# The Gran Sasso d'Italia

*In the Footsteps of Douglas Freshfield*

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In May 1893 Douglas Freshfield, with his guide François Dévouassoud, climbed the Gran Sasso d'Italia. This was not a first ascent; the mountain had first been climbed nearly a century earlier by one Bernardino Delfico.[1] Nevertheless, Freshfield's ascent had a certain adventurous quality about it since he wanted to approach the mountain from the less accessible north-east side, rather than from Campo Imperatore to the south. He had no map and had to rely on advice from local people about the most favourable starting-point.

The Gran Sasso d'Italia lies in the heart of the Abruzzi and, at 2912m, is the highest mountain in the Apennine chain. Yet Freshfield was almost apologetic about bringing it to the attention of the members of the Alpine Club. 'Has not the time come,' he asked, 'when even the Alpine Club may look back to what in the natural enthusiasm of discovery it left behind for a time, and remember that its true scope is to widen, not to narrow, our love of Nature? May not its members be now and then allowed an Apennine?'[2] This enticing argument made me resolve to climb the Corno Grande, as it is familiarly called in Italy, trying so far as possible to follow the route taken by Freshfield himself. I was unable to find a climbers' guide nor even a 1:50,000 scale map; the *Blue Guide* gives, in bare outline, a few itineraries all starting from Campo Imperatore on the Aquila side of the mountain. This was not the approach chosen by Freshfield; indeed, he maintained that 'the highest Apennine seen from this side is a mean thing,' and the country generally more like 'some barren province of Asia . . . than the heart of beautiful Italy'.

Freshfield's eventual starting-point was a village called Casala San Nicola. He and his guide had undertaken 'a good deal of cross-country and up- and down-hill work' to get there, having been misdirected to neighbouring Tosiccia. At San Nicola there was no comfortable albergo to stay in; instead, they had to accept the hospitality of the village priest which, though freely given, afforded a fairly uncomfortable night. 'It was a peasant's home,' Freshfield recalled, 'and François Dévouassoud, with his large mountain experience, looked on its owner as *le plus pauvre curé* he had ever met with.'

Casala San Nicola which, in Freshfield's time, consisted of 'a few poor cottages' is still a tiny village nestling against the base of the Gran Sasso. Rambling up the hillside towards a pretty post-war church, it overlooks rich farmland – fields of golden barley and brilliant yellow sunflowers, silver olive groves and dark poplars – stretching away into the distant heat-haze over the Adriatic. Unfortunately, the village is now dominated by an enormous viaduct which carries the autostrada out of the long tunnel under the Gran Sasso and marches off with it towards Teramo. I arrived here in the early afternoon and,

having booked a room at the albergo, I went to have a look at the mountain.

> 'A sharp-pointed precipice of yellowish-white rock, raised on a broad pedestal of beech forest, shoots up immediately overhead. The face of the cliffs is of inaccessible steepness, save perhaps in one place, where the spring avalanches, which were now lying in a broad white streak amongst the green, had tumbled over.'

Freshfield was evidently much impressed by his first sight of the mountain; my own thoughts were along the lines of 'what *have* I undertaken?'

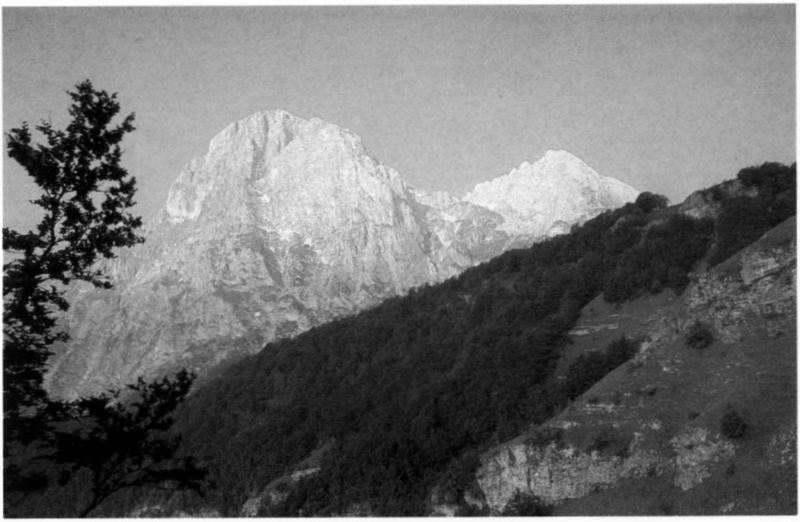
> 'Immediately behind the houses the path climbs steeply into a narrow dell lying at the very base of the great horn, and keeps close to the clear copious torrent which dashes down through the beechwoods.'

I could find no 'clear copious torrent', but behind the church a path which matched Freshfield's description followed the dried-up bed of a stream. There was also another path climbing leftwards out of the village. I wanted to be sure of starting out next morning on the correct track so I thought I would try to find the village priest and see if he could give me any information. Someone pointed out to me the priest's house. It was quite modern and clearly not the same one Freshfield had stayed in all those years ago. I rang the bell and an elderly man came to the door. He did not look like a priest but I thought that, in any case, it might be helpful to show an interest in the church as a starting-point for conversation. I asked whether it would be possible to borrow the key. The priest was resting, the old man said, but I could certainly take the key; I promised to bring it back in a few minutes. After looking at the church and giving the old man a small contribution towards its upkeep, I asked him about the route up the mountain. The path behind the church was the correct one, he said. The route did not go up the difficult face visible from the village but led round to a ridge and then circled behind it to approach the mountain from the north. No technical climbing was involved but since there was still some snow on the upper slopes an ice-axe might be useful. To reach the summit would take at least six hours. I should have liked to find the actual house where Freshfield and Dévouassoud had stayed, but it was too long ago; the old man knew nothing of any former priests or where they had lived.

Later that evening I chatted with the owner of the albergo. On the previous day, he said, a *sentiero geologico* had been inaugurated by the *Club Alpino Italiano*. He produced a map of the mountain showing a new geological path, about 18km long, circumnavigating the mountain. This was a wonderful piece of luck and the small map (reproduced on page 148) was invaluable to me as it also showed, in outline, a route to the summit.

Next morning I woke very early and looked out of the window. The sky was clear and starry but there was still no vestige of light. Freshfield had started moving at half-past one after a very disturbed night but was held up by the old priest deciding to accompany him for part of the way.

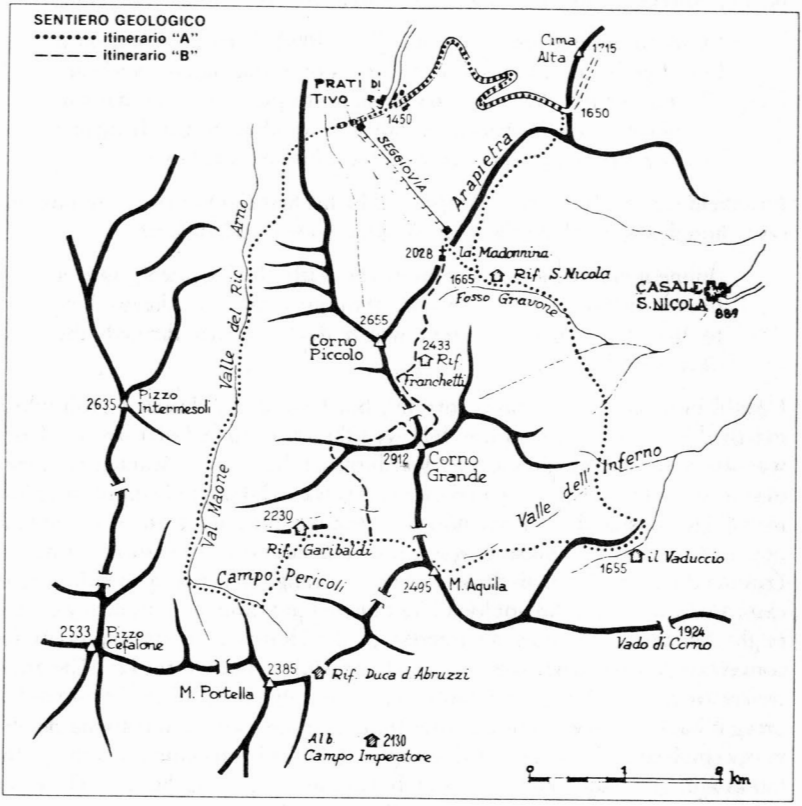
> 'To our dismay, when we announced ourselves ready to start, he



*61. The Corno Grande (2912m) and the Corno Piccolo (2655m).*



*62. The summit ridge of the Corno Grande.*




suddenly drew forth a pair of top-boots unseen before, and commenced slowly to grease them before putting them on.' Even so, Freshfield recalled, 'it was little more than half-past two when we walked out into the clear moonlight'.

At five o'clock I let myself out of the albergo without disturbing anyone. The sky was just beginning to show that faint tinge of grey which precedes the dawn. For the first half-hour I wore my head-torch to ensure that I did not tread on any poisonous snakes. This was no fanciful precaution as snakes do exist in that part of Italy. Freshfield and his guide had had 'to scramble up as best we could through the tangled thickets'. I was more fortunate for, after zig-zagging up for some way, I found what was obviously the new geological path. High above me, the sun-burnished twin summits of the Gran Sasso pierced the clear early-morning sky. I followed the newly-widened path horizontally for a while until, after crossing the bed of a stream where Freshfield's torrent had been diverted into a pipe to provide water for the village, another path wound its way up again through the trees, eventually emerging on a steep open meadow covered with

late spring flowers. It was now two hours since I had left San Nicola – the viaduct was a child's toy far below me. There were no signs or way-marks of any kind but a large cross on the skyline seemed to be the spot to make for. Soon I attained a wide ridge from which there was a clear view of the dramatic Corno Piccolo and the bold horn of the Gran Sasso itself. They still looked a very long way away.

> 'We were now turning the north-eastern corner of the pyramid of the Gran Sasso, and opening the long trough which runs round its northern flanks and divides it from the sharp-edged spine of the Corno Piccolo. The entrance to this was, however, still far above us, and to reach it we had a steep climb by little goat-tracks amongst rocks where the snow still occupied every hollow.'

Walking back along the ridge, I passed a ruined refuge and the top of an abandoned chair-lift. A rough path now picked its way up a boulder-slope to the Rifugio Franchetti at 2433m. It took another two hours to reach the hut; I was delighted to find that it contained a guardian – the first person I had encountered on my climb. In spite of its beauty and grandeur, the approach from San Nicola was obviously not often used, probably because of its length, steepness and relative inaccessibility. It was good to have found, through studying Freshfield's account, what I felt must indeed be the most interesting route up the mountain.

After eating and resting it was time to continue and the guardian pointed out the correct way forward: a rocky spur led to a higher ridge which doubled back towards the summit. By this time clouds were drifting up from the valley. The peaks above me were still bathed in sunshine but wisps of mist were beginning to swirl up and obscure them.

> 'We took the ridge falling northwards from the highest peak. It proved longer than expected. The limestone was loose, shattered, and tolerably steep, so that there was room for some scrambling.'

The summit was hidden from view by a mass of rough, steep limestone, but I was grateful for paint flashes which indicated a way through. Just below the final ridge, steep smooth scree, interspersed with patches of snow, fell away into a jumble of rocks below and had to be negotiated with care. Some unmistakably English voices wafted down from above and a few moments later I passed a group of young men coming down. '*Buona sera,*' they said. 'Hello,' I replied. 'Oh, you're English!' I said that indeed I was and they told me that they were theological students from Rome where they were studying for the priesthood. I wished them good luck and continued to the summit.

> 'I do not recommend any one who counts a mountain walk so much irksome expenditure of energy to climb the greatest of the Apeninnes. Those, however, who look upon the summit view as only one among the pleasures of the day will see a striking scene with a wild savage character of its own, unlooked for so far south. We repaired the stone man, which was much the worse for its wild

> winter . . . Before we left the top a company of white vapours had collected in the hollows under the mountain and was curling up its sides, cutting off from moment to moment fragments of the view.'

As I gazed around, the mist parted for a few minutes to reveal a glimpse of red sunbaked mountains disappearing into a hazy distance and, nearer at hand, the sharp thrusting towers of the Corno Piccolo. Only a simple cross marked the summit – there was no sign of Freshfield's 'stone man'. A few moments later everything, including the rocks where I stood, was again shrouded in hazy mist.

> 'The ascent from San Nicolò, a matter probably of nearer 8000 than 7000 feet, had occupied six hours of steady walking (without counting halts). The return was a very different affair. Once off the ridge we flew down on winged heels at a pace Mercury himself might have envied. From 9000 feet to deep in the beechwoods our progress was a series of shoots down snow-slopes and avalanche beds. We were actually in motion scarcely an hour and a quarter.'

To match Freshfield's speedy descent was clearly impossible, if only because the snow on the lower slopes had long since disappeared. I thought it might be interesting, instead, to traverse the mountain and try for myself the normal route down to Campo Imperatore which Freshfield had carefully avoided. The mist was not so thick as to make way-marks hard to see and on the south side of the mountain it soon dispersed. I had obtained a more detailed map from the guardian at the Franchetti hut which showed that the 'normale' followed a ridge running west from the summit. Here I met a party of teenagers, about 20 of them, following a single leader and, by mid-afternoon, still some way from the top. They were obviously unused to this sort of work, reminiscent of Crib Goch, and many were plainly terrified. What would the leader have done, I wondered, if one or more of them had slipped. There was no evidence of any mountain rescue arrangements on the mountain.

Once off the ridge, the normal route became quite boring and totally different from the beautiful approach, over varied terrain and with lovely views, which I had taken in the morning. A long, seemingly endless traverse across alternate scree and snow led over a great basin and along a flattened and barren ridge which eventually arrived at a crossroads. To the east the geological path mentioned earlier traversed the subsidiary Mt Aquila (2495m) and led back, after 6km or so, to the woods above San Nicola. Another path led to the Duc d'Abruzzi hut which, at the end of June, was not yet open. The normal route continued south to Campo Imperatore where I expected to find an albergo, marked on the map and sign-posted. I thought of staying there overnight and returning to San Nicola, via Mt Aquila, in the morning. However, Campo Imperatore turned out to be the most desolate of places, with nothing but an astronomical observatory, its silver dome glistening in the sun, and a derelict and abandoned hotel. It would now be a long walk back to San Nicola! By a stroke of good fortune, however, the theological students were still there, making a last brew before returning to Rome. They generously gave me a lift to Aquila where I was able to find transport back to San Nicola. 'It added

something to our day to be able to help you,' they said.

In a Preface to *Below the Snow Line*, Freshfield wrote:

> 'Nearly fifty years ago I published a little volume called *Italian Alps* which was so far successful that it still brings me from time to time letters of thanks from adventurers in my footsteps.'

Freshfield would no doubt be gratified to know that, 65 years on, his writings are still a source of inspiration to followers in his footsteps.

## REFERENCES

1. D W Freshfield, *Below the Snow Line*. Constable, 1923.
2. *et seq* (*loc cit*).