

## ASCENT OF THE MATTERHORN

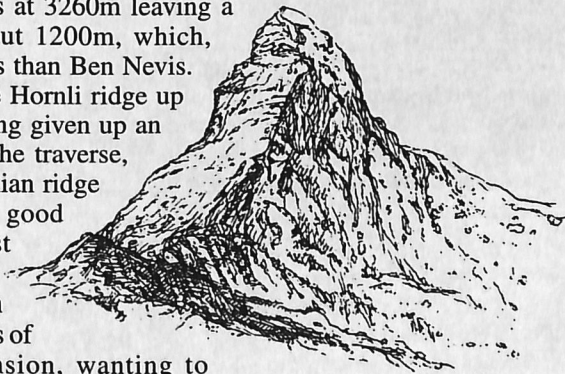
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Ever since my first climbing trip to the Alps I had dreamed of doing the Matterhorn. Its spectacular position over the ski slopes of Zermatt and its amazing and terrible history had given it prime position in my list of challenges. No one who has seen or read about this mountain can be unimpressed by its grandeur or fail to understand its attraction. On the other hand loose rock, volatile weather and crowds of climbers are dangers that inspire fear as well as admiration. For several years various setbacks, work, weather etc., had caused me to postpone my attempt but in 1998 everything fell into place.

After a couple of days walking in the hills near Leysin I teamed up with my guide from the well-known alpine village of Kingussie. For preparation we climbed the Pointe de Zinal, a good mixed route from the Schonbiel Hut which offers superb views of the Dent Blanche. In Zermatt we stayed for a night at the Bahnhof hotel which has been recently refurbished but still offers a warm welcome to the climber and at reasonable prices. We then headed up to the Breithorn, surely the easiest of the 4000m peaks. It was interesting to see the Swiss national ski team, with thighs like tree trunks, on the 7am cable car from Zermatt carrying three pairs of skis as they went up for their daily practice - such is the glamour of international sport. We duly arrived at the famous Hornli hut, which resembled a Victorian hotel that has gradually been downgraded to a youth hostel. Here we saw that most graceful of alpine creatures, the waitress who effortlessly carries a tray of six two litre glasses of beer over an obstacle course of rucksacks, ice axes and half-dead climbers and then returns with an even heavier load of Swiss franc coins. We had to ignore the beer in recognition of a 4am wake up call the next day. That's quite a late start by Swiss standards because the hut is right at the bottom of the climb, thus avoiding the long walk in which is so popular in the Cairngorms. The hut is at 3260m leaving a summit ascent of about 1200m, which, being optimistic, is less than Ben Nevis.

We planned to take the Hornli ridge up and down the hill having given up an earlier hope of doing the traverse, and descending the Italian ridge as it looked as if the good weather might not last long enough.

The night before an alpine ascent is mixtures of exhaustion, apprehension, wanting to



throttle a snorer, sheer excitement and a desperate hope that the weather will hold. At 4.20 am we were roped up and moving in a semi dazed state into the darkness. A rude awakening soon followed as with bursting lungs and aching muscles I struggled to keep up with the guide. Suddenly the reality of the Matterhorn became clear. It's just hard work. An endless succession of ledges, all just over knee height, strenuous scrambling, short of breath, no time to admire the view, try not to dislodge loose stones, keep going, wouldn't it be nice to find something difficult to make the guide slow down. After twenty minutes we met a Zermatt guide who was leading his client back down; someone had already given up. Most hills need will power or bloody mindedness and this was no different. Soon it was obvious we were making real progress, not particularly fast, but good enough, the weather and the conditions under foot were just right. Here and there we found a short rock pitch, never more than diff. and often with fixed ropes, which weren't needed in these easy conditions. Even the famous Moseley slabs turned out to be really simple. There was no let up from the steep scrambling, there just aren't any flat bits where you can recover your breath. From a climbing point of view it was straightforward, just a long scramble but always with spectacular exposure. It's a strange contradiction that one of the world's most beautiful mountains offers a pretty ordinary climb, although there are harder routes.

The recent scorching weather had burnt off a lot of snow and crampons weren't needed till well over 4000m. Eventually we came to the summit block where footprints led through the hard firm snow to that final very welcome summit ridge. It had taken four and a half hours which is a reasonable time although it felt longer. From a comfortable stance we relaxed and enjoyed a stunning view, great peaks in all directions, Mont Blanc and the Mont Rosa looking so high, the Dom and Weisshorn so graceful and the Dent d'Herens so close. Those few brief minutes at the top are worth all the hours of hard work and months of planning. We basked in the sun knowing that a dangerous descent had to be done and noting the gathering clouds. Going down was no quicker than the ascent as you're facing outwards looking down into the void instead of studying nice firm handholds, and the bottom of your rucksack keeps catching on the rock. We got down without undue fuss and only minor delays caused by other parties, but there was always a need to concentrate and avoid a minor slip, which could easily have disastrous consequences. I remembered Whympers' sad warning that "A momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime" Being roped to a professional guide is a great comfort in these conditions and it certainly makes for a quicker descent.

True satisfaction comes when rope and harness are removed and litres of mineral water drunk, regardless of cost. Back at the hut I wondered why it had all gone so well and the answer was mainly that the conditions were right. There must have been about sixty people on the hill that day although they spread out well and the hill didn't feel crowded. The later parties had to

contend with a spectacular hailstorm, which merited wearing a helmet. Those hailstones lay overnight on the ledges and became like a layer of ball bearings so that nobody reached the top next day. What a difference a day can make, it's all about being in the right place at the right time. I reckon that in good conditions the Matterhorn can be climbed by any competent climber with alpine experience, but in bad conditions it can be lethal and it is noted for rapid changes to the weather. Fitness, preparation and a light pack count for a lot. I climbed without an ice axe having agreed with the guide that his axe would give us enough protection on the short snow slope at the top. Leather boots, provided they can take crampons, are essential because plastics are too cumbersome for easy movement over the rock ledges. Timing is tricky, as no two summers are the same. The route is usually open from mid-July to mid-September and we were there in the middle of August. Ideally you should be on the hill after two or three days of hot settled weather so it is helpful to be able to plan a week's climbing around this ascent rather than be committed to only one possible day. It's a much-climbed hill, someone even took a bear to the top but it has also claimed many victims both famous and unknown. I'm most impressed by Lucy Walker who was the first woman to the summit in 1871 - what a thrill it must have been in the Golden Age when men were men, ladies wore long dresses and ice axes were made of wood.

The hailstorm meant a wet if dramatic walk down to the valley for the real pleasures of a shower, good food, a full nights sleep and of course another hill to climb. There's always another hill!

