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THE PEAKS OF MONTE ROSA

by W. Stettbacher

Spending last winter in Palma de Majorca, as usual, I was unfortunate to become a victim of food poisoning, the probable cause being some tinned meat. Various unpleasant side effects troubled me right up to the middle of June, and cast serious doubts on my ability to do any climbing this summer. The results of an X-ray on 8th June only reached me in Northern Italy in the middle of July. It was therefore with some misgivings that I left for London and Switzerland on the 18th June. Fortunately, however, from the very moment that I left Glasgow for London, my stomach seemed at last to take pity on me, and although I hardly realised it at the time, I had completely recovered by the time I reached Zürich.

According to the X-ray, everything inside was normal, except that my stomach had been displaced for reasons not known. Further extensive tests by a specialist were advised.

Incidentally, just before leaving Majorca, my hotel had appointed me as official guide for mountain excursions during the coming winter. While my fitness to lead such excursions is in no doubt, I

cannot see many guests being able to stand up to the strain involved in walking and climbing for 5–6 hours.

Still in Majorca, I had the good fortune of accidentally meeting and gaining the friendship of the Prince of Laos, the brother of the King of Laos, who came to the island a year ago, the local Press devoting entire pages to this personality with enormous riches. He owns a big farm far away in the mountains, and the inside is like that of a palace.

My wife and I left Zürich on the 28th June for our beloved Macugnaga, situated at the foot of the gigantic Monte Rosa mountains.

The stomach trouble having prevented me from doing any serious training, I now had to make up for lost time. I also had to try and regain at least part of the loss in weight. To help me to do this, the hotel owner served me with extra large portions of beautifully cooked food, while in between I drank pint after pint of milk.

By the middle of July, I regarded myself capable of undertaking serious climbs. But alas, any great climb during July was out of the question, because enormous masses of snow had fallen during

winter and spring. To climb the peaks of the Monte Rosa group, you take the cable railway to the Plateau of the Punta d'Indren, 3,150 m high, where there is a lot of summer ski-ing. At the end of July, the snow lying in this area was still 6 m high, had buried all the ski-lifts, so that new ones on top of the snow had to be put up.

I would have liked to climb once again the Balmenhorn, with its huge metallic statue of Jesus Christ on top, and the Punta Giordani, the latter's summit being adorned by a smiling Madonna. This would have supplied me with beautiful photographs to be shown during coming talks in Palma de Majorca and Scotland.

The weather became rather less certain in August, and for such climbs (over 4,000 m high) with their relatively high cost, with guide (around 200,000 lire in all) one must be reasonably sure of good weather.

Many parties set out in good weather, only to be thwarted the next day by a sudden change. Most guides are not particularly concerned about weather conditions. Once they have been

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Monte Rosa seen from Zermatt

engaged, they have to be paid in full irrespective as to the outcome.

Italian airports are responsible for the official weather reports, but these forecasts are valid for 24 hours only, and often are completely wrong. The weather charts shown in the newspapers are 24 hours old, and therefore of very little use.

In my younger days, I often heard that farmers and alpine guides, being close to nature, and observant, were good judges of the weather. This is, of course, a complete fallacy, just as are the theories put forward in relation to the changes of the moon. In climbing, it is important how the weather will shape the next day or two; depressions may be on the way, moving very rapidly. Many alpine tragedies are due to unexpected and quick changes in the weather. A barometer is part of the equipment of many a climber and even of guides, and a rapid fall in pressure is a warning to abandon any attempt. Others take with them a small transistor radio, in order to listen regularly to weather forecasts.

Some guides in Macugnaga, and also myself, on the eve of a big climb, telephone to Zürich airport for weather news. A forecast for any particular area, like the Monte Rosa, is given for the next 24 hours, with an additional esti-

mate for a further two days. I have found these forecasts to be invariably correct.

The somewhat uncertain weather in August, plus the fact that my guide was not always available, prevented me from carrying out the climb originally planned. Instead, I participated in an expedition organised by the Macugnaga guides. Two of the three guides had names such as Zurbriggen and Schranz, their forefathers being of Swiss origin, as is the case with so many Macugnaga inhabitants. Passing the night at the roomy Zamboni Hut, at the foot of the Monte Rosa peaks (2,070 m), our objective was to climb the next morning the rocky ridge leading to the Punta Battisti, and then traverse below the Pizzo Bianco to the Pizzo Nero.

TRAINING GROUND

The Punta Battisti is something like a training ground for rock climbers; numerous fixed steel ropes and iron ladders are fixed on to the rocks and overhangs to make their passage easier. Aided and abetted by the three guides, we set foot on the Punta Battisti after about three hours. The weather was all that could be expected, and an immense panorama was our reward. After leaving the summit, further fixed ropes and ladders were encountered.

The succeeding traverse below the Pizzo Bianco, normally easy, was rather delicate, the steep slopes of loose rock now being covered by snow and underlying ice. Taking every possible safety precaution, our guides helped us all to get safely across, not without one or two of the climbers slipping, but being held and pulled back easily.

The entire climb, lasting about 11 hours, was completed without any real incident, although a few of the climbers began to tire and slipped or rolled down a bit on the steep grass slopes. I arrived at my destination fit and well, surely an indication that I had completely recovered from food poisoning. Needless to say, I had taken numerous photographs, as I had done a few days previously during a demonstration given by Macugnaga guides of extreme and artificial rock climbing.

This climb was made under the auspices of the Italian Alpine Club which has similar aims and objectives as the Swiss Alpine Club.

The Swiss Alpine Club has at present 97 sections spread all over the country, varying greatly in the number of its members, with a total membership of 58,301. The section Uto (Zürich and district) to which I have belonged since 1921, has nearly 3,000 members, while smal-



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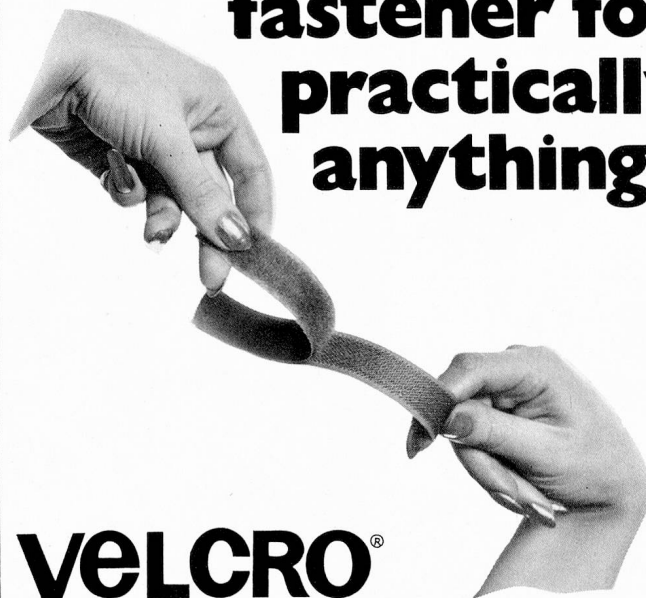
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ler ones may have only a hundred or a few hundred. Many sections take the names of the town in which the members reside, others the name of a mountain like the Mythen, or some denote a region like the Praetigau. One is eligible as a member on reaching the age of 18.

One of the chief aims of the Swiss Alpine Club is to instill the love of mountains, to teach its younger members the techniques of rock climbing and how to progress on ice and glaciers, by means of repeated courses under the supervision of guides.

Almost every weekend, both in winter and summer, excursions into the mountains, under the supervision of experienced leaders, and sometimes with guides, take place.

One of the tasks of the Swiss Alpine Club is the training of alpine guides, and the organising of rescue operations in case of mountaineering accidents, the latter in collaboration with guides, local authorities and, where necessary, with the support of helicopters.

Illustrated talks on mountaineering and similar subjects are given at the monthly meetings held by the various sections, while smaller groups inside sections may cultivate photography and choral singing.

Not without some measure of success, the Swiss Alpine Club is constantly opposing the spoilation of beautiful valleys and mountains by speculative builders, or preventing the construction of unnecessary chair-lifts and the overflying of mountains by noisy helicopters for reasons other than rescue work.

ALPINE HUTS

It is probably best known for the great number of Alpine Huts it has constructed. At present, there are 151 of them in all, and 241,849 alpinists and visitors spent the night in them between autumn 1976 and autumn 1977. Most of the huts are open in summer and winter, but some only in summer. They may have as many as a 100 to 155 places to sleep in; others are much smaller, especially those in regions less frequented. One of the biggest huts, the Monte Rosa (formerly named Bétemps), situated at the foot of the Monte Rosa mountains, can take in 128 tourists, and is open during summer only. During the summer of 1977, 7,533 alpinists found shelter there.

Most huts have a permanent hut-keeper (Huettenwart or guardian) during the season. In the larger ones, a guardian is often helped by his entire family, and/or by other persons, and students may assist during the summer. Teas, coffees and light refreshments, both alcoholic and non-

alcoholic, as well as soup and simple meals, are normally served.

The life of a hut-keeper is rather an unhealthy one, and the rarefied air at an altitude of say around 3,000 m does not help. Many a guardian whom I have known personally, has died of cancer of the stomach at a relatively early age. When a hut is the starting point for a big climb, like the Monte Rosa, he may have to get up as early as 1.30 a.m., to provide breakfast for as many as 50-80 climbers, and, after a few hours' sleep, he may have to renew the process around 6 to 7 a.m. when others, who have merely come to the hut to pass the night there, wish to return to Zermatt. During the day, there is continuous coming and going.

PREFERENTIAL

Since these huts are owned by the various sections of the Swiss Alpine Club, one would assume that individual members get preferential treatment in them. This is true in regard to the cost of the berth, but while, if accompanied by a guide, as I have been for most of my alpine career, you are always assured of a place, no matter how overfull the hut is, this is not necessarily so, when you arrive as an individual member.

It is correct that to a certain hour in the evening, a percentage of berths are to be reserved for members (25% I believe), but this is not always respected. You may be asked to lie on the floor, while scores of non-members, including women and children lie comfortably in their berths. This has always been a bone of contention, and is unlikely ever to be solved to the satisfaction of members.

The fact is that non-members pay much more for passing a night in a hut, which is undoubtedly welcome to the keepers and to the respective sections.

Of late, there has been a good deal of agitation that women should be admitted as members. There is a good deal of opposition, especially by older members, who maintain that this is merely a subterfuge to gain admission at lower cost.

Coming back to Macugnaga, the more we go there, the more we like its inhabitants who are now our firm friends. Life there is still very cheap, in comparison with Swiss standards; the food at our hotel was just perfect, at low cost. At the present rate of exchange, we paid about £6 per day per person, everything included. For instance, for a portion "Milchkaffee", yielding four cups, I paid 300 lire (approximately 18p), while a single cup in Switzerland would normally cost Sw.Fr. 1.40 (approximately 41p)!

Life in the big Italian cities may be more complicated, with the daily Press reporting constant robberies, kidnappings, strikes, etc. but in the valley Anzasca, to which Macugnaga belongs, everything is peaceful.

It is only when dealing with nationalised industries, such as the Post Office, that you realise what bureaucracy is. Letters from Switzerland, England or Scotland took in July 10/12 days, but in August, with many post officials being on holiday, the delay would be almost twice as much. It is therefore not surprising that Italians invariably use the telephone, when something important is at stake.

If you tender a 500 lire bank-note (about 30p) for the purchase of a stamp worth 220 lire, the Post Office generally has no change, you have to compromise by taking other stamps. Once I was told that no stamps were available at all, but that I could obtain them in the bar opposite!

In the course of the previous summer (1977), the community of Macugnaga started felling hundreds of trees in the mountains above, and a good portion was sent down by overhead cable to the village. A year later, the trees are still lying in the forests, or in heaps in the village, because the Rome bureaucracy had subsequently discovered that the cutting down of the trees was illegal. Several years may now elapse until a final decision is taken.

Recently prominent citizens of Macugnaga, mostly of Swiss descent, formed a so-called "Lindenbaum Gemeinde", and regular meetings will be held underneath a very old Lindentree standing next to the old church. Its aim is to preserve the customs and the language of the "Wallisers", i.e. of the inhabitants who came over from the eastern part of the Wallis several hundred years ago. Most persons over 40 still speak the Wallser dialect, but this is now rarely the case with the young.

Around the middle of August, the whole of the Anzasca valley was flooded by torrential rains. Altogether 15 persons died as a result of landslides, houses collapsing and road tunnels being flooded. Road traffic between Domodossola and Macugnaga was interrupted for four days, through the collapse of a road bridge, while Macugnaga was without electricity for 24 hours. Two helicopters were constantly used to bring in supplies. There had never been anything like this in the history of the valley, and the damage caused is enormous.

We left Macugnaga for Zürich on the 21st August, and thus another memorable holiday came to an end.