

# OVERSEAS MEET REPORT - THE ALPS

## Pontresina, 23<sup>rd</sup> July to 5<sup>th</sup> August 2012

My apologies for the late report, this is entirely the fault of the meet leader (myself). Many thanks to everybody else who promptly gave me the requested information last summer!

This was for me a slightly strange meet as it was rare that we were all in the same place at the same time, due to excursions by part of the group with overnight stays in huts and due to not everybody arriving at the same time. We were however blessed with fantastic weather and fairly good snow conditions and I think everybody had fun. I had thought when suggesting the meet that south-east Switzerland would be a poorly known area to British mountaineers, but there is a hair-raising account in the YRC archives from 1988 involving involuntary bivouacs on glaciers and cliffs. Phil and Bern had also previously been in the area, interestingly with much more snow on the ridges than we had.

The meet began for me on a Sunday with a delayed train meaning that I missed the bus connection and had to lug far too much stuff to the campsite at Plauns (about 3 km from Pontresina) as it got dark. Under time pressure, I found a nice quiet spot for a couple of tents in the fairly crowded campsite and settled down for what turned out to be the first of a couple of frosty nights. From the tent porch, Piz Palu could be seen along the valley. There had been some problems with communication so I wasn't quite sure when to expect anybody else (nor how to recognise them). On the Monday (still alone) I collected my mountain bike from the station and headed down the Roseg valley to get a look at the Biancograt and Piz Rosegg, before being defeated by lack of technique and fitness. That evening I bumped into Bern and David Oldfield on the campsite who told me that they had been expecting to see Phil and Evelyn by then (I had mistakenly thought that they were all travelling in convoy), and that they had had no luck with telephoning... This was somewhat worrying, but the next day I headed off, somewhat late, to the Coaz hut (2610m) to try and find Michael Smith and Peter Chadwick.

In the words of Michael:

*"It took some resolve to spurn the opportunity of a horse and cart ride up the first stretch of the Roseg Valley on the way to the Coaz hut, though the two hour wait for the next run was also a factor. The track was busy as far as the hotel then peaceful past the lake and up the side of the valley. Peter's father, Bob's 50 year-old map had two glaciers merging and flowing past where there is now the lake. We did have a modern map too.*

*Tucking in to the first course of the hut's evening meal the table's multinational diners speculated on the national*

*identity of the missing person 'Wysply'. Unrecognised, he soon arrived and joined the conversation then in German. Picking up a clue to our identity he turned and asked if I was Michael Smith."*

Wysply turned out to be the transcription of Whitby, garbled by the telephone and the local dialect. Having eventually identified my fellow YRC members by being sat next to them (I hadn't seen Peter for 9 years or so!) we agreed on **Il Chapütschin** (3366m) as our goal for the next day.

We had fine weather, and the ascent over moraine, slabs, a glacier and a broad blocky ridge provided no undue problems apart from a steep couple of meters or rock to get off the glacier, so that we got to the top, rather to our surprise, in the guide book time. On the way down, I slipped on a ledge and was very glad to be stopped by way of sliding into Michael who was surprisingly relaxed about the incident given the possible consequences. Later on, on wet slabs, the third member of the party was less fortunate and apparently took a long slide but with no harm done.

I then left Michael and Peter in order to meet my guest at the Tschierva Hut with a view to attempting Piz Roseg. Peter and Michael had been considering a number of rather unlikely looking routes and eventually settled on a pass called the Crasta del Lej Sgrischus, 3304m:

*"Looking for something to do on the way back from the Coaz to Pontresina we found in the guidebook a PD ridge with a decent track up to the nearside col, Fourcla Fex – Roseg 3068ms, and an assurance that 'a way could be made down either side' at the far end col, Fourcla dal Lej Sgrischus 3232ms. The first part was right enough. The ridge, though shattered included some entertaining scrambling and exposure. Then we arrived at the col, and could see the hut path a kilometre away at 2660ms. It took us 1½ hours of skittering, tottering, scattering, skating scree and boulder slope descent to reach the path. A rock band had to be down-climbed and abseiled, clearing the route as we went. Two long snow patches gave some welcome relief. The route probably gets few visits."*

On my way to the Tschierva Hut from the Coaz Hut, I misread the map and crossed a river by what turned out to be the wrong cable bridge. After a couple of hours of wandering up and down the moraine and half-hearted attempts to ford the in-spite correct river I realized my mistake and retraced my steps, arriving at the hut in light rain just in time for dinner again. Memo to self – do not use aluminium carabiners on steel cable bridges!

On the Thursday, Christoph and myself set off for **Piz Roseg** very early in the morning, only to learn on the glacier that my crampons had lost an important screw holding them together. An attempted repair with paracord lasted about 200 m and left me with a bleeding hand, and as it was still only about 5am we decided on **Piz Tschierva** (3546 ms) as a consolation prize, in the hope that we could repair the crampons either at the hut or in Pontresina. On the way down we were treated to spectacular but alarming views of a long-line helicopter rescue of two people from the Biancagrät (no one was seriously injured).

I got lucky at the hut, and they had a screw of the right size, so on Friday 27th we did make it to Piz Roseg by way of the Eselsgrät (or Middlemore ridge). This was a spectacular route, and I was very glad that I had invited Christoph to lead the extremely exposed (but well protected) crux on the rocky ridge. The old route on the rock-ridge is deprecated due to rock-fall (actually, it seemed to me to have disappeared completely) and the new route is steeper, but has quite a few nice new stainless steel bolts on the way up, and an equipped abseil route for the way down. The challenges we had were finding the correct route in the morning (we didn't, but we weren't alone!), the many crevasses (I went through over knee deep five times, and at one point high up we were both making swimming motions hoping that we weren't both over the same huge crevasse...), and finding the last abseil anchor on steep loose ground. The last abseil was overhanging, and landed us (just) on the downhill side of the bergschrund.

As we left the hut for the trudge down the valley it began to rain, but we were lucky enough to get a lift to Pontresina with one of the hut wardens. Interestingly, one of the staff at the hut was a native of Nepal, spending the summer in Switzerland.

At the weekend, David Oldfield and Bern had been up **Sassal Mason** (3031ms) from the **Bernina Hospice** (glacier and scrambling) and **Munt Pers** (3207ms) from Diavolezza (scrambling and climbing with some fixed ropes). In the meantime, it had become clear that Phil and Evelyn had been delayed en route by illness, but had made it to the campsite at Plauns. Phil, David Oldfield and Bern had been up to the Coaz hut (accompanied part of the way by Ann and Evelyn), with Bern and David continuing on to Il Chapütschin on the 28th. In the evening of the 29th, all those present met for the first time that week. The majority elected for a walk to **Piz Ot** (3246ms) on Sunday, an easy scramble with great views from the top. I didn't fancy another day in boots, so took my bike over the Bernina pass and down the other side to Poschivao (1200 m descent, all on trails). I got slightly lost (again!) and went too far but was lucky enough to get the last train back up to Morteratsch and thence back to the campsite in time to meet David Hick with Christine and Beth.

On Monday 30th the group split again, with several walking (after the cable car) up to **Piz Languard** (3262ms) for the views and the ibex, and others going to Lej Languard. Several people had spoken of **Piz Kesch**, and I had been

keen to try this myself having turned back in bad weather a few years before (with David Large) but in the end we split with David Oldfield, Phil, Ann and Evelyn driving over the Albula pass heading to the Es Cha hut on the way to Piz Kesch whilst James, Michael, Peter, Bern and David Hick went up to the Diavolezza hut for **Piz Palu** and **Piz Bernina**. Christine and Beth stayed close to Pontresina. The Diavolezza hut, despite the Matratzenlager, is a bit like a hotel with a four-course menu, waiter service and Europe's highest hot-tub!

Wednesday 1st of August (Swiss national day and, so I'm told also Yorkshire day) saw Phil and David Oldfield on **Piz Kesch** (3418 m) having followed the normal route over the Portad'Es-Cha. Unfortunately on the way up **Piz Palu** it became clear that David Hicks' cold was seriously affecting his performance and he had to turn back after the ice-fall. Many thanks to Bern for accompanying David back.

James, Peter and Michael continued in softening snow over the famously narrow snow ridge to the summit of **Piz Palu**, and then continued over the rocky ridge of **Piz Spinass** under Bellavista and through another huge icefall in cloudier conditions to the Marco e Rosa hut (3609ms).

Having had a chance to observe the significant differences between Italian and Swiss hut customs (including later breakfasts), we set off the next morning up **Piz Bernina** (4049ms), happily unaware that it was going to be a very long day. We got to the summit and back down to the hut with no real problems but our ropework as a group of three slowed us throughout the day. From the hut we worked our way back through the icefall at lunchtime to the bolted **Fortezza** ridge (with some thunder and hail) to head towards the Morteratsch glacier. Unfortunately, already behind schedule, we then got lost just below the steep part and only got to the edge of the glacier as it began to get dark (one of the 'tracks' we tried to follow turned out to be a meltwater channel...). We had planned for the group to eat together that evening but had to cancel the reservation. We eventually got to the Morteratsch Hotel a little after 8 pm, having first left the Marco e Rosa hut at about 6 am. Many, many thanks to David Hick and David Oldfield for meeting us, and to Ann and Evelyn for cooking for us!

## CULTURAL HIGHLIGHTS

The Morteratsch 'Schaukäseerei' (public cheese-making dairy)



Huge portions of delicious food.

James Whitby

## Attending

Peter Chadwick  
Phil Dover  
David Hick  
Michael Smith  
James Whitby

## Guests

Christoph Niederberger (CH)  
Beth Marriott (UK)  
Christine Marriott (UK)  
Evelyn Dover (UK)  
Berne Hellier (UK)  
David Oldfield (UK)  
Ann Oldfield (UK)



Photographs: by James Whitby

Top - Michael and Peter on the way up Il Chapütschin, at 7 am

Left - The summit of Piz Roseg, from the snowy fore-peak

Bottom - Peter and Michael on the very enjoyable summit ridge of Piz Bernina. The traverse in the background was ice rather than snow, with an uninviting view of the waiting Bergschrund below.

## Notable wildlife seen:

Many crossbills and nutcrackers in the campsite, possible bearded vulture at distance, several ibex and marmots near Piz Languard. Snow finches (quite tame) at the Marco e Rosa hut.

