

Once again, Engadine and Bregaglia

Walter Kirstein

The second half of August 1972 was not so good. We were a rather large ABMSAC party with a fixed programme for the Meet. However, the only fine weather week this summer was just over when we arrived. We still had a few very good days, but one had to be very lucky to have planned a climb for one of those rare occasions.

On a day when nearly all of us traversed the Pers and Morteratsch glaciers I had already arranged to meet my guide that afternoon to go to one of the Bregaglia huts. I had, therefore, to leave the party at the Isla Pers and hurry on to meet my guide, Ruedy Hellstern, in Pontresina. The easiest hut to reach was the Albigna hut. From Pransaira we took the work-cable-car to the dam of the Albigna lake, from which we could see the hut and behind it the Punta d'Albigna (2824 m) with its NW ridge, the route which we wanted to climb. In contrast to my last visit when the young Chorleys and I had to sleep on the floor of the dining room, we found the hut this time practically deserted, only a few other small parties were there.

We started at 5am on a marvellous but very cold morning. Crossing the glacier brook in the Cantone valley Ruedy slipped when turning round to warn me of some ice on the rocks. He managed to stop the slip, and not for a moment did I realise that he had sprained an ankle and was in bad pain. He just went on as if nothing had happened.

I found the approach walk harder than I had expected. Quite a few slabs had to be crossed and the snow-fields in the gully leading up to the climb had a hard frozen surface. We saw now the gap in the ridge where, according to Paul Nigg's guide-book, the actual climb starts. The book mentions three different routes, graded from III to V, though our route was, with the exception of one pitch, nowhere more than III. Paul calls the climb difficult and very rewarding. It certainly was a wonderful climb on this day, with really ideal conditions for climbing on the hard, dry Bregaglia granite. It is possible that these conditions made the route appear to me easier than Paul's description.

My guide was an excellent and enthusiastic climber and in spite of his youth he cared very well for his ancient client. He seemed to be satisfied with my climbing, because he pointed out some harder 'variations' which promised more fun. On one of these I slipped once, only to learn later from a Swiss in the hut, that each such slip ought to cost at least one bottle of Fendant! From here the route went first across steep slabs and then followed the crest of the ridge up to a point which looked to me like the summit. In fact we had to traverse another 120 ft horizontally and cross a gap to reach the actual top of the Punta d'Albigna.

In the still ideal weather we had gorgeous views from this rather low summit. The Albigna glacier extending to the s with the Sciora group and the Piz Badile behind it in the w and the Piz Cantone with its ice-fields close to us in the E. The Badile NE face had very little snow—it looked so peaceful, no hint of the tragedy which was to happen only a week later, when two young climbers were killed in a blizzard on the N ridge.

After a restful sun-bathing hour we climbed down to an abseil spot, from which the s face of the Punta d'Albigna falls vertically to the Vadret Castello North. We had to abseil about 75 ft towards a ledge which was a little to our right below us. Once on this ledge I found easy rocks, took the rope off and used this splendid opportunity to photograph Ruedy abseiling on his red double rope. Soon we were at a col from which a steep snow gully led down to the Vadret del Cantone. We passed an enormous ice-avalanche, which we had heard falling when we were resting safely on the summit. The snow of the gully had been softened by the sun, offering us a fast glissade and Ruedy noticed that I seemed to have some knowledge of skiing. Further down we had to cross some unpleasant scree slopes and boulder fields and only then did I realise that Ruedy had accomplished no mean feat in doing the whole climb without actually using his injured foot. We tried, unsuccessfully, to subdue his pain by a foot bath in the brook and were then soon back in the hut.

The very kind lady guardian prepared many glasses of blood-red orange juice to refresh us, but poor Ruedy had to limp down to the dam and the cable-car station, using a stick and an ice-axe as crutches. Fortunately the doctor's opinion was, that the sprain would only require a week's rest.

Piz Cambrena ice-nose (3603 m)

A few days later I followed a strong party of about twenty with three guides up to the Diavolezza hut. Next morning the barometer had fallen, clouds and mist everywhere left no hope of doing the intended Palü traverse. After many deliberations and a delay until 8am Paul Nigg, our head guide suggested Piz Cambrena by the ice-nose. Not that I had heard anything about this, in fact on all my previous visits to this peak I had flatly refused this route, which seemed to me too hard for my insufficient experience on summer ice routes. This time I realised only half an hour below the ice-nose that we were aiming for it. With the mist lifting I saw that we were not on the Palü route any more, nor were we cramponing up to the ridge between Piz Cambrena and Piz Palü as I had expected. Not to keep the younger climbers back I had taken my own porter and we had been staying somewhat behind, but we caught up with the others when they had to slow down on the ice-nose. I was amazed to see all these four ropes together on this steep ice ridge. Only the use of ice-screws made this kind of climbing possible and safe. Being the last I had to collect the screws and pick the ice from them and learned that way, how firmly they were inserted, especially the new hollow ones. Paul told me later about an accident to a German party on the Bumiller ridge of Piz Palü. An ice avalanche had hit a climber secured by a rope attached to an ice screw. The screw had stood up to the force but the rope had broken.



60 *The ice nose of Piz Cambrena* Photo: W. Kirstein

Paul waited at the end of the ice climb and led us the last fifteen minutes to the w summit, now in splendid sunshine, though some clouds were floating below us, hiding Piz Palü and Piz Bernina. Lunch and off, without crampons, half walking, half glissading down to the s peak of the Arlas to follow the nearly horizontal rock ridge to the n peak of the mountain. With my porter-guide behind me it was fun to find that the most difficult looking 'gendarmes' proved always quite easy to negotiate either by traversing or in by-passing them on either side. The scree slope down to the Col d'Arlas was not so good. The very steep 'path' became icy and slippery in the hail and snow, which were by now coming down and we tried hard not to drop some of the very loose stones on our friends below us. Once my porter slipped and fell but caught himself just in time—a horrifying moment.

A tiring hour from the col to the hut, but all strain was forgotten, when we drank Paul's health at dinner, thanking him for giving all of us a fantastic day in seemingly impossible weather.

Piz Kesch (3418 m)

With barometer and weather remaining unreliable, Dr Charles Warren suggested climbing a lower peak like Piz Kesch and combining a glacier traverse with a rock climb, not too hard under normal conditions. John Whyte and myself were joining him, and Hamish Brown and Donald Clarke also came with us, though next day they formed a separate party, not wishing to be held back by my slow pace.

We left John's car on the Albula road near the pass, from which an easily identifiable path took us in under two hours to the Cabane d'Es-cha. It was a beautiful and clear evening. Little did we care that Piz Palü and Bianco in the distance showed a few clouds. The friendly guardian made us comfortable, advised us about the best route and we went to our bunks in a very optimistic mood.

How disappointing to see the rain pouring down at 4am! It was 11am, when the sun broke through for a moment, and off we went. Though Charles and John had taken nearly everything out of my sack, I arrived at the Porta d'Es-cha only when Hamish and Don were already on the Vadret Porchabella, halfway between the Porta and the rocks of Piz Kesch. Though we got on quicker in their tracks, we heard Hamish's jubilant Gaelic call from the summit before we reached the foot of the rock ridge. They were down before we had finished our lunch and decided to descend to Bergün, which they did in a very good time. We were about halfway up the rocks when it began to hail and to snow heavily and a very strong and icy wind threatened to blow us off the rocks. Suddenly the sound of thunder very close by shocked all of us; John said later that he thought the air pressure of the thunder—or rather of the near lightning—seemed to tear his cap from his head. We took refuge a little lower under some rocks and were glad to have left our axes down at the glacier. When the thunder storm passed over after a few minutes, we decided to continue the climb. However, we had the same experience twice more, on the way down. We had stayed on the summit exactly 30 seconds—all the time that John gave me for a photo. The rocks had been in good condition on the way up, now we found them covered with hail and snow, making climbing and route-finding much harder. The last storm caught us on the ridge in a gap, the only tricky pitch of the climb just below us. I hesitated to go down, trying first to get some life into my numbed fingers. John shouted: 'Down with you, warm fingers won't be much good to you, if you are hit up here by lightning!' Down I went, and in a few feet we were wind protected and that was the end of our troubles. We picked up our sacks, using Charles's new ice-screw for the first icy pitch on the glacier. Then we even saw some blue sky in the distance, with some sunshine on the glacier. It was easy gliding across the glacier on the new powder snow. If we only could have skis, I thought.

There was only one further problem to be solved. Should we celebrate our tour with dinner and Fendant in the hut or in the valley? Having decided that Fendant in both locations was the best solution to the dilemma, we had to walk down to the car in absolute darkness, with the stars coming through the light clouds, a few car lights showing down on the Albula road and the lights of the Engadine villages in the distance far below. How romantic! Except that the romance ended when I blundered into a herd of cows, which did not at all fancy the night intruder with his torch. Dozens of them crowded round me closer and closer and pushing them back with my ice-axe I felt like Don Quixote fighting the windmill. I had lost the path and my friends and was really relieved when I discovered the other two torches again. A few minutes later we were at the car. John was very pleased with himself as leader. He said: 'What a good piece of navigation!' I could not agree more.