

Clinging to the Cables – Dolomites Meet 2014

Members of the Party

We circled round Venice Marco Polo Airport for half an hour and then seemed to begin to land. Instead, the stormy conditions dictated that we fly to Bologna. We should have been forewarned as we had experienced turbulence as we flew over the Dolomites. We had seen snow on the jagged peaks below as well.

Corvara (1568m) was our destination. It is in the Dolomites, roughly half way between Bolzano and Cortina. We did eventually fly back to Venice where we were joined by other members of the party for the onward journey by bus or car. We were to stay in Corvara for the week of 9th July to 16th July, 2014.

The party comprised Adrian Scott, Elizabeth Scott, Alec Macmillan, Alex Barbour, Derek Beverley, Eva Foubister, Fiona Cameron, Frances Macrae-Gibson, Han Papavoine, Hazel Witte, Kees Witte, Michelle Ward, Peter Bellarby, Roger Cookson, Rod Campbell and Susan Taylor. What follows gives a flavour of what we were up to, whether it was clinging to the cables on the many via ferratas or walking on the excellent paths. Peter starts off the account.

We woke next day to see what a splendid setting Corvara has with its backdrop of the soaring cliffs of Sassongher. Figure 1 shows a photo taken by Derek. Eager to get going, the via ferrata party headed for Ferrata Vallon – Piz Boè. Nice and easy to begin with, using gondola and chair lift to gain height. We walked up the valley, Il Vallon, towards the via ferrata. Adrian took the lead – he had been here the year before on a recce, hadn't he? But he was a bit puzzled. Then it was realized that the lower part of the via ferrata was covered with snow. Encouraged by the two others we saw ahead, we found a route up the side and joined the via ferrata. The plan had been to make a circuit of Pizes della Vallun and go down the easier Lichtensfelser Steig via ferrata. Easier it was, but getting to it was not, as we had to descend steeply down a considerable snow field. Rather foolishly I was wearing running shoes (usually good on via ferratas) rather than boots so I had made it rather difficult for myself. I should have taken more notice of the snow we had seen from the



Figure 1 *Sassongher*

plane. It seems there was rather more snow around than usual at this time of year, but we completed the intended route.

The following day was a good demonstration of the large range of opportunities there are round Corvara to suit all tastes. Most of us took the bus to the top of Grödner Joch, a pass to the west of Corvara. I've used the German name but you can use the Italian name or the Ladin name if you want. Ladin is a local language. Some went up the Gran Cir via ferrata, reaching the summit of Gran Cir. Some of us went up the somewhat more difficult Piz da Cir V via ferrata with its finish up a tower to the summit. The guide book says there is room for 10 on the summit but that really would be a squash. Figure 2 shows the party on the summit. Then we had to down climb the tower. The Gran Cir party had the satisfaction of reaching a higher summit than ours. Others enjoyed walking down from the pass towards Corvara with variations as will be seen as Fiona takes up the walkers' story.

Corvara, dominated by the majestic Sassongher peak, tempted me back two years running. In 2013 Eilidh Scobbie and I spent a week in Corvara, botanising, attempting water colour painting and lift assisted walking, some steep, rough and challenging. Unknown to us,

Adrian and Liz Scott were also there and had sought out a perfect venue for a club holiday.



Figure 2 *Summit of Piz da Cir V.*

This time there were 16 of us, and those of us no longer able to 'do' via ferratas were able to enjoy hearing the exploits of the lucky climbers. Our Hotel Ciasa De Munt was situated in the centre of the village, with buses, lifts, a swimming pool and low level walks all to hand. Fornella Pizzeria which served a large variety of cuisine was our evening meeting place. Tales of achievements flowed, then plans for the days ahead and reminders of local events, for example the market, music in Colfosco Church, and a First World War exhibition. This had a very local flavour, which made us pause to think how life was turned up-side down in this remote valley, as it was 'given' to Italy. (Italy joined Britain and France in 1915 to fight Austro-Hungary. The terms of the secret London Pact included the transfer of a large part of the Southern Tyrol to Italy after the war).

Having found our bearings on the first day, including the Boë lift and a very steep walk to our coffee stop at the Crëp de Munt rifugio, on the second day we all caught an early bus to Passo Gardena, the col leading to Val Gardena to the west of Corvara (you see the language problem here as Peter used the German version of the

name). Together we set off for the foot of the Piz de Gier via ferrata routes a warm-up for some, a first attempt for others and a chance to admire (and remember) for me. I was also reminded of my attempts at water colour painting in 2013 when I had succeeded in making a striking twin-peaked outcrop look like a giant rabbit!

As preparations for the climb took some time, the delightful flora soon grabbed the attention of the lower level party. There was coffee and the first of many apple strudels at Jimmy's Hut followed by a variety of walks, some back to Corvara along the balcony via the Eidelweiss Hut, some using lifts into the lower valley, and some taking the bus. Thus an excellent day with an impressive plant list was completed! In the evening at the hotel and Pizzeria we enjoyed tales of derring-do on the rocks above.

Next day we tried the west side of the valley using the Col Alt lift. The walks looked simple on the plan, and stunning meadows, welcoming coffee stops and superb views whisked the day away. We were lucky to catch the last lift down.

A walk north into Stern (German name – La Villa in Italian) allowed us to ascend using the Pic Ila lift. Intriguing wooden bird carvings in the windows of the Hydro station were an unexpected delight! At the top of the lift an adventure play park, aimed at children of all ages, came briefly between us and another floral extravaganza. Choosing what looked like an enticingly short but wild variation to our proposed route, we found ourselves in literally deep trouble! Our path dropped very steeply into a boggy, wooded ravine! It began to rain! We had missed the last lift down but found a long woodland path which eventually took us back to Corvara. Thanks to mobile phones we were able to let our friends know why we were delayed, and were delighted when three of them came out to meet us. The Pizzeria was an equally welcome sight!

A day at a higher level on the west of the valley had us searching scree slopes for rarer alpine plants, with lunch at the Franz Kostner Hut. By leaving the beaten track we found a variety of soldanellas (snowbells) in damp hollows, rather late in their season. Buses could have been taken for exploration further afield, but we had run out of time. Hopefully we will be back.

Back to Peter. Saturday saw the via ferrata party out in force on Sassongher. It seems impregnable from Corvara but with the help of

a bus to Kolfuschg and the Col Pradat gondola lift we reached a path going behind Sassongher. We were able to double back to Forcella Sassongher which is on the far side from Corvara. From here we reached the summit, partly on path and partly using via ferratas. Just before the start of the via ferrata there is a spectacular gully that plunges downwards between point 2563m of Tors della Sassongher and Sassongher itself. Figure 3 shows the route on the upper slopes. The panoramic views from the summit, including the Marmolada, were really impressive and worth the effort in getting there. It was back to the Forcella where there was much debate about which path to take. We wanted to make a round trip, but the path we wanted to take seemed to be heading for impossible difficulties. Take courage, my friends! The path looks well used so it can't be impossible and that, indeed, was the case. It was a very pleasant walk to Utia Gherdendenacia where refreshments were had. Down in the valley at La Villa, we still had time left, so most of us used a gondola lift on the other side of the valley to extend the walk, but it was a rush to get to the last gondola going down to Corvara.



Figure 3 *Kees on the screes...(.with apologies), Upper slopes of Sassongher.*

The last day of the trip was the opportunity for a climax or two. Figure 4 shows a photo of some of the pinnacles below the Col de Stagn on the Club Alpino Italiano route 636, from the Kaiserhütte Refugio to Lêch de Boè, taken by Kees, Hazel and Han. It entailed a steep scramble in places, with dwarf pines lining the route and sightings of the beautiful pink-flowered *Potentilla nitida* and white alpine butterwort to cheer us on.



Figure 4 *Pinnacles below Col de Stagn*

Rod and Roger went up Brigata Tridentina. Rod tells the story. This is supposed to be one of the classic via ferratas of the Corvara area. The problem with being a classic is that many people are drawn to it and, on a via ferrata, in anything approaching reasonable weather, this means queues. I guess that one reason for it being a “classic” is that you can see the spidery bridge between the top towers from the road thus allowing you to impress your fellow bus passengers by pointing out that you have “done that one”.

This route was the last one of the week for us, the alternative being an ascent of the snowy West Ridge of the Marmolada (only for the brave). The week had been very successful so far, given the

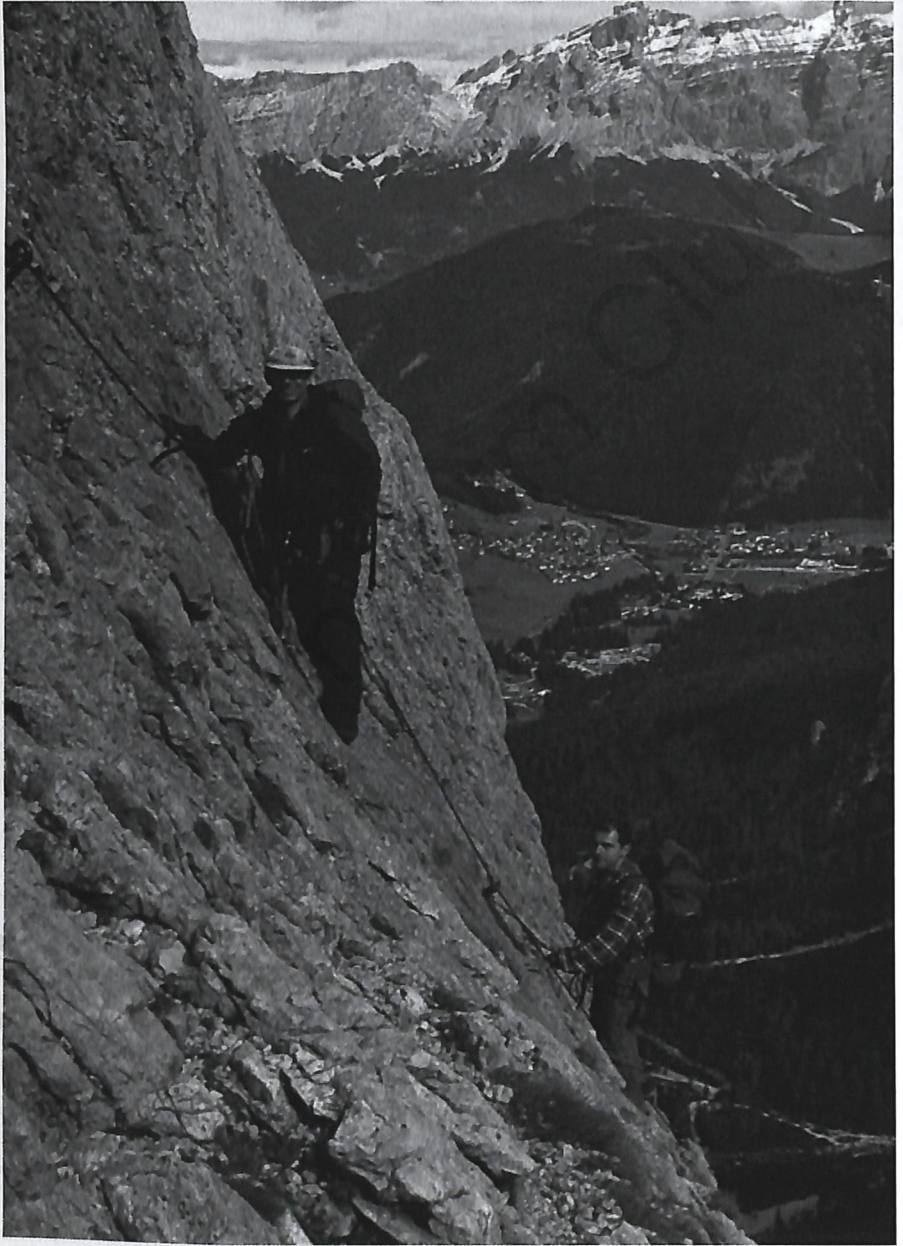


Figure 4 *Climbing Brigata Tridentina.*

slightly iffy weather, with five via ferrata routes ticked and a day off walking the coffee and cake trail.

Using the bus transport from Corvara (about 20 minutes), Roger and myself arrived mid-morning at the start, about a couple of kilometres below the Passo Gardena on the the Corvara side, to find people already heading for the route. It starts with a long traverse, with stemples (iron steps) and cables, about ten minutes from the car park. There was then a ten minute steep walk up to the start of the route proper which is where the queuing began. The assembled throng was like a mini EU with mutual recriminations and queue jumping, but all in good humour.

We then followed a rising traverse on good rock with some quite steep and exposed climbing with excellent views down to Corvara as can be seen in Figure 5. Then it was round the pillar into the bowl below the refuge, eventually reaching the famous bridge, Figure 6, which proved to be the main bottleneck. Most parties insisted on posing for photographs, selfies, asking for photos to be taken and some having attacks of the collywobblers.



Figure 5 *The bridge on Brigata Tridentina*

After that it was a simple walk up to the excellent Rifugio F. Cavazza al Pisciadu (2585m), shown in Figure 7, where a bowl of gulaschuppe and an apfelstrudel made my day. I remember that there were quite extensive snow patches at that height but not enough to cause a problem.

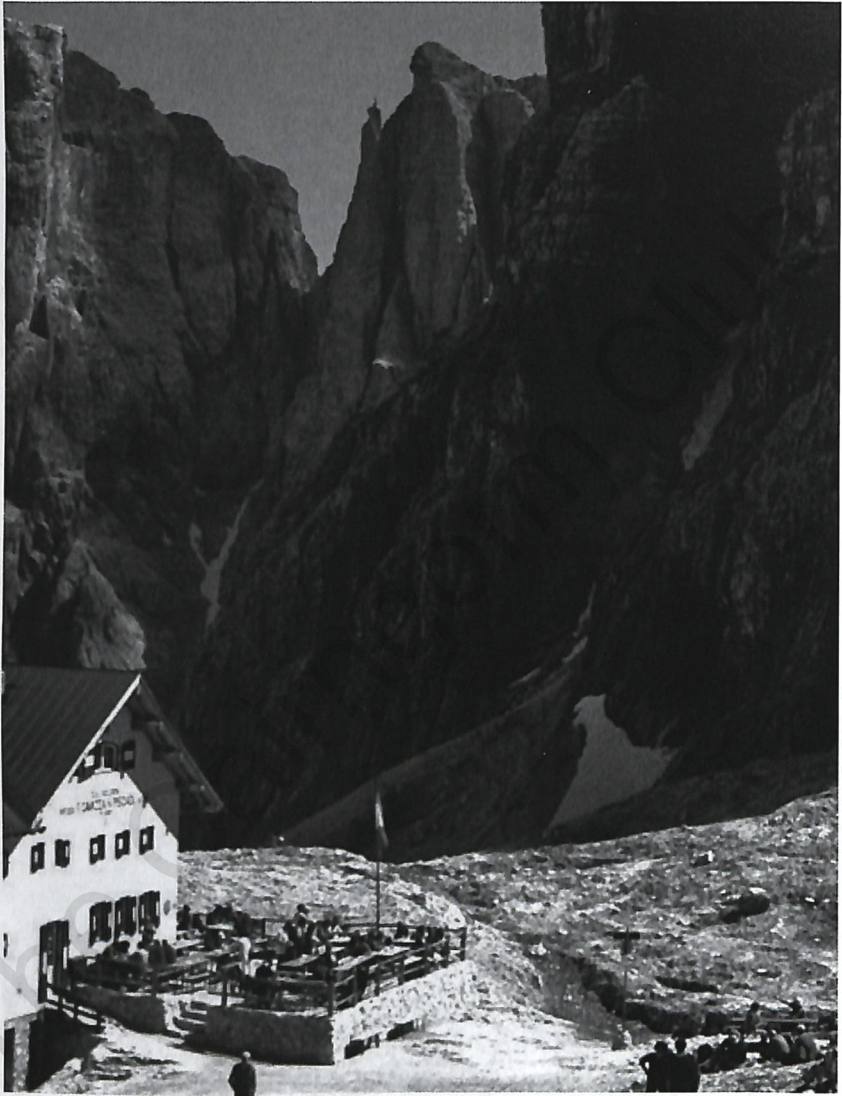


Figure 6 *Rifugio F Cavazza al Pisciadu.*

We chose the long descent all the way to Corvara as we had arrived by bus and we had plenty of time. The descent was a little tricky in parts with some protection before it reaches the pleasant main valley path through the woods to Corvara. We were back in Corvara by

about 4pm, so it was a 6 hour round trip which was about right, given the queues.

The Cicerone guide gives the route a difficulty grade of 3, with a seriousness level (this seems to depend upon the possibilities of escape from the route) of B, an ascent of 750m with 400m of via ferrata and a return time of 5-7 hours. It can be done by any able-bodied person with a reasonable level of fitness who does not suffer from vertigo!

Adrian recounts another last day adventure. Michelle, Peter and myself wanted to climb the Marmolada by the via ferrata on its west ridge (grade 4 – don't believe the guide book). We spoke to Guide 1 (5 o'clock shadow), the cable is buried; come back in August. Guide 2 (designer stubble), normal route no problem, west ridge – not possible – no one has done it this season – you will need



Figure 7 *Climbing the west ridge of Marmolada.*

additional ropes – we could ring the hut and ask about the snow conditions – blah blah. Guide 3 (full set of ginger whiskers) – let's go. You might need to wear crampons. So choose your guide by the amount of facial hair.

We were collected from our hotel at 07.20 and driven to the 'chariot chair lift' for the first lift of the day 09.00. This is a stand-in lift which does not stop or slow down at the end stations. You have

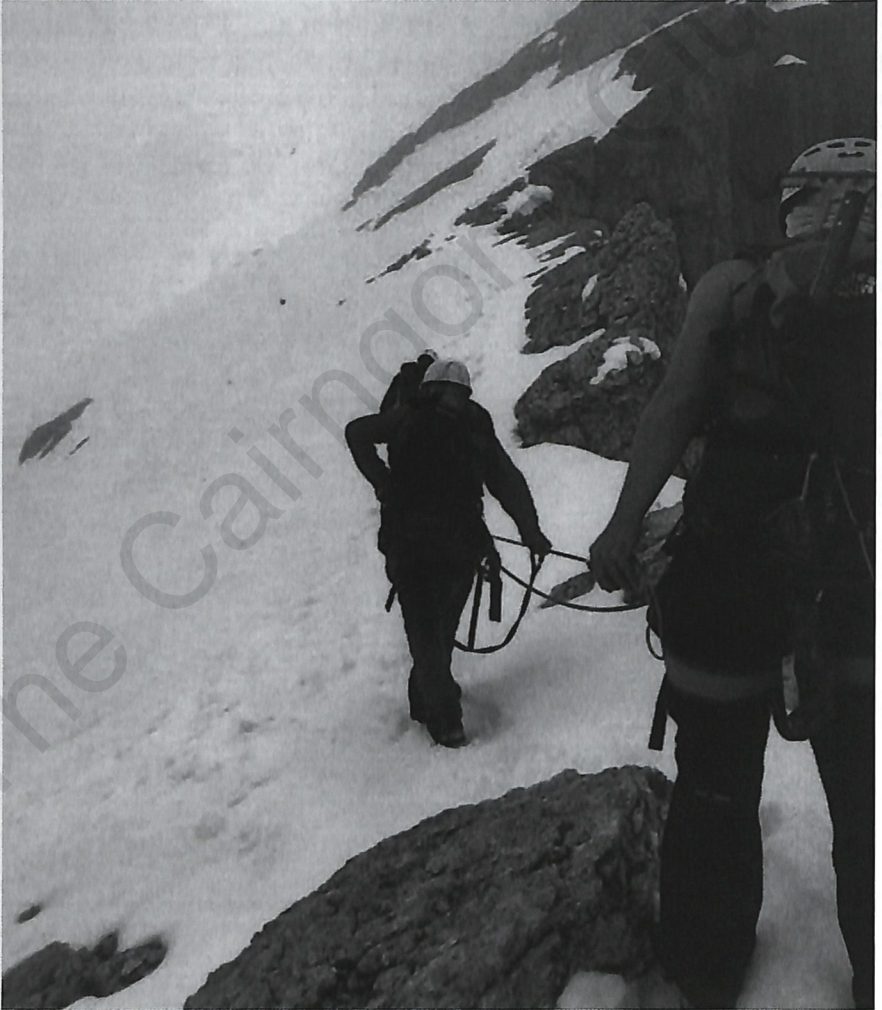


Figure 8 *Cables buried under snow, west ridge of Marmolada.*

to run and jump in. We walked from the top station (mostly downhill) for about an hour and a half mostly across a snow covered glacier until we gained a break in the ridge where the via ferrata started. We were ready for it. There was 850m of ascent, 400m protected by via ferrata (where it surfaced above the snow). Figure 8 shows us climbing the via ferrata and Figure 9 a section where the cables were buried.

So we reached Punta Penia, at 3343m the highest point of Marmolada and the Dolomites. Amazingly, there is a hut a few metres below the summit which serves refreshments. Coming down the normal route we passed several parties coming up. Worryingly the first pair's rope had two extra butterflies tied in the rope and no one attached! Missing somebody? Michelle showed that it could be fun falling into a crevasse, Figure 10.



Figure 9 *Michelle.*

Peter summarises. Our thanks go to Adrian who ably organised the trip and was the leading Bergführer. The meet was greatly enjoyed by all, so much so that there is demand to go back to the Dolomites in 2015.

Sadly Roger Cookson died whilst attempting Aconcagua early in 2015. We greatly enjoyed his company. He was a great guy; we will miss him.