

By Eoin Fitzgerald

*"I've been a Choss climber for many's a year
And I spent all my money on Choss climbing gear,
With me mortar, me resin, me sticks of T.N.T.,
How those Alps still stay up is a mystery to me"*
(Traditional Alpine Climbing Lament)

Note : To protect the reputations of John "JOC Strap" O'Connor, Sandra "Madame Douche" O'Reagan and Richard "Captain Disgrazia" Jones, their identities shall remain nameless.

We loaded up a gansai load of bags into Richard's spacious campervan and burned rubber to Rosslare (we drove pretty fast too !). The only memorable event of the ferry crossing was when John commented on a 10 year olds Tipperary jersey saying there was too much blue on it and not enough yellow. The kid's reply was a curt and hilarious "Fuck off". We were in stitches for ages. I think Richard opted for the cheapest cabins going as the they were 2 decks below the cars, and judging from the heat in those sweat boxes they must have been beside the engine room. We were well glad of showers that morning, little did we know it would be the last for 6 days !

After a day and a half of driving through France, Switzerland, Austria and Liechtenstein, we crossed into Italy and made for the Dolomites. We slowly gained height as we headed up to the Sella Pass which is sandwiched between the Sella and Sassolungo groups. The advantage of the campervan is having so much space inside for gear, the disadvantage is having queues of 20 to 30 irate Italian drivers behind you as you slowly wind up the corkscrew bends. After a few hours in a campervan a few golden rules are quickly established ; don't leave any water containers on the sink ; don't leave any pots on the rings ; don't walk while the van is in motion, crawl ; don't leave boxes of groceries on the table; and don't sit under anyone who opens an overhead press.

We set up base outside of the Sella Pass Hotel. There were a couple of English lads in a campervan/tank beside us by the names of John & John. They supplied us with a load of useful information and recommended route descriptions which were regularly interspersed with "it were right loose" and "by heck, it were a right trouser filler". The toilets of the Sella Hotel were a handy source of water (and a great place for washing spuds). The staff

didn't mind as long as you purchased "grossen bier" each night. We were only too happy to oblige. We were always served by the most ill-mannered barman we have ever met. With a fag-in-gob he reluctantly pulled pints accompanied with several grunts. He would have probably been more responsive to "ugg ichi ploff ti ra nisi" than "zwei grossen bier bitte". Up until the start of the century the Dolomites were part of the "Zud Tyrol" region of Germany. As a result a lot of the locals are fluent in German and the place names are a lot more German sounding than Italian.

Day two in the Dolomites and we were up at the crack of dawn to try the normal route on the 3rd Sella Tower (UIAA III+). A short walk across some scree and we were at the bottom of a wide crack. Luckily there was only one other party ahead of us. We started up the right hand side of this and quickly up to the only crux of the route which proved tricky enough for an easy grade III. There were some spectacular routes on the 2nd Sella Tower out to our right and parties were quickly queueing up. Luckily for us we were in the shade for most of the day. A few more pitches brought us to a short but brilliant traverse. Myself and Richard were 2 pitches ahead of Sandra and John and were waiting for the 3 Italians ahead to move on. Suddenly one of the Italians loosened a clump of rocks and did not bother to shout any warnings. I roared down "below" at the others, but Sandra was hit on the shoulder and neck. Luckily she was hit by a clump of earth and not some rocks. It was a good excuse to practice the little Italian I knew as a roared "Bastardi" up the cliff. We motored across the traverse and up 3 loose limestone pitches which brought us to the top. We waited for the others in glorious sunshine and took in the views of that area of the Dolomites. The tops of all these towers are strewn with scree so we edged over to the absail point with extreme caution. The descent proved to be a lot more hairy and loose than the ascent. I can't understand why they have no problems bolting and pegging ascents and then only fix one point on the whole descent, which was described in the guide as "an easy walk back to the ramp". In my ring !

The second day we headed in the opposite direction to try for the Fingerspitze on the Sassolungo group. We got a small cablecar up to the coll and descended from there. The Italians are more akin to the Irish with their laid back attitude as the cablecar was due to start at 8 but didn't get going until 9. Makes you wonder if the Germans were there at all ! I managed to cock up things brilliantly by going off route in the first pitch going left instead of right and having "a right trouser filler". A good hour and several unretrived bits of gear later, I rejoined John & Richard at the belay. From there the guide was consulted as feverently as an OAP with a prayer book at a Solemn Novena. The route description was very sparse and while this might add to the adventurous nature of a days climbing it is annoying when time is wasted backtracking and absailing. However the day was splendid with roasting weather and fantastic views of the Sassolungo group which was much bigger than it looked from the pass. We found that the harder the climbing the more solid the rock. The route contained a few spectacular absails and traverses. One worrying feature of the climb was the old bits of tat left at absail points, into which we saw several climbers willingly lower off on, without any back-up. All for the sake of 50 or 60p's worth of chord and a few minutes ? One of the English lads had a friend

killed a few years ago when he absailed off an old bit of tat which snapped.

As it turned out getting down off the route took as long as getting up it. By the time we got back to the coll the last cablecar was well gone but it was only an hours walk back to the pass. There was a brilliant scree slope running most of the way down so I hopped in and slid the whole way down. Great fun. Needless to say Richard and John being slightly more mature in years declined in partaking from this form of descent and opted for the OAP (Only Along the Path) route.

We decided to head for a different group the following day. We picked a route in the Pala group which was described as "a great route on good firm rock". After scrambling up some steep grassy slopes we roped up, pulled our way up through some more steep but strong grass, avoided all rock as it moved at the touch, and unanimously decided it was a load of Choss. We were beginning to think that good rock in the Dolomites was any rock/vegetation with more consistency than a gravel heap. We abbed off and picked our way back through the pastures which were still being cut by hand with scythes. Maybe this was more for the benefit of the tourist trade than the local farmer. This was definitely true of the bells that the cows wore, as any old randy farmer unlucky enough not to have his way with the local women would be heard from miles off.

We opted for a short route the next day as we planned to head off to the Bernina Region, and went to climb on the First Sella Tower only 10 minutes from the road. Unfortunately a lot of other climbers had the same bright idea. Myself and Richard ended up spending half an hour waiting for the first pitch, again a supreme load of Choss. The belay point at the end of the first pitch was a joke with ropes running everywhere, and the two of us stuck in the middle. Over to our left there were at least 6 climbers all clipped onto the one peg with 2 more absailing down from above. Discretion was the better part of valor so we legged it. We were waiting for at least 2 more hours for John and Sandra back in the campervan and we could see 5 to 6 climbers still only at the top of the second pitch. It was time to annoy more local drivers, so we loaded up and headed off down the corkscrew roads, bound for Mt. Disgrazia in the Berninia. Our record for that day was 35 cars. We pulled into a proper campsite that night with some miles still to go but rejoiced in having showers for the first time in 6 days. We half expected the camp site owner to come up and de-louse us before getting into the showers.

Getting up the Ponti Hut on Mt. Disgrazia proved to be more of an event than the climb itself. The campervan wasn't going to make it up the hill to the end of the road so we started walking from the small village of Carraegio. The guide stated that the road up to the hut was blocked by a land slide but that this was due to be re-opened by 1995. We also knew that the hut was 2

hours walk from the end of the road and that was 4 hours from the village. So we grabbed cornflake box and pen and wrote "Refuge Ponti 20,000 Lira" and waved it at as many locals as possible, much to their amusement. Eventually after a lot of walking and hitching/begging we got a lift to the end of the road only to realise that the road was still blocked (and by the looks of things would be so for a good few years to come). and we still had at least 4 hours walk ahead of us. The Irish and Italian County-Councils have obviously had an exchange scheme in operation for many years.

The scenery was beautiful but walking in the heat with heavy packs was tough going. Once we were past the blockage we got back onto the road and entered a sort of forgotten village. I was glad I never got out a copy of "Deliverance" to watch. Luckily for us one smart thinking local saw opportunity knocking and had a small sign outside his little shack "Taxi - Refuge Ponti". We piled into his Fiat Uno and hared off up the road taking great amusement out of the dashbaord mounted horizontal and vertical angle meters. We gained ground at a tremendous rate and went through more hairpins than the Alp d'Huez. The walk from the end of the road was a slog but the situation was beautiful. I was fairly tired by the time we reached the hut but was quickly shook back into life by the other hut occupants. Among them were a dozen elderly Italian men having dinner and giving full operatic belt to some rousing songs.

We were looking forward to a good days climbing and a chance to don crampons. Mt. Disgrazia was described as "a remove but beautiful isolated peak with a committing route to the top". The walk up the glacier to the coll was enjoyable but straightforward. Luckily for us there were only 4 others on the climb. At the time of writing the guide the route followed a snow crested route with some rock to the top. However we were on rock most of the way, and surprise surprise it was as loose as a whore's knickers. Ag chossadoireacht aris. The views of Mt. Bernina and surrounding peaks were well worth the effort but the route fell well short of its illustrious praise in the guide. One of the couples ahead of us decided a rope was not necessary for the rock section but soon regretted their decision. They were very glad of a rope from John after coming across a tricky iced section. After brief summit celebrations we made our way back to the coll, back on with the crampons and off down to the hut. We stopped for a few cups of tea and took time to admire the views. Those female Italian day trippers were some sight ! We were blessed with luck on the way back down. Just as we reached the head of the road a small open-backed van pulled out of a clearing and granted us a lift. They were on their way to mass in a tiny wooden church at the bottom of the isolated valley. There must have been at least 50 in the congregation. More luck followed as some of the climbers on the route had driven up to the end of the blocked off road, and they were only too happy to stick us in the back all the way to Carraegio.

It was time to change country so we left Italy and headed for the Swiss Alps. We drove around

the beautiful but completely built up Lake Como and had a great evening generating car queues. The next day brought us to Kandersag with the Bluemishalp in our sights. The walk in to the hut was long but took us up by a beautiful deep blue glacial lake. I passed the time throwing small stones into Johns helmet that was hanging down from his day-sac. A bit of drag training is no harm. The hut was fairly busy and we were informed that the normal route up to the Blumishalp was not in condition. So we would try for the traverse which was described as more committing and spectacular than the Rocheford Arete in Chamonix. For once the guide proved correct.

By 5 in the morning we were picking our way through the crevasses on the glacier while most other parties opted to pick their way through the rock slopes. By sunrise we were making good ground as the terrain steepened and we ascended the Dodelhorn. There was some very enjoyable climbing over solid crevassed ice and up the slope to the top. It was probably no more than 45 to 50? but the ice was in good condition and the climbing went well. We then started off on the ridge to the Wisse Frau encountering some steep ice and loose rock sections. Like Mt. Disgrazia a lot of the snow has melted away in the last few years which changes the nature of the climbing and the grade. Once on the Wisse Frau we could see the ridge to the Blumishalp clearly. There were some signs of rockfall but not from the ridge top. The climbing remained exposed but very enjoyable as the snow stayed frozen. We were no more than an hour from the peak when a large lump of rock came away from the ridge and plummeted down to the glacier below. It was time to retrace our steps. We decided that the Wisse Frau was not safe to descend, again coming into the category of Choss, so we continued back to the Dodelhorn and from there backclimbed to the glacier as the sun began to set. I picked up a nice souvenir in the form of a Charlet Mosser walking axe, which was frozen into the side of the steep slope. There was no sign of the owner though. It was dark by the time we crossed the glacier and we opted for the high path through the rocks to avoid the lower crevasses. After an hour of going down dead ends on the rocky slopes we decided to bivvy and wait for light to get to the hut, which we could see was at most an hour away.

The flashes of lightning in the far off distance and the overhead canopy of stars helped to distract from the cold and the hard bed. I must have annoyed the hell out of the others as I also had an emergency foil blanket wrapped around me which the wind continually blew around. I looked more like a giant Christmas Turkey than a bivvying mountaineer. As light came we awoke and staggered around like drunken men trying to get blood back into limbs. When we got back to the hut the plastic boots came off. Boy what a stick. The hut was full of scouts amused at our rough appearance. One young girl came out of her room, stuck up her nose and declared "phew, there's a smell of men here" before going back in. On the walk back down we heard two almighty explosions and frantically searched for avalanches or stone falls. We learnt later that they were caused by Swiss Air Force Jets going supersonic. AS far as I know they are the only European country that allow supersonic flight in their air-space, everybody else goes out to the Atlantic.

We got back to the campervan and were surprised it was not towed away for not having any parking tickets on it. After a day of rest, Jenga and 12 year old Jameson Whiskey we drove over to Grindelwald and booked into the Mittegili hut on the West ridge of the Eiger. Ever since seeing that route on Dermot Summers brilliant "Cuairt na Crinne" program on TnaG we wanted to try it. We got some great advise from the old campsite owner who used to be a guide himself and had hauled up 30 meter lengths of the fixed rope on his back. They don't make them like they used to ! We joined the throngs of Japanese on the Jungfrau train and gradually made our way up to Kline Scheidg and then literally right through the Eiger. Its hard to believe that this railway was built almost 100 years ago. We got off at the Eismeer station and dropped onto the galcier below. Ahead could be seen the Mittegili Ridge and its hut, a small isolated dot spectacularly situated on the ridge. After 3 hours on ice and choss we reached the tiny hut. Its hard to believe that it sleeps and feeds 16. All the feeding was done out of a second tiny hut by one brave warden who has been up there for the last 2 months. Dinner was in rota as there was only room for 6 at a go. We were lucky that we arrived late and only had an hour to wait. Some English lads were waiting most of the day for food. During the traverse to the hut earlier that day they were right under a serac when some more Swiss Jets went supersonic. Trouser filler how are ya !

Like dinner breakfast was in rotation so we were last to go on the ridge. We made good ground and for once the rock was solid enough. We found that hauling yourself hand over hand is the quickest way to climb the many fixed ropes that adorn the Mittegili. The ropes were definitely unnecessary in places but they speeded up the climbing throughout, allowing us to move together for most of the ridge. It was a tremendous route with some spectacular exposure and great views of the Lauper route, Monk and Jungfrau. There was hardly any snow or ice on the route and our crampons remained in our bags for that day. After some summit posing and photographs of Richard with Ballymaloe House Relish, Taty Crisps and The Cork Holly Bough we were on our way down. We opted for the ordinary descent which is very aptly described as a "pile of stones strewn across a tile roof". Route finding is indeed difficult once the absail posts peter out. Whatever about coming down this route I would hate to have to climb it. We followed the book carefully and "descended down diagonally rightwards to where an oblique meets the ridge, then absail a steep gully". We repeated this move at least 3 times until we reached the correct point. There is no path to follow for most of the descent and the best guides are crampon marks on the rocks. I can't remember a longer, more tiring or boring descent. A traverse onto the back of the Monk is a far more appealing and only slightly longer option.

We made it back to the Eigergletcher station just in time for the last train which was full of sleeping Japanese, knackered from excessive photographing at altitude. Another good sesiuin of Jameson and Jenga followed that night. Sandra and John went back up to do the Monk the next day as myself and Richard took the morning off. The weather broke that afternoon and the two came back down having had a good day in the storms. It was time to pack the bags and head for Cherbourg with a stop in Fontainbleau on the way back. It was my first time there and

what a place. We stayed in two small areas for the whole day and didn't have to repeat the same problem once. The whole forest is covered with millions of boulders with endless numbers of routes. We celebrated in style on the boat the following night with John succumbing to the disorientating effects of low-altitude and requiring 4 attempts to successfully find his cabin that night. That marked the end of the chossadoireacht. We were looking forward to getting back to some good solid Kerry sandstone ??