SUPPORT OUR JOURNALISM Get all members-only articles, Gaia GPS, $50 gear credit and more JOIN NOW →

Lane Wallace

Sep 13, 2018

Disaster in the Alps

Thousands of people flock to the Alps each year to ski tour high-elevation routes, spending comfortable nights in a string of huts that serve wine and hot meals. This spring, a group of experienced skiers and their guide were trapped in a storm overnight on an exposed saddle. By morning, nearly all were dead or dying.

Receive $50 off an eligible $100 purchase at the Outside Shop, where you'll find a selection of brand-name products curated by our gear editors, when you sign up for Outside+ today.

At 6:30 a.m. on Sunday, April 29, 2018, a group of ten skiers set out from a secluded mountain hut more than 9,000 feet up in the Swiss Alps. Perched on the top of a rocky hill surrounded by towering peaks and mountainsides, the Dix hut is a quirky, three-story stone building with a beautiful, south-facing terrace. It's a popular stopover for skiers traversing the Alps on multiday tours that combine backcountry skiing with a surprising level of overnight comfort.

The sky was just getting light as the group put on their skis and headed for the Cabane des Vignettes—another alpine refuge, about six hours away, across high-alpine terrain filled with glaciers, cols, peaks, and magnificent slopes of unbroken snow. It was the fourth day of a planned six-day tour between Chamonix, France, and Zermatt, Switzerland.

Ski touring has been a popular sport in the Alps for a long time. The Haute Route, as the Chamonix-Zermatt crossing is sometimes called, was first skied in 1911 and remains the most iconic of the touring routes in the region. As one Swiss mountain guide put it, "Pretty much any ski tourer, one day or another, wants to do the Haute Route at least once in his life."

As a result, that group of ten skiers was just one of many in the Dix hut that morning, which can accommodate up to 120 guests at a time. All told, some 2,000 skiers travel the Haute Route every year in a season that begins in early March and runs, if conditions allow, well into May. The Alps, unlike most backcountry skiing areas in North America, are easily accessible. A 20-minute gondola ride from numerous town parking lots deposits you directly onto routes at elevations as high as 12,000 feet. Skiers are supported by a broad, international network of full-service alpine huts like the Dix and Vignettes. In addition to providing heated group bunk rooms with mattresses and pillows, the huts offer hot meals, wine, beer, and internet access. Most supply plastic slippers for the guests.

The hospitality provided by the huts, or refuges, as they're known in France, has long been a part of the Alpine experience and tradition. But the comfy overnight accommodations, along with access that makes even a 112-mile tour like the Chamonix-Zermatt route possible in a six- or seven-day vacation, also increase the appeal and popularity of the tours. And while some skiers opt to self-organize their trips, the logistics involved in getting space in the crowded huts, as well as the inherent hazards in high-alpine backcountry skiing, lead many people to hire trained mountain guides to help them plan and navigate.

ADVERTISEMENT

The Dix group was no exception. It consisted of eight paying customers, all seasoned mountain enthusiasts and skiers, led by a professional mountain guide and his wife.

The Dix Hut (Pmau/Wikimedia Commons)

One of the skiers was Tommaso Piccioli, a 50-year-old architect from Milan, Italy, who began ski touring in 1990 and had been a member of the Alpine Club of Milan for more than 20 years. Over that time, he'd self-organized numerous ski tours, canoe trips, mountain biking expeditions, and hiking trips for himself and friends in Europe and Australia. Accompanying Piccioli on the tour were three friends from the Bolzano Alpine Club of Italy, where he'd taken several mountaineering courses over the past couple years. Elisabetta Paolucci, a 44-year-old Italian teacher, began ski touring with her father when she was still a young girl and had recently taken a year's sabbatical to pursue sailing and mountain adventures. Marcello Alberti and his wife, Gabriella Bernardi, were both experienced climbers and ski tourers as well.

"We usually organize our trips by ourselves," Piccioli explained. "But this time, because of the logistics––it's not easy to book the huts––we got a guide."

The others in the group included Francesca Von Felten, who was a member of the Parma Alpine Club and an experienced climber and skier. She had summited Aconcagua, the tallest peak in South America, the year before. There was Andrea Grigioni, a 45-year-old nurse from a small town northwest of Milan; a 72-year-old from Ticino, Switzerland, whom Piccioli described as "a very strong man"; a German woman from Munich; and the guide's 52-year-old wife, Kalina Damyanova. Piccioli didn't know any of the guests besides his friends but noted that after the first couple days of the trip, "You could see they were experienced. We were all at the same level."

ADVERTISEMENT

The guide leading the group had an impressive mountain résumé as well. Mario Castiglioni was a 59-year-old veteran mountaineer from Como, Italy, who in 1992 founded his own guiding company, MLG Mountain Guide, based out of Chiasso, Switzerland. He'd successfully summited four of the Seven Summits, three 8,000-meter peaks in the Himalayas, and a host of other notable mountains and routes around the world. It was because of that experience––and the fact that Castiglioni was a native Italian speaker––that Piccioli's group selected MLG Mountain Guide for the friends' ski tour.

Initially, the group had planned to travel from Dix to a hut called Nacamuli, but the forecast said bad weather was coming. So Castiglioni explained to the group that he was changing their destination to Vignettes, which would shorten the day's leg by about 2.5 hours.

"The night before, I went to check the weather," Piccioli said. "I talked with some people there, and they said a big wind was coming and it was serious. But then the day after started with quite beautiful weather." The group strapped on backpacks loaded with spare clothes and gear, snacks, water, and small thermoses of hot tea, checked their bindings, and stepped off the hut's stone terrace onto the snow.

They descended from Dix toward the southeast, crossed the Cheilon glacier, and started up the long four-to-five-hour ascent to the Pigne d'Arolla, a 12,454-foot peak that offers the highest elevation of the Haute Route and breathtaking panoramic views when the weather is good. From there, it's typically a 30-to-60-minute downhill ski to the Cabane des Vignettes, which is cut into a stunning but exposed ridgeline at 10,357 feet. Leaving at 6:30 a.m., the skiers should have been at the next hut in time for a late lunch. They never made it.

The following morning, a small group of skiers leaving the Vignettes hut heard a cry for help from a rocky outcropping a little more than 500 yards away. Within 15 minutes, a massive rescue was underway. But for most of the group, it was too late. Of the ten skiers, one was already dead, and six more would die of hypothermia within the next two days. Among the fatalities would be the guide and his wife.

ADVERTISEMENT

How could such an experienced group, with such an experienced guide, have gotten into such trouble? Because so many of the group died, including the guide himself, some of the answers will never be known. But there are enough pieces to reconstruct, at the very least, an important cautionary tale.

The route from the Dix hut to the Cabane des Vignettes is "one big climb, and then one big descent," according to Dale Remsberg, technical director of the American Mountain Guides Association. He has personally guided the Haute Route numerous times. "It's also the point where you get to the highest elevation on the Haute Route, and it's the leg that's most exposed to weather."

> **As one Swiss mountain guide put it, "Pretty much any ski tourer, one day or another, wants to do the Haute Route at least once in his life."**

From the Cheilon glacier, the ascent toward the Pigne d'Arolla is a steady uphill effort, including one section near the top that is steeper than the rest. The descent to the Vignettes hut, said Miles Smart, an American-trained guide who has worked in the Alps for 15 years, "is actually quite straightforward in good weather. But if you're there in bad weather, there are a few critical route-finding decisions to make. You don't want to go the wrong way or you could potentially end up going off a cliff."

What makes the descent tricky, Remsberg explained, is that a couple thousand feet down the slope, you get to a point where "you have to find this little passageway through the rocks, which is marked by a big cairn, a big pile of rocks that people put there to kind of mark the spot. It's only about 12 or 15 feet wide. So it's a very, very small target to hit. And if you've got poor visibility, it's a very, very difficult spot to find." Once a skier finds that passageway, he said, "you ski below this icefall and right over to the hut."

ADVERTISEMENT

As you approach that passageway, the hut is to the left, and, Remsberg said, “the fall line wants to take you left.” But if a skier were to follow the fall line, they would head right off the cliff. Again, none of that is too difficult to manage when the weather and visibility are good. But the conditions the doomed ski group found themselves battling were a very far cry from good. And the conditions deteriorated long before they reached this critical junction.

For the first three hours of the day, the group proceeded uphill under partly cloudy skies. There was a little wind, but “nothing to worry about,” Piccioli remembered. By about 10 a.m., however, as they were getting pretty high up on the slopes, the conditions quickly began to worsen. The sky clouded over, the wind picked up, and the visibility dropped to near zero due to the fog and light snow. And yet the group continued to skin uphill toward the summit for another one to two hours.

Hikers headed towards Pigne d'Arolla during their traverse of the Haute Route. (Pmau/Wikimedia Commons)

Castiglioni was navigating with the help of his smartphone, a common practice among Alpine guides. “On a trip like this, I’d say most guides are carrying a small Garmin GPS as a backup, but they’re primarily using their smartphone, because it works very well for navigation these days with apps like Gaia,” said Remsberg, referring to the GPS-based mobile app that offers preprogrammed hiking and touring maps.

There is spotty cellphone coverage throughout most of the Haute Route, but reception isn’t necessary for the navigation apps to work, since they rely on GPS. Most guides, Remsberg said, actually switch their phones to airplane mode and turn off everything, except the navigation app if they need it, to save battery power. But the apps themselves use a lot of power, so most guides use a case with a built-in secondary battery and carry a larger backup battery that can recharge the phone several times. In addition, under normal circumstances, guides tend to take their phones out only periodically to check their group’s progress on a route and then put it away in a warm pocket, because cold temperatures degrade battery life.

ADVERTISEMENT

It’s unclear what precautions Castiglioni took with his phone or what kind of backup battery power he did or didn’t have. But at some point in that uphill section, it became clear that there was a problem with either his phone or navigation app.

“We were in the whiteout, and he was going all over the place,” Piccioli said. “So, after some hesitation, I pulled out my GPS.” Whether because of the cold or wet snow, Piccioli’s cellphone––and, he thinks, everyone else’s cellphones, as well––had stopped working. But he was also carrying a waterproof Garmin eTrex GPS unit.

“I could see we were heading the wrong way,” Piccioli said. “So I said to the guide, ‘Look, we have to go to the other side.’ And at first he said, ‘No, I know where to go.’ So I said, ‘Fine, let’s go where you want to go.’ But then he came back over and said, ‘Show me your GPS.’”

The specific technical problems Castiglioni experienced remain a mystery. But one thing is clear: The device or battery or app failure was a critical factor in the tragedy. While Piccioli’s GPS continued to work faithfully throughout the rest of that day, he had loaded it only with the summer hiking version of the Haute Route. And while the summer and winter tracks on the Haute Route are similar, they’re not identical. “If the eTrex didn’t have the winter routes in it, really, all it would be good for would be pinpointing your position on the map," Remsberg said. "You wouldn't be able to find the route."

Nevertheless, Piccioli's GPS was the best option the group had at that point. "Where we got lost, I saw a track on the map that ended at the Vignettes hut. So we decided to get to that and start following it," Piccioli said.

The group made it to the summit area of Pigne d'Arolla sometime between 11:00 a.m and midday. But when they got to the summit saddle, the wind picked up and the weather got worse. It was so cold and the wind was so strong that they decided not to stop for lunch. Normally, it would have been a short ski down from the summit to the Vignettes hut. But because of the wind, snow, and limited visibility (about six feet at this point, according to Piccioli), Castiglioni opted instead to have the group take off their skis, put crampons on their ski boots, and hike down.

ADVERTISEMENT

"If the weather was bad enough, a guide might decide that it doesn't make sense to be on skis, because everybody can get away from each other a little too quickly," Remsberg acknowledged. "That might be a technique a guide would use to control the group and minimize risk, for sure."

When the whiteout began, a group of four French ski tourers who had been self-navigating on the same leg joined up with the group because they, too, were having trouble finding their way. That meant the group hiking down from the Pigne d'Arolla summit now consisted of 14 people: Piccioli, trying to follow the summer Haute Route track on his GPS, followed by Castiglioni and the 12 other skiers. The group did not rope up, but Piccioli said Castiglioni did tie a rope around his waist and let the end of it drag in the snow behind him so the skiers would have a track to follow, even if they couldn't see him.

Cabane des Vignettes (cimaxi/Wikimedia Commons)

Even if the group had been following the winter ski route, a GPS in whiteout conditions can't warn of hazards like crevasses or drop-offs. The increasingly intense storm added to the already considerable risk factor. As the skiers slowly wound their way down from the summit, the wind gusts began reaching speeds above 50 miles per hour, the temperature dropped, and the snow fell harder. "The wind was so strong, it would not let us fall," Piccioli said. "We couldn't take off our gloves, because our hands would have frozen, and we probably couldn't have put them on again."

ADVERTISEMENT

The group couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of them. Trying to navigate the summer route in the snow got them lost several more times. What should have been a 60-minute journey stretched into an endurance marathon that lasted throughout the afternoon. Late in the day, a thunderstorm struck the mountain, intensifying the snow and wind.

The hours of fighting their way forward, retracing step after step, against howling winds, cold, and snow, without food or drink, drained the group's strength as afternoon gave way to evening. And yet they pushed on, doggedly trying to find the hut.

With hindsight, it seems amazing that a group of experienced skiers would have continued on for so many hours, in a complete whiteout and in worsening wind and snow, instead of turning around or trying to call for rescue. It is, in fact, something Piccioli himself now questions. But, he explained, once the group started the descent toward the Vignettes hut––which is also when the conditions began to get really bad––going forward seemed the best possible option.

"We were all convinced that the hut was close," Piccioli explained. "And it *was*, because you could see, on my GPS, that it was quite close. So we said, 'All right. We're going to be seeing it very soon.'" But what the clients in Castiglioni's group didn't know was how tricky the navigation was between their location and the hut. Due to the snow, wind, and minimal visibility, they never found the stone cairn or the passageway to the last downhill. Instead, they wandered in vain above it, becoming weaker and weaker until, at around 8 p.m., night fell.

Castiglioni told the group they had to stop. It was too dangerous to keep going in the dark. He pulled out a satellite phone and tried to call for help. But, according to Piccioli, the phone's battery was dead.

At that point, the group had no alternative except to try to dig in for the night. But the place where they'd stopped was a rocky outcropping. To make things worse, they were on a south-facing slope, and the wind, which was now near hurricane force, was coming from the south. "I dug a little hole behind a rock, but there was no way to dig a real shelter, because there was no snow in there," Piccioli explained. "It was a saddle. The wind was roaring very, very strong. So it had blown all the snow away." Everyone in the group had Mylar space blankets in their packs, but, as Piccioli said, "They were completely useless because of the wind. So I didn't even take mine out, because as soon as you took it out, it would blow away."

ADVERTISEMENT

> **The hours of fighting their way forward, retracing step after step, drained the skiers' strength as afternoon gave way to evening. And yet they pushed on, doggedly trying to find the hut.**

The situation at that point had become dire. The temperature was dropping, and the group had very little left in the way of physical or mental reserves. Piccioli and Castiglioni put Francesca, Elisabetta, and Gabriella in the small space Piccioli had dug, even though it wasn't really big enough to shelter them from the wind. The four French skiers went to find or dig shelter of their own, as did Castiglioni's wife. Piccioli and the German woman found niches in the rocks near the other women. Gabriella's husband, Marcello, the Swiss man, and Castiglioni huddled down in the best shelter they could find nearby.

Everyone in the group was nearing the point of collapse. Piccioli started out trying to stand to keep himself moving and awake, but the effort was too much. So he sat against a rock, trying to minimize the amount of his body area in contact with the snow. He knew from mountaineering courses and books he'd read, that in order to survive, he had to stay awake and moving. "Not great movements. Little movements, just enough to keep your heart beating, and just a little bit your body," he explained. "And also not to fall asleep, because that's dangerous, to fall asleep. Then the hypothermia catches you and you're gone. So I said to myself, 'In the next eight to ten hours, I have to move. I just can't go to sleep.'"

Late in the night, Piccioli checked on the three women in the hole he'd dug and saw they were doing poorly. "When that terrible night started, I thought Gabriella might die," Piccioli recalled. "She was pretty weak. But honestly, I didn't think that anyone else, apart from her, was going to die."

ADVERTISEMENT

By the time he checked on them, however, all three women were in trouble. "They were dying," Piccioli said. So he went over to Castiglioni and suggested that the guide go and see if his wife had found a better shelter. If she had, he said, the two of them could go with their shovels and dig a bigger hole and move the women there.

"But he said to me, 'Look, I can't see anything,'" Piccioli recalled. "He said his eyes had been damaged by the blizzard. By the wind. He was blind. He couldn't see anything. That's what he told me." A few hours later, Piccioli said, he saw Castiglioni sitting with his backpack strapped on his back. That was the last time he saw or heard from the guide. When rescuers arrived in the morning, they found his body at the bottom of the steep slope below the outcropping where the group had stopped.

Piccioli returned to his shelter and focused on trying to keep himself alive. The temperatures were below freezing, the wind was approaching 60 miles per hour, and the snow was driving into him. "At that point," he explained, "you pretty much have to think for yourself. Because your forces are very low. You don't have great capability, in terms of thinking. I knew I had to keep moving. But at least two or three times, I thought, 'What's the point? It's too hard. Just let go.'"

What kept him from giving in? Piccioli paused, remembering. "You know, at that stage, you don't really think about you. It's strange, but at the real end, you think about others. I thought about my wife, and my mom, and I said, 'I can't do that to them. I'd like to, but I can't.' And that's what saved me."

Around dawn, the wind and storm finally abated. Piccioli had kept his eyes closed against the wind. But when he opened them, the sky was overcast and there was decent visibility. He stood up and went to check on his friends. The German woman was alive, sitting near him. Several of the others were unconscious. "It was really bad," Piccioli recalled. "All the people were lying on their chests and covered by snow."

ADVERTISEMENT

Helicopters run by Air Glacier who, along with Air Zermatt, worked to rescue the group by the Vignettes hut. (Fanny Schertzer/Wikimedia Common)

He looked across the valley and saw the Vignettes hut. But he also realized it wasn't all that close, in terms of actually skiing there. Unsure of what to do next, Piccioli dug into his pack and got his thermos of tea, which he shared with the German woman. Neither of them had anything to eat or drink for almost 24 hours and were at the end of their endurance.

While they were drinking the tea, the German woman suddenly spotted skiers below them. "So I stood up," Piccioli said, "and I shouted out, 'Help! Help! Help!' And the skiers stopped. They gathered together, and I could see they heard me. And then, after 15 minutes, the helicopter came."

The weekend of that storm, a total of 16 people died in the Alps. Besides the seven who died near the Vignettes hut, two Swiss climbers, ages 21 and 22, got caught out in the storm and died of hypothermia in the Bernese region, as did a Russian woman snowshoeing on Monte Rosa in Italy. Two Frenchmen, a climber and mountaineer, were killed in separate avalanches, one near Mont Blanc, in France, and the other in Switzerland's Valais Canton. Four others died in falls. Enrico Frescura, 30, and Alessandro Marengon, 28, both volunteers from the Dolomite Mountain Rescue in Italy, slipped on the final stage of an ascent on Monte Antelao in Italy. Two other skiers died in separate instances after tumbling into crevasses.

Accidents or events that result in multiple deaths are hardly unknown in the Alps. In 1970, a total of 113 people were killed in an avalanche and a landslide, just two months apart. In 1999, 12 people died in an avalanche near Chamonix. In 2008, eight more people were killed in a single avalanche on Mont Blanc. In 2015, two separate avalanches took the lives of 12 skiers and seven climbers, respectively, in the span of only five and a half months. But group fatalities from hypothermia, frostbite, or exposure are rarer. And what makes the Pigne d'Arolla accident particularly perplexing and tragic is that it really shouldn't have happened.

ADVERTISEMENT

Anjan Truffer, head of mountain rescue for Air Zermatt, the company that worked with Air Glacier to rescue the group near the Vignettes hut, using seven helicopters, said that although his company performs between 180 to 200 high-altitude rescues each year, "it's not common" for such an accident to happen on the Haute Route. "Those tracks are well traveled, and normally there are a lot of guides on those trails," Truffer said. "Technically, it's not a very, very difficult thing to do."

What's more, although the storm that hit the Alps that weekend was severe, it was not sudden or unexpected. Miles Smart was guiding a ski touring group along the same Haute Route track that Castiglioni's group was following, just 24 hours ahead of them. On the morning of April 29, Smart and his clients were in the Vignettes hut. "We were in a weather pattern known as the Foehn wind," he explained, "which is a south-wind weather phenomenon on the main alpine ride of the Alps. And it's especially strong, normally, from the Pigne d'Arolla to Zermatt. So we were watching that all week. And we were pretty confident that we weren't going to be able to do anything high up that day."

> **The eight skiers were all experienced enough to check weather and research the route. But because they'd hired an expert guide, they surrendered their decision-making to his.**

When Smart and his group woke up on the morning the storm hit, the actual conditions at the Vignettes hut were as bad, if not worse than the forecast had predicted. "It was very, very windy," he said. "And poor visibility all around. There were probably about five or six guided groups in the hut that morning. Among all of us professionals––American guides, Swiss guides––there didn't even *need* to be a conversation. Everybody was on the same page. Instead of trying to go on to Zermatt, we chose to just descend down. There's quite an easy route from the Vignettes hut to the village of Arolla. We left at about 7 a.m., and we were down about 45 minutes later."

ADVERTISEMENT

Even that early, however, the winds were strong enough that the guides had to help each individual client safely navigate the short distance from the hut to a spot on the leeward side of the ridge where they could put on their skis and start the descent. So even as Castiglioni's group was preparing to leave the Dix hut, the storm was already "full on," in Smart's words, at the Vignettes. Beyond the fact that the weather forecasts Smart had been following all week would have been available to any guide, the huts are also connected by telephone. So a simple call before the group departed Dix would have revealed how bad the weather already was at their destination.

In addition to obtaining that weather information, it would have been common, although not required, for a guide to call ahead if a group was planning to divert from its planned itinerary (in Castiglioni's case, from Nacamuli to the Vignettes hut) to make sure there was room for the group at the alternate destination. But Piccioli says the provincial police investigating the accident told him that the guardians at Vignettes never received a phone call asking about the weather or alerting them that the group was coming. Indeed, it's hard to imagine the group setting out if Castiglioni had talked to anyone at the Vignettes hut.

There were also alternatives to the high route the group took over the Pigne d'Arolla summit. From the Dix hut, it's possible to descend and follow a low route on the north side of the mountain, near the village of Arolla, and either overnight in the village or skin up the same slope to the Cabane des Vignettes that Smart's group skied down. Another choice, according to Smart, would have been to set out and see how the conditions were, and then turn around if the weather started to get bad.

ADVERTISEMENT

It's also a mystery why Castiglioni at least appeared to have had only a single cellphone for navigation. "I think it is quite a deadly thing to do to rely simply on the cellphone," Truffer said, "They run out of battery life so fast when it's cold and windy. You should have an actual, proper GPS." Again, some guides do rely primarily on smartphones for navigation, but, as Remsberg noted, they also usually make sure they have some kind of redundancy in capability.

Given the various alternatives available to the group, and the fact that the storm was not only predicted but already in force at Vignettes early that morning––information that was readily available at the Dix hut––Remsberg agreed that, at best, "it is hard to understand" how Castiglioni made the decisions he did that day. At the same time, it's perplexing that a group of experienced skiers never questioned those decisions and kept following their guide blindly into the storm.

Nobody will ever know exactly what was going through the minds of the people who died. But how decisions like that manage to get made is something the American Mountain Guides Association, which trains and certifies professional guides in the United States, and the IFMGA, its European equivalent, have been paying more attention to in recent years. And several factors undoubtedly played into the tragic equation on the Pigne d'Arolla.

"We focus a lot on [human factors] in American guiding, more than we used to," Remsberg said, especially heuristic assumptions, or mental traps, that both guides and clients can fall into. One of the biggest traps that influences accidents in the Alps, he said, is that of complacency, because of the fast access and the amazing hut system. "It's easy to feel more protected because of the infrastructure," Remsberg explained. "You can get to the terrain easier in the Alps, so therefore it seems safer." It's not, of course. More than 150 people die in the Alps every year. But that illusion has numerous consequences. One of them is that European clients and guides alike can think they don't need as much information or equipment redundancy to be safe.

ADVERTISEMENT

"It's not that [Europeans] don't want information. It's that the mountain culture in Europe and the support infrastructure in the Alps create an environment that makes them feel they don't need as much of it," Remsberg said. In the United States, by contrast, guides and clients have to be more self-sufficient, carrying not only tents, rescue tarps, and supplies, but also more survival, communication, and navigation equipment. As a result, U.S. guides also tend to be better at or focus more on communication with their clients, from sharing maps, weather, and navigation plans to hazards and the reasons behind go and no-go decisions. "American guides are definitely into giving a lot of briefing, in general," Smart acknowledged. "It's something we're known for."

Zermatt, Switzerland: the end of the Chamonix-Zermatt crossing. (chensiyuan/Wikimedia Commons)

Obviously, individual guides will differ in how well they communicate with their clients. But one of the reasons Piccioli says his group *didn't* question the decisions that day was because they didn't have any idea what the plan was or where their route was going to take them. "There was very little talk and no briefing at all from the guide," Piccioli said. "And I think, on a trip like this, you should inform your group where we're going, what we're doing, exactly. If I'd known about the narrow passage we had to find to get to the hut, I would have said, 'No way we're going on.'"

Complacency can also influence a guide's preparation and decision-making. It could be that, compared to some of the bigger expeditions Castiglioni had been a part of, the relative "ease" of the Haute Route lured him into bringing less redundant navigation and communication equipment, as well as pressing on even when the weather deteriorated. Certainly Piccioli acknowledges that he and his friends "underrated the gravity of the situation."

The group also seems to have fallen into a trap known as the expert halo. On their own, the eight skiers were all experienced enough to check weather, research the route, and question the decision to set out in the first place. But because they'd hired an expert guide, they surrendered their decision-making to his. "We just did the trip, not planning. He was supposed to plan," Piccioli said. "And this probably was a weakness from us. When you self-organize, you really care about things like maps and weather. But once you have a guide...," his voice trailed off, and he sighed. "Nobody said anything because, probably, they all trusted him. Including me. They all trusted him and said, 'OK, we're just following him.'"

ADVERTISEMENT

That is perhaps the biggest takeaway from the tragedy. “If I have something wrong and go to the doctor, I don’t just blindly trust that they’re making all the right decisions,” Remsberg said. “And I think people should approach the mountains that way, even if they’re hiring a guide to take them out. I would encourage people not to blindly hand over all responsibility to the guide, but to be a team member in the setting and approach it that way.”

For Piccioli, however, the answer is simpler. From now on, he says, he’s going to make sure he’s in charge of all the planning, equipment, and decision-making in any future adventures. “I’m sure there are a lot of great guides out there,” he said. “But I’m going to do the organizing myself.”

Filed to: Evergreen · Long Reads · Navigation · Snow Sports · Survival · Weather

Lead illustration: Cameron Cottrill

More Epic Features

The Green Green Grass of Utah

By: Mark Sundeen

800 Miles with Bears Ears Prayer Runners

By: Anna Callaghan

Another Voyage for Madmen (And, This Time, One Woman)

By: Maggie Shipstead

Rescue on the Killer Mountain

By: Marcin Jamkowski

ADVERTISEMENT

Join Outside+ to get Outside magazine, access to exclusive content, 1,000s of training plans, and more.

LEARN MORE

© 2022 Outside Interactive, Inc