



On the Ridge of the Badile

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PIZ BADILE BY THE NORTH RIDGE

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GEOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Piz Badile (3,308 m.) forms, with its neighbour Piz Cengalo (3,370 m.) the culminating western point of the Bregaglia Alps. The approach on the North (Swiss) side, from Val Bregaglia, is up Val Bondasca to the Sciora Hut (2,148 m.) ; on the South (Italian) side, from San Martino up Val dei Bagni to the Gianetti Hut (2,158 m.). Both peaks are rock climbing territory, the best routes being on the Swiss side, though between them Col Cengalo (3,057 m.) is a steep and unpleasant-looking ice couloir. The easiest way up Piz Badile from this side is by the North Ridge.

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It would doubtless have been prudent to have reconnoitred the start of the path across from the Sciora Hut, but the toil up from Promontogno fully-loaded the previous afternoon had been too much for such considerations ; so on leaving the hut at 4.00 a.m. we resorted to navigation after twenty yards or so. However, one hasn't much choice but to cross the valley below the steep slabs from which the glacier has retreated, and we struck cairns there near the first glacier stream—which was quite full since the night had been warm. After dislodging part of the old moraine on the far side, we reached a verdant hollow where a cairn marks the foot of a grassy rake leading up a steep broken wall to the broad lower slopes of the North Ridge ; we attained the top of the rake soon after six o'clock and surveyed the view, which was fine, and the weather, which was less so inasmuch as the tops were misting up. The dangerous part of the expedition now over, we plodded up glaciated rock-ribs and patches of hard snow to the foot of the tower guarding the ridge proper. A left traverse below the tower on poorish rock led to a small saddle, where we roped up—Stuart Hutchinson and Charles Aldridge on one rope, Tom Reynolds and I on the other—and started off about 8.30.

Pitch succeeded pitch of excellent climbing ; there was only one way to go, except down again, and the standard maintained itself around Grade Three. Occasionally the mountain provided us with a peg where other belays were scarce. Progress, we felt, was satisfactory ; after some three hours we arrived at a step in the ridge, where a wide ledge to the left gave an excuse for lunch and an impressive glimpse of the North-East face of the mountain where the Grade Six climbs live. Evidence of other diners lay around ; we guessed we might be halfway up, but we couldn't be sure because the way ahead was invisible and mist persisted on the tops. Photographs were taken and

we consulted Tom's notes for further instructions : "The first gendarme is turned to the left, all other difficulties to the right ; attempting to go left forces one out on to the steep North-East face." This we could well see ; but was this the first gendarme ? We decided it was and started up a chimney at the far end of the ledge. 50 feet and some time later we revised our opinion ; the route was well pegged but extremely steep, and we were loth to climb on others' mistakes. Back on the ledge we explored to the right behind a detached block ; this proved the correct route since, true enough, the rock was less steep and more favourably disposed.

A couple of hundred feet higher up we regained the ridge and were soon faced with a steep little nose. Seeking the easiest route I obediently went right and up another flanking chimney ; but 150 feet of this led to a niche and a small overhang beyond which we would be back on the ridge. Tom and I in turn attempted the Severe move without success ; we were embarrassed by finger-cramp caused by continual clutching at sideways holds. We waited in the niche for Stuart, in an airy, but secure, stance. Stuart obligingly led the overhang, followed by his rucksack and our congratulations.

The general angle eased here, but since during these trials and errors the day had worn on to 4.30, the Gianetti Hut began figuratively to recede. We speculated on the distance to go, but the ridge profile was convex and afforded no clue, nor could we see the top of Piz Cengalo, still in mist ; we were still lower than the Badile-Cengalo col, however. A few straightforward pitches now led to the last difficulty, a steep slab partly snow-covered. (It must be an unusually late season that leaves snow there in August.) A short and cautious traverse across the snow-patch, which had ice underneath, led to a thin crack leading straight up the slab to a corner beneath a wall ; following the foot of the wall up to the right, and negotiating a short chimney, we emerged on the ridge again with the way clear ahead. The remainder of the climb consisted of easy pitches interrupted by short walls, on a gradually decreasing gradient but still affording exhilarating climbing without any trace of loose rock.

The North Ridge terminates in the West Peak, only a few feet lower than the main, central, top from which it is separated by a shallow col. By the time we reached the pile of boulders at the summit we had no doubts about reaching the hut that night—we weren't going to try ; it was past seven and the way down, as available in translation, was not so clear as to be self-luminous. We gazed around at our neighbours, now clear of mist though rather monochrome ; perhaps our senses were dulled by effort—the full pleasure of achievement would be recollected not so much in tranquillity as in comfort.

We sought, and soon found, a stone under which to crawl for the night ; it wasn't far from the top, on the start of the way down to the Gianetti Hut, which was plainly visible : first a shape, later a light. It looked quite near. Charles was encouraged to use his professional talent on dry-stone walling, whereby draughts were reduced but not excluded. The exercise kept us warm for a while until the desire for rest overcame the party ; we ate our food, put on spare clothing (rather too spare for most of us) and entombed ourselves, myself first as the carrot in the cornucopia. The night began clear, with a moon, and not too cold ; we slept in snatches then woke and recirculated. Later it snowed slightly.

Dawn was appreciated dimly through mist, mental and atmospheric, and we started stiffly down soon after five a.m. The route "presents no difficulty under dry conditions" but the snow made the rock slippery and we went roped and carefully ; at one point the last man came down on the rope. Cairns were seen initially, then none for a while. The mist was a nuisance but we seemed to be doing all right ; after some uncertainty we eventually came at once into sun and on to a respectable path. Descent to the snowfield presented no problems and we reached the hut at eleven o'clock ; we had seen nobody since leaving the Sciora Hut.

In due course an excellent meal was provided : risotto, steak, tinned pears, and coffee. With much difficulty the temptation to sleep was overcome, and at 1.30 we started back for "home" via the Bondo Pass. (We actually crossed the "false" pass which, besides being nearer, looks much easier than the true one until you start down the other side, but the bergschrund proved less trouble than it looked ; thoughts of a second night out, however briefly entertained, were unalluring.) The impressive crevasses of the Bondo Glacier were admired in passing ; fortunately tracks were available through the maze and at 8.00 we were off the glacier ; by dusk we were steering a compass course for the Sciora Hut, nipping along over the boulders under the threat of a storm. The Hut did its part by being lit up—not for our benefit, but that's another story—and by 9.30 we were thankfully indoors.

As a long continuous climb of medium difficulty the North Ridge must have few equals. Had we not missed the route twice we should not have had any trouble in getting off the mountain before dark ; but on the other hand we were lucky with the weather. Moreover, the privilege of making their own mistakes is jealously preserved by guideless parties.

Finally, a word of appreciation to Bob Robinson who put the climb at our disposal, so to speak, and thereby missed the chance of doing it himself.