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An Alpine Autumn

Chronicles from the AACZ Centennial year, 1996; extracts covering the most beautiful and most difficult alpine routes I climbed.

The first weekend of September found me hiding out in Vienna, successfully dodging more dire rains over the Alps for a few days of improving my Central European historical and cultural awareness. Standing by a crêpes stand outside the Rathaus in a crowd of 5000 people at a big-screen film of “Die Fledermaus”, the person next to me said, “Don’t I know you – from MITOC?” He was Chris Barrington-Leigh, a Canadian, now a graduate student at Stanford who was an undergrad at MIT (OC is Outing Club) when I was there, and was in Vienna for the summer at the International Space University. His plan for the following two weeks had been to head for the Alps to try to find someone with whom to climb. His arrival in Switzerland also coincided with the best 10-day spell of weather since June, albeit in the South only and interrupted by one passing front (and a pile of old snow from August).

This window was also seized for the scheduled trail work at the Mischabelhütte, an event rapidly running out of Verschiebedaten. Having volunteered to help with that, I took Chris down to Saas Fee at some ungodly hour of the morning, and we hiked to the hut to find that the only people who’d shown up were the Lomatter Bros., who run the hut anyway, Franz Häfliger, the current chief hut administrator, and Alfred Fleckenstein, the retired ex-chief who is one of the cadre of great old boys (Altherren) with stories from all over the globe. As a result, our presence was greatly appreciated, and we were soon carrying metal stakes, coils of wire rope, cement mixings and drilling rigs up and down the trail, and cementing stakes in bore-holes. In the evening we got the full-board treatment at the otherwise empty hut, which is the nicest I’ve yet seen. The next day was spent cementing more stakes, pulling out old sections of wire rope and stretching and clamping new ones, all against the backdrop of the glistening Weissmies group. It turned out that there wasn’t really that much to be done, and by the end of the day we were already back at the hut fixing a ladder to the outside wall as a fire escape, and declaring ourselves done. The following morning, a stroll to the top of Nadelhorn and Stecknadelhorn rounded off our Mischabel experience in the last good weather before a brief polar front.

Two days later, after a Saturday of separate non-climbing commitments and failed climbing plans, Chris and I were back in my kitchen at 11:59 pm to make a snap decision on a substitute activity. Throwing caution to the winds we chose to go back to the Valais for a short but steep ridge on Zinalrothorn (Kanzelgrat, TD, V, 300m). After a late start and an early scare that the passes might all be shut, we got to Täsch in stunning weather and took the train to Zermatt. Chris, who is used to pristine Canadian Rockies wilderness, immediately categorised the place as unpleasantly tacky and instantly leavable (I had to confess that I’d stopped noticing), so we did, hiking for five hours up the W side of the valley to the (closed) Rothorn hut at the S foot of Zinalrothorn. We bivouacked on the balcony, and in the morning were up before the sun for the 800m hike to the base of the ridge. The cold front hadn’t dropped much new snow that far S, the wind was moderate if cold, we were completely alone and the only clouds were far below us



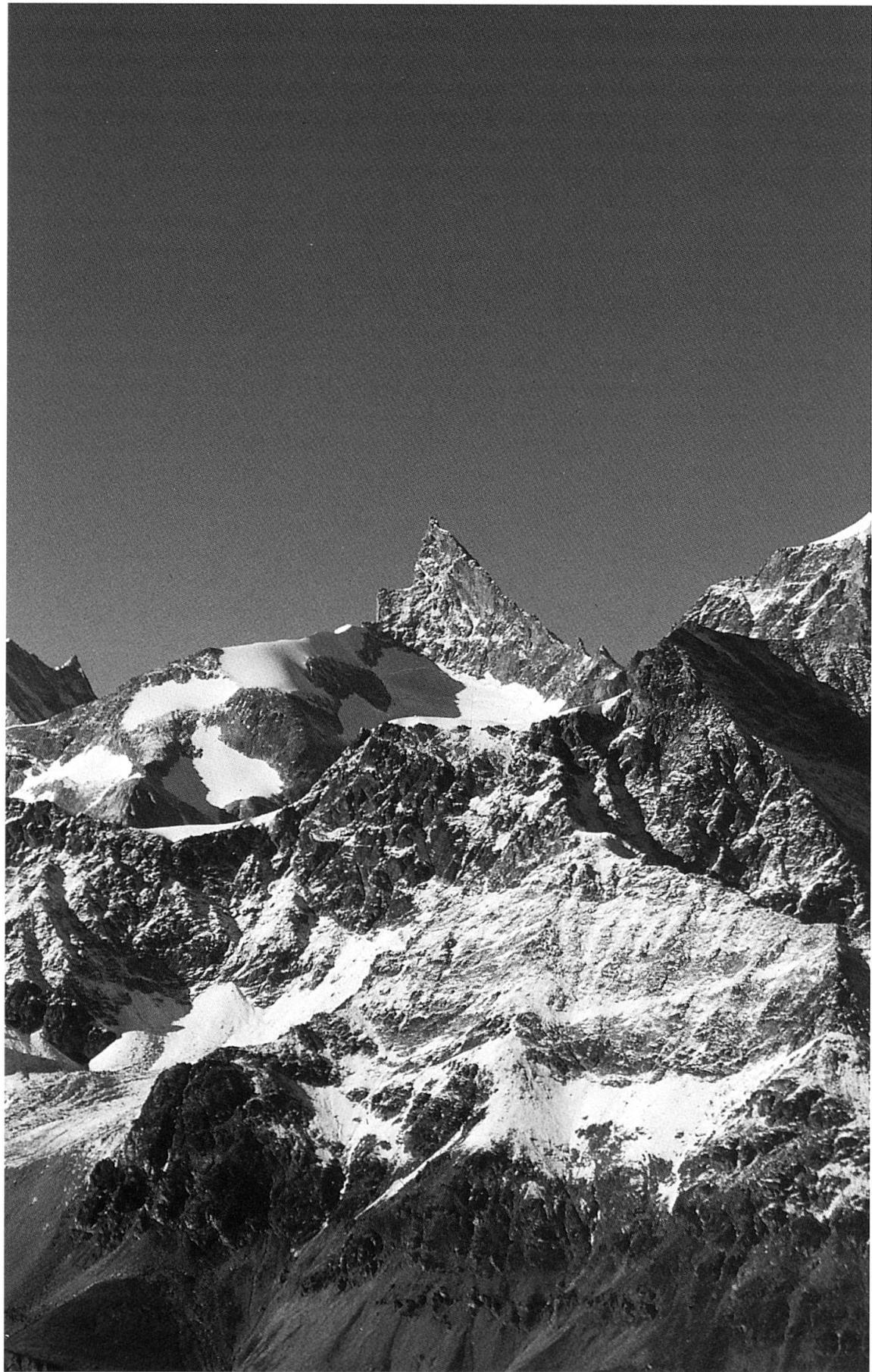
Bruce Normand (am Alphubel-Westgrat).

in Italy, so the views of the rest of the Valais, especially the N faces of the Matterhorn, Obergabelhorn and Dent Blanche, were stunning. The ridge itself was mostly snow-free, and provided only a couple of short steps of V, although Chris added another nice and slightly strenuous crack by poor route-finding. The summit ridge was pretty airy for a normal route, and we hung out by a big statue (which made a good anchor) of poor old Jesus being eternally crucified, while drinking in the views of most of the rest of the country. As additional proof that it wasn't summer any more, the regular haze was fully absent, allowing us to see from the Bernina group in the far E, past the Bernese Oberland to Mont Blanc in the far W. My nemeses for this year, Matterhorn in the S and Weisshorn in the N, were both dominating the foreground. The descent was slow and careful on the soft snow in the normal-route gully, the walk back to the hut was easy, and the walkout was fairly fast and furious, getting us back in Zürich on the right side of midnight, at the end of the 4th cross-country trip in 10 days.

The next morning Chris set out to burn a few days of train tickets, and I headed to the airport to pick up the arriving Stu Ritchie. Stu is a professional guide in the US with particular expertise in Alaska, Argentina, Chile and Peru; we met briefly on Mt. McKinley, and several times in the Cordillera Blanca in 1995, where I was a few acclimatisation days ahead of him on Alpamayo and Quitaraju, and he needed all the route information he could get for helping some particularly recalcitrant clients. We both had some spare days at the end of his guiding stint, which we used for a mildly epic traverse of Chopicalqui (6345m, ED1). Stu's stay certainly saw more bad weather than good, especially on the N side, so that most of the first two weeks were spent dodging rains on (or under) small crags. After another failed bid on the Matterhorn (Zmuttgrat) due to unforecast weather betrayal, we were finally presented with a window.

We set out for Chamonix, finding the place almost dead from a tourist point of view, and having no wait for the Aiguille du Midi cable car. On high, the reasons revealed themselves more clearly, as it was windy, there was new snow and a lenticular cloud was growing from Mont Blanc to the rest of the range. We motored off down the Vallée Blanche, seeing few people there but a faint trail over to the Helbronner station; the hordes were all doing the only routes deemed safe, the normal route as far as Mont Blanc du Tacul, and the Arête des Cosmiques (SW on Midi) which sported a 25-person queue below the crux. Far from the madd(en)ing crowd, I set off on a posthole-fest into the valley between Tacul and Tour Ronde, where I'd camped for a week's perfect weather 2 years previously. The ice-fall crossing gave Stu an in-over-the-head crevasse fall, through an invisible bridge which had supported me. We laboured up and across the basin, over the short, steep ridge which is the start of the Frontier (Kufner) Ridge and must be crossed to reach any of the Brenva routes, and waded up to the base of the SW Face of Mont Maudit for a de-luxe night camped in Stu's Bibler tent. The clouds vanished, the summit winds abated and things were looking good.

We woke far later than we needed to have done to see something, due to a bright half moon, and by the time I'd wallowed up to the base of the face via a snow cone the sun was rising on us. The target was the Voie Crêtier, a faint ridge graded TD- with some steps of IV+ on the steep lower buttress. The route turned out to be steep, serious, sustained, sandbagged and well out of condition, at least when judged by the water dripping down every crack.



Zinalrothorn.

Stu's opening lead was a bit desperate and not aided by some loose rock, then my next one was quite strung out and strenuous. Stu got the wet, smooth chimney on the 5th pitch after some hair-raising slabs, and I got us almost to the base of a snow crest, which turned out to start with some mushrooms plastered to very little, and was also my lead. Stu's hand of cards also held the last rock step, but this was a slimy waterfall which he elected to pass further right, effectively handing me a lead which wasn't so hard after all. This took us to a "steep ramp" as the sun passed behind Mont Blanc, and I was pushed back to its inside edge at a dihedral which looked steeper the closer one got. Stu passed his lead of that to me, and I finished up with the best and hardest mixed pitch of my career, first sketching for holds on a rockslab, then working up the dihedral with one hand on rock and the other on the axe, and one foot in the shaky ice of the crack while the other was balanced out on the slab. A full rope-length later, we were on another of the many sub-ridges which had kept us out of the way of falling ice and trundling rocks in the gullies all day, and moved up that with no trouble at the last hardish step. At this point it got dark, as I led us onto the final, snowy part of the ridge and into rising wind. Moonrise came on the pitch where I got to pull over the last, steep semi-serac edge and out onto a relative plateau 30m short of the summit. Stu was for camping right there despite the gale, but I showed him the short walk off to the Mont Blanc highway, which had been well beaten out that day and which we followed round to the other side of Mont Maudit. We dived into the Bibler in the partly sheltered Col Maudit at 4000m at midnight, and slept a cold night through to dawn.

The wind in the col was unchanged, but the weather was cloudy and gusty, as we soon discovered when nearly knocked over several times getting over Mont Blanc du Tacul and down to the Vallée Blanche. That had every reason to be calm, but we found ourselves in increasing, destabilising gusts until we were having to crawl along the final ridge of the trunk route back to the Midi station, contemplating the 10m of snow for self-arrest before the rocks of the N Face, and the 1000m beyond them, should the wind get its way. The cable car was in fact running, but did so only very slowly due to having to stop both cars swinging as they passed each pylon. The forecast was unequivocal about non-stop storms to hit the range for the foreseeable future, so once more we made a run for Zürich to reassess.

Bruce Normand