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ALPEN IS NOT ENOUGH – BUT I’LL TRY AGAIN

By Martin Roebuck

It was going to be Scotland again, for the third year running, until I happened to tell a colleague at work, George Sommer, Editor of the *Swiss Observer*, about my passion for walking and climbing. George’s father was born in Switzerland, and he is the persuasive type. It only needed a lunchtime pint together for him to convince me that such places as Mürren and Grindelwald were not the invention of calendar manufacturers. They really existed, said George, and were just as idyllic as they looked. He firmly hooked me on the idea of a fortnight in the Bernese Oberland.

Everything was rather rushed. Commitments later in the year left mid-May as the only possibility — and that was just three weeks away. Add to that the compromises that any backpacker has to make — you always wish for that extra £100 to spend on equipment, you want to carry ten pounds more than you reasonably can — and my preparation was on the scanty side.

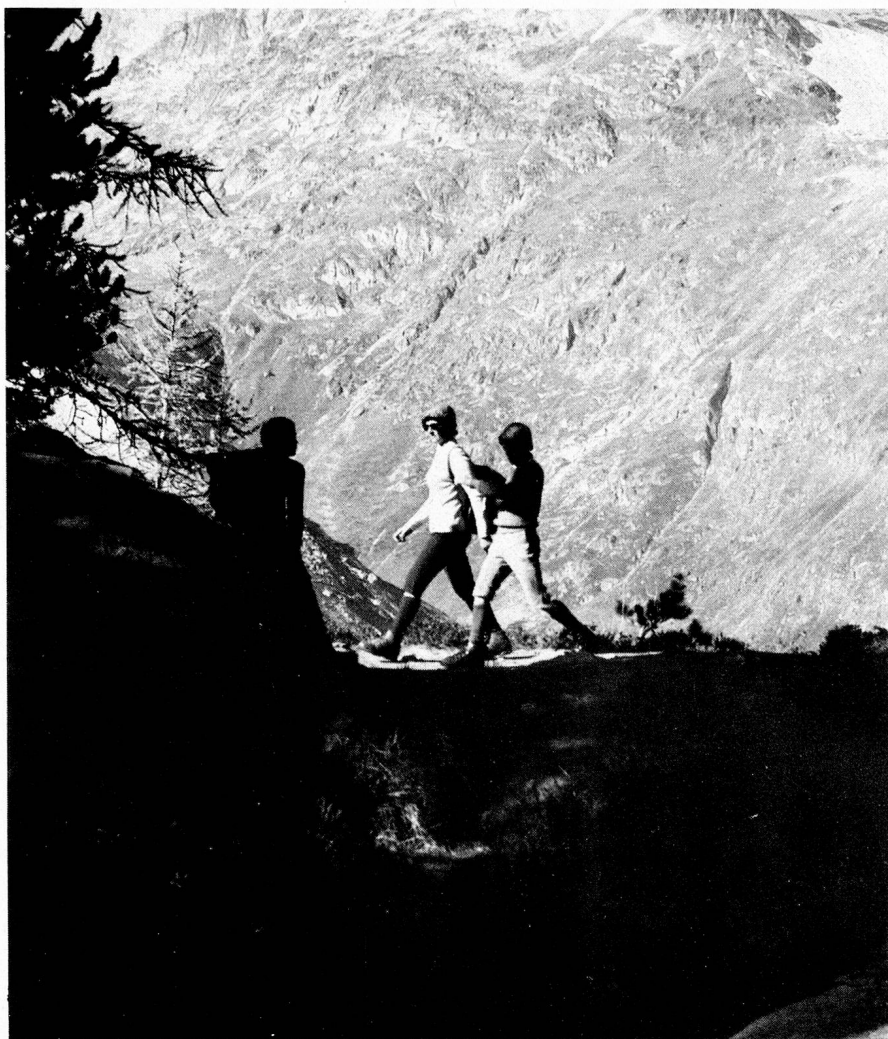
MAPS FIRST

First, after poring over a large-scale map of the country to plan the general route, I wanted some 1:50,000 maps. (No problem at all. Stanfords seems to have everything. Last year a friend motorcycled right up Norway, beyond the Arctic Circle, and got maps from stock for the whole trip.) Next, as soon as I saw the size of the glaciers skirting the Jungfrau and Finsteraarhorn, I was straight down to Alpine Sports for some new crampons and a larger ice-axe.

I also took the precaution of a better but lighter tent to replace my battered Campari. I eventually settled on a Marriott Solite. What’s good enough for John Merrill, who is about halfway round his 7,000 mile walk of Britain’s coast, is good enough for me.

But the tent, the ice gear and one or two items of clothing were all I could buy. With less than a month to departure date, the new sleeping-bag I had wanted and the first aid kit I had been promising myself would have to be postponed for another year.

Organising my food requirements was no problem. I have always subsisted in the mountains on Alpen (this year it even *sounded* right), crispbreads, cheese, chocolate, nuts, coffee and gallons of



Switzerland boasts a network of about 30,000 miles of well marked hiking trails. The people in this picture seem to be having a slightly easier time of it than our intrepid author! Rumour has it that he is going to “have a go” at Iceland before he returns to Switzerland to conquer the Eiger! Picture by courtesy of SNT0.

soup. I saw no reason to change now. Topping up with cheese and chocolate ought to be fairly cheap even bearing in mind the frightening Swiss exchange rate. After all, they make the stuff.

It seemed that before stopping to gather breath I was at Gatwick, bound for Berne. And Berne it had to be, twice as close to the walking country as Geneva or Zürich. In the event the flight was okay, though bad planning on my part caused me a long delay. I tried to take gas cylinders on the aircraft with me, thinking this was better than leaving them in the hold with my rucksack. The authorities at Gatwick still confiscated them as a fire risk.

I could not replace them in Berne — my stove ran on Epigas cylinders, not widely available even here — so I had to buy a new stove and some Camping Gaz cylinders. This was not easy in broken German, and to cap it all I had to

ditch my old stove as there was no room for the two. I had lost so long buying the new one that I simply left the other in a litter bin in the main street, rather than fixing to leave it with someone. It would have been a golden find for a tramp, if they had tramps in Switzerland.

This incident cost me several hours all told as the city of Berne lay the wrong way — north — from the airport. The good walking appeared to begin about 20 miles south at the town of Wattenwil. But I was determined not to use public transport — call it masochism, or simply the desire to save precious francs after the £6 escapade with the stove — so I would have to make up the time on foot.

A quiet road running roughly parallel with the Berne-Interlaken motorway gave me a good chance to work rapidly south, familiarising myself with the terrain and weather conditions before heading into

remoter parts. The boots also needed some road work before I started climbing; they were broken in, but not yet very heavily used.

So for the first two days I stayed with civilisation, getting a good view of the Swiss way of life without putting in too much hard work. The sun shone pleasantly but was not too hot; my feet hurt and then thankfully eased again; most important I made a mental note to tell George that, yes, the landscape was just as marvellous as he had promised.

The wooden chalets, shuttered and long-eaved as precaution against winter snow, were just as practical in summer. They looked cool and dark inside. The bars were particularly inviting, though at this stage I was still energetic enough to buy lemonade from village stores and to drink on the move. And the meadows behind were perfect.



A typical sign on one of our many hiking trails. The author admits having welcomed some of these on his expedition! Picture by courtesy of SNT0.

They could have been out of *The Sound of Music* — greener than green, and full of flowers that to this non-botanist could have been rare gems or as common as the throngs of slugs and snails that every morning were clinging to the outside of my tent. Julie Andrews never had that problem, unless that was what she meant by "The hills are alive".

A SHORTAGE OF WATER

My one problem at this time, strangely, was water for night and morning. The Oberland proper is full of the stuff, of course. But some geological quirk means that between Berne and Wattenwil there is very little surface water. I poached mostly from roadside farms, which almost universally in Switzerland draw water from an outside pump rather than through pipes and taps.

A swift cut across country then

took me through a petrified forest on steep, soggy clay slopes. Footholds were tricky, and clutching with my hands at roots and tree trunks did not pay dividends as it usually does, since the wet wood was liable to crumble at first touch. There was no flat ground either, and my one night up there was spent minus tent, wrapped round a couple of the sturdier trees. It was mild and I did not feel the solitude as cow bells were ringing somewhere down below until very late. After dark the lights down the valley in Spiez, a major centre, made good watching.

Next day I headed up Simmental — one of those superb Swiss valleys that rise for 20 or 30 miles through a string of villages connected by a single road and railway. Imperceptibly the mountains close in, nearer the road and higher, until you reach the last place and there is nowhere else to go.

Simmental must be the best of its kind. Your views gradually get better and better, the weight of traffic lighter as you pass through each village. Then Lenk, the last stop on the line — 3,000 feet higher and noticeably cooler than the foot of the valley. It is track or open fell from there, Regensboldhorn and Rothorn forbidding further use of wheels.

There are still options. You can head west, the easiest way, over a 6,000 foot ridge. You can carry on south, over the ice slopes and into the French-speaking cantons: the hard route. Or you can turn east as I did and aim for the next valley via a

7,000 foot pass. Across in Engstligental they still speak German, though it seems a strange, rustic dialect — Alpine Somerset.

From Lenk to Adelboden, the town at the head of Engstligental, was my first piece of all-out hill climbing and could have been my last. Everywhere you go in Switzerland, yellow signs point walkers in all directions, giving distances in hours rather than kilometres. It is a helpful but depressing system, since whoever set the schedules was either strong beyond belief or only ever walked in September without hindrance from the snow. Lenk-Adelboden, posted as four hours, took me eight. The snow all the way was just over knee deep, and soft — about as bad as running through sand dunes.

The most soul-destroying thing in the world must be resting for five minutes, carrying on when you feel fit for another mile and then having to stop again, panting, in ten steps. One section, over a river where a thin crust of snow no more than two feet thick looked too fragile to support my weight, was completed by spreadeagling myself and inching across with the help of the axe. I did not fall into the fast-flowing water, but ended up almost as wet.

That night I had not the strength to pitch camp and took a hotel room at 8 p.m. when I reached Adelboden. By then it was snowing thickly. As I stood in reception like a drowned rat, trying numbly to get my gloves off, I was greeted of all people by an effervescent American



Adelboden, a typical village in the Bernese Oberland, probably never presented a more welcoming respite than that described by our hardy young man. Picture by courtesy of SNT0.

woman who had come up Engstlental the easy way, by coach.

She insisted on taking photographs for her backpacking friends back home, despite my weak protestations.

Then she turned up unexpectedly trumps, demanding of the management that I be given a hot bath. After the welcome soak, a gargantuan meal and a night between crisp sheets I felt distinctly better.

Determined at least to see the Jungfrau-Mönch-Eiger massif for future reference, I started the second week with another high pass to save time on the roads. Again the yellow sign was wildly optimistic, suggesting five and a quarter hours for a walk that took me thirteen hours, punctuated by a high-altitude night on snow — but considering the conditions I was pleased. The whole middle part, between 6,000 and 8,000 feet, was on soft snow or slippery, muddy scree slopes.

I still saved time over the road route, and that despite stopping for a couple of hours to gaze down upon the best view of the fortnight. A flock of Alpine choughs and myself shared the magical experience of looking down from a high spur on the whole nine-mile length of Brienz See and the mountains beyond. My

vantage point was tilted, but seemed level because there was nothing except the sky to measure it against. Instead it looked as though the lake sloped down substantially to one end — an Irish water-skier's dream and an illusion that persisted the whole time I sat there, though logic dictated otherwise.

During the following days the weather closed in and low cloud obscured all the long-distance views. I worked slowly around to Mürren, via a café in Wilderswil that served the best strawberry flan I have ever tasted.

Mürren sits on a natural shelf at 5,000 feet with vertical cliffs above and more below, falling to the valley of the Lütschine. A tributary of that river, Mürrenbach, leaps down the mountain nearby and forms the tallest sheer-drop waterfall in Europe. The torrent of water at the top dissolves into spray before it hits the bottom.

When I was there, crews of carpenters and painters were making everything ready for the new season, two weeks away. There were no petrol-engined vehicles. They rode around in electric carts — it seemed like an Arctic base except for the constant thunder of distant avalanches, reminding you that a mile away across the Lütschine

were the sheer western walls of the Jungfrau and Mönch. Most of the time they were only just discernible through cloud, and were all the more forbidding for that.

This year I had to content myself with looking, and the poor visibility made that unsatisfactory even from the top of Schilthorn, my one major ascent of the tour. In summer the mountain's revolving restaurant (immortalised as Piz Gloria in the Bond film *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*) gives one of the finest panoramas in the Alps, across those giant peaks to the east.

TIME TO GO HOME

When I was there, it was possible to see about twenty yards. There was no waiting, or trying for the view again the next day. I had only two days left, and I felt I must go down to Interlaken to pick up a souvenir cuckoo clock or something for George. I was thin. I was tired. But I was happy, and he deserved my thanks for suggesting all this.

I would be back.

Editor's footnote: I never did get that clock or even a piece of the strawberry flan but it is nice to know that a professional colleague enjoyed his visit to Switzerland.

George Sommer



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