



Dodging ghosts, rocks, and weather in
Switzerland's Val Bregaglia

By Brendan Leonard
Photos by Dan Patitucci

The Alpine Pursuit of

Thirteen pitches of easy
slab climbing on *Bugel-
eisen* (5.8), a perfect
ridgeline in the Sciora
Group of Switzerland.

When it comes to long, easy climbing, I'm something of an aficionado. Climb a moderate all the way to the clouds? I'm in.

Nothing in the world compares to the *North Ridge* of the Piz Badile. It's 3,000 feet of 5.6, with 24 bolted belays, up a granite ridge that drops off to a glacier on each side. I imagined starting from the Sasc Fura hut in the morning, topping out, walking off the summit into Italy, sleeping in a hut, and then walking back into Switzerland the next day to head back down to our car. It would be the highlight of my summer, maybe my year.

We have fun long climbs in the U.S., I know. I've done lots of them. The Piz Badile dwarfs them all. It's four Cathedral Peaks stacked on top of each other, or two-and-a-half *Solar Slabs*, three First Flatirons. It is the El Cap of 5.fun. You hardly even have to take a rack.

It's classic, and it sits next to another classic. On the northeast face of the Badile, climber's left of the *North Ridge*, lies the *Cassin Route*, a 22-pitch 5.10b, one of the Six Great North Faces of the Alps, first climbed in 1937 by legendary Italian alpinist Riccardo Cassin, and then ticked off by pretty much every big-name alpinist in Europe over the next two decades.

But wait, there's more.

In the very next valley to the east, a two-hour walk from the base of the Piz Badile, sits the Sciora Group, a set of toothy granite peaks with an

embarrassing amount of fun climbs: a 26-pitch bolted 5.9 over here, a 14-pitch bolted 5.7 over there, a 13-pitch bolted 5.8, and a 22-pitch 5.10c with bolted belays. All of this within a 90-minute approach of a hut perched right in the middle, with a stunning view, hot food, and cold beer. Plenty of reasons in both valleys, collectively known as the Bregaglia, to fly across the Atlantic. But that one, the *North Ridge* of the Badile—holy shit, that was what sold me.

I looked at photos of the ridge, not to study it, but to get excited by imagining myself romping up it with a rack of draws and a few nuts and cams clipped to my harness. Photographer Dan Patitucci said come on over to Switzerland, we'll go to the Bregaglia, bring Hilary, and we'll get Simon Duverney, the young, stoked, and hilarious French mountain guide we hung out with last summer. It will be fun. I bought the expensive plane tickets without a second thought. Can you really put a price on a memory like that?



Sport climbing on a large boulder at sunset in the Sciora Group.



Hiking into the beautiful Sciora range.



Simon Duverney on the West Ridge of the Innominata in bad weather.



Checking out an old guidebook in the comfy Sciora hut.



A group of friends shares a hot meal after a long day of fun climbing.

We hiked up the Val Bondasca to the Sciora hut in the humid air, under clouds obscuring the peaks above, grinding up a steep trail that gains 2,700 feet in less than two miles. The clouds dissipated enough to reveal the mountains just as I saw the hut for the first time. It was a building big enough to house 42 people, and it looked like a dollhouse beneath the Sciora peaks looming 3,500 feet above its roof.

Walter Bonatti, who spent a decade and a half climbing in the Alps, the Himalaya, and Patagonia, wrote in his memoir, *Mountains of My Life*: “The whole Bregaglia is wonderful, but among the valleys that converge on it is one most dear to mountaineers, the Val Bondasca. It begins at the little village of Bondo on the left-hand slope, then rises, fantastic as a fairytale, to the foot of some of the greatest granite colossi in the Alps. What mountaineer has not at least dreamt of knowing the clear faces of the Badile, the Cengalo, Gemelli, Sciora, Trubinasca, and many other peaks?”

Fantastic as a fuckin’ fairytale indeed, Mr. Bonatti. A brook winds through giant boulders to the back of the Sciora hut, which looks like it’s been built as close to the mountains as possible, and a few feet from where the biggest chunks of granite stopped rolling after they cleaved off the peaks above. I stood behind the hut wondering for just a second what the odds were of a house-sized boulder toppling off the 10,397-foot Sciora Dafora and rolling down 3,000 feet of talus and smashing the hut like a giant foot stomping on a Cocoa Puff. Then I blinked it out of my brain, glanced up at the huge peaks and thought, *This is going to be fun.*

I have almost no suspicion thus far that I am about to be taught a life lesson about expectations as a climber.

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The 22-pitch slab route Punta Pioda (5.7), above the Val Bregaglia, Switzerland.

Our entire time in Switzerland, all the locals talked about was the weather. So much rain, they said. People would greet each other on the street and you could count down the seconds until someone mentioned the rain. No one had a good summer—mountain guides, paraglider pilots, photographers. When we arrived in August, no one had summited the Eiger via the *Mittellegi Ridge*, the trade route to the top, all year. Photographer Keith Ladzinski happened to be in Switzerland at the same time, and posted on Instagram, “The locals told us that it’s been the wettest summer in 50 years.” We could sit around and wait for the weather to improve, which it likely wouldn’t, or go try to force some climbing. Our loose plan: Hike into the Sciora hut, climb a couple routes, move our stuff to the Sasc Fura hut, climb the Badile, and walk out to the car the same day.

By the time we got to the Sciora hut, the staff there said that only a couple climbs were dry. We headed for the *Bugeleisen*, a 1,000-foot 13-pitch bolted route up Pizzi Gemelli that was about as pleasant an intro to the area as you could ask for: incredible views to either side, slabby 5.8 granite, straightforward raps down the route to descend, and the biggest rockfall I’ve ever seen ripping off the face of the neighboring east wall of Piz Cengalo.

Dan had said that in the Sciora hut, you can hear the low rumbles of rockfall throughout the night—and I did. And then during most of the days, too. Based on my time in the Bregaglia, I’d say that if you got to the Sciora hut, bought two beers, went outside, and drank them at a normal pace, you’d hear rockfall at least once. Not that the climbing routes are dangerous—most of the classic routes are on solid granite. The rockfall comes from the other faces. For instance, the standard route on Piz Cengalo, the *Gaiser-Lehman* (or NW Pillar), a 3,000-foot trad 5.8, heads up the north wall of the peak, around the corner from the side of the mountain where we saw a bus-sized block drop off.

Dan and I chatted at the top of our last pitch on the *Bugeleisen*, waiting for Simon and Hilary to finish the pitch. I heard the tap-tap-tap of some gravel sliding down the south face of Cengalo, and then turned to look over my shoulder and see a 20’ x 20’ section slide off, drop 500 feet down, and explode on the glacier below, sending a cloud of gray dust 300 feet wide and 100 feet tall up in the air just below us.

As an American, whenever I see bolted belays or multiple bolted pitches on the “plaisir” (pleasure) climbs in Swiss guidebooks, I relax a little. No funky gear (or no gear at all sometimes), minimal route-finding issues, and maybe a whole day on a 1,000-foot climb with hardly any worries besides whether or not I can pull the moves. Since we have so relatively



The North Ridge of the Piz Badile stands out in the background.



If easy ridge climbs aren't your thing, there are some harder challenges on the smaller rocks.

BREGAGLIA CLASSICS

The 9 routes you need to add to your tick list

From the Sasc Fura hut:

Nordkante, Piz Badile

24 pitches, 5a+

Bolts and gear

Only 5.6, but requires a descent off the south side of the peak into Italy, and a lengthy hike back over to Switzerland the next day. Or four to six hours of rappels.

Cassin, Piz Badile

22 pitches, 5c+

Bolts and gear

The most famous route in the Bregaglia, a full-on alpine rock route, the *Cassin* is rarely 100% dry, and is still a testpiece for alpinists.

From the Sciora hut:

Gaiser-Lehman/NW Pillar, Piz Cengalo

29 pitches, 5b, gear

With, no bolted belays, this 3,000-foot route is set back at a friendly angle and is an area classic, but less popular than the *Cassin* or the *Nordkante*.

Bugeleisen, Pizzi Gemelli

13 to 14 pitches, 5a+

Bolts and a small rack

A great intro to the area, it’s a

romp up 13 pitches of mellow slab climbing.

West Ridge, Torre Innominata

13 pitches, 5b+ or 4c A0 (bolted)

A fun climb up a moderate ridge, but a serious descent down an often snowy, and sometimes loose, couloir.

Via Noemi, Torre Innominata

6 pitches, 6a+ or 5c+ A0

A more recent (1997) area classic with great positioning, but it’s less committing than longer routes in the area. Mostly bolted, with an easy descent.

Direct Integrale, Sciora Dafora

22 pitches, 6c (6 A1)

Bolts and gear

A mostly 5.9 and easier route with three 5.10b to 5.10d pitches up high, on a scenic arête to the summit of Sciora Dafora.

Piodakante/NW Ridge, Punta Pioda, 5b

26 pitches, 6b or 5c A0

Bolts and gear

Another area classic, and an enormous completely bolted climb, with one A0 move over a large, usually dripping-wet overhang.

Kasper Pillar, Ago di Sciora

6 pitches, 5b, bolts and gear

A steep, fun, half-day climb to the top of an aesthetic (but smaller) Sciora peak.

few long bolted routes in the U.S., I get a kid-in-a-candy-store feeling to look at a book full of Swiss routes that all promise a full day out and nothing but a rack of quickdraws on your harness.

The Bregaglia, however, is far from a carefree playground. There’s rock-fall, bad weather, and plenty of opportunities to get in over your head. Marcello Negrini, 64, and Vittorio Scartazinni, 27, are the local crew of Rega, the nationwide Swiss air rescue service, and they perform about 15 helicopter rescues per summer in the Bregaglia. Mostly, they say, the rescued parties underestimate the length of the routes, or don’t have the endurance, or see a bad weather forecast and decide to go up anyway. Both men have been climbing in the Bregaglia since they were 8 years old, a total of more than seven decades of experience between them.

“Because of the Badile and Cengalo, it’s our Yosemite,” Negrini says.

Only one English guidebook for the area is available, and it’s quite erratically written. The author has evidently done some of the climbs in the book, but is happy to quote others’ trip reports at length in route descriptions. Some climbs have notes on what gear to bring, and others have zero mention of whether they’re bolted or gear routes. The other Bregaglia guidebooks are either in German or Italian, and often have rather large discrepancies in ratings and number of pitches.

Our second day had a rather spotty weather forecast, so we picked another easy climb, the *West Ridge* of Torre Innominata, which one guidebook said was a 10-pitch 5a (5.7) and another said was a 13-pitch 5b+ (5.8). We spent the day climbing into and through a cloud, a light mist covering the rock. We found 14 bolted belays, and a stout 5.10 layback move at the start of one of the upper pitches.

The history of climbing in the Bregaglia dates back to the 1800s. The high passes, such as the Cacciabella Pass (9,500 feet) were used by Italian smugglers bringing tobacco into Switzerland far in advance of the first for-pleasure climbing in the area. In 1867, American W.A.B. Coolidge made the first ascent of the Piz Badile by its south ridge with French guides François Devouassoud and Henri Devouassoud, which the Swiss Alpine Club called “the beginning of serious rock climbing

Beta

Getting there Fly to Zurich, then take a train to St. Moritz, and a bus to Bondo. From Bondo, either hut is a 3.5-hour hike (but if you can catch a ride with a passing car, the hike is 1.5 to 2 hours). St. Moritz is the best bet for groceries.

Stay For access to Piz Badile routes, bunk at **Capanna di Sciora** (\$64 per night, including breakfast and dinner). Contact the hut guardian, Barbara Hofmeister Salis, at +41 81 822 19 68 or sciora.cap@bluewin.ch. For access to all routes not on Piz Badile, stay at **Capanna Sasc Furä** (\$60 per night, including breakfast and dinner). Contact the hut warden, Heidi Altweger, at +41 (0)81 822 12 52 or info@sascfura.ch.

Guidebook The best English guidebook, providing a useful overview of the area's most classic routes, is *Bregaglia Climbing: Sciora & Badile*, by Chris Mellor. Download a PDF at needlesports.com for \$11.

Guide Get pointed in the right direction with Alti Planet guide Simon Duverney. He's IFMGA-certified, fluent in English, and 2013's mixed climbing champion at the Ouray Ice Festival (altiplanet.fr).

in the district.” In the 1890s, a Swiss guide named Christian Klucker was hired by Russian photographer and writer Anton von Rydzewski to help him explore the region. Although history would reflect that the two men quite despised each other, they teamed up for dozens of ascents, including many first ascents of peaks and routes in the Bregaglia: Pizzi Gemelli, Sciora di Fuori, Punta Pioda, *West Ridge* of Piz Badile, *North Face* of Piz Cengalo, *West Arête* of Punta Trubinasca, *South Ridge* of Sciora di Dentro, *West Ridge* of Ago di Sciora, and others.

Klucker wanted the first ascent of the *North Ridge* of the Badile just as bad as anyone at the time, and one day, while waiting for a client to show up, he soloed the lower pitches of it. Unable to get footing in his stiff boots, he climbed in socks. He never wrote how high he got, but the rumor is it was almost halfway up.

On August 4, 1923, another guide, Walter Risch, led his client up the first ascent of the *Nordkante* (aka *North Ridge*). In July 1937, Riccardo Cassin led the first ascent of the northeast face of the Badile, on a route that would eventually bear his name, and a climb that would

“People come back, and they tell us how much they enjoy it, that it’s not even a big challenge, but they climbed it because it’s so long,” she says. “It’s allowed nowadays, to simply enjoy climbing an easy route.”



French guide Simon Duverney enjoys some of the Sciora hut’s alpine amenities.



Barbara Elia climbs the *North Ridge* of the Piz Badile, which some might say is the most classic rock route in Switzerland.



If only every day were such a perfect weather day on Bugeleisen (5.8).

become mountaineering legend. Cassin, with partners Gino Esposito and Vittorio Ratti, started up the then-unclimbed face, to find Mario Molteni and Giuseppe Valsecchi on the same face attempting its first ascent. Molteni and Valsecchi asked to join Cassin's party, and over three days, the team worked its way up. They summited in a thunderstorm, but Molteni and Valsecchi died of exposure and exhaustion on the descent.

Over the next two decades, the summit register of the route started to read like a European climbing hall of fame: Cassin, 1937; Gaston Rebuffat, 1948; Maurice Herzog, 1949; Louis Lachenal and Lionel Terray, 1949; Jean Couzy, 1952; Lino Lacedelli, 1952.

The second-biggest story of the Badile, next to the first ascent of the *Cassin*, is Hermann Buhl's: On a Friday in July 1952, Buhl left Innsbruck on his bicycle on a Friday night, biked from Landeck to the Austria-Switzerland border, slept for four hours from midnight until 4 a.m. Saturday, then biked 100 miles to Promontongno and hiked into the Sciora hut, where he spent the night, hoping to get up at 2 a.m. to start his climb. He overslept, woke at 4 a.m., hiked up, started climbing at 6 a.m., summited at 10:30 a.m., downclimbed the *North Ridge*, got back to his pack at 3 p.m., descended to Promontogno, and got back on his bike. After 90 miles of riding (including a 3,600-foot climb up the Maloja Pass), he fell asleep on his bike and crashed into the River Inn. He walked the rest of the way to a bus stop and took a bus into Landeck at 4:30 a.m. Monday morning.

We walked to the Sasc Fura hut in pouring rain. Two Polish climbers organized their gear outside, on their way down from the *Gaiser-Lehman* route on Piz Cengalo. They said they had one day without rain and that the rainy summer had not just been Switzerland, but all of Europe.

Inside, hut guardian Heidi Altweger told us the top third of the *Nordkante* was covered in ice, and no one had topped out in a week. Altweger left a full-time career in social work at age 50 when she answered a newspaper ad about the Sasc Fura hut guardian job, and she has worked here since 2007. She first climbed the *Nordkante* in 1988, and every summer at the hut, she tries to arrange for at least one day off so she can climb it one more time. Because, she says, it's just a fun climb.

“People come back, and they tell us how much they enjoy it, just this climbing, that it's not even a big challenge, but they did a big thing because it's so long,” she says. “I just think to people it's allowed nowadays, that you're allowed to simply enjoy climbing an easy route. The Badile *North Ridge*, when the weather and everything is OK, is one of those routes you really can enjoy.”

From the back of the hut, when I walk outside to the bathroom, I can see about half the *Nordkante*. The other half is in a cloud. My chances of climbing this thing, the El Cap of 5.fun, are also in a cloud. The forecast is now a 70% chance of disappointment.

Up until this trip, I had always believed that destination climbing stories have to have the author in them. They must contain, at some point, the standard “No Shit There I Was Moment,” wherein the writer communicates to the reader that the climbing is good here, I have gone and tested it for you, and can vouch for it. This thought was a source of stress as I ate dinner at the Sasc Fura hut and tried to admit to myself that this route, the 3,000 feet I have traveled 5,248 miles to climb, is probably not going to happen.

I woke up at 5 a.m. to go outside and pee, and I saw stars and the hulking shadow of what, even in my blurred, contact lens-less vision, I knew was the *Nordkante*. Back in my bunk, I tossed and turned for an hour or so, wondering if we made the right call. There is ice up top. No one has summited in the past week. Zero other people have come to the Sasc Fura hut to try this route, one of the most famous and accessible climbs in the Alps.

I woke up a couple hours later, and at breakfast, Simon said, “We can still go do it.” Meaning the first 10 or so pitches, or the first half, or whatever. Simon climbs 5.13. He is always stoked. Why was I not as stoked? Should we climb the first half? I don’t think so. That would still mean I’d have to come back and finish it one day.

I asked Simon: “If you could fly to America knowing you could climb the first half of the *Nose*, but not finish the climb, would you do it?”

He paused. “Hm, I don’t know.”

On the walk down from the Sasc Fura hut, I fell behind the group, carefully stepping over wet roots and rocks, unable to get out of my head. The sun popped out, it rained again briefly, and I finally admitted to myself that the story of a place does not have to have me in it. This whole thing, this place, the history and the story of climbing here, it can’t be captured in a selfie. Regardless of whether or not one more American verifies it, the *Nordkante* of the Piz Badile is still one of the greatest rock climbs in the world. I don’t get to say I was there on that amazing ridge, but I can solemnly swear that it is an amazing climb. All I can say is I saw it from the base, and I know I’ll be back to do it someday.



The Sciora Hut sits directly beneath many popular climbing routes.



Hut trips in Switzerland involve more green and less white: Climbers move from the Sciora Hut to the Sasc Fura Hut.



The north face of the Matterhorn. The Hornli Ridge runs along the left ridge.

Climb The Matterhorn

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the iconic peak’s first ascent

I didn’t expect the summit to look like this. A small dome to rest on, perhaps, or a sharp point to prop a leg upon triumphantly, but not this serrated, wind-assaulted tightrope stretching the distance of a football field. It’s wild and intimidating—one errant step, and it’d be a rip-roaring slide. Your partner would have no choice but to jump over the other side of the ridge to arrest your fall. There are two distinct high points: the

Swiss summit at 14,690 feet and the Italian summit at 14,686. It’s tempting to tiptoe across, but the 50 mph wind gusts make it difficult to stay upright (and impossible to stay warm), so we ham for a summit selfie, take a quick gulp of now-slushy Coke, and make haste back down the *Hornli Ridge*, the same route the seven-person first ascent team took in 1865. The Matterhorn was the last of the major peaks of the Alps to be climbed. British climber Edward Whymper made several attempts and was finally successful with the help of a strong father-son Swiss guide duo, both named Peter Taugwalter. The rest

of the team was comprised of Michel Croz (a Chamonix guide) and three more Brits, Reverend Charles Hudson, Lord Francis Douglas, and Douglas Robert Hadow. The latter four fell to their deaths on the descent. It was so controversial that Queen Victoria threatened to ban Brits from attempting any further Matterhorn ascents. Her words only fueled interest in the peak, causing hordes of U.K. visitors to come to Zermatt just to see the deadly mountain. This Matterhorn mania is widely considered the birth of tourism in this once predominantly agrarian valley. There are roughly 30 routes and major variations to the summit today. Every-

thing that can be climbed has been done in every season, though every route on the ice and snow-encrusted pyramid of crumbling gneiss is a still a serious undertaking. The Hornli Ridge that I ascended with local climber Andreas Steindl (who once ran from town to the summit in 2 hours, 57 minutes, an incredible speed record) isn’t difficult, but it’s long and sustained with serious rockfall hazards. It gains 4,000 feet from the Hornli Hut, and it’s often severely underestimated. It demands great fitness and prior experience. Though Swiss guides haul hundreds of folks to the summit daily in prime conditions, instability and foul weather limited the

summit tally to fewer than 100 climbers in 2014 when I summited. Zermatt has higher hopes in 2015, with celebrations planned throughout the year, culminating in July with the grand reopening of the renovated Hornli Hut, the now-traditional launching pad for the majority of Matterhorn ascents. Climbers talk a lot about aesthetics, but I’d argue there isn’t a prettier mountain out there, or one that’s more alluring to climb. Get a jump on it, and you can run up and be back in the valley enjoying a beer before lunch, satisfied with a major tick off your bucket list. Find out more at zermatt.ch. —Shannon Davis