

Expedition Report: Monte Rosa 2017

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Day 1:

We arrived at Gatwick Airport three hours before the flight to ensure we had enough time to check in the research equipment and board our flight. Despite a participant being held up at the courtesy of a National Express bus, we all managed to board the plane with no problems. Our luck took an unfortunate turn for the worst as a bout of turbulent weather played its first hand in a series of adverse weather events cast by 'heatwave Lucifer'. This ridge of high pressure had descended over Europe causing widespread thunderstorms which delayed our departure time by almost two hours. As well as being a worrying sign for the week to come, in the short term, the delay had put our transfer and dinner plans under threat. Nevertheless, the Italians awaiting our arrival were more than accommodating and managed to transfer us all to our valley campsite with enough time to spare to pitch our tents before we headed to a nearby restaurant for an incredible four-course Italian meal.

Day 2:

The day began with clear skies, an early start and a quick morning briefing over breakfast. Soon after, the Research Coordinator gathered the expedition group and explained the scheduling of the research rota, before commencing with the first round of research. At this point, all was going to plan. As the research ended, the guides arrived and distributed the necessary mountaineering equipment amongst the group. Once everyone was kitted out, we had our first briefing from the guides during lunch, before setting off for the Orestes Hut. After a three hour hike in the warm, muggy Italian sun we arrived at the very modern yet rustic mountain refuge where we were treated to a wonderful four-course vegan meal. Having arrived at our new altitude, we began our second round of research which was completed earlier than anticipated, granting the team some time for relaxation before bed.

Day 3:

An early breakfast set the tone for the day as we collected our kit and headed up the valley towards the foot of the Garstlet glacier. It was another three hours of hiking through varied terrain as we continued our ascent. Before long we had reached the glacier, and following instruction from the guides we strapped on our crampons and freed our ice axes

from our backpacks. We then split into groups of four and went through some basic mountaineering skills before traversing the glacier towards the base of a steep rocky ladder that paved the way to the Gnifetti Hut. Upon arrival, we helped ourselves to a quick lunch before heading out onto the decking for an afternoon rope skills session with the guides, where we practiced knot tying and crevasse rescue techniques. Spirits were high as we sat together and enjoyed yet another astonishing and much needed four-course meal. After dinner, we conducted another round of research before retiring to our cabins for the night. It would be an early 4:30am start the next day if we wanted to reach our final destination - the Margherita Hut. With heatwave Lucifer continuing to cause meteorological chaos on the higher slopes, the guides had prepared us for the inevitable by voicing their concerns about the unfavourable weather forecast for our summit day. Nevertheless, we remained hopeful, blind with ignorant ambition, and that night we all slept with our fingers and toes crossed.

Day 4:

It was at breakfast the next day that our worst fears were confirmed as the guides delivered the crushing news that there was to be no ascent to the Margherita Hut. Although the conditions outside the Gnifetti appeared clear as we sat and ate breakfast, we knew that the weather was predicted to deteriorate rapidly. Even though there was a chance that we could make the ascent, we would inevitably become stuck, unable to descend from the summit for days. In an attempt to make the most of a bad situation, the guides offered to once again take us out onto the glacier so we could practice negotiating and crossing crevasses. After an hour of ascent, as we reached the 4,000m mark, the blizzard crept in and it became blindingly obvious that the further 554m of ascent to the Margherita Hut would not be possible. After another hour spent descending in poor visibility, we were all glad to put the experience behind us and relax in the relative safety of the Gnifetti hut. To compensate for our missing data set from 4,554m, we decided to complete a second round of research at 3,647m. After dinner, we gathered in the main seating area for an evening of conversation and card games with the other mountaineers that had been trapped by the storm at the refuge. Shortly before bed, the guides announced that a weather window the next day might allow us to attempt the summit of the nearby Vincent Pyramid, before our scheduled descent back to the valley campsite. Although this wouldn't rectify any research shortcomings, it would have gone along way to ease the disappointment of having been unable to reach the Margherita hut. Unfortunately, although unsurprisingly, thunderstorms ran rampant during the night, with bolts of lightning reportedly hitting the Gnifetti itself.

Day 5:

The next day we awoke to beautiful clear skies and to news that other groups of mountaineers staying at the Gnifetti had already begun their ascent to the Margherita. Despite the now favourable weather conditions, the guides expressed their reservations about taking our group of 20 up to the Vincent Pyramid after the recent snowfall. At the time, their decision led to a degree of discontentment amongst the expedition group, but in hindsight it was clear that the guides made the right call. The fluctuating weather had become an increasing source of frustration for all, including the guides, and in some ways we were glad that the expedition was now coming to an end, and with this we began our descent back to the valley below. Upon our safe return, we parted ways with the guides and decided to treat ourselves to dinner at a local pizzeria. Despite heavy rain and thunder outside, the restaurant was full of local residents, and with our restrictions on alcohol now lifted, the night enveloped into a dancing exhibition as Italian and British dance moves filled the foyer until well past midnight.

Day 6:

Day 6 of the expedition schedule was our allocated rest day and it turned out to be exactly what the group needed. With no formal plans, the expedition team spent the day exploring the valley and the nearby 17th century castle. Despite the continuing thunderstorms, spirits were high as the sting of our failed summit attempt started to abate. To end what had been a very eventful week, the team gathered for a final meal at the same local restaurant that we had enjoyed our first evening meal at. Once again we were treated to a selection of four courses, each one more delicious than the last, and although there was no dancing that night, the lightning outside provided all the entertainment we could have asked for.