

# The escapades of a grand old man

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# THE ESCAPADES OF A GRAND OLD MAN

*We are much indebted to Mr. W. Stettbacher of Bishopbriggs, Glasgow for this exciting report of his climbing activities this Summer. What he has undertaken was difficult by any standards but when one remembers that Mr. Stettbacher is 74 years of age, his achievement is nothing short of phenomenal. We wish him a comfortable Winter in Majorca.*

WGS

Since the *Swiss Observer* published late in 1974 my report on my fourth Matterhorn climb at 71, my wife and I have continued to spend the summer months of July and August in Macugnaga, at the foot of the Monte Rosa, near the Swiss border.

The Matterhorn is undoubtedly the world's most famous mountain, but the peaks of the Monte Rosa group must rank second, and in the eyes of Italian climbers, first. Not only are they the highest mountains in Europe, except for the Mont Blanc, but they are also not very difficult technically, at least in good weather. This assuming that a would-be climber is well trained and acclimatised to high altitudes. The rarified air is much more noticeable on ice and snow than on rocks, and here the dreaded mountain sickness always remains a threat.

Both in the Macugnaga area and elsewhere, heavy snow falls had been the order of the day through spring and early summer, with heavy masses of snow right down to 2,500 m, with no serious climbing possible until the end of July.

Near the end of July, an alpine guide told me that the Signalkuppe and Zumsteinspitze, my objectives, had just been climbed, in fairly good conditions, from Alagna. Meanwhile, with the weather becoming less certain, I had to be first on the look out for a good weather report. The weather people at the Swiss airports are known to give accurate reports, but on a day trip to Brig, on the 1st August, I read in the *Bund* that the Wallis should have good weather on the 2nd and 3rd August.

Incidentally, I went to Brig to post a number of postcards and letters. Particularly during the holiday period, the Italian post is chaotic. Letters from London to Macugnaga took up to 23 days. Telegrams sent inland or abroad during August would first go to the Central Post Office in Milan, stay there for two or three days, and then be forwarded by ordinary mail! This did not prevent the Italian Minister for postal affairs from proclaiming that everything was going well, and that in five years' time, the Italian post would be second-to-none. Always jam tomorrow never today!

With a good weather forecast in hand, I decided to climb several "Viertausender" of the Monte Rosa group. I set foot on them more than 50 years ago, and have climbed them again several times since. My first task was to find another guide. My previous

Matterhorn guide always tried to overcharge me. He was the man, when asked what would be his tariff for the Matterhorn, replied: "If you have no money, you pay nothing, if you have a little, then you pay what you like". I soon found a suitable person, and although he has the Italian sounding name of MORANDI Edoardo, speaks very good "Schwyzerduetsch".

The guide took me in his car to Alagna, about 130 kms away, by road, although it is only approx. 10 miles from Macugnaga, as the crow flies. From there, a cable railway took us from 1,200 m to the Punta d'Indren, 3,250 m high, over three different sections, in approx. 25 minutes.

## HUT CROWDED

The next step is to climb over snow and ice to the famous Gnifetti Hut, fixed on a big rock near the Lys glacier. It is said to house 250 climbers, but on certain week-ends, especially in August, there can be as many as 400, with many having to sleep on floors. The hut is normally fairly empty during the week, but our arrival there, at 6 p.m., on 2nd August, was preceded by a period of bad weather. It was therefore not surprising that the now perfect weather had attracted around 150 climbers. As a result, the general dining room was packed to capacity. The hut-keeper soon took us down to a special dining room, reserved for those with guides or taking full meals. Our dinner was as good as at any Hotel.

We were given a sleeping berth for two, rather draughty, and with the outside temperature being down to at least 10 degrees, it needed eight blankets to keep us relatively warm. At such a height, a real sound sleep is unlikely, but at least we had a good rest, necessary for the hard physical work to come.

It came as a relief when the lights went up at 4.30 a.m., and without a wash we went straightaway to the dining room to enjoy a good breakfast consisting of coffee and fresh cow's milk, with bread and butter and marmalade, the very thing needed for a serious climb.

We stepped outside the hut, exactly at 5 a.m., already roped together. About seven parties of two or three had preceded us. We all aimed for the Punta Gnifetti (or Signalkuppe), and the hardier ones meant to attack the Zumsteinspitze as well.

The Punta Gnifetti is 4,559 m high

and on its summit stands the highest weather observatory and hut in the world. It is a phantastic sight; two men are stationed there during summer, sending out constantly weather reports, but also attending the needs of the tourists arriving at the hut. There are light refreshments available, and if one so desires, one can pass an uncomfortable night up there.

Some 20 years ago, I myself spent an unforgettable night here, but one I would not like to repeat. Sleep at such a height is out of the question, and I suffered continuous nightmares. I was told by one of the keepers that a Milan tourist who, on arrival at the hut, the year before, collapsed, had died a week later in Milan.

Weather permitting, the two keepers are relieved every four days. Nowadays, helicopters are used for this purpose, if required, just as they are dropping food and drinks at regular intervals.

The beginning of such a climb is often the most difficult part; you may not have had a pleasant night at the hut, a poor or unappetising breakfast, you step out into a cold and dark night, wondering whether you might not make the grade or be the victim of mountain sickness. I have been facing such problems as long as 50 years ago, but now at 74, with more time available for training and acclimatisation, I seem to have little trouble.

## A BRISK PACE

It was still fairly dark, at the start, but the stars were shining, and there was no need for a lantern or torch. My guide set a fairly brisk pace, my legs were going machine-like, and to my delight, we started overtaking one party after another. Fresh snow had fallen two to three days previously, but after a cold night it was fairly hard and presented no difficulty. We gained rapid height over fairly steep slopes of the Lys Glacier, and after 1½ hours, we reached a point below the Balmenhorn, approx. 4,100 m high, which stands entirely on Italian territory. On its summit there is a gigantic and magnificent statue of Jesus Christ, more than 3 m high. First erected there by guides from Alagna and Gressoney — Schwyzerduetsch is spoken in both of these alpine villages — in 1931, it was destroyed in time by the great storms raging particularly in winter, only to be replaced in 1970 by a new statue of metal.

Fifteen minutes later we reached a point near the Lysjoch, 4,250 m, the pass connecting Alagna with Zermatt over

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