

Climbing – May 2005, Brüggler

Saturday 21st

Carsten and Stine, a Danish couple of formidable strength, stamina and personal drive agreed to drag me up some multi-pitch monster on a day which promised certain lightning and probable rain. Sounded good to me.

They picked me up at about 8.20am and we drove to Näfels, a small town nestled within the deeply conservative canton of Glarus. From there we took a small road up into the Obersee valley and then on to Schwändital, a beautiful little collection of wooden houses scattered around a valley thickly blanketed with yellow daisies. Driving through that one was a genuine Heidi moment.

Carsten parked the car and sorted out the permit while Stine and I pulled gear out of the car and started readying ourselves for the walk in. The approach was long but pretty gentle, rising from 1235m at the carpark to 1640m at the bottom of the Brüggler. During the walk we could see the wall clearly enough, a 200m high off-white sheet of limestone draped against the Wageten ridge.

We stopped for a rest and some water at the depot stone right under the huge dihedral which marked the Brüggler's left side. From there we could see at least five different parties on separate routes. Carsten and Stine were here about a month earlier and hiking beneath the wall. They had met some people who were doing a climb near the midpoint of the wall and somehow learned of some climbs that they might like to do. We were looking for a red arrow or a blue spot. They had a guide (*Plaisir Ost*) and we wandered along the trail searching for the indicated signs. There was some snow lying around, but Stine said it was nothing to compared to the amount they had slogged through a month



ago. Up ahead Carsten had found the routes, or at least where they should start up on a fairly broad and easily accessed ledge. We found a blue mark but the red arrow was not visible. After consulting with the guidebook we were pretty sure that this was the right place anyway. Carsten was a bit concerned about being caught by the weather, clouds were sweeping slowly overhead and it seemed possible that we might get a thunderstorm at some point, so he

recommended that we do a shorter route. He picked out one which was, according to the book, named *Weinachtsroute* (4c), at five pitches it stretches up approximately 180 metres to the top of the ridge. Descent was to proceed by a leftward walk off on the other side.

Carsten and Stine set to work with the ropes while I took their camera and started to take a few pictures. They had two thin 60 metre ropes, only 8.3 mm in diameter, eyow! I had never climbed on anything thinner than about 9.8 mm and these felt like fishing lines by comparison. Being the third wheel I was quite happy to let Carsten and Stine make the strategic decisions. The both of them are pretty hard core athletes and Carsten in particular has lots of experience with all sorts of climbing. So I had no problem with him making the operational decisions of the day. Being the guest I would have been happy just to leave the leading to them.



We looked at the first pitch (4b) and tried to find bolts marking the route, I could only see one and it looked a long way up. Fortunately Carsten had what looked like all of his trad gear with him and it turned out that we needed it on every pitch. Carsten (wearing a brand new pair of 5.10s) went up, trailing both ropes and immediately placed some camalots and then continued upwards angling slightly left.



While Stine belayed and I snapped the occasional photo a couple of young Germans struggled up nearby looking for a free line, and this old fellow came up to where we were and sat down. The young guys found what they were looking for on a route to our left (*Dornröschen*, 5a) and started setting up. The old guy, sitting just a few feet from us, took off his little day pack and began to put on some climbing shoes. For a moment I thought he was going to ask if he could join us, but he didn't pay us much mind at all. When he was ready he stepped past Stine, said a little prayer and then (ropeless) soloed a line up and off to the left. Insane.

With the both of us carrying packs we suited up and followed Carsten while he belayed for us at the top of the pitch. Stine appeared to prefer crawling through the cliff-trees that he had led by, but I snuck out to the right following what turned out to be a nicer line away from grabbing branches. The climbing consisted of mostly following short vertical cracks with frequent pockets for hands and feet. Nothing too scary. I was feeling pretty good. Carsten had only found a single additional piece of fixed protection on the way up, an old pin, so he had found his rack quite useful. Stine's pack became caught in the down-sweeping branches of a tree that Carsten was belaying from, it was so stuck that I had to swing across and give the offending branches a bit of a shove before she could slip free.

After we got up beside Carsten it seemed that Stine wasn't really keen on leading the next pitch. She said that she would prefer to have the last one which, rated at 3b, wasn't as hard. Carsten then asked me if I wanted to have it. After a moment of hesitation (I had expected to be just a passenger all day) I accepted. The first pitch was quite nice and the second, rated at 4a, was only going to be easier. Carsten asked me if I wanted to hand him my pack, but I felt comfortable enough to keep it. The only problem I was having were my smelly gym shoes, they were obviously going to be too damn tight for half a day on the wall.



Carsten handed me his rack and it felt curiously good to be fixing camalots and such to my harness again. The last time I had suited up like this was a little under three years ago.

Eyow ... that gave me pause, I haven't placed gear in nearly three years? Good thing this pitch is only 4a. Carsten was saying that he could only see one bolt above, and we weren't exactly certain of the route. The guide stipulates a two bolt anchor just under the small but long fold that was developing on our right and then sweeping high over the top of us. The climbing was not very hard at all and I was able to run it out about twelve metres to the first bolt. After my Arizona adventure with Leon and James back in 2001 (where on *What's My Line* in the Stronghold we scared ourselves silly climbing long and nearly unprotectable pitches of chickenheads) this was a cakewalk. From there I could see a second bolt and so I continued on up to it. With lots of cracks, pockets and jug-like edges climbing limestone was becoming a really nice experience. After going about eight or so meters above the second bolt my nerve finally gave out and I found myself putting two big camelots deep into a large crack system before running out to the end of the pitch. Phew. I set my trusty old gi-gi on the anchor and got to work belaying up Stine and Carsten. I forgot how much work simul-belaying was and, being so engrossed in how terribly sore my shoulders were becoming, I totally ignored the necessities of rope management. Needless to say these became desperately Gordian in nature.



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Danish couple up with me we got organized for the next bit. Carsten took the rack and fired on up pitch three (4c), but I didn't see a single moment of his ascent because I was trying to untangle the ropes while he climbed.



My feet were killing me, so I had removed my shoes to give them a break. The resulting stench, not unlike that given off by the local cheese, was making Stine's eyes water. Poor girl. But my feet were feeling much much better. A friend of mine at work had suggested that I enclose the shoes in a plastic bag with some formalin-soaked cotton wool for a night, it sounded extreme at the time but I think I'm going to have to do it. It's either that or the old gasoline-and-lit-match treatment.

I barely managed to untangle the ropes before Carsten pulled them up at the end of his pitch. Stine and I followed and the line once again crept under the branches of cliff trees determined to make our lives miserable. Just before leaving, one of the German dudes reached our belay and I exchanged friendly greetings with him. The first part of the pitch, a crumbling bulge, was peppered with nerve-rackingly loose stones and I wondered how the heck Carsten had managed it. Stine did say that he might have been a little stressed.

We found Carsten at the anchor, which consisted of a single old pin plus one of his trad pieces. This baffled us a little bit, but looking at the guide later confirmed that the pin was indeed the belay anchor. As there was a bit of room we stopped there for some water and chocolate biscuits, the view was just magnificent (we could see the Grosser Mythen out towards Schwyz) and the weather was behaving itself. So we were feeling pretty good.



Carsten offered me the fourth pitch, also rated at 4c, and after hemming and hawing a bit (I was pretty nervous about the lack of fixed pro) I agreed. Gotta be a manly man right? Besides, we could see two bolts just above us. So I handed Carsten my pack and took all the gear he offered me. When I was ready I slowly crawled up there into this big old off-width and managed to clip

the first bolt. Then the bloody route seemed to overhang a bit and there weren't any foot holds. The next bolt was only a couple of metres higher up but I was too scared to claw up towards it. So again I slipped around to the left side where there were some easy steps and then just reached back down into the big crack to clip that second bolt. There were no more bolts, but the last run-out wasn't hard at all. Only one tricky bit at the exit from a steep slot where I protected with one of Carsten's camelots.



I was less stupid with the ropes at the hanging belay, but it was still fairly tricky. The others came up pretty smartly and we were left with one last pitch (3b) to go. Carsten relaxed, took off his shoes and snapped some pictures with the camera while I belayed for Stine's lead. Stine once again enjoyed the attentions of some trees at the beginning, so much so that she had to abandon her pack, clipping it to a branch. Above the trees she found herself in a super-exposed situation, high above the valley and mountain peaks all around, she should have just closed her eyes and climbed by braille. That's what I would have done, maybe. It was pretty stressful and she was stuck somewhere up there, we found it difficult to see her through the trees. After a while I thought that maybe Carsten should climb up there and maybe help out, but he shook his head and said that she would be able to work it out. Which she did, finishing the last runout without any further difficulty and then belaying us both as Carsten and I simul-climbed. I grabbed the pack as Carsten still had mine and then watched as Carsten went straight through branches as if he was crawling through the jungle. Of course I chickened out again and went over on the right instead, which was much gentler. I had the camera and managed to snap a few more photographs.



Stine warned that the other side was something of a steep drop and the walk-off didn't look abundantly clear at all. What she said was something which freaked me out a little. Actually, there was a good sized area up top for us to sort the gear and change into hiking boots. But the walk-off itself *was* a nightmare. With two difficult unroped downclimbs and traverses across extremely steep slopes which were slippery with mud or snow or both. One muddy traverse under a snowfield which frightened me so much I chose to go high squeeze along a gap between the cliff and the snow. This was probably a mistake, because I had to be very

careful not to break through and slip *under* the upper edge of the snow. It was like traversing a long but very small bergschrund. After a few desparate moments here and there, with neither Stine or I feeling at all comfortable and Carsten leaping confidently ahead as if he had lived his entire life with the world at a 70° angle, we finally reached a decently civilized trail.



The walk down from there was just great, if a bit hard on the knees (we peaked at about 1800 metres), and the views were fantastic. We could see the Zürichsee and on the horizon a little southwards of that we could discern the great ragged profile of Mt Pilatus over by Luzern, nearly 50 km away.

We live! Woohooo!

On the way down the car was attacked by cows which were doing the Aufzug thing.

