by de Chesne, Kugy's companion and still tended by the son of a Kugy guide) and on to the Kugy statue, a large bronze of the big man gazing up to Jalovec at the head of the Trenta. We then walked down to the shops and the local museum. It was one of the best of days as Alpine valley days so often are. The next day we returned to the heights.

A bus took us to the Vrsic pass and another fine hut, from which we traversed peak after peak to Triglav, before descending the undeveloped Kot valley to Mojstrana and Dovje, where Herman Rogan's closed our stay with baths – and dinner on the balcony. Herman, a cripple, ran the bar from his bed. A previous gang had the interest of a police raid. Perhaps there was a *slivovic* still under the bed. This local plum brandy is a drink I would chiefly recommend to my enemies.

Above the Vrsic col is Prisojnik, a mountain which shares, with Tafonata in Corsica, the fame of having a great hole through it. Our best day took us down through this for hours of tortuous wending down several thousand feet of N face. We met chamois, and watched butterfly-bright wallcreepers for relief from the overbearing verticality. The summit ridge was Cuillin-like, if you could imagine the TD Gap and the Tooth wired up. A whole area of spires and towers round Skrlatica has been left with no paths, wires, huts or any development beyond several bivouac huts. It took Kugy several attempts before he climbed this peak, last to fall of the big Julians. This dolomitic-fastness is one of the few unspoilt areas of Europe. Kugy would notice little change.

There is a dearth of literature on the region in English. There is a German guidebook, and many local ones. Descriptions of it, and Kugy, are given in 2 chapters of H. E. G. Tyndale's *Mountain Paths* (Eyre & Spottiswoode 1948). Farrar reviewed Kugy in *AJ 46*, 428 and Tyndale wrote an obituary in *AJ 54*, 293. A Victorian ascent of Triglav is given in *AJ 4*, 345.

Round Triglav once lay the magic gardens of the Rojenice, the good fairies. Zlatorog, the sacred white chamois with the golden horns kept watch over the gardens. It was death to any who shot at him, but despite warnings, Janez, the Trentana, did so to gain the golden horns and find the treasure of the mountains. Zlatorog recovered under the magic healing of the red roses of Triglav, which sprang from his sprinkled blood, but the hunter fell to his death. Zlatorog, in pain and rage, uprooted and destroyed the garden which is why, today, there is only a barren boulder sea round Triglav, and which is why it pays to go carefully among those heights. Who knows when Zlatorog might confront the hardy mountaineer? It is a chance worth taking.

El Gran Trono Blanco

Isabelle Agresti

(Translation: H. Pursey)

In California, just S of the frontier between Mexico and the USA, there is a wild mountainous region which extends over 200km from the Pacific to the Sea of Cortez, known as the Sierra Juarez. On the E slopes of this range there are some fine granite faces, especially on the Gran Trono Blanco where they reach

a height of some 500m. East of this chain is the Laguna Salada, a desert region which, when seen from high in the Sierra, gives the impression that one is in the Hoggar, in the middle of the Sahara.

When we set off towards the Gran Trono Blanco we had little idea where we were going. How high did the chain rise? Which route should we take to reach the edge of the plateau? We did not know. The first serious climbers in this region – S. Baxter, L. Dexter and K. Karlstrom – gave no precise indications in their *Summit* article of September, 1972, as to how to get there, and only in J. Robinson's guide-book *Camping and Climbing in the Baja* were to be found vague directions as to 2 possible routes: either by making one's way up the Tajo Canyon, which necessitated a long day's walk, or by dropping down from the plateau by steep ravines to the foot of the face. Eventually it was this latter solution which we chose.

At the end of December, 1972, we had just passed the Mexican frontier, and to the S of Rumarosa we drove our huge Chevrolet Impala into the complicated tracks which seemed to grow narrower as one looked at them. Would we ever find our way out again? But that is another question. We had been joined by an American climber, Larry Gorbet, who had had no previous experience of an enterprise of this scale.

Just before nightfall we arrived at the edge of the plateau. The track ended there – but where was the Gran Trono Blanco? There was no landmark to help us. Pleased with ourselves that we had not left bits of our vehicle behind, we set up our bivouac. At first light we decided to go down the first canyon which appeared. Easy to begin with, the descent rapidly became steep and difficult. We soon came to a region with an ecology which surprised us, a jungle of pines and cacti which proved extremely inhospitable. Further down hairy palm trees swayed in the shade of deep gorges – it would have been pleasant to rest for a while and drink some of the water which ran in this lower part of the canyon. But as we were still far from the foot of the rock face, we had to leave this oasis. We started off on a long traverse, the ground bristling with cacti of all kinds. I had never imagined so many different varieties existed. Everywhere there were spines – sharp needles sticking out in every direction – a real nightmare, where the smallest slip would be fatal. The sharp points of the 'Spanish daggers' pierced our Vibram soles, but worst of all were the 'chollas', veritable pin-cushions whose points, often invisible, lodged themselves in our clothes by the dozen when we brushed against them. At least once, one of us had to remove shirt and trousers in which an infinity of needles was stuck. We finally came through, but the spines which had fixed themselves in our clothes, thighs and calves reminded us of their presence for several weeks.

And beyond this sea of agaves, 'creeping devils', 'boojums' with surrealistic shapes, and 'elephant trees' there suddenly appeared before us the E face of Gran Trono Blanco, towards which we now had to climb up again. At 2 o'clock in the afternoon we at last reached its foot. The idea now was to repeat the route called 'El Progresso' – but who knows what Henri might have in mind? A short rest and we set off again up the slope towards the upper part of the face. This part of the climb was fairly easy and by nightfall we found a comfortable place to bivouac. Soon a sharp fall in temperature hit us and we slid into our duvets. Larry disappeared behind a mask through which only his eyes



40 El Gran Trono Blanco (Photo: T. Birtley)

showed. He looked like an actor in some ancient drama – and certainly the events which nearly engulfed us on the rock face that December night were dramatic enough.

The sight of a desiccated-looking cactus at the edge of our terrace gave us the idea of lighting a fire to warm ourselves. The flames took hold and set fire to the numerous dead leaves round the cactus. Suddenly with the heat, the heart of the cactus, which was still green, took fire to our great surprise. Blisters appeared everywhere, and the boiling sap came crackling out as if it was pure petrol. It was at this moment that a strong wind sprang up from the canyon of Tajo down below and beat with full force against the rock-face of the Gran Trono Blanco. Thousands of sparks scattered in all directions, and we noticed everywhere around us, in the light of the fire and further off in the shadows, that the whole face was covered with cacti and various other bushes which would burn just as easily as ours. By now we were getting really scared. Supposing the fire spread? But it surely must spread! We had visions of flames on all sides which would roast us and turn the Trono and the entire Sierra into an enormous brazier.

Our means of defence were feeble. We scratched up the earth, a sort of large, round-grained sand, which covered part of our bank, and threw it on the cactus. We tried to trample on it and, in desperation, to sprinkle it with the only liquid – rarified by the day's torrid heat – which our bodies could extract. It was in vain. Just as we had nearly extinguished it the wind redoubled its strength, giving new vigour to the fire and spreading sparks everywhere. An area 20m below us began to catch fire. Henri, who had been on watch all the night while the rest of us were asleep, tried by imitating the 'Mannekin-Pis' and by repeated showers of sand to extinguish this new eruption. By an inexplicable miracle the fire spread no further.

Next morning when we left the bivouac, the wind slackened and it began to snow. Not enough to assuage our fears, because a few hours later a thick white smoke again rose up from the cacti. All day we were haunted by the

fear that the fire might take hold once more and climb the slabs, dièdres and overhangs. What an odd fate for a climber, to perish by being roasted on a rock-face!

After we had left the ramp of 'El Progresso' we looked for a way of escaping the violent wind by forcing a way up an overhanging recess. This was the only place where the gusts of wind were somewhat attenuated and it was possible to climb without losing one's balance. Night overtook us in the middle of a long overhang and we were forced to bivouac once more. Larry stayed alone on foot at the end of the overhang, while Henri and I perched as well as we could, standing on one leg, in the branches of a bush. The snow began to fall again during the night, making our teeth chatter; a blessing compared to the grilling we had just missed . . . But could we get out of the last dip of the overhang in this snow? At the end of the night the wind stopped, and with the daylight we saw that the fine weather had returned. Larry joined us and Henri cleared the last difficult section.

When we eventually reached the summit, the sun thawed out our numbed fingers and we discovered a vast plateau, well covered with vegetation, where at each turn we were astonished by the strange rock shapes sculptured by the wind. In the distance one looked over empty deserts towards the horizon and the Laguna Salada. The descent needed great care, as it was new to us. Here, too, we were helped by luck and good fortune, and at the end of the afternoon we reached our vehicle which started easily and took us back to San Diego.

On returning from the Gran Trono Blanco we had the feeling that our adventure had had some quite exceptional quality, in a region far away from the well-beaten tracks. During the months which followed, the mountain attracted climbers who became more numerous as the approaches became better known. Bit by bit routes have been opened up on every face.

We came back 15 months later to make the second ascent of a beautiful new route recently opened on the S face. The climb itself was very satisfying to us, because of its difficulties and the physical skill which was needed, and also on account of the atmosphere of the region; all the same we did not rediscover that unique flavour of our first adventure. For one thing we were going to a region which was already known. And then, too many people had been there meanwhile, and man had left his traces at several points. There was no longer the same feeling of isolation. Soon, no doubt, the Trono Blanco will be just another school of climbing at the gates of California and Arizona with an excess of climbers out for a day's excitement, as is already the case at Tahquitz, Joshua Tree or Yosemite. And the Gran Trono Blanco will no longer be what it used to be. As for ourselves, and a few others, perhaps we ought not to write articles such as this, so as to leave in solitude those rare mountains which are still comparatively unknown.

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