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Gross Windgällen SE Flank

As the warden of the Windgällenhütte was retiring, a big party was planned in the hut over the weekend. We left the top of the cable car on Saturday morning still deep in the fog, and chatted as we walked up the trail. After about an hour we broke out of the cloud and into the clear air of early winter. When we reached the hut, a few people were enjoying the sunshine and the views of the Gross Windgällen and Oberalpstock. Others had already left to go climbing on the Schwarzberg, a small hill behind the hut. Over the last year or so, the club has been developing this crag to provide a rock-climbing venue near the hut. Last year I put up a new three-pitch line to reach the top of the crag, but a couple of rusty pitons and an old but not too rusty bolt on the summit showed that some ascents had been made before.

The evening involved much eating and drinking and tributes to the hut warden who had been there for 30 years, and his father for the 50 years before that. Someone had even carried up a whole pile of fireworks. Then discussions began on what to climb the next day. Our plan was to climb a route on the Gross Windgällen. As a large party of people were planning on the normal route, Salim and I decided on the SE flank as a slightly harder alternative (AD, IV). We set off in the morning about an hour before the others so that we'd reach the foot of the climbing by sun-up. The description in the guidebook didn't quite match the mountain that we saw in front of us, but we eventually located what had to be the start of the route. Instead of being an easy romp up rocks the route started with a short but steep ice step. We had brought ice tools and crampons for the descent, but out they came right at the beginning. Salim led this, but was unable to find a belay above, and so planting himself in the snow got me to follow anyway. Above the step we were on fairly easy ground of mixed snow and unprotectable slabby rock. Eventually after about 150 m of this Salim found somewhere to put a piece of gear in, which was just as well since the next step was up a steep chimney which was distinctly harder. Unfortunately there was no further protection in this chimney, which made the delicate scratching up the rocks a little tense. When I joined Salim above the chimney I discovered that the belay was only a half-placed walnut and a stance with footholds that sloped into the hill – who said that seconding was like top-roping? The next stage was over more of the same, barely protectable but not too steep rock, with occasional patches of snow to help. Another short chimney led us to the base of the “big yellow tower” which was the only feature in the guidebook description that we could recognise so far.

Beside the base of the tower was a gulley filled with snow, which the book said to follow to its end, taking the left hand branch when it forked. The snow in the gulley was easy, and we thought we were home and dry. However when we reached the end of the left branch of the gulley, we were faced with two options. First Salim tried the ramp on the left, but the snow was too soft to stand in, and the rock underneath too smooth for the crampons to bite. Then he tried the crack on the right, but it was too steep and off-balance, with no visible holds to aim for. This wouldn't go either. Then I tried the right-hand crack, again with no success. Then the left hand ramp, where I managed to get a bit further before having to agree with Salim again.

Considering how unprotected our ascent route had been, there was no way to abseil much in retreat and downclimbing would have been truly hor-

rible. We had only one chance left: the right hand fork of the gulley. Cautiously I climbed up the side of the gulley to get into the right hand fork, Salim had a reasonable stance in the snow, but I didn't want to see how strong it was. The snow was only a few inches deep on the rocks, but my crampons were holding onto some small edges. As I eased delicately along, I saw a streak of ice to my right – if I could reach that we were back in business. My axe bit into the ice, and a foot soon followed. We were away again. From here it was easy, almost all the way to a small notch on the ridge. Just below the notch the snow had drifted very deep and was so soft that I finally made it only by a strange combination of swimming, trenching and climbing.

The crux pitches begin at the notch, but the rock was dry from here, so, after changing into rock boots, we started the last section of the climb. The rock here even had some cracks for gear, and there was even a line of pitons over the hardest pitch. Before long, we were on the summit, but it was already 3:30 and night would fall by 6:00. We quickly started down the trail left by the other party on the normal route. Although most of this route involved plodding through snow, there were some tricky mixed sections. On one small section where I was having a little difficulty, Salim suggested that I just jump, as the landing was soft snow and he had a bomber belay. I went for the move, failed and took a short swift ride down the snow. Eventually we were back on the glacier, and down to the hut just before dark. From there it was an hour's walk back to the cable car. Thanks to a fortunate lift to the station just in time for a train, we were back in Zurich by 9:00 pm, happy and exhausted.

Henry Lickorish