

Alpine Meet

**Randa
Zermatt valley
Switzerland
2 – 26 August 2003**

After some uncertainty (in my mind at least) as to how many people were attending the trip, and where they were staying, some seven members and their guests had found each other by the evening of Sunday 3rd August. Three of us camped at the pleasant Attermenxen site half-way between Randa and Täsch and I believe the remainder stayed in Randa itself. On the Sunday, whilst awaiting the rest of the party, James Whitby, David Smith, Albert Chapman and John Lovett strolled through the woods to the East of the valley reconnoitring the route to the Täschhütte and Peter Chadwick visited his family in Zermatt.

After some discussion it was decided that an ascent of the Alphubel (4206m) via the glacier from the Täschhütte (graded *Peu Difficile*) would be a sensible 'warm-up' and acclimatisation route and so Albert Chapman, despite the alarming noises from beneath his car, kindly drove a group to the the Täschalp thus eliminating 800m of steep ascent in very hot (~35°C) weather. After a snack in the restaurant it was a hot but pleasant walk up to the hut (2701m) where we settled in before the evening thunder storm. John had decided that the hills were a little on the large and steep side, and so the party consisted of Alister, Jane, James, Peter, Albert and David. As the hut appeared to be full, it was fortunate that we had reserved places that morning (although the warden didn't understand my recently acquired German, he spoke good English). The catering was good and the atmosphere friendly, confirming the comments in guide books. There were good views across the valley towards the Weisshorn and Schalihorn.

Despite an early morning start, it was remarkably warm which did not bode well for the snow conditions later. David, who had been feeling below par, turned back to the valley when we reached the glacier at about 3200m. The rest of us put crampons on and tied into one rope. Further progress was steady until Albert fell down a crevasse, necessitating a quick revision of rescue techniques (solved by Alister's use of brute force in simply lifting Albert out of the hole). When we reached the col of the Alphubeljoch (3773) a little after 8am we paused for a drink and assessed our options. (It should perhaps be noted that we had caught up with a group of three who had overtaken us earlier which included a gentleman with only one leg...). Albert had twisted his ankle in his fall and so Alister and Jane volunteered to escort him back down, leaving Peter and me to continue the ascent. At this point we started up the well-defined South-East ridge of the Alphubel, and it was clear that Peter was keen to make up for lost time as I was having to work hard to keep up. The ridge was very enjoyable – fine views but nothing too alarming. The snow was generally very soft, but the last few rope-lengths below the summit were surprisingly steep and icy, to the point where a slip would have been very difficult to hold. (The guide book says 45°, but I'm sure it was more in places). There were some in situ belay stakes, which were used by other parties, but their placement was somewhat eccentric – one of them was in a crevasse, and wobbled alarmingly.

At about 10.30am, a couple of hours behind the guide-book time, we reached the broad summit where there were several people admiring the spectacular views, particularly impressive were the Täschhorn and Dom immediately to the north. The Allalinhorn, which had been mooted as a possible second peak that same day, could be seen clearly to the south-east but looked rather large and distant. Pausing only for a drink and a photo we began our descent down the

crevassed snow slopes to the east that form part of the most popular ascent route from the Saas Fee lift system. The plod along the flanks of the Alphubel seemed endless as, despite the existence of a track, the snow was very soft, the sun was very hot and the size of the crevasses awesome. Stopping for a rest was inadvisable as if the snow we were walking through was anything to go by, then there wasn't much holding the ice-cliffs above us in place.

The going was slightly easier after we reached the Alphubeljoch again, and we passed the scene of Albert's accident without further incident. At the bottom of the glacier we caught up with the other three, and it was clear that Albert had been wise to turn back as he had a pronounced limp, and we all made slow progress down the path to the hut for a much-needed drink. Somewhere along the way Jane had picked up severe blistering on both feet, which looked very painful and was to curtail any further mountaineering activity by her.

That evening a very pleasant meal was had with all members and their guests in attendance, but it became clear that we were running low on active alpinists. Wednesday was a rest day with much thought given to the wisdom of various objectives in the unusually hot and dry conditions. Peter and Alister had tentative plans for the Zinal Rothorn, but these were to come to nought when Alister slipped on some stairs in his apartment and hurt his back (he should have camped!). At this point the meet began to fragment as several people chose to return home via scenic routes in France. Peter Chadwick hired a guide for the more technical peaks he wanted to do, and his successes are described in the accompanying article.

On the Thursday morning, after a flurry of activity, Peter set off to Zermatt to present himself to the Bergführerbüro, and David and I set off up the Trift valley with the vague idea of seeing Peter off from the Rothorn hut the next morning. Alister and Jane were to follow us, but as

Breakfast on the Alphubeljoch with Albert Chapman.
In the background from the left are the Matterhorn,
the Ober Gabelhorn and the Zinalrothorn.



it turned out that was the last we saw of them. Our plans were changed when we met Jack on the terrace of the Berggasthaus Trift (2337) and were inveigled into staying for a couple of beers. We ended up staying overnight and walked up to the viewpoint peak of the Platthorn (3345m) the next morning and then down to Zermatt and took the train back towards the campsite. On Saturday we had a day to kill before Peter's return, and so decided to climb the Breithorn from the Klein Matterhorn cable car. This remarkable lift takes you to nearly 3900m, from where it is a short trip to the summit of the Breithorn at 4164m. Despite a slightly late start that was exacerbated by taking the wrong cable-car at one point (my fault) we got to the top without trouble and had fantastic views in all directions. We had at least missed the worst of the crowds - the Breithorn appears to be a popular tourist destination, and we even saw a family with children no more than six-years old (all properly equipped with climbing belts, crampons etc.) Especially noteworthy amongst the views was the sight of the snow-free east face and Hörnli ridge of the Matterhorn, although we couldn't see where the recent rock-fall had taken place. Back at the cable-car station we inspected the ice-grotto - an artificial cavern excavated within the glacier. I was intrigued both by the sight of a crevasse from below (it just happens that a natural crevasse intersects the cavern, and has been allowed to remain) and also by the figures from the network of strain-gauges which showed how quickly the glacier is moving toward Zermatt.

That evening we met a tired but happy Peter who told us that he had a good deal with the same guide to climb the Matterhorn on Tuesday which didn't really allow time for an easier peak in the meantime. So, on Sunday we went to the peaceful Zinal valley only to find that there was a foot-race finishing in the village and it was packed. We eventually found a parking place and went for a pleasant walk which gave fine views of the other sides of the Weisshorn and Zinal

Rothorn. David pointed out the Besso, an impressive looking rock-peak which had been climbed on a YRC meet some years previously.

I had to go back to work, and so with only two members left, one of whom was climbing with a guide, that was effectively the end of the meet after only one week. It was nevertheless great fun and I wish only that I could have stayed longer, and that there had been more members present with a greater variety of of experience and ambitions.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the week was the hot weather which had continued all summer. The more experienced members of the group had commented several times that glacial retreat since their first visits was clearly evident (despite this, some people continued to use maps from the 1950's...). If you want to ski or climb classic routes in the Alps then it may be best to go sooner rather than later.

James Whitby

My ambition on this years Alps meet was to climb the Zinalrothorn, Ober Gabelhorn and the Matterhorn. Those 3 peaks had so far eluded me but being on the wrong side of fifty (I admit, no great age for the YRC) I was determined to take the opportunity before anno domini takes its effect. I was also aware that it had been ten years since I last did anything serious in the Alps and that I had failed miserably to get fit beforehand.

In the event, the lack of members on the meet meant that I had to hire a guide for three days. I knew this would not be the same as climbing with a companion, but it would greatly enhance my chances of success, provided I could keep up. My guide proved to be a Canadian called Tim Pochay who was very friendly, extremely fit, helpful and above all safe.

I can thoroughly recommend him to any member who may be in a similar situation. We met at the Rothorn Hut and the following morning set off early for the Zinalrothorn. The route up to the Sneegrat crosses a number of snowfields and rock bands but is relatively straightforward. The main summit block is ascended via a stone-filled and loose couloir (in normal years this would be snow filled but this was not a normal year) until reaching the gabel notch where the climbing suddenly becomes steeper, more serious and decidedly more exposed. Just below the summit there is a sensational ledge traverse with excellent hand holds, but it is best not to look down (vertical 3,000ft drop). The number of ropes belaying onto iron stakes made life a little more difficult but one has to expect a large number of parties on a popular route. Suffice to say that we reached the summit and were down again at the hut before midday for lunch and a rest feeling pleasantly stretched.

The next day we set off again to traverse the Ober Gabelhorn via the Wellenkuppe. The party behind us decided to turn back early on, and I can only imagine that they decided that the mild temperatures (even at 4am in the morning it was well above freezing) would make the return journey across the glacier in the afternoon too dangerous. There was only one other party in front of us. The Wellenkuppe summit was reached by approximately 7am via a loose rocky ridge. We then descended to a col avoiding some nasty

looking crevasses to find the rocky ridge to the summit of the Gabelhorn rearing up in front of us blocked by a needle sharp gendarme. This has fixed ropes on it which are extremely strenuous to pull up on but the top section of the gendarme can be turned on the right. The ridge from there on is normally a steep snow climb but for us was 1,000ft of slab climbing and belaying. This presented no particular difficulties but the steepness and exposure were quite tremendous and it was midday before we reached the summit.

The descent via the Arbengart also required full attention as any slip would



have had serious consequences. Approximately two thirds of the way down the ridge it is possible to gain access to a route going down the steep south face. Unfortunately we strayed slightly off route and ended up in an extremely dangerous and steep stone couloir, full of rubble and loose rocks. We had to retrace our steps carefully to get out of this. Eventually we reached the Arben Bivouac by about 4pm feeling extremely relieved to be down in one piece. The descent to the valley from the hut also proved to be quite tricky involving a 50ft abseil. We then trudged down to Zermatt in the late afternoon heat arriving at approximately 7.30pm - a full fifteen hour day!

The Gabelhorn was probably the hardest day I have ever had on the hills and I certainly needed the next day to recover. However I had arranged to meet Tim the following day at the Hornli Hut. For a long time I had felt that the Matterhorn was just a circus and thoroughly overrated. However, it is such a fantastic imposing shape that eventually it takes over in the imagination and most mountaineers succumb. I was no different. I just wanted to see what it was like and get it out of my system. In the event, so did the sixty or so other people staying that night in the hut. I did not sleep at all and there was a mad scramble starting at 3.30am to get kitted up and be first in the queue for the ascent. Tim was clearly very anxious to be off. He knew that there would be blockages further up and it was better to be above rather than below the falling stones. I have to admit that right from the start, he raced ahead and I found it very difficult to keep up. I was extremely grateful for the occasional hold ups in order to catch my breath. The climb is everything that you think it will be - long, dangerous, loose, exposed, overcrowded, tiring and above all - exciting. The fixed ropes were not as difficult as I thought and we were soon on the top wedge and then on the slender summit ridge. After a brief halt it was down again. It takes most parties as long to go down as up. We took 4 hours up and 3½ down and I was back at the Hornli

Hut by 12 noon, feeling utterly exhausted and elated.

So, a quick summary?

1. Hiring a guide is a good way to bag a peak if you don't have much time or opportunity, but they are expensive and not so much fun as working it out yourself.
2. Next time I will get fit first and make sure I take some proper modern equipment with me.
3. Half the glaciers in the Alps will have disappeared in 30 years time.
4. An excellent meet - a pity there were not more people there to enjoy it.

Peter Chadwick

Attendance:

Peter Chadwick
Albert Chapman
Sammy Chapman
Betty Lovett
John Lovett
Alister Renton (meet organiser)
Jane
Jack Short
David Smith
James Whitby

