

# PIAN D'ALPE

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Looking across the calm sapphire surface of Lake Como to the Alps beckoning in the north takes me back to an adventure that began here, 28 years ago.

I was attending a late-June meeting for young arms controllers, at the Villa Serbelloni, the Rockefeller Foundation conference center on Lake Como. After the conference, I was to travel through the Soviet Union with a friend from college. Back in 1978, the Soviet government gave permission to enter the country only on a certain day, and the date we had been given was a week after the conference ended. So I planned to spend a few days hiking in the Alps with Chip, my college friend who came down from Paris, and a graduate school classmate, Jack, who had also attended the conference, before Chip and I departed for the U.S.S.R.

As the conference wound up, a German colleague, Harald, said he also had plans to hike and the four of us joined up for our tramp through the mountains. Harald knew of a Swiss Alpine Club hut, Pian d'Alpe, that we could reach in the Ticino, the southern Alps. We shouldered our backpacks and boarded the ferry across the lake to Como. From there, we caught the train to Switzerland, and then a bus to the tiny mountain town of Biasca. We loaded our packs with the essentials – salami, chocolate, cheese and a bottle of Cinzano – and picked up the key to the hut from a nearby inn. Waving aside warnings from the locals that it was a late summer in the Alps and we might encounter snow, Harald advised Chip

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and Jack to lighten their packs by leaving their sleeping bags behind. It would be a short hike to the hut, where bedding was provided. I kept my sleeping bag in my pack.

We set off in high spirits, talking and laughing in the brilliant alpine afternoon, winding our way above the village to the trailhead. Once on the trail, we soon encountered a crusting of snow, at first an inch thick, then ankle deep. Before we knew it, dusk fell and the red and white trail markers painted on rocks and trees became invisible. We stumbled around, finally coming upon one of the high mountain settlements where the Swiss move their livestock in the summer, now empty before the pasture season began.

In the last of the light, we ran from one stone building to another, rattling the doors to see if any were open, and finally found an unfinished house without windows or



Clockwise: Gloria, Chip, Jack and Harald pose for the camera before starting their Alpine descent.

doors, where we settled in for the night. We built a fire on the hearth and spread our rain ponchos across the windows to keep out what became a frigid, howling wind. Without their bedding, the men huddled in all the layers of clothes they had, while I enjoyed the luxury of my sleeping bag.

The next morning, we had just started off when a blizzard commenced and we were in complete whiteout conditions. Afraid of falling off a precipice if we tried to descend the mountain, we continued upward. The snow rapidly became knee-deep, then waist-deep. For several hours, we took turns breaking the path through the snow, legs freezing in our blue jeans. Chip was hiking in his tennis shoes, and when they disintegrated into a sodden mess, I lent him my leather hiking boots and took on the snow in my nylon Nike sneakers.

Looking at the topographical map, Harald and I were sure that Pian d'Alpe was nearby. Jack and Chip were exhausted, and stopped, chests heaving, under two evergreen trees where the thick branches had kept patches of ground free of snow. Harald and I went ahead to search for the hut, criss-crossing a meadow where we thought it should be. Suddenly, I saw something that contrasted slightly with the whiteness all around. It was a thin flagpole, and I followed it downward to the barely discernable roofline of the hut, buried to the gables in the snow. I shouted to Harald and we went back for the others, jubilantly slogging the last little way to the hut.

I can still see Jack sitting inside the hut with his head between his knees, his stomach knotted from the exertion, and perhaps from shock at the danger we'd been in and disaster narrowly averted.

It was an adventure with many lessons – the rewards of perseverance, the blindness of youth to danger, the importance of heeding warnings. We were stupid not to turn back when we first encountered snow, but in the end, the experience tested us and strengthened us. And it explains why, to my husband's endless amusement, I carry a Swiss Army knife with two-dozen attachments, a heat blanket and a down vest on even a casual walk in the mountains! Ω