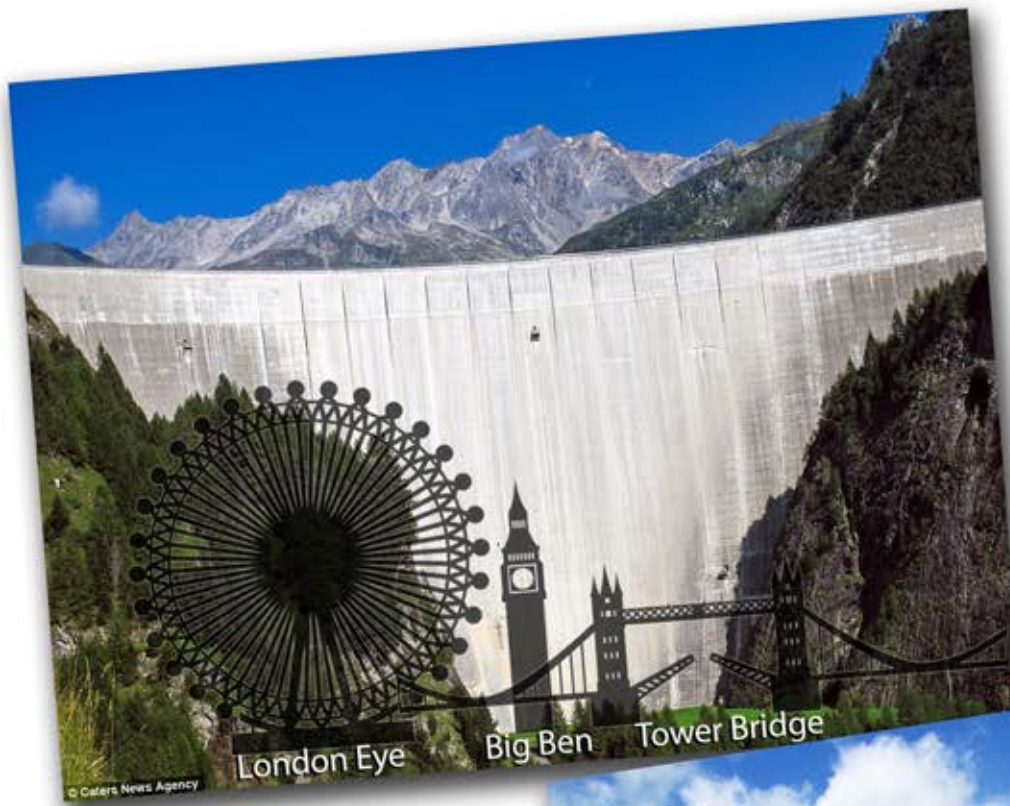


Don't Look Down

Diga Di Luzzzone - Charity Dam Climb



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After overcoming our irrational fear of flying, we touched down safely in Zurich bound for Olivone, which was to be our base. Time and the weather were already our potential enemies but things were going smoothly as we eagerly jumped into our hire car with a bag full of climbing equipment and only one change of clothing. 2 1/2 hours was our estimated journey time but construction works in a tunnel 17km long, would see us arriving at our hotel at around 9.30pm.



Although we needed food, we so desperately wanted to lay eyes upon the concrete colossus which would turn out to be our nemesis. After obtaining directions from our non-English speaking hosts, we set out intently. The roads were long and winding. With every twist and turn we held our breaths hoping to catch our first glimpse of the dam. 20 km later we did lay eyes upon a dam but not the one we had seen in the pictures at home. No holds, no restaurant, not as high as we had thought and not the right dam! We turned around and headed back to Olivone, this time heading on the only other road out of this small sleepy town. Eventually, after negotiating hair pin bends, we came upon a sign which read Val Luzzone. We followed the road, passing through tunnels which seemed never ending and there it was, standing like a sentinel at the head of the valley. It was Goliath and we were the head lice in David's flowing tresses. It was magnificent and we were drawn to it like magnets. We couldn't help ourselves and driven by the "must touch it" voices in our heads, we parked the car and ran through the grassy meadow.

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Standing at its foot for the first time we realised that no picture could have adequately prepared us for its scale and we knew that the exposure would be mind blowing. Looking up we could see that restaurant lights were still on. Reluctantly, we left the wall and drove up, our aim to secure our place to climb at first light. Language difficulties were experienced once more but thanks to the only customer and his assistance through broken English, we found out that we could not get the key for the ladder to gain access to the wall until 8.00am.



We returned to our hotel feeling a little deflated. What if we returned to find a queue of eager climbers? Our mood was not improved by the fact that the restaurant had closed and that our evening would come to an end without the hearty meal we were longing for. Following a sleepless night we jumped out of bed at 6.30am, our tummies were grumbling but we were full of eager anticipation. At that point it was a close call as to whether we were more excited about breakfast or the climb! Despite the friendly welcome and promising array of breakfast foods, we admitted defeat to the local fly population who were already tucking into everything on the table. We had to settle for coffee and a spoonful of yoghurt from the bottom of a deep bowl. This was not exactly what we had hoped for or needed ahead of our challenge.

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Unperturbed and adrenalin fuelled, we jumped unto our hire car and made for the restaurant. After communicating with a member of staff, which turned out to be like a game of charades, we handed over 40 chf for the climb and 100 chf deposit for the key. The waiver forms were in German, of course we are fluent - not - but we got the gist. Perils of death etc. etc. (eek).

The weather could have been better but we couldn't complain. After 2 weeks of thunderstorms, a little light rain wasn't going to stop us. Time to take photographs of the surroundings and get just a little bit excited. It was at this point, our challenge became very real.



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It was atmospheric to say the least. We had borrowed walkie talkies thinking we would need them to communicate our instructions clearly but they were soon abandoned. You could hear a pin drop and even the tiniest of sounds echoed down the valley. Excited, well I was at least, after all I was not the one leading this time.

Thankfully we selected a safe parking place for the brand new hire car, ROCK FALLS BEWARE! We then set about making it to the starting point of the climb, some 12 - 15 feet above ground. We unlocked the ladder and after I had secured myself at the starting belay point, Paul made his way up the rope like a circus performer taking only seconds. This was it, all ready to go and my first experience of a hanging belay, a bit of a leap of faith I guess. As traditional climbers/boulderers, we have always found sports routes hard to get our heads around. A reliance upon a bolt or two drilled into a wall or rock perhaps years before, is still a bit alien.

Sitting side by side in our harnesses, we studied the route (noting that the run-out between bolts looked to be extremely generous, something in the region of 2 1/2 metres). We checked our gear one more time, kissed, exchanged I love you's and Paul set out.

The first pitch was long but straight forward and quite an easy climb. We were adrenalin fuelled and I reached Paul a little more than 30 minutes or so after setting off. Even at the top of the first pitch, the exposure was hypnotic. Eager to press on, Paul set out on the second pitch as soon as I was secure. Sitting in my harness was uncomfortable at best and my feet were already hurting!



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We both climbed the second pitch with relative ease, stopping only for a second or two up the climb to clip and un-clip quick draws and shake out our pumped arms. We exchanged thoughts about the cracked holds we had climbed over and the excessive use of a glue-like substance, which is always reassuring. The views were breathtaking and the exposure was crazy. We paused for a little longer at the top of the second, trying to work out whether or not the Go-Pro had in fact been filming :-).

Lacking in fuel for our lethargic bodies, we pressed on.

The third pitch was more challenging and steeper. It seemed like 100m rather than 40m. Energy levels were running low and the lack of food had started to take its toll. Our Boost bars gave us no boost at all and the decision was made to retreat from the top of the third, in favour of refuelling, resting and trying again the following day. The decision was not made lightly and we both felt an air of disappointment but our bodies were telling us that our efforts were futile. Looking on the bright side, the 390 foot abseil would be exciting, especially when you are forced to find out whether or not the 80m rope you purchased is actually 80m (the perils of purchasing rope off a roll!)



Alison Noble & Paul Alexander
19th -21st June 2015

Don't Look Down

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We had made it to the third pitch relatively quickly and so felt assured that if we ate and rested, we would conquer the wall early the next day. Abseiling proved to be quite straight forward and exhilarating. We walked away from the wall feeling positive and already proud of what we had achieved. Funnily enough, there were no crowds, no queue of eager adventures ready to take our place, there was just nobody else at all. It was tranquil and so beautiful. The sun was shining and the air was filled with the smell of alpine flowers, we were having adventures together. It was a good day :-).

As we made our way to the restaurant at the top, our bellies were groaning and the lethargy had well and truly kicked in. Trying to explain to the staff that we would like to keep the key to the ladder and try again the next morning was perhaps more challenging than the wall itself. I resolved to call my Italian brother-in-law to assist with translation. We explained to him what we wanted to achieve and he relayed this. Our hearts sank before the call had even ended and we could tell from the conversation and body language, we would not be allowed to keep the key overnight. Our translator also broke the news that because of a music festival in the valley that evening, nobody would be at the restaurant to give us the key until mid-morning the following day.

The figures just did not stack up, mid-morning, five hours of climbing, construction works in the tunnel = missed flight.

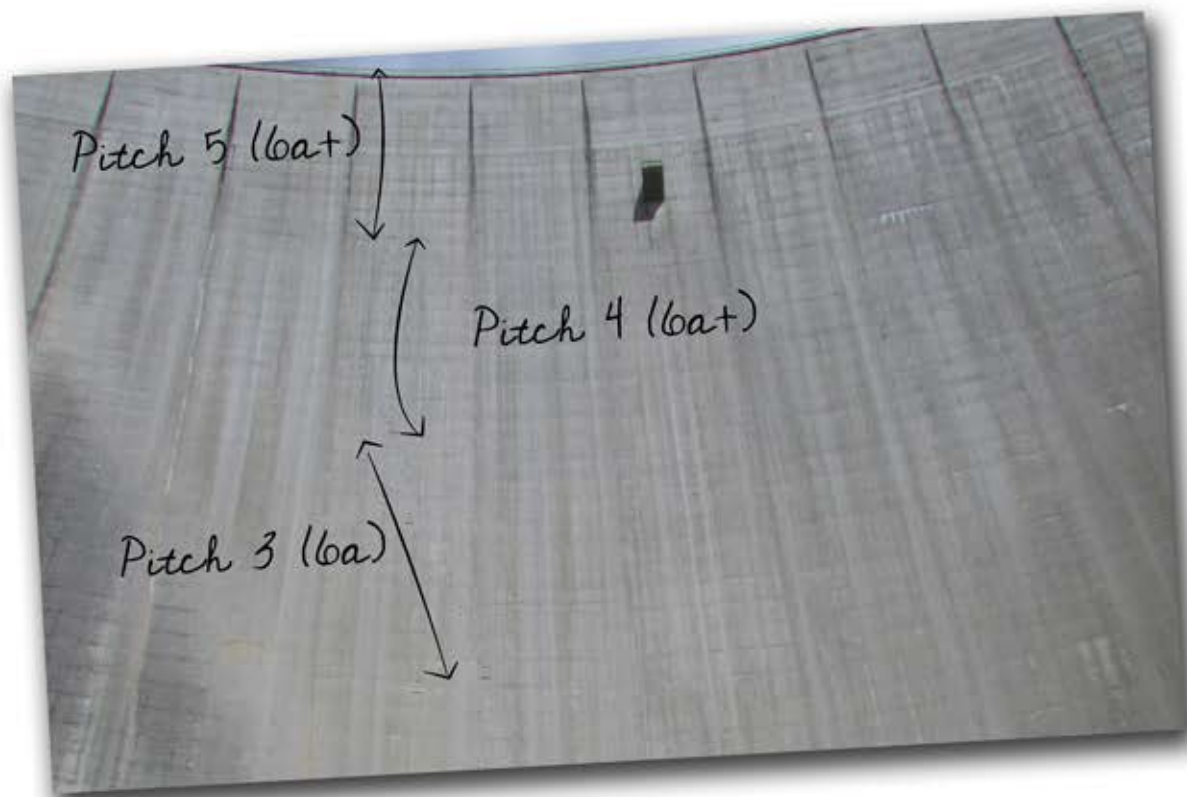
It was a now or never moment.

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Refuelled and with the weather on our side, we decided to give it another shot that day. Like us, the Go-Pro had run out of charge, so filming this attempt was not an option. We still had the camera though but to be honest, there came a point when we just needed to conserve our energy. Looking back that point was probably at the top of the fourth pitch. Up to then, our second attempt had not gone too badly. A little scrappy at times and a challenging route from third to fourth but otherwise the climbing was full on but so exhilarating. The top seemed close enough to touch (if only), perhaps it was the way it leaned over at you threatening and menacing but beckoning all the same.

The fifth and final pitch was to be our nemesis. By the time we reached the top of the fourth we were absolutely spent. It became apparent that no amount of pasta or Boost bars were enough.



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Already at a height of around 500 feet, Paul set out for the final pitch. After clipping a couple of bolts he took a scary fall which frightened me to death. He was determined and set out again, taking yet another fall. I wasn't happy, he wasn't happy and we had to make the agonising decision that enough was enough. The look in Paul's eyes said it all and I would have been the same if I had been leading it. The run-outs didn't help but seemed even longer as we became exhausted. In total, we had climbed for around 7 hours and covered about 850/900 feet. It was the right decision.

The retreat was fun and a little bit scary but when we reached the bottom we had heavy hearts. We lay at the base of the wall for a while looking up at the route and contemplating what might have been. It looked so close, if only it had been possible to extend our trip by even one day. We reflected on our preparation, what we might have done differently but in reality it was just circumstance. The cards we had been dealt for our mini adventure were the way they were and that was that. We had done our best.





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I tried to convince Paul that he should lower me over the top of the dam, so I could top rope the last pitch to get closure but he was having none of it. Looking back, it would have been insane as you couldn't even see the holds below because of the overhang. We felt so emotional, low but high all at the same time. It would have been easy for us to return from our adventure and tell everyone that we did it but that's not what we are about. For us, the better message to take home to those who may be inspired to give something a go, is;

"there is always a chance that if you try something you may fail but it's not always about the destination, not always about success but rather the journey, the ride, the adventure, the experience. All of that makes us who we are, all of that makes us stronger and even more determined".

We got to do something amazing together, something that has strengthened even further the unique bond that we share. Better still, we got to do all this whilst trying to raise money for our charity, a charity which supports a child's right to play, to grow through play and become adventurers of life. We feel truly blessed and we will be back!

As ever, the last words go to those who supported us, encouraged us, believed in us, who donated equipment and sponsored us. You know who you are and no words of thanks could ever be enough but;

THANK YOU.