

Notiziario della Svizzera italiana

Objekttyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1964)**

Heft 1459

PDF erstellt am: **28.04.2024**

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NOTIZIARIO DELLA SVIZZERA ITALIANA

We are sorry we are unable to publish this week's report; it has not yet reached us owing to the postmen's strike.

DANGEROUS CLIMBING IN THE MONT BLANC REGION

By W. STETTBACHER

Last summer, like every year, I returned to Switzerland to spend my holidays climbing in the Alps.

I had already arranged the previous summer that my usual guide, René Marcoz, of Verbier, should again accompany me in 1963. Our intention was to do some climbing based on the Cabane de Trient, in the area between the chain of the Mont Blanc and the Swiss frontier near Champex. One finds here some immense glaciers, from which a number of *aiguilles* with their sharp peaks are rising to the sky, immobile and eternal. The most famous mountains in this area are the Aiguille des Charbonnets and the Aiguille d'Argentière, both being my objectives, weather permitting.

When my guide at last sent me a telegram accepting to accompany me, I had nearly engaged another guide. It was arranged that we should meet at Champex on a Monday afternoon. I arrived there first, and was in need of lunch. I entered a modest-looking *pension* for this purpose, and the holiday makers lunching there, accompanied by a Priest, were obviously persons of modest means. Yet I was charged for an inadequate lunch including tip Frs. 13.75! It is not only Zermatt, but also places like these which at times give Switzerland a bad name.

Champex is surrounded on nearly all sides by mountains and is famous for its lake with its black waters. The numerous hotels, *pensions* and chalets are in the midst of a dense forest, and the whole place has a Canadian aspect. Unlike the Val Ferret lower down, Champex is an integral creation of tourism triumphant.

Many years ago, especially in the days of the great mountaineer Javelle, Champex was an important alpinistic centre. Its guides of the name of Crettex were a household word, but then, with the advent of the modern climbing methods, climbers sought other fields to conquer. Guides are now rare in this district. It is much easier for them to let chalets, to sell souvenirs or drinks, or to run a sports shop.

The same tendency prevails, of course, in other parts of Switzerland. Even my guide told me that from now onwards he would be at my disposal only during June and September; he had now a sports shop and a number of chalets, which would bring in much more money, and with less effort.

A guide exercises one of the most beautiful of professions. This because he exercises it nearest to nature.

Nowadays, few things are of a lasting nature. Life is so fast and full of noise! Man is in such a hurry that he ignores for the most part the many beautiful things which nature has to offer.

Every day in summer, an active guide gets up early in order to look at the sky and at the winds. The night before, he was worried, because the clouds came from the west. He was afraid as the stars were glittering too strongly, while the temperature was too warm. But

northerly winds have now taken the upper hand, the snow is hard and the sky looks right, so that the guide can awaken his tourists and start for the climb. The rope unites two human beings which now virtually represent a single life; the guide, during several hours, attaches himself to someone unknown who will become a friend; when two persons are together for better or worse, they are no longer strangers to each other.

Owing to the inevitable repetition of the same climb, the profession might become somewhat tiresome, but the guide is not only a machine for rock climbing or for scaling walls of ice. He does not climb for himself, but opens the gates of the Alps to his clients. He gets his recompense when he finds how his companion appreciates the beauties of nature and the joy of mountaineering. He likes difficulties, but detests dangers. Sometimes, he may die, hit by lightning, stonefall or avalanches; this is part of his profession, but as long as he is alive, he will fight to bring his companion to safety.

My guide arrived on the next postal motor coach, and we headed immediately for the chair lift which takes you in a few minutes up to the Tête de Breya. In good weather you enjoy a superb view over the lake of Champex and the Val Ferret. Numerous visitors come specially up here to admire the vast Panorama of the Pennine Alps, and of the enormous masses of ice of the Grand Combin.

From here, it takes a good three hours to reach the Cabane de Trient, 3,200 metres high. After two hours, we passed the Cabane d'Orny, which used to be the starting point for climbs in the Trient Plateau, but for some years, it has been superseded by the much larger and more modern Refuge de Trient. From the Cabane d'Orny, the path leads up a glacier, and the last few hundred yards, over fairly steep rocks, are particularly strenuous. When we reached the hut an elderly climber asked me "Etes-vous martyrisé comme moi?"

The Cabane de Trient is one of the largest Refuges in the Swiss Alps, and I estimate that on both nights that I stayed there, there were more than one hundred people present. It is always a marvel to me how the warden (in this instance the warden and his wife plus one or two small children) manages to look after all these people, and make out the accounts which call for an enormous amount of detail. This particular warden also acted as cook, and what a good cook he is! I twice had lunch and dinner, every bit as good as I would obtain say in a well-known Station Restaurant. It is true that nowadays wardens of such a hut are considerably helped by the use of helicopters which bring fuel (wood) and foodstuffs as well as bottles of drink at regular intervals. The only time a warden can get some sleep, is between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m. and again between 6.30 a.m. and 10 a.m. No wonder it is not a healthy life, and I have known personally a number of wardens who prematurely suffered through ill-health or even died from cancer.

(To be continued.)