

WEISSHORN AND ALETSCHHORN TRAVERSES

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I AM sure that I am by no means the only climber who must have had long-held plans spoilt or delayed by the caprices of the weather. My luck improved slightly in 1963 and some ambitions have been fulfilled, perhaps not always to the hoped-for climax. However, one must not be greedy but be grateful for some of the wonderful experiences vouchsafed unto us.

In the summer of that year, with a group of friends and Cesar (my guide), I drove up the very beautiful and still unspoilt Zinal Valley in the Valais district of Switzerland. The road wound and hairpinned through green and verdant pasture, with inspiring views upwards to the mountains and downwards to the Valley.

Having taken my "good" car as far as possible, we quenched our thirst and the party split up, some going higher to the lovely Arpitetta hut, the others remaining to explore Zinal itself and its immediate environs.

Greta, Cesar and I were packed into the back of the friendly Hotel-owner's Volkswagen, amid rucksacks prickly with crampons, and enjoyed a hilarious journey through rivers, round boulders, over a delta of debris from a gully, all brought down by the Montet Glacier in times past.

Having been deposited at the foot of the Chasseurs path, we struggled almost vertically upwards through a forest of vegetation and young conifers and finally swarmed up fixed ropes over muddy rocks. This was the "short cut" to the private hut at Arpitetta, one of the most charming I have ever visited. Owned and maintained by the Guides of the locality, it has a delightful situation, enjoying quite incredible views of the Weisshorn, Schalihorn, Moming and Dent Blanche. Well appointed, its water supply is collected from a pipe at the back, and it rejoices in a stainless-steel sink and lilos.

Dusk was approaching as we arrived. Having taken time to photograph the sunset, we set to work. Cesar, who had gone on ahead, had a stove going, but there was water to fetch, lamps to fill and food to cook. We ate and drank well that night! Tomorrow—at last—I was to set foot on the Weisshorn: would the weather and my luck hold?

A few hours of uneasy sleep, trying to relax rather than toss and turn, and at 2 a.m. Cesar's alarum watch went off. Quickly up and out into a surprisingly warm morning with the stars bright and twinkling—too good a chance to miss—and before 3 a.m. we were away. Greta was the noble soul who stayed behind, did the housework, decently interred the yards of remaining spaghetti and, on her way down, took photographs in the morning sunshine.

By the time she was setting out from the Hut, well after sunrise, Cesar and I were only just arriving on the Schaliyoch after a difficult journey. The steep snow and ice slopes up to the Joch had been disconcertingly soft, and, in many places, the wet soggy snow did not adhere to the hard ice underneath. An hour's rest in the sun, some much-needed food, mutterings from Cesar about the weather and we were preparing for the Schaligrat, the real climb of the day.

Cesar had not done this route before and he likes new routes. We hoped also to descend the Junggrat, so, to both of us, the climb was strange and exciting; as for me, at last I was achieving an ambition of many years standing.

The climbing was exhilarating and we made height rapidly over rocks rough and warm, much steeper and more exposed than they looked from below, much more difficult too than the Guide Book led one to believe, due to the large quantities of very unstable snow. Hour succeeded hour, I grew hungry, but about this time the clouds, which had been gathering slowly, descended upon us, enveloping us in wet, cold mist. Still we climbed on at full speed and it began to snow. No thought of stopping now and the pangs of hunger were stayed for a while with glucose. The weather, the technical difficulties, the dangerous snow required all our attention, and we hardly spoke. I thought disgustedly that all views had gone and no photo would be possible on the top.

Then suddenly we trod on no more rock, just snow with a couple of sticks in it; we were there! We congratulated each other and certainly my thanks to Cesar were deep from the heart.

Why do Guides climb in these conditions? Certainly not for the money. I have been lucky to find Cesar, for here is a man who loves his mountains. Only the mountain-lover undertakes such long trips and has the courage and skill to press on in face of bad weather. Lesser men would not have started at all. My heart fills with pride and gratitude as we undertake these climbs, for although a Guide, Cesar is well off. He has other businesses which bring him quite a substantial income, and, as he is not married, does not have to provide

for a family. Here is a man who is happy in high places and follows a calling which his father and grandfather (of Aconcagua fame) have bred in his blood, and a more able exponent of Mountaineering Art would be hard to find.

To return to the Weissshorn, fed and warmer now, with extra clothes and gloves on, we debated on the descent. The North Ridge neither of us knew, the usual route was normally not difficult and should have old tracks which might help.

I plunged downwards. The slopes were steep and I plunged in deeply almost to the hips, the ridge narrowed to a steep crest, snow broke away in front of me and rolled in all directions in great woolly balls. I was unhappy as an avalanche seemed inevitable. I could not see Cesar at the end of the rope but the flow of German patois told me that he was unhappy too. The amount of new snow on the East Ridge was appalling, and it was immediately obvious that no one had ascended that day and that we would never find any old tracks.

Thoughts of an enforced bivouac was not an inviting prospect and spurred us to greater speed and care. Clinging precariously to the crest of the rib, we plunged on downwards, pushing down vast quantities of snow, which spun out into space at my right much more gracefully than we had any wish to do.

All the time from Cesar came the order "you are ready to jump, Anne, if the snow breaks? Always we must jump to the opposite side." This advice would possibly save our lives, but it would have been most unpleasant. I realised that, if I had to, I must jump first and think afterwards.

By the grace of God we came to the end of that interminable ridge and reached a small steep glacier, where our passage started a wet snow avalanche which fell between two constricting rock walls. While keeping a wary eye on its speed and dimensions, we rode the avalanche, finding it easier than walking.

Eventually we reached the Weissshorn hut, where a cold welcome awaited us—no stove going, no hot water, and only one couple in residence. While I wrung out my socks and emptied my boots on the veranda, I mused that it was at home in Scotland that one usually got so wet. Cesar organised some tea and our remaining food—chocolate. What were we to do? Supperless to bed and a long walk before breakfast or a long walk tonight with supper, bed and breakfast at journey's end. The answer was obvious! I knew Randa was a long way down and losing the path on one occasion did not help.

We descended with a halo of moths fluttering around our torches and ended, as we had begun, in the pitch dark, reaching the hotel at 10.10 p.m.

A long day in the high places had brought a glow of satisfaction through my weariness. We had endured, practised our craft and, even more important, kept our sense of humour and proportion. The Weisshorn is still there—the Junggrat awaits my boots—maybe next time the climb will have pleasanter memories and allow some photographs.

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Much discussion preceded our next trip and, although we had designs on the Viereselgrat of the Dente Blanche, prudence decided against this because of the very dangerous snow conditions.

We settled finally on the Aletschhorn because we could make an easy approach—car to Blatten, cable-car to Belalp and then about two and a half hours to reach the Bernoud or Ober-Aletsch hut. We made good speed at all stages of our journey and enjoyed the walk up to the hut in a pleasant evening and with the company of a Swiss couple.

Andre Pont, Guardian, with his rare sense of humour and ready encouragement, was still there. We had an early meal, broached a bottle of wine and went off to bed at 8 o'clock, which left little enough time for sleep, as we were up again at 1 a.m. After forcing down a good breakfast, we were out in the dark night air at 2 a.m., still sweating slightly from my bunk and not too sure whether it was cold or not. The first blow came just outside the hut when Cesar demanded my torch and I was left racing after a fast departing "chamois", trying desperately to memorise the dangers and boulders which lay between the small circle of light and me. Not for the first time did I bless a pair of long legs.

Our two figures rushed ahead in the darkness, tripping and slithering, leaping over boulders and scree, now down onto the glacier with its refrozen surface glinting in the starlight, then up a gradually steepening side glacier, one step up and slither and backwards! Finally a halt to don crampons, when it was still so dark that we had to hold the torch for each other and our fingers discovered it was indeed very cold.

On and upwards and what a pantomime to avoid crevasses! In the dark the torch revealed only their gaping jaws and the depth was left to our imagination, which our rapid progress kept in check! Among the big crevasses at the beginning and centre of the glacier

we lost a lot of time, as they were too wide for uphill jumping and few had decent bridges. Sometimes we wove our way across several and had to retrace our steps when we met an impassable rift. Slowly we worked upwards, slowly the snow bridges improved and to speed up we trailed a longer rope between us. One moment Cesar was on his feet climbing steadily, next scuttling on all fours across a doubtful snow bridge. Behind, I followed suit, my heart often missing a beat as the snow creaked under me.

But all went well and eventually we puffed up the last steep slope in the cold grey light of dawn and into the sunshine of another new day, arriving at the foot of the Aletschhorn South Ridge.

A superb panorama opened before us—to the south the Valais lay sleeping, still shrouded in cotton wool clouds—only the giants the Weisshorn (“whiter than white”), the Mischabel and the Weissmies groups reaching up to the sun. Nearer at hand stood the massive Oberland ranges: Finsteraarhorn, Monch, Jungfrau, the chain of the Ebnefluh down the north side of the Lotschental and, of course, the Nesthorn and the Bietschhorn with its “cut off” top.

And though I feasted my eyes on this view, took photographs and appreciated how lucky I was, more mundane things imposed on my concentration. I had to admit I felt very sick indeed, and it was a long time since breakfast!

A rest and some food put things to rights again and we speculated on whether we were destined to find this ridge possible. Andre Pont had told us that it had never been climbed in its entirety during his eight years as guardian at the Ober-Aletsch hut. This was an inviting prospect so we roped up and were away.

Everything went easily for the first half-mile, providing the weight was distributed carefully between all available points of support, as the rock was very loose indeed. Climbing down between one gendarme and the next, one was liable to wait there, bridging a pile of rubble made up of blocks the size of the Shelter Stone.

The day wore on, a day of pure physical joy, sun and warm rock, gendarme after gendarme, rock crystals to explore and collect. By midday, as sun and altitude had brought a raging thirst and breathing became more laboured, we had to stop and rest now between the more difficult moves. We could see other parties coming and going on the West Ridge and, from the way they gazed at us, we were also visible to them.

Hour followed hour till we forced ourselves up the last 800 feet to the summit, glad at last to reach cool snow and to give our tortured

lungs and hearts some rest. It was now 2 p.m. and all the other parties had started on the way down. We knew we would not be the last back to the hut, as we watched the progress of the group below us!

An hour's rest and we started the descent—the trek along the glacier and the climb up to the hut were accomplished in a whirlwind two hours. I was only too happy to shove my head into the water-trough. In years gone by, I have run down British mountains for the sheer joy of it, or to catch a bus or train, or simply to get out of the rain. I never expected to run down a 4,000-metre Alpine giant just for fun—and yes, because it was Sunday and Cesar wanted to go to Mass!

Leaving the Hut, we paused for a last look. From the cushions of brilliant blue gentians and pink moss champions, our eyes wandered down to the glaciers below, where two met in a graceful curve, forming a great black heaving medial moraine, living geography, I thought, and wondered what the view from here had been a million years before. Then our eyes swept up to the towering peaks above, the Aletschhorn, a stately beautiful pyramid with its attendant peaks and ridges; in the opposite direction the Nesthorn with its graceful horseshoe of almost vicious-looking ridges and to the south a soft haze rising from the Rhône Valley and blending fold upon fold of hills with the soft darkness of dusk.

My shoulders ached, as did every joint for that matter! I fell into that pleasant lethargy which a long successful day in the hills can bring, when the legs take charge, and we trotted down in companionable silence, occasionally broken by a yodel of sheer joy.