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AACZ SKITOURENWOCHE NENDE ROTONDOHÜTTE (MARCH 15-16, 2014)

Even the best of mountain plans are at the mercy of the weather. Twenty-three of us were booked into the Rotondo hut for the AACZ skiing weekend on the 15th and 16th of February. But heavy snow and a forecast of zero visibility made us cancel. Another opportunity opened up a month later but only ten of the original group could make it at short notice. Luckily there were exactly ten spaces left in the hut. So nine of us – Elena Borisova, Felix Dimigen, Raniero Della Peruta (with two guests), Robert Buessow, Martin Hood, Geoff Warnock and myself – met up in Realp on Saturday morning. Our tenth, Eugen Zalinescu, had decided to get a bit more exercise and was skiing in the long way via Winterhorn and Pizzo d'Orsirora.

We skied up the easy track to Ober Chäseren and then climbed west onto the broad northwestern slopes below the Rottälligrat. We had perfect skinning conditions until

we reached the Rottälligrat itself. Strong winds buffeted us as we hiked the narrow ridge to Rottällihorn. The clouds had come in from the south and what would have been a soft snow descent to the Rotondo hut was now a bone-jarring ride over the frozen ruts of yesterday's skiers.

The welcome at the hut was warm. A little bit of snow fell overnight, promising some nice skiing for the next day. On Sunday we divided into three groups: one heading over Leckipass and then a traverse over Stotziger Firsten down to Realp, another heading up to Hüenerstock, and the third towards Pizzo Rotondo, hoping to get into the Bedretto valley. Visibility was mixed with high clouds and mist drifting amongst the peaks. Not the best of conditions perhaps, but we all managed to get in a bit of adventure and some nice skiing.

Roy Smith

INTO THE VALLEY OF DECISIONS

Of the ten Hüttlis who took part in the windy Rotondo area ski-tour weekend organised by Roy Smith in March 2014 last spring, seven made the right decision – not to come with us over the pass into the Bedretto valley.

That left just Robert Buessow, Eugen Zalinescu and myself to ski out southwards from the hut into an unpromising dawn. Later, when we stood on the pass, the wisdom

of the majority became apparent. Our planned traverse wasn't going to work. For ten minutes, we stood and gazed into the swirling cloud, hoping it would clear. It didn't. Time to recalibrate, as those in-car GPS sets say: instead of the Rotondo, we could climb the Witenwasserstock. Or so we thought. As we approached, we saw another party – it turned out to be Roy's – skiing from the top of a lower summit. Ano-

Felix on the Rottälligrat (photo Roy Smith)

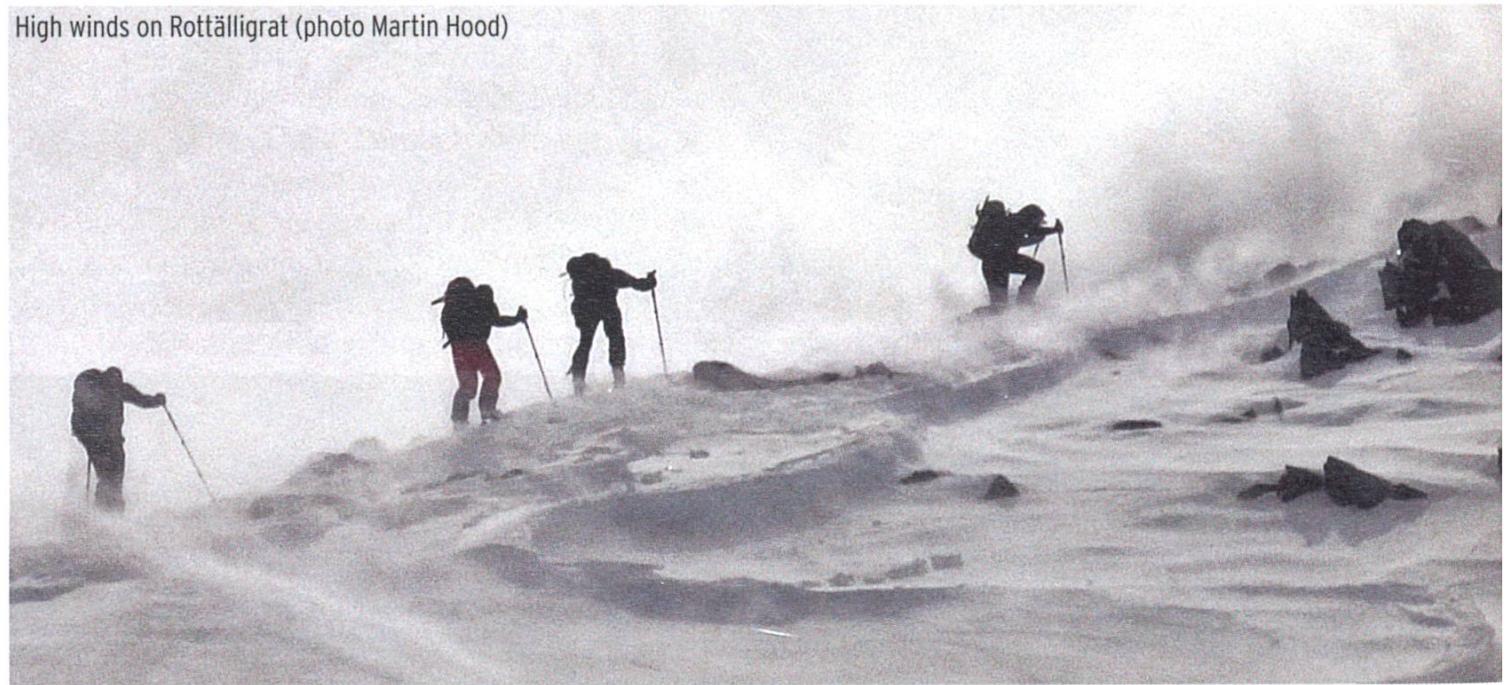


Muttengletscher (photo Martin Hood)

Approaching Rottälligrat (photo Martin Hood)



High winds on Rottälligrat (photo Martin Hood)



Picnic alfresco (photo Martin Hood)



ther good decision on their part: we soon found that the Witenwasserstock isn't amenable to being climbed in light snowfall without a rope.

Backing off, we rewarded ourselves with a ski descent in bad light and cement-like snow. For the second time, we found ourselves in the hollow beneath the Rotondo hut. We ate sandwiches while the weather cleared. Surely it's too early to pack up, said Eugene – what about skiing over the Leckipass and going home via the Muttenletscher? Ah, the enthusiasm of youth. Clearing weather seemed to endorse the decision. We came up to the Leckipass in a storm of wind and flying ice shards. "What about taking in the Leckihorn too," suggested Eugen. "I guess I'm good for peaks today," said Robert, saving me the trouble of sounding the voice of caution.

In brilliant afternoon light now, we yee-hawed our way down the deserted Muttenletscher, each with unlimited tracts of untouched snow to inscribe as he wished. So intoxicating was our onrush that nobody noticed when we parted ways with the faint traces of previous parties. We stopped only when the valley pinched down into a narrow gorge ahead.

Belatedly, we pulled out our maps. Ah yes – to avoid the narrow slot ahead, we should have climbed out of the glacial basin several hundred metres ago. As for the gorge, even our maps were in two minds about it – mine, a veteran printed version, showed a dotted line down the valley, indicating a possible thoroughfare. But Robert's, more up to date, didn't recognise that possibility. It was obvious why not. The sunward slopes had already avalanched, filling the streambed with vast berms of debris. On the shady side, though, the snow was still hanging there, untold thousand tons poised at a hair-trigger angle of repose. How tedious, we thought, we'll have to

put on skins and backtrack... But wait, isn't that a solitary set of ski-tracks coming out of the gorge? Maybe we can ski it after all...

So we did. The savants long ago disproved that talking loudly can set off an avalanche. Nevertheless, we skied in silence, widely separated, and as fast as we could. That didn't feel fast enough. Avalanche debris choked the foot of every gully. Once, where the stream had undercut the snow, we edged across the almost vertical walls of a foaming plunge-pool, adding the prospect of an icy swim to the threat of sounding obliteration from above.

With three sighs of relief, we came out into the main valley that leads down to Realp. And not before time; the cold wind had died and the sun now bore down with a mellow warmth. Robert and Eugene had gone ahead when I stepped aside to let an upcoming party of ski-tourers through. While waiting, a delicate sussurration caught my ear, harmless, it seemed, as a grass-snake's hiss. On the sunlit summit opposite, a raft of snow had started to slide. Slowly at first, yet every passing metre added to the avalanche's tonnage.

Leaning on my ski-poles, I watched as the debris excised a curving trench in the snowslope. At mid-slope, the floor of this channel morphed from white to black as the sliding mass carved its way down to the underlying grass and mud. Sussuration turned to freight-train roar as the avalanche lost cohesion, broke up into blocks the size of compact cars, and cascaded into the streambed below. I noticed that the other party had stopped too. But I doubt if they were impressed by the spectacle as I was.

The mountain had spoken.

Martin Hood