

THE WALKING BUG

ANNE F.G. CORDINER

In 1983, looking for something which would take an out of practice mountaineer who was not getting any younger, amongst big mountains, yet not be too serious, I interested two friends in the idea of completing the 'Tour du Mt. Blanc'.

Having achieved it and seen in passing 'other country' or as Robert Frost put it "way leads on to way", I was able to amuse myself on dull winter nights in dreaming up another route for 1984.

So in summer 1983 it was the 'Tour du Mont Blanc'.

We were a threesome. Two from the far north, Sheila (Murray) and myself, who first had an overnight train journey to meet Gwen (Dunkley) at Heathrow where a leisurely breakfast preceded an uneventful flight to Geneva. All other transport ran smoothly and by late afternoon we had booked into a small hotel in Martigny and were savouring our first return to Switzerland in many years.

Next day dawned bright and sunny, we did our early morning shopping, dutifully wrote postcards and duly presented ourselves at the bus stop to catch a mid-morning Post Bus to the little village of Trient.

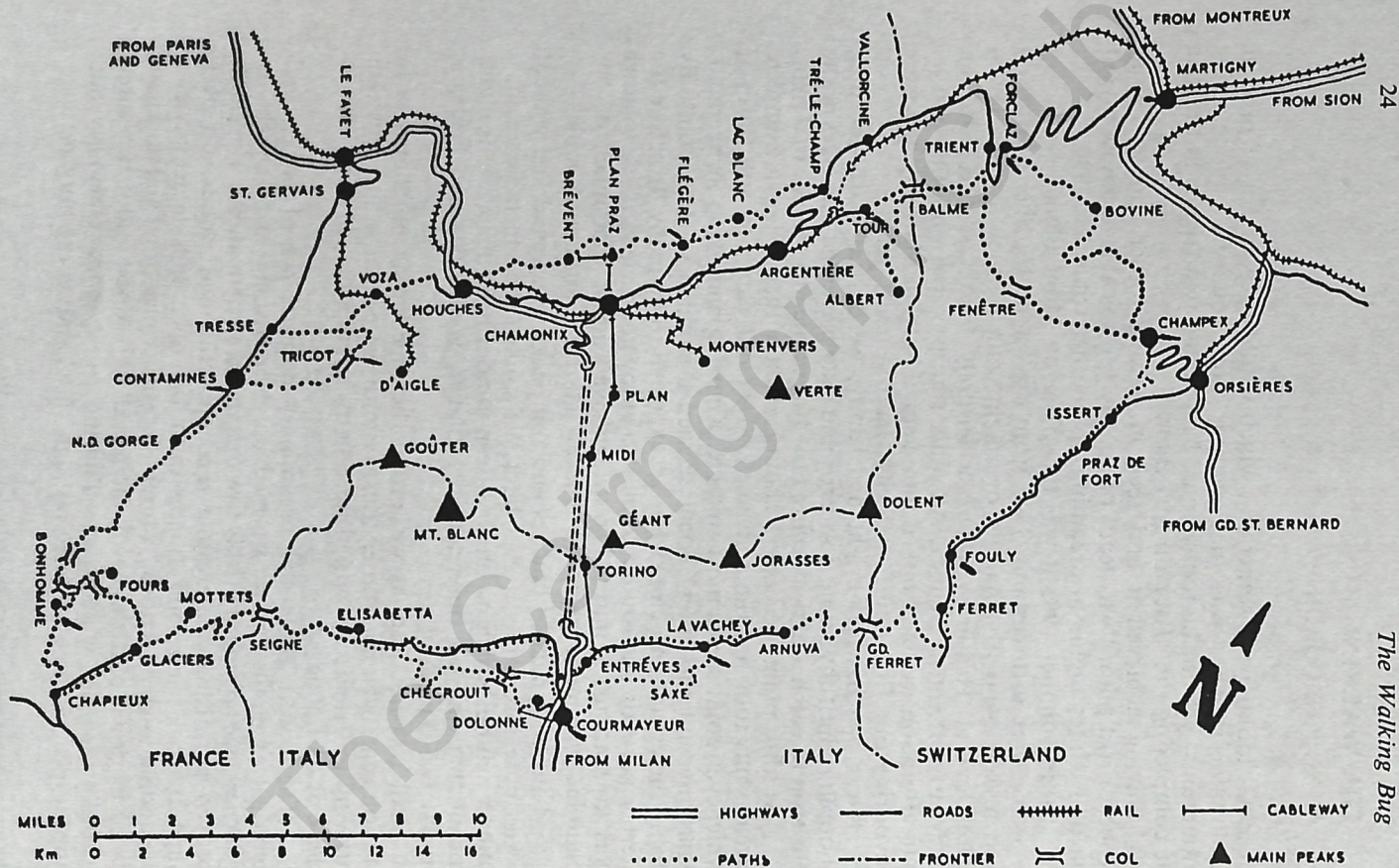
At this point perhaps I should explain that being a complete circuit, this tour has the convenience that one can start and finish at whichever point seems most suitable. Knowing and liking Switzerland, Martigny and the hotel, Trient seemed a suitable starting point. By doing the circuit anti-clockwise, we expected to be really fit before the sterner parts of our route and also to enjoy good views if the weather was kind to us. I must also straightaway admit that much of our planning was made easier by Andrew Harper's little guidebook.¹

Thus with packed lunches and full packs, we waited and waited! Swiss buses are rarely if ever late! We studied the timetable again; a minute symbol which no one had seen in poor light the previous night, meant that one bus only ran on Monday, Wednesday and Friday—to-day was Tuesday!

All was not lost, as we passed the time eating our lunch on a station seat, watching other tourists until we caught a later bus. On arriving in Trient, we wasted no time in striding out on our climb to the Col de Balme.

There were the usual preliminary adjustments of packs, and removal of clothes as we warmed up. Not wishing to be caught by darkness, we advanced briskly towards the steep path ahead. The climb proved surprisingly interesting through scrub and woods, up over slippery rock steps and finally onto the open hillside with views expanding in all directions. A brief glimpse because cloud and darkness raced us down past the newly 'arranged' ski slopes, and it was three 'drookit' females who began enquiring for a room. Obviously our appearance was not sufficiently 'high class' and as the hoteliers who

¹ *Tour of Mont Blanc*. Andrew Harper. Cicerone Press.



Reproduced by kind permission of Cicerone Press, Milnthorpe, Cumbria.

turned us away may have guessed, neither were our purses! Full marks to Andrew Harper—the dormitory at Montroc took us in at 7 p.m. For a meal, we had to venture into Argentière, but duly wine and dined, it proved no great hardship.

Breakfast was provided, not alas fresh croissants, but middle-aged French bread and then we were off for our first complete day's walking. Gradually as we gained height along the 'balcony' path on the west side of the Chamonix Valley, the clouds also lifted and the sun came out. We ambled along seeing plenty to keep us interested. Old friends among the alpine flowers, pupils of a climbing school on some rocky stretches, the rocks festooned with their ropes and gear, but no one proceeding up their pitches with any alacrity! We found some wire hausers and iron steps and finally a nice sheltered corner for lunch and the first of many brew-ups.

A day by day description of the trip would soon bore, but there were highlights and perhaps points which may be useful to others.

Accommodation varied. From a hotel at the upper station of a cable car (La Flégère) most reasonable; to private bunk house or dormitory or alpine hut. The huts were interesting, from the gaunt draughty Croix de Bonhomme in its half ruinous state, to the civilised, expensive Elisabetta Italian hut which employed its own chef in the summer months. In small resorts such as Courmayeur, La Fouly and Champex Lac, we were very lucky, usually obtaining a room for three in small hotels and eating our evening meals there. Prices seemed very reasonable and on the whole we enjoyed good service and felt that we received good value. The occasional hotel room let us enjoy the luxury of a shower or bath and keep up to date with our washing.

We met and exchanged views with several other parties also 'doing' the Tour, and gained considerable amusement from the group of three tough British lads also doing things our way round. Our first meeting may have been in Courmayeur but thereafter, until we decided on two nights in Champex we would see them load up and dash off each morning. Our gentle day would include a stop for lunch, a brew-up, usually plenty of photographic halts, not to mention chat and we would roam in just after afternoon tea-break to find the bold lads had arrived at lunchtime and had been 'passing the time' ever since. We wondered why they just didn't do two sections each day. We also suspected that we afforded them quite a bit of amusement!

We had some fun at one hut. Five French fellow travellers rudely grabbed the bed space allocated to us, but by the time we gained three mattresses elsewhere we reckoned that with five in a space for three, we had definitely come off best!

Another day we stopped above some big melting snow patches and watched a weasel at play in the snow and among the boulders. It would pop up through a hole and slide down the snow and repeat the performance again and again, always choosing a different hole – greased lightning indeed!

Beyond Courmayeur the only accommodation was at the Mt. Dolent Chalets – a collection of old cow sheds. We did not meet any rats, but were apprehensive, for it seemed that kind of place. Again our fellow travellers provided some levity, as some well built Italian couples endeavoured to heave their spouses into top bunks; some slept well if the snores were anything to judge by.

Next day over the Col Grand Ferret, 2537 m (8321 ft), there should have been magnificent views, but alas, we covered the distance in thick wet mist all the way. Our Scottish hill training came to our rescue here, with compasses out in doubtful places, and like tortoises we would catch up our continental friends, pass them and plod on. As the path again became obvious, they would rush past and disappear into the gloom – until the next time – and the next.

One lunch break, sheltering among a few larches, we looked across the steep banks of a small river and sat fascinated, watching a sturdy Swiss cow ‘besting’ her cowherd! He had whacked her with his hefty stick and obviously hurt her feelings! So, disappearing among the scrub, never causing a ‘dong’ from her large bell, she gradually worked her way uphill to pastures of her liking – quite an intelligent animal!

Strange to say, on our days off (there were only two) we spent them walking, but minus full packs, and our return to Martigny was a glorious day of sun and magnificent views and a long hot descent through miles of pasture and forest. We enjoyed blackberries and raspas and finally grapes as we dropped down through the vineyards. The views of the Dents du Midi, the Barbarine Lake and the Oberland sparked off the idea that grew into the next trip!

Meanwhile relaxed and sunburnt, well pleased with our circuit, weary, dusty but with no blisters, our Martigny hotel welcomed us back. Hot showers soon restored us to a condition fit to celebrate the end of a most enjoyable and successful holiday.

For the technically minded, we covered approximately 132 miles and 46,000 ft. of ascent in 14 days. About £400 covered everything, transport from and back to Aberdeen, flights to Geneva and all our accommodation and meals.

Footnote—In the last Journal, Anne Cordiner gave us a flavour of Nepal and the Annapurna Sanctuary. In this number, she has taken us to Switzerland, France and Italy in the vicinity of Mt. Blanc. There will be another instalment of Anne's travels in the next Journal when she will be describing an expedition on both sides of the French/Swiss border travelling south from St. Gingolph on Lac Lemman to Les Houches near Chamonix—Editor.