simple comforts of the mountain inn, but eschewing as much as possible the fast motor road and the big hotel. Some who have not yet tasted the delights of a holiday of this kind may even be tempted to have a go. If so, I would assure the would-be initiate that he will require only a normally sound constitution, a rucksack containing the usual paraphernalia for a holiday away from home, a pair of stout nailed boots, a quantity of money (not excessive in proportion to the normal requirement for a holiday abroad), and, if possible, a slight acquaintance with the language of the country in question.

The first of the holidays was spent in the latter part of September 1953 among the Dolomite mountains in northern Italy. The idea took seed in our minds from the account in the brochure issued by the Ramblers' Association of the trip organised by them to that area. We found this Association most helpful, and they were able to supply us with a very good large-scale map of the area. The comparative lateness of the holiday is partly explained by their advice to avoid the summer months as far as possible. Partly also, I wished to try out the off-season hotel charges. But, although the charges of the more fashionable and more elaborately run hotels fluctuate noticeably from season to season, those of the mountain inns, or rifugi as they are known in Italy, do not appear to do so at all. Incidentally, many of the rifugi are run under the auspices of the C.A.I. (Club Alpino Italiano), and in these membership of one of the alpine clubs often entitles one to cheaper facilities.

We travelled out via Basle and Innsbruck and thence through the Brenner Pass to Bolzano, a delightful town with a distinct old-world character of its own, superior in that respect, I think, to Innsbruck even with its memories of the Hapsburgs. The inhabitants are predominantly Austrian by race, and the language heard in streets and cafés is German, in spite of the fact that the town is well within the Italian frontier. In other parts, Italian is the language most often heard. In fact, the whole area is like a vast language chequer-board, the two races, noticeably different in appearance and behaviour, alternating with each other, sometimes from valley to valley.

We had had a glorious day for our rail trip through the Brenner, and when we went to bed that night in Bolzano, having chosen a moderately priced albergo, we were looking forward to our first close look at the Dolomites on the morrow under perfect conditions. Our hopes were not to be fulfilled, for next day the weather was overcast and there was cloud down to about four or five thousand feet—sufficient to effect a complete obliteration of all the higher ranges. “Just the good old Lairig Ghru all over again,” we thought as we boarded one of the local buses for the small village of Nova Levante. This was the place that, from its position on the map, we had picked as the likeliest spot from which to commence our tour. We had decided to stick, for the time being at least, to the route described in the brochure, and, according to this, our objective that day would be the Rifugio della Coronella. On arriving at Nova Levante, therefore, we looked about for some sign of a path that would take us there, and in fact found it without much trouble.

Here it was that we first encountered that system of marked paths and routes which is such a boon to the hill-walker in many of the mountain areas of Europe. The Dolomites are outstanding in this respect. Not only has each route its own peculiar colour, but it is numbered as well. The colours and occasionally the number appropriate to the route are painted at intervals along that route on some convenient flat surface. So, having carefully noted the number and distinctive colours of our own route, we hoisted our rucksacks on to our backs and addressed ourselves to the task in hand—a climb of some two to three thousand feet. Through woods, past saw-mills, finally, after emerging from the trees, past peasants working on the steep hillsides—still our path went on climbing. It was not long before we began to regret the fact that we had also planned for a fortnight or so of city life and so were carrying in our rucksacks quite a bit of extra clothing which would be of little use to us in the



ROSENGARTEN FROM RIFUGIO VAJOLET

Margaret Munro

mountains. Nor was this the last occasion for regrets on this score—Dolomite ascents tend to be steepish and, as a rule, rather long. Numerous indeed in the days that followed were the occasions upon which, after a hard spell of climbing had put what felt an intolerable strain on the lungs, we at last threw ourselves full length upon the ground to await at least partial recovery—rucksack being for the moment *persona non grata*. The pattern of these little halts became so well known to us—first the submerging of all other conscious effort to that of drawing air and still more air into the lungs, then the slow lessening of the pulse-rate and finally the gradual recovery of the feeling of well-being and with it the pleasurable consciousness of the external world—the sharp, clear mountain air, the magnificent panorama of mountain, valley, and wood.

That day, however, although we were fast learning the value of these short periods of relaxation, our attention was focused mainly upon the prevailing conditions of mist ahead. Later in the day it did begin to clear a little. We had not so far been vouchsafed our long-awaited look at the Dolomites at close quarters, but at last there came a moment when the mist lifted just enough to reveal—quite suddenly—an enormous rock-face straight ahead of us, towering up into the cloud. There it was marked on the map, for sure—yet its appearance from the mist just then was so unexpected that it had about it something even of the frightening. If the curtain had been drawn aside just a little to reveal that monster, what more might it not disclose shortly? However, the mist came down again very soon afterwards and that was that.

This glimpse was, as we confirmed by subsequent experience, as good an introduction as any to the Dolomites, which have something of the dramatic in their very nature. Great rocky buttresses rise abruptly from the green hillsides of a rolling upland countryside with which they do not seem altogether to blend, and which does not appear quite to accept them as part of itself. The rock which is a pinkish limestone has, in a great many places, weathered into a wide variety of shapes, some grotesque, others tantalising the mind with memories of familiar, but half-forgotten objects. Moreover, the highest plateaux, those above the vegetation line, have a curious bleak, dusty appearance characteristic, one might imagine, of the surface of some dead planet. The mist, of which we saw a fair amount during our short sojourn in the area, also contributes to the general effect, though disastrous from a photographic point of view.

Soon after the glimpse of the rock face which had momentarily

dumbfounded us we caught sight of our objective. It was perched at the very top of the long slope which we were climbing and looked at first like a doll's house alternately appearing and disappearing through the mist. When we reached it in another two to three hours we found, however, that it was of a quite considerable size. In front was a paved courtyard. Here we were met by a tall, dignified personage with heavy, sweeping moustaches, who turned out, on my addressing him in broken Italian, to be none other than the padrone. However, subsequent conversation having proved abortive by reason of language difficulties, the padrone disappeared and was not seen by us again during our stay at the rifugio. Exploration revealed a number of comfortable dormitories, a spacious dining-room, and what looked from the outside at least like a fairly well-equipped kitchen, complete with staff. Nor were we disappointed in the latter, for we were served at dinner with a most excellent meal. I used the word dormitories instead of bedrooms advisedly, but the service was undoubtedly up to good hotel standards. Nor was this exceptional. We found nothing to complain of in the catering at the rifugi. The general standard, in fact, was surprisingly good—especially considering the fact that many were in remote places, all but inaccessible, where provisioning had to be carried out by mule or donkey or sometimes even by porter. Again, the staff in these places would, during the tourist season, have to make up their minds to live a fairly secluded life.

From the Coronella the path to the next rifugio, the Vajolet, continued, according to the brochure, up a "seemingly vertical rock face." Before breakfast, on the following morning, we tried to spot our route on the ground. The mist had by this time cleared and we could see perfectly in all directions, but there appeared to be no vestige or trace of a path in our direction. The rifugio was actually built close up against the rock face already mentioned. This did not look as if it could be negotiated at any point without the usual rock-climbing equipment. At the same time we recalled the brochure and went in to breakfast feeling rather thoughtful. I decided to ask the cameriera where the path lay. "Su là" (up there), she replied, pointing to the rock face. Apparently, according to her, it was not dangerous either, but easy. It turned out that the path, beginning almost on the roof of the rifugio, wound upwards by fissures and faults in the rock, not visible from below, which made it quite a feasible proposition for the non-rock-climber. It was, however, rather steep and there were many places where hands and

arms had to be brought into play, and where the heavy rucksacks made the going awkward. I regretted not having proper nails in my boots. We reached the top safely enough after a climb of about two hours, and thereafter the path was quite easy. The Dolomites are, as in this case, apt to present the hill-walker pure and simple with situations which the ordinary member of that species in Scotland need not and would not face.

Our route led from the rifugio which lies beneath the well known and impressive Torri del Vajolet up and over the Passo del Principe. The path thereafter descended into a kind of natural bowl where the mist was eddying like steam in a cauldron, and then climbed once again over the Passo del Molignon. Our objective that day was the rifugio of the same name. This turned out to be situated, as might be expected, in the valley to which the path descended from the Passo del Molignon. The valley was an idyllic-looking place, just low enough in altitude to be cultivable, and remote from contact with the outside world. The Arcadian effect was enhanced by the fact that at the time the local country folk were engaged in bringing in the hay harvest and were, by the sound of it, enjoying themselves thoroughly in the process. We found this change from the bare, rocky plateaux which we had just been traversing very pleasant indeed.

We could not afford the time for a longer stay here than was strictly necessary, and so next day we resumed our journey. Our path led us from the valley up the course of a mountain stream and, after skirting the gigantic mass of the Sasso Lungo (Langkofel), took us on to the road winding over the Passo di Sella where we stopped that evening, putting up at a small rifugio. We recalled with a sense of pleasurable anticipation the glimpse which we had had that day of the Marmolada with its prominent glacier. Monte Marmolada is, at just over 10,000 feet, the highest mountain in the Dolomites, and beside it lay our ultimate objective, the rifugio of the same name. From the comfort of the rifugio we silently contemplated the towering rock bastions of the Gruppo di Sella. Somewhere up there, at about 9,000 feet, was our next stopping place, the Rifugio Cima Boe.

Next day we followed the road for a few miles to the point at which the path up to the Cima Boe led off. We then halted to take stock. Facing us there was what appeared quite a formidable climb, one which looked almost as perpendicular as the first part of the path from the Coronella to the Vajolet, but which would very likely be considerably longer. The sky was quite clear above, although the presence of some ominous-looking clouds farther down on the horizon

showed that the weather was very far from settled. We could at this point simply have continued along the main road to the Passo Pordoi and then gone straight on to the Marmolada. We decided to try for the Cima Boe.

After a few minutes we lost the path completely and thereafter pursued our climb up the bed of an almost dried-up water-course. This eventually gave way to a small plateau, on reaching which we succeeded in spotting the path again about a hundred yards to our left. This was lucky, for by now the weather was rapidly closing in and we were soon enveloped in thick mist. Vivid flashes of lightning and peals of thunder made it apparent shortly afterwards that we were, in fact, in the middle of a thunder-cloud. A furious wind sprang up, driving a sort of stinging hail into our faces with tremendous force, so that we could hardly keep our eyes sufficiently open to make out the path. Indeed, had the route-markings not been particularly numerous at this point we should have been in a sad plight. We were tempted to stop for shelter, but not knowing how long the storm would last, thought it wiser to keep going. Eventually, after what seemed an age, we reached a plateau upon which we could dimly discern the outline of the rifugio through the mist—a welcome sight indeed. This place was, it seemed, due to close for the season next day—as was soon indicated to us. It possessed only a very small skeleton staff, and much of it was locked and shuttered up. We succeeded, however, in obtaining a meal and a bed for the night. We had not up till then seriously envisaged the obvious risk attendant upon travelling in this kind of area in the off-season, which could have been very awkward for us on this occasion. I have no doubt that the C.A.I. could supply the necessary information with regard to this matter.

Next morning, which was bright and clear, we left the staff busy completing their locking up and came off the Gruppo Sella, descending to the Passo Pordoi which we reached about lunch time. After lunch we set out along the path to the Rifugio Marmolada. This lay for the greater part of its length along a ridge overlooking a deep valley, the Vial del Pan. The other side of this valley is dominated by the Marmolada massif. We had hoped to obtain a good view of the mountain, naturally enough, from the ridge, but—alas for this!—the mist was down again. By the time we reached the rifugio it had even begun to rain.

The next day, however, dawned blue and cloudless and the glittering north flank of Marmolada stood out in all its detail. We had, in

fact, a series of magnificent views of this spectacular mountain along the whole of the first part of our day's journey. The road was now smooth and downhill nearly all the way. It was very pleasant after our previous labours, and by now our rucksacks did not seem to weigh so much either. Our objective was Canazei, where we stayed overnight, and from which we caught the local bus next morning back to Bolzano. Our ramble in the Dolomites was at an end.

Although in the Dolomites we had adhered pretty much to the route suggested, we had made no advance bookings and had trusted instead to luck and the off-season to get accommodation. This had worked out so well, we felt, that we resolved to do the same the next year, this time in the Jotunheim area of Norway. Advice as to routes for this trip was obtained from the Norwegian Travel Association, who supplied us with an excellent large-scale map of the area.

The most convenient railway stations for an excursion to this part of Norway appear to be Fagernes and Otta. The latter was the more convenient for our project, and at the beginning of September 1954 we duly entrained at Oslo. The journey takes about eight hours, and as we had left by the afternoon train it was pitch dark by the time we arrived. As we groped our way out of the station we were inclined to wonder whether we should be able to make ourselves understood. Neither of us knew a word of Norwegian; up to that time, however, we had never had the slightest difficulty in this direction. Knowledge of the English language is apparently a *sine qua non* in Norwegian schools. And, in fact, we had no difficulty in Otta either, nor in any of the huts at which we later stayed. In that way we were better off than we had been in the Dolomites, where I had had to bring my somewhat doubtful Italian into service.

Otta is, by British standards, a medium-sized village on the main Trondheim motor road. The next stage was a bus journey along a side road in the direction of Bergen to the small village of Røysheim, from which we were to begin our trip proper. So next day we duly caught the morning bus at Otta, a very short distance from which, as we soon observed, the road became innocent of any kind of surfacing apart from the most primitive—mud. This being the main traffic artery of the locality, we could only guess at the state of roads regarded as more minor. We were, without a doubt, in real walkers' country. It was about 11 A.M. when we reached Røysheim. There we stocked

up with sandwiches and coffee (it had been wine in the Dolomites) and, having donned our hiking boots, started on the road to our first hut, Spiterstulen.

It was not a very gruelling walk—not to be compared with our first day's hike to the Coronella, and easily accomplished by 4 P.M. The path, which was broad and smooth, ascended gradually, following the River Røysheim. It was afternoon before we eventually got beyond the tree-line and had our first close look at the Norwegian mountains. The most vivid impression which we got—one which never subsequently left us—was of their similarity to our own. Perhaps it was the fact of the sky being overcast that day and of there being a slight drizzle that was responsible for this particular effect being so strong. But there is no doubt that for us these great granite monsters heaving their rounded masses from the sober-coloured landscape had an appearance of reality which the jagged stucco-looking Dolomite rock-towers and pinnacles could never have—not that the Norwegian mountain landscape is by any means identical in every respect with that to which we are accustomed in our own country. The scale is much larger, of course; but just as noticeable, I think, heather has not the universal prevalence that gives the Scottish Highlands their distinctive atmosphere.

In regard to Spiterstulen itself, and indeed all the other huts at which we stayed in the Jotunheim, suffice it to say that they were in every way of equal quality with the Dolomite rifugi, with comfortable quarters and magnificent food. Another thing worth mentioning is the extreme affability of all in these huts—Norwegians and Swedes for the most part. They all appeared to have at least a smattering of English which removed that most formidable barrier to friendly intercourse—language. In the previous year we had never succeeded, either at our various rifugi or elsewhere, in making any contacts with our fellow-tourists, who had been mostly Italian or German. Here, in Spiterstulen, at breakfast next morning, almost before realising it, we found ourselves enlisted in a party planning to climb the nearby mountain of Galdhøpiggen, which at just over 9,000 feet is the highest in Norway.

Besides ourselves, the party ultimately consisted of a Norwegian, a Swede, and a Dane. We set off thankful to be rid, for one day at least, of the burden of our rucksacks. It was an ideal day for a climb, sunny, but with a coolish wind blowing, and on such a day Galdhøpiggen is quite an easy climb, at least on its "safe" side. To reach the summit by the path involves about four hours' steady



LANGKOFEL

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plodding which leaves one with a pleasing sense of achievement and in a by no means exhausted condition. Arrived there, we were consequently, despite the tricky snow and ice conditions near the top, in an excellent state to admire the view offered us by the surrounding country. My friend and I had long been looking forward to this moment. Jotunheim means, I understand, the home of the giants. According to Norse mythology it was in this area that the Nordic gods had their abode. Looking round, one could well understand the violent and capricious qualities which the early inhabitants had assigned to their gods, qualities which must have stamped themselves indelibly on the primitive imagination from the very nature of the country. To the east, quite near, a great inverted globe, was the white summit cap of Glittertind, the second highest mountain in Norway. To the north and west lay mountains, peak upon peak, to the very horizon, and among those peaks everywhere the white gleam of the glaciers that from a distance appear to wash round them like a sea. It was a part of the Ice Age somehow surviving into the twentieth century. We had so often come across the tell-tale marks which the passage of ice in bygone ages leaves upon the landscape, the corries in the Cairngorms, the great natural bowls in the Dolomites. But here before us was the process actually taking place, here in front of our eyes the slow but powerful glacial currents were at work, moulding and shaping the contour of mountain and valley.

Next day, on the way to our next hut, Glitterheim, glaciers did not inspire us with such sublime feelings. We had to traverse mile after mile of glacial detritus consisting mostly of huge granite boulders, wet and treacherous in the drizzling rain. Although we had no difficulty in finding the route, it became clear to us that the system of path-marking was nothing like so elaborate as that to which we had been accustomed in the Dolomites. There was, for instance, a complete absence of numbering or special colouring.

Two of the Galdhøpiggen party, the Norwegian and the Swede (Rolf and Lars respectively), accompanied us to Glitterheim. This hut lies at the foot of Glittertind, the mountain which had been such a prominent feature of the landscape as seen from Galdhøpiggen. It was decided to tackle its ascent on the morrow, depending on the state of the weather, which at the time looked most unsettled. However, next morning dawned bright and clear, and the party set out, minus myself, but supplemented by two Norwegian nurses who had also arrived at Glitterheim the night before. I wanted to rest

my heel, strained in the boulder-hopping episode of the previous day. Since I cannot bear personal witness to conditions on the summit of Glittertind, I might as well relate the interesting fact that on this summit one is actually at a slightly higher altitude than on the summit of Galdhøpiggen, the reason being the much greater thickness of its snow and ice cap.

The party, six in number since it now included the two nurses, moved next day to Memurubu Hut on Lake Gjende. It was one of the pleasantest days that I personally have ever spent among the hills. The weather was beautifully warm and sunny, inviting one to loiter and even, there being time to spare, to lie spread-eagled among the scrub, basking luxuriously in the hot sun—an invitation which, I may add, we did not refuse. Moreover, the landscape was interesting and varied, the highlight for me being a small lake with the romantic name of Rusvatnet—a veritable gem in its setting of rough moor and crag. At last, at sunset, we emerged on to a ridge which overlooked Lake Gjende and from which we had an excellent view of that mighty lake. It is rather like one of the larger Scottish lochs in appearance, apart from its vivid bluish-green colouring. Memurubu Hut was visible about a thousand feet below us, and it was here that we spent the night.

Our next objective would, we had very regretfully decided, looking at the map and the short time at our disposal, have to be our last. This was Gjendesheim Hut, which lay at the eastward end of the lake. The other members of our party decided to accompany us there, and for Rolf and Lars it was the last lap of the journey too. We hoped to reach Gjendesheim by traversing Bessegen Ridge which runs parallel to the eastern portion of Lake Gjende. Peer Gynt, so the story goes, did this on a reindeer. However, weather conditions next morning were, to say the least, adverse, and the ridge was completely blotted out by low cloud and rain. We were forced to make our way to Gjendesheim along the lake side. As it happened, we could all afford a day extra, and so, next morning, following an improvement in the weather, the whole party climbed the ridge from the Gjendesheim side. From this side it begins as a fairly wide plateau, but farther west narrows to about three or four feet in width, and descends steeply for a few hundred feet until it ends at a small loch on the opposite side from Lake Gjende. From here, looking in an easterly direction, it presents the appearance of a gigantic staircase hewn out of the rock, hard going even for a reindeer, I should imagine. While we were making our way off the ridge, the mist came down and it began to

pour, a rather disappointing valedictory gesture on the part of the weather which had, till then, been on the whole remarkably kind.

And that brings me to the end of this article, helplessly aware of its complete inadequacy to convey anything like the essential spirit or feel of either of the two holidays, and aware also of the great mass of material either forgotten or of necessity left to one side. But I suppose that the former is something which each one must experience for himself, while the latter is too personal to mean much to anyone but me. My only hope is that I have whetted the reader's appetite to visit these places.