

Piz Quattervals

This is the report of my trip of Friday, October 14, 1994. It was the last day of our vacation in the *Engadin* valley which we again spent at the hotel *Il Fuorn* at the *Ofenpass*, following an old family tradition. This time we formed a rather small group of four including my sister and my mother's youngest sister. They are good hikers but still did not always feel like joining me on big hikes. On the preceding days I had done a few tough trips on my own; therefore I felt pretty confident about my condition. Since the weather was still like a dream I decided to tackle *Piz* (pronounced pits) *Quattervals*, a peak of 3165 meters of altitude in a rather remote region of the *Swiss National Park*. I had been in the area before, and I knew it was going to be tough.

I left the hotel at 7.30 - too late, of course, but I did not want to miss the good breakfast - and I was at the trailhead (1480 meters above sea level) around 8 a.m. I climbed comfortably through pine and larch woods that had already turned into the beautiful yellow colors typical of the season. After a climb of 600 m the trail flattens out to cross a few steep gulleys, but then, alas, you have to return all the way to the bottom of the valley, losing more than 300 m of altitude. This brought me near the *Cluozza hut* which I reached in a total time of two hours.

This hut is unlike most other Swiss huts. It consists of a whole complex of buildings in American block house style, still in the forest, and renovated only last year. There is even a little museum section showing the animal and plant life of the Park, like chamois, ibex, eagles, vultures. I did not allow myself to stop more than a few minutes since Piz Quattervals was lingering 1200 meters above the hut at the end of a steep (damn steep!) valley called *Valletta*.

Soon I had to leave the easy trail, and I immediately found myself alone with no living things around except for a little bit of dry grass. The tiny red trail markings ended, and I was on the mercy of the occasional cairns, barely visible among the countless rocks that fill the bottom and the slopes of the valley. I managed to climb another 600 m, totalling my time to about 4 hours. On a plateau overlooking the lower Valletta and the huts I stopped for a while, then I continued into the wilderness of rocks and snow only.

This remote area is really very interesting; part of it is covered by one of the rare block glaciers. As seen from below, the block glacier looks like a pile of gravel in a quarry, with tidy slopes as if they had been carefully prepared. It behaves like a glacier and moves a few feet per year. I do not know the exact mechanics of it, but I guess some ice buried underneath could play a role. The Valletta block glacier is more than 20 meters high, 100 meters wide and almost 1 km long. Walking along the slopes of the block glacier and on top of it became more and more tiring since the rocks were just about the size of the boots.

It would not have been a good idea to climb the block glacier at its lower end; there the impressive pile of rocks and gravel was too steep and not sufficiently stable. However, on its side there was a little valley, quite comfortable to walk up if you didn't mind the countless rocks you necessarily have to step on. A little further up,

where the block glacier was only 10 meters high, I managed to climb to the top which is almost entirely flat except for a modest slope in the direction of the valley.

At this spot I got my first close-up view of my goal, *Piz Quattervals*. It is an impressive mountain, very unfriendly, though. The whole Northern side is covered with gravel and countless rocks in the range of decimeters to feet in size (no scree fun as in the Dolomites!). Typically, the slope gets ever steeper the closer you approach the mountain. I was trying to make out a possible route to climb the remaining 250 meters to the top, circumventing the steepest part to the left. The biggest problem was the lack of snow which leaves all the blocks exposed. It would have been a pleasure to walk up on frozen snow with crampons. This area had been a glacial cirque not long ago, but now the glacier is reduced to a few pieces of ice burried under the blocks. By the way, on that day I probably saw more pieces of rock than in my whole life before. It was already noon, and I was able to enjoy walking partly in sunshine. In many spots up there the sun never rises in October.

The cairns became more and more scarce; it had been quite some time since I came by the last one. I continued climbing over the blocks, heading for a saddle on the left (Eastern) ridge. The weather was still beautiful, and there were only three colours to be seen: The dark grey of the rocks, the dark blue of the sky, and the white of the patches of snow. Although I really adore being in the mountains I started feeling "somewhat" lonely. I felt about as lonely as if I were on the Moon. In fact even lonelier; on the Moon at least from time to time an Apollo crew comes by.

Slowly I began to realize that I would not make it to the top. But at least I wanted to reach a spot where the slope seemingly became less steep for a while. Also, this spot is about at the 3000-meter level, so it looked like a good place to call it quits. To get up there was one thing, but to get down again in the steep slope over the coarse and loose rocks was really a pain in the neck, to say the least! Every block I stepped on started to move, and often my boots got stuck between two loose boulders. All kinds of bad words came to my mind; only the strongest expletives can adequately describe this initial portion of my descent. After carefully negotiating over loose rocks for more than an hour I reached a stable spot again which was even in sunshine.

Since I did not have to go to the Piz any more, I took my time to examine the remains of the extinct glacier. One piece of ice contained the bottom of a crevasse. To fall in would not have been nice, but you would have been able to free yourself without rescue equipment.

The advantage of giving up ambitious plans is that you can take it easy after you have accepted the facts. That's what I did, I sat down on a fairly large boulder in a sunny spot, drank some of my hot tea and enjoyed a gorgeous meal with sandwiches, bread and chocolate (still one of my favorites). And of course I pondered about what to do differently to get to the top next time. It is not a mountain to be done solo in a day trip in mid-October, starting late at the bottom of the valley! It's as simple as that, and I should have known this before, but you can always try. At least it was quite an achievement to have gotten that far.

However, I still had to get down. So I had better stop pondering and get going. Walking down over the coarse rocks was still delicate; to sprain an ankle would have

been a disaster. At last, I reached the rim of the block glacier, and I had to overcome the steep and extremely rough grade of it, before I finally could walk a bit faster on smoother terrain. After a while I arrived at the plateau which marks the end of the recently glaciated area. It was a very interesting spot indeed: in the back was the barren landscape of rocks and ice in absolute loneliness. However, in front, 600 m below, one could see the hut in the green valley like having a glimpse back into civilisation. I enjoyed the two completely different views for a few minutes before I began the long descent which was to consist of about 700 m down, 350 m up, and again 600 m down.

It started with some scrambling in a fairly steep slope, but to compensate, occasional cairns marked a rudimentary trail. Rare patches of grass told me that I had left the lifeless area and was to come into more hospitable regions. Suddenly, I heard somebody whistle above me, but it was not the otherwise ubiquitous whistle of a marmot, it rather sounded like a bird's whistle. I searched the entire sky, but there was no bird. Instead, I found myself right next to a herd of majestic ibexes (Steinböcke). I remember having heard this whistling sound as their warning cry on other trips. These mountain goats were impressive animals, males and females carrying beautiful big horns. Two of them were only 20 meters away, and they were not at all shy. It looked like they were considering me as one of their friends rather than as an intruder. A little bit further up there were many more, 16 altogether. With my glasses I really could observe them very well. I took this as my reward compensating me for not reaching the summit.

The remaining descent was without special events. Near the hut I encountered the first humans after my day in complete isolation. They were getting ready to spend the night up there. Unfortunately, I had planned differently. Well, next time I'll do better. The "descent" from the hut would have been an easy walk, had it not contained the climb of 350 meters. The trail first descends 75 m into the valley and then winds all the way up to the timber line on the other side, not a nice sight when you've had your fair share of climbing already. I took all my courage and reached the top 50 minutes later. Since I still had some energy left I used the steep shortcuts for the final descent through the alpine forest, and I reached the car after only 45 more minutes. This was another surprising effect of using shortcuts, to be added to the "Cristallo Paradox" of 1993, where I had passed the leading group by a large margin from a position way behind.

Amazingly, a mere 3 hours' walk had brought me back out of complete isolation. Over all, on this trip I covered a trail distance of 20 km (12.5 miles) with over 2150 meters (7000 feet) of climbs and descents in 9 hours 40 minutes, a good day's work! My party was happy to see me back. And I still was in sufficiently good condition to enjoy the good meal and the nice evening at the hotel.

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Jörg Waldvogel