

Dom (4545 m or 14,913 ft), August 16th, 1996

Dom is the crowning point of the Mischabel range and the highest mountain situated entirely in Switzerland. By Swiss standards it is a relatively easy climb but this was my most technically difficult mountain yet, more difficult than Rainier.

There were four people on the trip, Jörg Waldvogel and Hans Bär from Kloten, Switzerland, Lynn Prebble from Canyon City, Colorado and myself from Divide, Colorado. Hans, who had not climbed five years, had an impressive climbing record: 1) the North Face of the Eiger, 2) the North Face of the Matterhorn, 3) the Grandes Jorasses and 4) ten routes up the Mont Blanc. Jörg had climbed Rimpfischhorn, Tödi and the Matterhorn. Lynn and I only had Rainier to our credit but we had the advantage of being used to the altitude climbing 14ers in Colorado.

We started the trip in the town of Randa (1408 m), a very typical and lovely small town. We had taken a train from Zurich to our starting point which was the trail to the Domhütte which starts on the other side of town. We had to start the trip off right by stopping at a restaurant for drinks and ice cream sundaes. Then we wandered through narrow side streets, where all the houses had beautiful flower boxes and gardens, to the trail which ascended steeply to the hut at 2940 meters.

This trail was typical for a Swiss Blue trail: steep, ladders, cables, rock climbing and some exposure. The scenery was spectacular with awesome views initially of Weißhorn and later of the Matterhorn. We made it to the hut in under five hours and found a mob scene. Unlike the huts that I had frequented before this one was completely full. Similar to our 14ers, the 4000ers in Switzerland are equally as attractive and this hut was a climbing hut. This meant that our only possible accommodation was the floor with no blankets or pillows! (I do believe that this was Jörg's revenge for me putting a 50 pound pack on his back when he visited me in Colorado in 1989). It's hard to believe that I used to consider sleeping in a snow hole as "roughing it".

I was not very enthusiastic about this idea since it hadn't been an easy trip up, we were going to be awakened at 2:30 in the morning, and we had a major climb ahead of us. I was also concerned about Jörg who was not used to the altitude as Lynn and I were. After all, this was supposed to be vacation and I was here to visit with Jörg not take him on a death march so that I could claim another peak. However, Jörg talked with Hans and we all agreed that if he were to have problems we would turn back. This made me feel a lot better though it didn't enhance my enthusiasm for the floor.

Dinner was great (as they always are when you're starving) and it was soon 9:00 and the tables were moved aside for those attempting to sleep. There were others outside on the ground in sleeping bags scattered all around the hut. Needless to say, I didn't get much sleep that night and before I knew it the lights came on with the hut keeper calling "Morgen!". From here on it was utter chaos with everyone trying to pack for the climb. At 3:00 breakfast was served. Everyone stood in line to obtain their bread, butter, cheese and jam along with tea or coffee. By 4:00 we were starting up the trail towards the glacier, following a line of bobbing lights ahead of us.

The trail led to the glacier's edge and it was here that we put on our crampons and roped up. We started out on the solid ice of the lower part of the glacier with Hans in the lead, Lynn next, then Jörg and myself bringing up the rear. The glacier took off steeply and soon we were having to weave around the crevasses that obstructed our way. These crevasses kept getting bigger until soon we were walking beside large gaping trenches. At one point we started crossing over narrow ice bridges and at another point traversed an ice bridge no more than a foot and a half wide. This was done putting our feet on a narrow ledge a couple of feet below and balancing above with our hands. "What am I doing here?" went through my mind.

Then Hans decided to cross an even more foreboding route and I decided that this was not for me. If climbing Dom was this hard I was way out of my league. Plus, the guidebook had said to stay close to the left side of the glacier and we were way out in the middle. I appealed to Hans to consider this approach. After some discussion amongst ourselves we headed back towards the left and, to my relief, left the sea of crevasses. Soon we were on an obvious snow path and things were much lighter as dawn came. We could see that the valley was clouded in but above us was clear blue sky. The Matterhorn was magnificent with the rosy hue of dawn and I was feeling a lot better now. We could see the backside of Dom and its long connecting ridge to the Festijoch (3723 m at its base).

The Festijoch was the pass from the Festi glacier to the Hohberg glacier. This pass looked most formidable like a fortress wall and I wasn't sure how easy this would be to cross. The initial ascent from the glacier was 4th class climbing on solid rock where someone had placed a fixed rope. Upon inspection, the rope had seen better days but the climbing was good. Once over this section we were again on trail up to the top of the ridge. Looking over the other side to the Hohberg glacier one observed that the ridge dropped off dramatically onto a glacier criss-crossed with many crevasses. We followed the ridge towards the direction of Dom and it suddenly seemed to drop off to nowhere. We looked around for an obvious route but didn't see one. Hans was suggesting that he belay me over the edge for a look. I climbed higher and looked over the edge. This looked like the route, which followed the ridge, so I came down and started over the edge.

The climbing was good class 4 but the exposure was a little disturbing, one could potentially fall onto the glacier and into a crevasse. I climbed on, weaving around many corners and not really confident that Hans could hold me since there was no protection holding him. But I was confident in my abilities and soon made it to the other side and onto the glacier. I belayed Lynn over from my end and Hans from his end also belayed her. Then came Jörg with Hans soon after. We were now below Dom and most of the people ahead of us were on its northwest ridge, the ridge that we had intended to climb as well. This ridge is steeper than the standard route but safer in that you don't have to go below a potential ice fall point.

Hans, who had not climbed in five years, was also feeling the effects of the altitude. He thought it may be better to go the standard route because there was no way to turn around part way up the northwest ridge. On the standard route we could do this and weren't committed to making it to the top. The one disadvantage was the potential ice fall but I considered this worth the opportunity to have a way out if one of our party couldn't go on. With this decision made we descended to

the flat glacier and walked towards the Nadelhorn below the icefall. Debris from the falling ice littered the glacier and we walked quickly through here. The amount of overhanging ice above was humongous and it did not seem prudent to tarry long below it.

Once across we had a couple more crevasses to jump and then we walked across a large basin towards the Lenzjoch which crossed over to Längfluh on the Saas side (where we had stayed two nights to do our climb of Allalinhorn) . We were now at the foot of the snowy north flank of Dom and we angled right up the glacier. The route at this point was pretty straight forward following the trail in the snow. It was steep, poor footing at times, and sometimes very strenuous. But the views that were emerging were spectacular. The sky remained clear and deep blue with the alps a beautiful backdrop behind the massive white slope of Dom. We traversed across a couple of snowbridges where the crevasses on both side were large enough to park several motor homes. What a mountain!

Several times during the slow trudge up the north flank, Hans tried to encourage Lynn and I to go on ahead. He felt that they may not make it and we could if we went ahead. With the weather as beautiful as it was I was in no hurry to summit and I questioned as to what other unforeseen hazards could happen if we were late in summiting. Hans seemed to feel that this wasn't a problem so Lynn and I insisted on all of us taking it slow to the top. This was fine for me, for once I was able to really take in all of the view without worrying about my next breath.

We passed several groups coming down, some encouraging us that we only had a maximum of 2 hours to go. We finally reached a level point just below point 4479 m where a large group of Italians were resting before the trip down. Like numerous other people we had encountered they were very curious about my snow pickets. No one seemed to be familiar with their use which I was quite surprised about. We were told that the summit was a bit breezy and cold and so we decided to take another break at this point to replenish for the final leg.

We took off again and soon reached the saddle at point 4479 m. From here we had one last steep and narrow ridge to climb to the summit. Finally we were there at 14,913 feet, the highest that Lynn, Jörg and myself had ever climbed! What a view, so different from those in Colorado or from Rainier. Everywhere you looked there were sharp and glaciated peaks. We could see Allalinhorn, which we had just climbed two days before, Rimpfischhorn, Monte Rosa, the Matterhorn, the Mont Blanc, and the Grandes Jorasses which just names a few. We stood on a tiny summit with a steep and precipitous cornice to the east of us. With great feeling we exchanged hugs and took pictures. But it was cold and late and soon we had to go down. It's so unfortunate that this is usually the case in mountaineering, the long arduous haul for the short moment of wonder at the top.

Now all we had to do was make it safely back down. Though it was cold at the top, things had warmed up considerably elsewhere on the glacier and there would be a greater possibility of punching through the snowbridges on the way down. Plus, we were more tired and the chances for error had increased. It seemed like we noticed the massive crevasses more on the way down since now we didn't have to fight for oxygen and seemed to see things more clearly. The ice fall also seemed a bit more intimidating but soon we were back to the Festijoch. It seemed like the return was

measured in increments of one hurdle conquered and then the next. Now we only had two more hurdles, the rock of the Festijoch and the crevasses at the bottom of the glacier.

I was first again over the rock and did slip at one point and bang my shin, I definitely had to be more careful. But we all made it safely to the final downclimb with the questionable rope. Downclimbing is always the hardest for me but soon we were all down and Hans had taken off. I think he could no longer stand the confines of the rope and had glissaded off down the snow trail with the rope! Oh well, we were probably all right and it was time to travel more in the Swiss fashion. But I was putting on my crampons, call me crazy. We only had a few small crevasses to cross ropeless, what the hell.

It was everyone's opinion (besides possibly Hans that is) to try and avoid the crevasse field we had traversed that morning. We saw bits and pieces of a crude trail alongside the glacier. We followed this (which was interesting with crampons) and then at one point Hans crossed over a point where the ground started sliding downward. Upon closer inspection I realized that the moving ground was rocks/dirt on a steep ice slope that slid uninterrupted into a cavernous and seemingly bottomless crevasses. You could hear the continuous sound of falling rubble and it appeared like the slide was feeding a glacier monster below. Lynn crossed behind Hans and stood on a large rock as it slid towards the mouth. I told her she should probably move and I looked for a way to avoid this way of passage. I moved further up and crossed the ice where it was clean. Even with the security of crampons I didn't like the thought of that mouth below me. I quickly crossed to the ground on the other side and carefully hugged the dirt side down to Hans. From here the mouth of the crevasse looked even bigger, I was glad to be back on safe ground.

Further down we encountered another seemingly bottomless crevasse that we had to skirt on less than stable ground. It was hard to decide which route had been worse, the one this morning or the one we were on now. But soon we were back to the place where we had first roped up and could take off our crampons. Great, all the hurdles were now jumped and we only had a dirt trail to follow back to the hut. But the elation of victory was short lived when we were told that the situation at the hut was much worse, instead of a floor to sleep on we only had a chair! Later we were to learn this was only a joke, the floor would just be more crowded. I was even able to get a bed. So with some great food, wine and company we celebrated our accomplishment. Plus, by 3:00 everyone was able to get a bed as the next wave of climbers marched on to Dom. Unfortunately, out of this wave we did learn later that two were killed in a fall off the Saas side.

What a trip Dom was, something I will never forget. Thank you Jörg for the opportunity to share my highest and hardest summit with you and thanks to Hans and Lynn for the great comradery and team effort to the summit. Words will never express the feelings that I have.

August 28th, 1996

Denise Snow