

Tour de Val de Bagnes – Alp-trekking on a rather high level

September 2005

There we stood - ready for the challenge – all six of us in Verbier, Switzerland and waited for the taxi. There was Ted with a past career in international textile-trading, Jörgen, the Professor in specialist surgery, David, international entrepreneur-consultant with the whole wide world as his office, Pekka, the IT/Telecom executive, Kim, the golf-course entrepreneur, and the undersigned, a discharged bank-executive – all aged between 20 and 80. The taxi arrived and took us down to Chable and up on the other side of the valley above Bruson to Montagne du Six Blanc, and the trekking could start. The taxi-driver smiled delighted, when he left us 100 francs poorer and he probably thought he was lucky that he was spared from having to join the trekking. The sun was shining from a weak blue sky and we started our march from an altitude of 2.150 meters, with our organiser Ted in the lead. We all had one pole in each hand and slowly but surely we found the rhythm. Already after half an hour it was time to trim the clothes, when the drops of perspiration (sweat) started to appear. The first pause was on Col de Mille at an altitude of 2.471 meters and we entered Cabane de Mille, where we shared a plate of dried meat together with – in this early hour – some soft-drinks. The trekking then continued in lovely easy terrain at an elevation of between 2.400 and 2.070 meters and after a while we arrived at Cabane Brunet at 2.101 meters, where lunch was served – spaghetti al pesto and a juicy well suited red wine. After lunch it became tougher, not only because of the wine. Major quite stony heights above Col des Avouillons, were interrupted by tougher downhills. The grand finale of the first day's trekking was the crossing of the glacier – Glacier de Corbassière – with some nasty cracks and a very long, steep and stony finish up to our night-shelter – Cabane FXB-Panossière at an altitude of 2.636 meters. This first whole day of trekking lasted for more than eight hours and measured a difference in altitude of 1.585 up-wards, and 1.045 downwards. A very tired gang had a meaty but leathery dinner swallowed with the assistance of some red stuff with a picture of the cabane on the bottle. After having enjoyed the sunset above the mountains and the dramatic glaciers we all fell asleep in a six-persons dormitory. The snoring and some friendly farts made the night rather memorable for the non-snoring majority (probably partly however due to the relatively high altitude).

Well, so we woke up to a new day, with the same fantastic weather. Breakfast and away we went. First a heavy ascent to appr. 2.900 meters up to Col des Otnes and then slowly down towards a very large dam – Lac de Mauvoisin. At a couple of places the cows with their horns sharpened – or perhaps they were bulls? – were so obtrusive that only by using our utmost cow-pedagogic tricks we managed to scatter the herd and continue our trekking. We had our lunch – no wine this time – on the slopes above the dam. After lunch we followed the track at an altitude of 2.100 meters along the whole dam, and then after a relatively steep ascent, we reached Cabane de Chanrion at 2.463 meters. Also this cabane was very nice, the wine tasted red, the pasta-dinner was tasty and we finished it all up with coffee and Williamine. This day we had walked about 7 hours, and reached altitude-differences of 890 meters up and 1.100 meters down. A very accommodating cabane-hostess – and only a few other guests – made it possible to place the two snorers in a special room, thus the night in this cabane was more agreeable for everybody.

Day three was another day and we woke up early. Snow and rain – mist, damp and coldness – well, well the spirit was still high and the cheese from Ted's rucksack tasted excellent for breakfast. To start with some hundred meters (altitude) upwards and then slowly down on the

other side of the dam. We saw wild mountain-goats keeping watch high up on the peaks and the farmers sheep glared at us on the slopes down towards the dam. Finally we came down to the end of the impressive dam, where the turbines were buzzing and we arrived at a station, Mauvoisin, where we caught the regular bus to the village of Fionnay (only a ten minutes bus-ride away). Here we left the professor who had become lame in one leg and had been limping along the last couple of hours, as well as Kim who had an urgent meeting in Geneva to attend to. The remaining four of us left the bus, and after some well deserved cappuchinos we started on a decent ascent – up, up and away... Here and there we were assisted by fixed devices. In spite of the mist we hinted and enjoyed the dramatic sceneries with fine precipices and upwards reaching plateaus. After about an hour and 45 minutes and 750 meters of altitude change, we reached Cabane de Louvie. Here they were about to close down for the season, but nevertheless we were treated with great red wine and a totally acceptable lasagne as well as a very friendly reception. The charming cabane-hostess, Claudia Filliez, only 24 years of age, has already four seasons behind her. She is doing a great job and has made this cabane very famous in the district, not the least for its excellent food. During the winter-season, Claudia works in the Guide-office (Bureau des Guides) in Verbier.

Time passed and suddenly it was half past three in the afternoon. The rain continued to fall with some snow on higher altitude. The idea was now that we should continue via Col Termin and then Sentier de Chamois to Cabane de Mont Fort. But, but sometimes one has to be able to change ones plans – the group sitting at the next table had just come from Cabane de Mont Fort and could tell us that the usual track was blocked because of a rock-slide and the track that they had taken via Col de la Chaux had taken four and a half hours. We could count on five hours, another 720 meters of altitude difference, mist, snow and at the end falling darkness – in other word very tight margins. The decision was taken and we turned around and found our way down to the village of Fionnay. The good thing with this decision was that it gave us the opportunity to at a very close range study two magnificent ibexes with their stunning horns on a mountain-cliff just above us. If we had brought our rifles the grand trofees had now adorned our walls above the fireplaces, but now instead the great creatures could continue to fascinate the trekkers.

Anyhow – one should never give up – we still aimed for Cabane de Mont Fort. The taxi was ordered, which took us to Verbier and up to les Ruinettes, the lift-station at an altitude of 2.163 meters. The mist was thicker now and it was slowly getting dark, but we challenged it and made for the ascent. We followed a road - we followed a ridge - we followed nothing. We saw houses which were no houses and it was getting dark. Now we called from a mobile to the cabane and asked somebody to go out and shout, and we heard something from a far distance. Then, suddenly Ted shouted of joy. He had found the track which led to the cabane, and after another 15 minutes we could rest the horses at the fireplace of the cabane. A very nice cabane, which most skiers in Verbier know well. We were given two rooms- the snorers shared of course one. Here we now celebrated this long but very memorable day with salad, soup, dried meat and cheese-fondue. The food was accompanied down the stomachs by a great Rosé – Dole Blanche – and we finished off with a plum-cake, Williamine, and capuchinos..... well, well its tough in the mountains.....! This day we had covered an altitude-difference of 1.370 meters up and 1.760 meters down in about seven hours.

The next morning it was below zero and the mist was still thick. We walked on easy tracks with man-made water-folds (bisses) all the way down to Verbier, and our four days of trekking had come to an end. We met the professor whose leg had now healed and we all agreed on that this was a great way to live – freedom and floating, almost magic views of

peaks and glaciers create a strange feeling of humility – probably these experiences assist in making you a better human being!

September 2005 - Anders Björck