

## A month (and a bit) in the mountains of Switzerland September 2014



*Our hiking is shown in green*

Our general plan was to spend a few days in Chamonix warming up, then to travel to Courmayeur and start our hike with a few days of the Tour du Mont Blanc, connecting up to the Walker's Haute Route and ending in Zermatt after about 14 days. There we'd spend a few days enjoying the scenery, taking side trips to Saas Fee and the Aletsch Glacier. We'd continue to Pontresina, where we would meet our friend Al Peters and do another 4 day hut-to-hut hike, with a few days in Zurich before we left to go home.

That is sort of how it worked out. The weather in Europe had been unstable most of the summer, and that's what we got - some days of sun, but mostly cloudy, especially in the afternoon, and a few days with some rain. This was a trip to see—and to be in—mountains. And we definitely did see a lot of mountains, and notably, a lot of glaciers.

The first part of the trip -14 days of hiking - was harder than we expected. Typical days were 6 to 8 (or even 9!) hours of hiking time, with over a thousand meters (3000 feet) of up and also of down. The trails were much rougher than in the Sierras, not only steeper, but also in many places covered with rockfall that required climbing over rocks or walking on unstable surfaces. Occasionally there was also anxiety on stretches of narrow trail above long drops or steep slopes.

We ended up traveling in concert with other people for a few days at a time, and enjoyed their company. We met a young American couple on day 2, and two trios of Brits near the end of the hike. Our friend Al joined us in Chamonix, as well as for a few days of the Haute Route, and then again in Zermatt and in Pontresina.

Highlights of the trip were many:

- Cabane de Moiry, on a rocky promontory right above a glacier.



- The day's walk from Bettmerhorn to Fiescheralp along the Aletsch Glacier, the longest glacier in Europe.



- Coming around the corner of the Troara ridge above Jungen and seeing the Matterhorn and Mischabel above Zermatt.



- The long, wonderful hike from the Trift Hotel to Zmutt at the top of the Zermatt valley, with the Matterhorn looming above.



- The hairy climb over the Cacciabella Pass to the Sciora Hut, involving 4 ladders, a steep scramble down a rockfall, and rappelling down chains over hail-covered rock that was just at the limit of our capabilities. Memorable, for sure!



Then there was the food-raclette, fondue, rosti, and mushrooms, especially chanterelles, for it was definitely mushroom season. There was also a lot of good local wine, but like everything else Swiss, it was not cheap! Many nights we stayed in 3 star hotels, sometimes in mountain huts in communal sleeping rooms that were a bit of social adjustment. We did get used to sleeping on the continental double bed, which is just two single beds pushed together, with separate quilts.

We took a variety of transportation. We took the Glacier Express from the Aletsch Glacier to Pontresina, billed as the slowest express train in Europe. It is one of the most interesting routes, with circular tunnels, viaducts, and amazing engineering to get it up the valleys. We rode busses, several funiculars, countless cable cars, some chair lifts,

trams, and assorted other trains. And we found a terrific train museum at the beautiful small town of Bergün.

Jane did enjoy some spa time, at the posh Hotel Walther (sister hotel to our more modest but still really lovely Hotel Steinbock in Pontresina).

We also enjoyed a fantastic small local museum in Saas Fee that beautifully captured the inside of a Swiss house from the previous century, along with great pictures from the late 1800s of the people and area.

One of the highlights of the trip was watching the AlpAbzug in Celerina - this is the ceremonial "bringing the cows down from the high pastures" at the end of summer. We lucked into a very local ceremony. We watched the cows get decorated with special bells, headdresses, and flowered belts for the occasion (they were not that cooperative), then walked down through the town. Girls passed out little sugared fried dough to onlookers. At the end, there was free local milk, wine, bread, more of the fried dough, cheese and more. Singing, alp horn playing and dancing provided local entertainment. We were among the few outsiders enjoying the festivities.



We were in Chamonix during the UltraTour du Mont Blanc, where about 1700 runners ran the 200km Tour Mont Blanc which normally takes 8-10 days and we watched the winner come in after 21 hours. We enjoyed the extra markings placed along the trail to help the runners!

Our last two and a half days in Zurich were a change of pace. We got a distant view of snowy peaks of the Bernese Oberland from the Uetliberg above Zurich, walked miles along the lake and around the old town, and spent a long morning in the marvelous Landesmuseum which had a collection of old rooms reconstructed from the 17 and 18th centuries, along with lots of Swiss history (and more - we had to stop from hunger).

There were so many valleys that we would have loved to spend a few days exploring, so many more walks to do in Saas Fee, Zermatt, Pontresina, that we could easily go back for another month. But for now, we are very glad to be home!