

Brandler-Hasse, North Face Cima Grande

I'd climbed with Nick for years, mainly in the Lakes but also on lots of trips around the UK. I'd also had my fair share of foreign climbing trips. This was to be a trip to remember. We were going to the Dolomites for a long weekend to do the *Brandler-Hasse*.

I had nothing to do with the planning. The Captain organised our itinerary with military precision and it all worked like one of his well-planned, brilliantly-executed covert operations. He said he'd booked us into an Alpine hut near the crag. That sounded a bit primitive. I was a bit concerned it might not even have running water, let alone any beer. How was I to know it was as good as a hotel with waiter service and a well-stocked bar?

I'd been under strict orders to get fit so set about getting back to fighting weight and climbing strength. I was training down at Leo Houlding's wall in Staveley – the Fly Cave – a superb little facility that soon got me up to the required fitness.

All that training paid off. Between us we crushed the route – despite the reservations of the bloke in the hut. Little did he know what the Wharton-Wood combination was capable of. Apart from the piss-wet pitches at the top, it was a breeze, and we were back at the hut 'in time for tea and medals'. The Italian was well impressed and pointed up at the wall overlooking the hut. "Tomorrow, you climb that... is special... you enjoy!"

He was right. Next day the Captain had us up bright and early as usual and we had a superb time on the Gelbe Mauer, scene of Wolfgang Gullich, in place of Stallone, at the start of the film *Cliffhanger*. Of course, we both had to do the one-arm dangle off the massive jug (see Glossary) on the lip of the roof when we got to it. That night was a real bender. The Italian and his staff kept giving us drinks. Capitano Nico and Maestro Woody were the heroes of the hour.

The thing that stands out about climbing with Nick is the attitude that anything is achievable. Nobody else has the same drive to try and perform like him. He has 100 per cent commitment, and he expects it from you as well – no excuses. He did the second ascent of *Paths of Victory* (E6 6c) on Dow Crag straight after I did the first. Okay, he'd watched me, but it's a bloody hard sequence and he still did it first go. Both Caff and Ian Vickers apparently fell off first go. I love the dry humour. It's always good value. I've never had a bad day out with him. But the ridiculous early morning starts... it must be an army thing!

Stuart Wood