





# Heaven's above

Ian Thomson's family were sceptical about the prospect of an arduous uphill hike in Italy's Gran Paradiso National Park, sheltering in spartan refuges along the way. At the end they didn't want to leave

Lake Combal in the Veny Valley, part of the Gran Paradiso National Park

In the snowbound heights of northern Italy above Turin is the Gran Paradiso National Park. With its alpine moraines and meadows, this is where Italians increasingly go to escape the stress of city life (the beaches have become too hot). I last visited in 1992, while researching the life of the Turin-born writer and Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, who often climbed in the Paradiso. Twenty years on, I returned with my wife and children (aged 15, 13 and 10). Our journey was to involve a six-day trek across the Aosta valleys; we would stay in mountain refuges run by the Italian Alpine Club, and carry all we needed on our backs.

The children groaned when I spoke of the delicious fatigue to be had at a journey's end – what Italians call *la grande fatica*. ('Yeah, right...') The prospect of a week's hiking did not appeal. While they were used to coastal walks in Cornwall and yomps in the Lake District, the Paradiso sounded more like a punishment than a holiday.

With a supply of blister plasters and Kendal mint cake for emergencies, we flew over the Alps to Turin. The city looked unrecognisably light and airy to me after its renovation for the 2006 Winter Olympics. Our hotel near the Duomo had rooftop views of jagged peaks and snowfields stretching towards France; in the August heat the Alpine backdrop looked cool and inviting. That evening the Italian journalist Alberto Papuzzi came to meet us. Alberto had been Primo Levi's chief mountaineer companion and has become a valued friend of mine. Over iced coffee we discussed the itinerary, which had been devised with the children in mind.

Apart from one bus trip, the entire journey would be undertaken on foot. Our overnight stays in the refuges had been booked ahead; evening meals and breakfasts would be provided, along with packed lunches if required. Mindful of the weather, Alberto offered us waterproof ponchos and a couple of ancient dented water bottles. 'This stuff belongs in a museum,' he admitted. Like many Turinese he understood the mountains, and reminded us of the need to be wary of potential dangers: falling rocks, sudden mist. '*Buon viaggio*,' he said. Have a good trip. We embraced and said goodbye.

Early next morning we took the bus to Cogne, some

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70 miles north of Turin. Cogne is an old-fashioned mountain resort hemmed in by woods, where families and elderly couples come to enjoy the cooler temperatures and Alpine views. I worried that the hike from Cogne to the first of our refuges might be difficult. Rain clouds had gathered, and walking in a downpour would be cheerless. We were expected at the refuge before nightfall. Anticipating a five-hour walk, we set off mid-morning. Would the children cope with the exertion? Traversing three miles of the Valnontey Valley provided a gentle introduction, and time to find our walking legs and get used to our heavy backpacks. My wife and I adjusted our pace for the children. Our destination was the Vittorio Sella refuge, situated at 2,700m.

As we negotiated the steep ascent it began to rain. On went the waterproofs. The children in their blue and red ponchos looked like small, hunchbacked monks toiling uphill. Cogne now lay six miles behind us, a smudge in a dark, cloud-filled abyss. The boys were miserable in the downpour and had to shout to make themselves heard. '*We want to go back to London!*' The walk involved much cajoling with sweets and pauses for drinks. So far we had seen hardly anyone.

A mist began to creep up from the valley. Now we were exposed to the three main dangers of the mountains: cold, hunger and fear. How far was it to the refuge? We had been walking a long time and, swaying with exhaustion, we



emerged on the crest of a hill within view of a low stone building. The refuge? Surely. Excited, our daughter rushed on ahead followed by her brothers and was the first to discover the bad news. The building was not a refuge at all but an abandoned farmhouse. A donkey emerged from the mist to stare at us balefully. For a long time the children said nothing; my wife looked over the map in silence.

Wonderfully the mist lifted and a rainbow appeared in the hazy sky. In a moment the landscape had changed. On the far side of a rushing stream we caught sight of the Vittorio Sella refuge. 'It's really close now!' exclaimed our youngest, with a palpable sense of achievement. After 40 minutes we arrived to find the dim-lit entrance hall cluttered with ice-picks, crampons and coils of rope for rock-face assault. We hurried out of our wet boots in time for supper, and put on the plastic slippers provided. The mountain air felt chill and rarefied; wild crevasses lay around us with not a tree in sight. We had our first glorious experience of *la grande fatica*; it had taken us eight hard hours from Cogne to get here.

The refuge looked like a Klondike log cabin, with its cast-iron stove and wooden shelves on which to store walking boots. There were private quarters for the staff and in a spacious common room stood refectory tables and wooden chairs carved with heart shapes. ('This is proper Heidi territory,' our daughter said.) Our room upstairs had a couple of camp beds squeezed in amid the bunks. The communal bathrooms had washbasins and hole-in-the-floor lavatories. Our four-star hotel back in Turin seemed like an impossibly civilised amenity now. Hungry, we devoured a meal of potato dumplings with braised meat, Alpine-style. Thirty or so fellow hikers, a few children among them, sat at tables drinking from pitchers of wine as they watched the sun go down over glacier heights. The sunset was menacing in its grandeur, and gave a sense of tingling remoteness to our journey so far. After supper, we got into our sleeping bags and, without another word, fell asleep.

The next morning we set out after a breakfast of bread and jam; it was to be another day's tough journey-work. Having walked downhill from the refuge, we took a bus into a neighbouring valley from where we climbed higher to the Chabod refuge. For hours we trekked within sight of Italy's tallest mountain peak, the 4,061m Gran Paradiso itself; mist

## In a common room stood refectory tables and wooden chairs carved with heart shapes. 'This is proper Heidi territory,' our daughter said

swirled round its summit like smoke. 'We're supposed to be on holiday!' the children complained. (Our daughter, to her annoyance, had *Climb Every Mountain* sounding in her head.) Midway along the path we encountered a herd of grazing goats, hearing them long before seeing them; their bells sounded an irregular, hesitant note like a gamelan orchestra.

The animal life on the mountains entranced us; we saw marmots peering at us from behind a rock. Sometimes they gave an extraordinary plaintive warning whistle. On one occasion, a mangy-looking fox passed us on the path, scavenging for picnic scraps. Alberto had spoken to us of the 'divinity of the mountains', and nowhere in northern Italy is nature so wild and varied. On the higher pinnacles,



**Top** the dramatic beauty of the Gran Paradiso National Park. **Above** at the glacier's edge, the Thomson children buried Mars bars in the ice to freeze them. **Right** are we nearly there yet? A sign points the way to the Chabod refuge



raptors could be seen circling for prey; chamois moved like dots across the distant slopes. Sadly we failed to see the majestic mountain antelope known as the ibex. Climate change has forced them into ever colder altitudes out of human view.

Even at this altitude, breathing was sometimes laborious and we had to rest. The weather had changed since we first set out; sun cream was now required, not rainwear. The Paradiso's snow-capped summit, moving in and out of view, kept us going uphill. Italian hikers greeted us with a friendly *buon giorno*, and sometimes we asked them how far we had to go. One used an altimeter strapped to his wrist to calculate the distance and the time it might take to cover it. "Too complicated!" my wife snapped.

At sundown we arrived at the Chabod. Here at last we could change our socks and dry out our walking boots. I was now finding a certain difficulty in sleeping at these higher altitudes. The Dutchman who shared our dormitory spoke of the strange dreams he regularly experienced when this high in the mountains. A further irritant was being woken at four in the morning by the odd clank of metal followed by giggles, and voices outside. These were the diehard mountaineers, men and women, who left early in order to complete their climb before the mid-day sun could melt the glacier ice. At its height, the noise sounded like an army on the move.

We had covered a good 30 miles so far. There had been much chat along the way; with the rain over, the children could enjoy themselves. Conversations were fluid and varied. Talk was of wildlife, food, the Mafia and the virtues of the Super Mario console games. We were booked in at two more refuges. The first, at the foot of the Tresenta glacier, was named the Vittorio Emanuele II after Italy's Risorgimento-era king. This was the largest refuge we stayed at, with spectacular views of the Tresenta's rocky, ice-bound ridge and the surrounding mountains. On the deck outside were a dozen long tables for enjoying the sun, with a hundred or so people milling about. I was reminded of a Martini ad ski resort. ("When you're up here you forget that Facebook exists," I overheard someone say.) We played cards and read Stephen King novels; the following day we walked to the glacier's edge, where the children buried their Mars bars in the ice to freeze them.

We left early for our final destination, stepping



**Above** chamois clamber on the slopes.



**Right** the path from the Chabod refuge to the Vittorio Emanuele II

## Nowhere in northern Italy is nature so wild and varied. On the higher pinnacles, raptors could be seen circling for prey; chamois moved like dots across the distant slopes

smartly down the mountain as we did so. Along the way a supplies helicopter whirred overhead with a plump white sack swaying below it like a gift from a giant stork. Our journey continued along an old hunting path before snaking through meadowland close to the French border. We followed it for several hours, filling our water bottles from fast-flowing streams, until we reached the end of the great Nivolet plateau. The sun was golden and the meadowlands a joy to walk across. Even now in August there were traces of melting snow under the blue sky. In a few miles we would reach our last refuge.

Alessandro Bardo, the manager of the Chivasso refuge, greeted us cordially. A grave-looking man, he said he had lived in these mountain heights for more

than '20 summers' now. In his stern vision, mountaineering was less a sport than a sort of morality. "The Paradiso is a cathedral of nature," he announced, "which you must enter with reverence." To disturb the natural order of things by feeding foxes or leaving picnic litter was a sacrilege. At supper Alessandro showed us an ibex skull he kept on display; it had impressively long, ridged and curved horns. The ibex was declared a protected species in Italy in 1922, after Vittorio Emanuele II (who loved to hunt) had shot them almost to extinction.

We rested for several nights at the Chivasso, reluctant to leave the beauty and drama of the mountains. In the daytime we went for walks in different directions from the hostel. The famous final scene in

*The Italian Job*, where the coach is left teetering on a cliff edge, had been filmed at Cerosole nearby. Amid the timeless grandeur of the mountains, exam and work worries were suspended; we felt a sense of liberty and pride in having come this far. For the best part of a week we had journeyed under rain and sun. The Grand Paradiso had helped us to think with our bodies, not just our heads. Primo Levi's own training on the snow peaks here had enabled him to survive the hardships of the Nazi concentration camp; the mountains had put steel in his veins.

On our final night Alessandro wished us a safe trip back to Turin. '*Signori alpinisti, buon viaggio,*' he saluted us. Having retraced our steps across the Nivolet plain, we returned to Turin with our eyes still dazzled by the beauty and immensity of the mountains; it had been a journey worth making.

*Ian Thomson travelled to Turin with Kirker Holidays (kirkerholidays.com) and booked mountain refuges through the Cogne Tourist Board (cogneturismo.it)*