

Thursday, July 28th, 2005

Mt Pilatus

I am completely exhausted. Running on empty. Leila has just fed me some honey and yogurt and in a minute I will start feeling much better. But right now I am at the very end of my endurance. I am, clearly, out of shape.

Today started pretty well. I wanted to go and watch Natalie give her progress report to the Werner group at Honggeberg. I had prepared my climbing pack the night before so it was just a matter of riding to Oerlikon and dropping it off at Jean-Marc's place. It was also an opportunity to get Jean-Marc out of bed, he's on holiday and I didn't want to have to wake him up at 10am. Time was always going to be too short for us. The plan was to go climb Gultigernturm on Mt Pilatus. But first, I wanted to support my PhD student as she threw herself at the mercy of Judge Werner. All things considered that went very well and I was back at Jean-Marc's by a little before 10am. We grabbed the keys to Patrik's car, found his Opel and blasted off at about 10.20pm, aimed for Luzern, which is the large city beneath Mt Pilatus.

Of course, nothing is ever easy and we crawled through Zurich in very heavy traffic. Time ticked away and I wondered if we would have to go to plan B ... which, in the spirit of damning torpedoes, hadn't even been considered at that point. But as we followed the butt end of a garbage truck through the steamingly hot warren that was Zurich, I toyed with the idea of going to Ibergeregge instead.

For reasons of navigational complexity too difficult to fully explain here, we eschewed the freeway and ended up on a minor road headed more or less in the correct direction. After many red lights and lots of traffic we eventually got back onto the freeway. Then the car, which had developed a worryingly serious sounding rattle somewhere in the driveshaft bits, began to entertain us with a warning light the meaning of which would never become clear. Also, the speedometer decided to take a permanent break. Awesome. Patrik's car needs some urgent attention. So we pulled off around Zug and let some more time tick away as we opened the hood and scratched our heads over it. Frankly, we had no clue.

Back on the highway we rattled and popped at unknown speed through the tunnels under Luzern and eventually made it to our first destination – Alpnachstad. We got there and had the smoking Opel parked just before noon, by which time I had originally hoped to be atop the mountain already and strolling down to the start of our climb. There's still time, we can still do it. These thoughts, totally divorced from reality, kept revolving around and around in my head and totally blocked access of my higher brain centres to more reasoned cogitation. Jean-Marc had never been up Mt Pilatus and was oblivious as to the time pressures I was plunging us into. We had to wait 20 minutes for the cog railway to start its slow trundling up Pilatus at the world-beatingly steep angle of 48 degrees. Speaking of degrees it was pretty damn hot. The sun, as it were, beat down.

The plan, which I have refrained from describing in full until after the moment of commitment had been made, I will describe presently. The moment in question, by the way, coincided with the cog railway's battle against common-sense and the gravitational imperative. The plan was to ride the cog all the way to the top, walk down to Metalplatte and climb, in its 13-pitch entirety, the Gultigernturm and then return (by 5.30pm) to the cog-railway for the last ride back down the mountain. This mountain hovered 1.5 km above the Opel. Missing the last ride would entail a very long walk, under full packs, back down to the car. Cool plan except for the part about us very probably not being able to do this, being neither supermen nor particularly fantastic climbers. However, once on the cog, we were locked and loaded.

It took 40 minutes for the cog to haul our soon to be very sorry asses to the very tippy top of Mt Pilatus. Jean-Marc's digestive system threatened him with self-implosion unless he could satisfy its demands for food. Not wanting to appear unrelaxed I went along with the idea of gaining immediate sustenance. Within five minutes we had obtained sausages from a kiosk, wolfed them down and then (more or less) started jogging down the insanely steep slope to Metalplatte about a half kilometre lower down.

Did I say that nothing is ever easy? I'm sure I did. We were making pretty good progress and by some miracle had avoided the directissima descent afforded by merely falling over, when Jean-Marc's trick knee did its little trick and effectively subtracted one leg from his locomotive equation. Aside from threatening to end the climbing right there it was mucho strange. There was this weird little bump just down and to one side of his knee which was apparantly, and this blew me away totally, a very large bone deciding to try another location for a while. He said, while limping at high speed beside me, that it would go away soon. It did too, with a little click the lump vanished and the bone returned to its normal position. Jean-Marc had two legs and we were again legging it down the mountain as fast as we thought prudent.

Jean-Marc's trick knee reminded me that I had my own anatomical uncertainty that could easily come into play at any moment. Some months before this I had seriously injured my ankle (torn ligaments, soft tissue damage, destroyed hopes of ever again being a touch football god) and it was still a concern. I had found that climbing was no problem, but hiking made it swell up and become painful. Here I was running down a big mountain wearing a heavy pack and ... er ... sandals. The whole way I was totally focussed on terrain that was no more than six feet ahead, needless to say. Eventually I'll be able to explain this behaviour.

Down we plunged, overtaking an old lady with sticks and high altitude cows of indifference and reaching Metalplatte in just 35 minutes. While crawling under an electrified cow frier Jean-Marc managed to get his bag hung up and then himself slightly shocked. I even saw the little blue spark that went along with the bzzt-ouch sound. He was more careful with the next one. We crossed under the cog railway tracks (handy little bridge), passed the Metalplatte cowbarn and then back up a little bit to the wall which had all the hard climbs we were definitely not interested in. There was a young couple climbing it, people often do this as a prelude to the big easy ridges above, where

we wanted to go. Grasping at straws, I interpreted this as meaning that maybe we had more time than I thought. We had to follow a steep and rocky goat trail that went up to the right and then back over the top of this wall. This took twenty minutes and cost me, I think, only one lung. But at last we were at the base of our climb.

The Gultigernturm are a series of sharp ridges that stretch back up towards the top of Mt Pilatus. Despite big exposure (you can see far too much of the world from these ridges, it's distinctly unnerving) the climbing is not particularly difficult at all, it's just that there's thirteen pitches of the stuff. That's a long way. Let's see, it's just after 2pm and we still haven't started climbing and we have only three and a half hours to get back to the cog. Unless we want to walk all the way back down of course. Ack! Let's go damn it! So we quickly prepared and discussed signals and then just went for it. I led up the first pitch, one bolt, another bolt, then ... uh ... nothing. No problem, it's easy climbing so just keep going. Uhn. I cross a ledge and then get about four metres up a wall, and I'm scanning around left and right unable to see any bolts and ... obviously ... lost. I considered just going straight up, after all I had brought some trad gear with me (three camalots), but what I had wasn't appropriate (i.e. enough). The ridge proper is to the right, so I carefully traversed over there and found a bolt, and thus the route, only three metres further up. Then another one, and then a pair of belay bolts. I finished the pitch and checked my watch. Twenty minutes.

This wasn't going to work. We were going to have to take the first walk off (there were two, the first one was after the sixth pitch) and then ... um ... I wasn't sure if the first walk-off would take us back up to the cog or on down the mountain. I guessed that we would find out.

Even though we couldn't communicate very well Jean-Marc had started climbing and I was reeling him in. He didn't take long, only ten minutes. I linked the next two pitches together. The climbing was fun! Mostly solid, nice pockets, plenty of foot placements. It was hot under the sun but still good. Awesome views. The ridge was sharp and very airy, I could see the lake behind Jean-Marc a kilometre below us. Cool. We were able to move pretty fast too. We reached the walk off by half past three and discussed our options. That couple we passed way down below were somehow ahead of us climbing the next part of the climb. We guessed that they had walked up the left side. Jean-Marc and I agreed that if we were to make it to the cog then the climb was over and we had to get moving immediately. We had two hours to gain about three hundred vertical metres and cross a couple of kilometres to the west.

We did it in one hour and twenty minutes. It was the hardest forced march I have ever done. At one point I dropped my pack and watched it roll about fifteen metres downslope before stopping. I also came really close to properly tweaking my bad ankle. If Jean-Marc didn't carry the rope I would never have made it. As it was, by the end I had to stop every ten steps and breathe. Jean-Marc went pretty strong though. Even with the rope and his own pack he made it a good five minutes ahead of me. We had missed the 4.45pm cog, but there was still the last one. The both of us slept on the ride down. The Opel got us home too. Lots of warning lights though.