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The Föhn – friend and fiend

The Föhn wind is a dry downslope wind which occurs in the lee of a mountain range. In Switzerland, the Föhn comes from the South. Moist air rises on the South side of the Alps. The air gets colder and can hold less water, which means that it rains on the South side of the Alps. Then the air rises further, still getting cooler by about half a degree per every 100m altitude. This air makes it over the Alps. On the North side of the Alps it drops; however, it does not gain the half degree per 100m altitude, but it gains 1 degree per 100m.

Let's have an example: Air of say 15 degrees in Locarno at 200m above sea level will have lost 12 degrees once it reaches 2600m. The air on top of the Alps will be 3 degrees. By the time the air reaches Erstfeld, on 500m above sea level, it has gained 21 degrees and is now 24 degrees!

Föhn winds can raise temperatures from winter to summer temperatures in just a matter of hours. The Föhn is called "snow-eater" for its ability to make snow melt overnight. This is due not only to high temperature, but also to the low relative humidity of the air mass.

Often snow melts in such quantities that dangerous floods are the result.

Föhn winds are notorious among mountaineers in the Alps, as they change conditions within hours.

These winds are often associated with illnesses ranging from migraines to psychosis. A study found that suicide and accidents increased by 10 percent during Föhn winds in Central Europe. And if you ever experienced the human atmosphere of a proper Föhn day, you know what I am talking about; the air seems to be explosive.

The positive side of the Föhn is the fact that it is a gigantic heating system. Without the Föhn, the snow would take much longer to melt, and the vegetation would be much slower. Grapes, figs, maize, chestnuts would not grow in the latitudes and altitudes where they do grow in Föhn valleys. And the photos on those phantastic postcards of Bern or Zürich with very clear and very close mountain ranges in the background were all shot on a Föhn day, I guarantee.

tb

Föhnstorms - Firestorms

The main Föhn valleys in Switzerland are the valleys of the rivers Rhein, (right from Graubünden to the lake of Constance), Linth (with the whole Canton Glarus), Sihl (with Zürich), Reuss (with the whole canton Uri), Aare down to almost Bern, and Rhone from Martigny to the Lake of Geneva. In these and neighbouring areas Föhn days were especially dangerous in earlier times, when fire brigades were not so efficient. In some towns cooking on open fires was not allowed on Föhn days. And still devastating fires happened: Meiringen lost 183 houses in a Föhn storm, which left 854 people homeless in 1891; Heiden lost 129 houses in 1838, Sent 45 houses, and no doubt the list is much

longer. Some towns that had to be built from scratch decided on city planning; that is how Heiden AR



Füür! Hääde brennt!

became such an orderly and almost grandiose place, with a square and the main streets at right angles. and I seem to remember that I learnt at school that the right angled towns in the Rheintal owed their right angles to fires, too.

Wikipedia/tb

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