

# A Pensioners' Day Out

by Richard Haszko



*The way up to the col - Richard Haszko*

“It’s cloudy every day but it doesn’t rain. In fact it hasn’t rained here for weeks.” We were told this as we checked in at the campsite in Alagna, a lovely Italian village at the head of a steep sided valley tucked under the south side of Monte Rosa. Valerie and I had gone out to get in some acclimatisation before heading off to Pakistan in August to trek up the Baltoro Glacier to K2 and I’d found an easily accessible 4000m peak that fitted the bill perfectly, providing we were fit enough and not too old for this sort of thing, both being 68.

Settled into our fine campsite we planned a campaign to get us ready for Pyramid Vincente, one of the peaks of Monte Rosa at 4215m but not too far from the hut. First off was a steep walk up for about two hours to the hamlet of Otra for lunch and some great views as the cloud cleared. There was some lively discussion about my choice of descent route but we got it right in the end and all was well. A couple of days later we took the lift up to Pianalunga at 2025m. After a bit of trouble finding the start of the path we hiked up to a tiny lake at Bocche delle Pisse at 2306m.



*The way to the hut - Richard Haszko*

Back at the campsite I couldn't help having a word with the lady who told us it didn't rain as there was now a thunderstorm and heavy rain every afternoon, a trend that was to continue throughout the rest of our stay. Fortunately we were never caught out in one of these. We studied the forecast carefully and decided we had time for one more acclimatisation day before venturing up to the Gnifetti Hut for an attempt on Pyramid Vicente. The storms were set to continue for some days but our final Saturday looked to be the best day before the weather turned downhill again.

We got lifts up to Passo del Salati at almost 3000m. Spending a couple of hours strolling around and having a picnic lunch at this altitude we reckoned we were OK to go up as planned, so we had a day back in the valley, booking places in the hut and generally getting prepared by enthusiastic eating and drinking to get plenty of calories and hydration.

Friday came and with it the lifts up to Indren at 2975m but progress was halted as heavy rain started just as we emerged from the cable car. This persisted for some 45 minutes but finally relented and we set off into the swirling mists. The way led across a dry glacier to the track leading to a big rock band. I confidently said the route couldn't possibly go straight up as there was a low point at the left hand end and that was where it must go. But no. An unlikely-looking path that was near to being a Via Ferrata in places with thick fixed ropes and steep wooden ladders took us to the top of the rock band and another short glacier crossing. A final steep section with fixed ropes and giant staples on a vertical section led to the Gnifetti Hut, nicely perched on a rock buttress at 3647m.

It's a big hut, sleeping 170, and rather pricey but the dinner and breakfast were good and substantial. Dreams of a fine afternoon watching the sunset were dashed when clouds rolled in and before long a full blown snowstorm was underway. We retired to our room, along with four others, a little despondent until one of the occupants produced his phone with the weather forecast. "Not good?" I said. "No, no," he replied. "Look, is good." I looked and, sure enough, the symbol for the early morning was a full sun. I couldn't really believe it but went to bed a bit more hopeful.

A couple of alarms woke me at 4am. I looked out of the window above my bed, not feeling very confident but the sky was full of stars! It was chaos downstairs as a lot of people struggled into harnesses, crampons and ropes. I cunningly arranged a serious rope tangle so as to delay our departure as much as possible and let the crowds drift away. However we were ready by ten past six and stepped out into a perfect alpine dawn. A short descent on a few staples at the back of the hut put us on the glacier and off we set, the fresh snow only a couple of inches deep.

It was easy going with an obvious track to follow and we made steady if not fast progress. A couple of steeper sections and some zigzagging around big crevasses and over snow bridges and we emerged at a broad col. Here there were several tracks as parties went to different peaks or on to the Margherita Hut. Our way went right, the snow now less firm and more difficult to walk in. As we went up I began to wonder why I was carrying our axes as they weren't needed and walking poles were the best things to use. At least we weren't wearing helmets as a lot of others were; there was no danger of anything falling on our heads and sun hats were of much more use.

Slowly we gained height, just two people ahead of us now and before we got to the final slopes they were on their way down. As the slope steepened the surface firmed up nicely and we cramponned confidently upwards until suddenly the angle eased and we were on a lovely narrow, short horizontal ridge. Clouds bubbled up below and we could see for miles with Mont Blanc in the far distance and Lyskamm close to hand. And the icing on the cake was we had the summit to ourselves! It was a great moment and we felt very pleased with ourselves.



*A fine dawn - Richard Haszko*



*Valerie and Richard on the summit – Richard Haszko*



*Summit selfie - Richard Haszko*

We went down quickly, passing lines of hot, sweaty climbers heading up in strong sun and heat, reaching the top cable car station in just two and a half hours, in time to get back down to the valley for a very welcome and celebratory lunchtime beer. We'd done what we set out to do and felt ready for the Baltoro.

Photos by Richard Haszko