

Grossglockner for Oldies

by Graham Willoughby



Grossglockner with a summer sprinkling: Graham Willoughby

Jim turned to me, his body hunched, sweat dripping from his eyebrows: "What the f*** are we doing up here, Graham"? That was three years ago in the Stubai. Now, once again, the 'seniors' were slogging up another glacier, heavy rucksacks biting into our backs and Jim's words floated back to me. I was fast approaching my Steve Redgrave moment "Shoot me if I get into another boat"!

So today, homeward bound on a Munich train, I thought it prudent to record what happened and how I felt during Allan's Senior Grossglockner Tour before again being seduced by another of his emails.

There were ten of us, average age 70, from Penzance to Chicago, with far too heavy rucksacks, gathered together in our first hut, the Fürthermoar Alm, under the Mooserboden dam, in the Hohe Tauern National Park. Ahead of us that day was the 800m unrelenting zig zag route to the Heinrich-Schwaiger-Haus at 2802m.

Next morning, in better weather, we started on our first peak, the Wiesbachhorn (3564m). Immediately after leaving the hut the ground steepened with *Klettersteig* sections leading to a disappointing glacier to reach what resembled a pile of loose rubble with a crucifix on top. Just a decade ago it was crampons all the way. With dark clouds menacing, we quickly slithered off the summit to a surprisingly busy hut with axes unused.

The next day looked big and it didn't disappoint. Straight down to the dam, along the reservoir and up to the Kapruner col in good weather. Now downhill again; my feet started to complain and possibly blister and soon the others were way ahead. Somehow I lost the red markers and that bloody bridge. Sod it, wade across. The sky was darkening with thunder and lightning closing in from the north. Eventually I reached the river where the lads were waiting for me with predictable jibes. Then the heavens opened up with the

Berghotel Rudolfshütte, still another 323m of punishing ascent to go. Finally, after 11+ hours, I staggered into this weird en suite oasis in another world.

The next day Chicago Mike and I watch the others head off for Stubacher Sonnblick (3088m). Three hours later a tired four returned followed much later by the others who were defeated by poor weather close to the summit. I commiserate from the swimming pool happy in the knowledge that my washing was done and my boots dried. Still the axe unused!

The next day dawned looking like a dreich Scotland. "It's a really magnificent valley," Allan assured us as we padded south heading for Kalser Tauernhaus (1754m). Our party of 'seniors' split into three distinctive groups when arriving at most huts. The first, normally led by Allan, order a large beer. The second group hit the apple strudel and the third, always headed by Colonel Graham, wash, shower, shave and preen. That day was no exception.

We anxiously hung around the hut next morning waiting for the taxi. This was the beginning of the tour's main agenda, to climb the highest mountain in Austria. Two years previously the seniors were beaten by fresh snow. Today the sun was shining and the visibility excellent; expectations were high. It's a good walk to the Stüdlhütte (2802m) but really worth it. The food would put some Innsbruck restaurants to shame with excellent 4 course dinners and friendly service.



The well-fed Oldies at the Stüdl hut: Graham Willoughby

It was an early start next morning as we had to be at the Erzherzog Johann Hütte by midday to meet the guides. The Ködnitzkees glacier on Grossglockner's southern flank is disappointing. Initially a mixture of rock and ice it then becomes a snowfield climb to the *Klettersteig* route right under the hut. Still my axe remained unused.

The guides arrived in good time, a 'stroll' from the valley. Their plan was to get us to the top and return to Innsbruck in the evening! "You don't need ice axes," they said. With two ropes of four, and the Colonel and Gottfried on another, we set off at 1pm. It took a little while to get used to being roped so closely together so progress up the soft snow and ice of the Hofmannskees glacier was slow but steady. Then the inclination steepens as it approaches the rocky ridge. I'm beginning to feel more vulnerable now: it's a very long

way down! Up ahead I can hear Wilf whose speech goes into hyper-drive the more exposed he feels. I wish I had my ice axe! Then it's crampons off for those belay posts. The ridge is very narrow with pockets of snow. My age is showing as I shuffle across. The exposure is severe. What's happened to my confidence? I used to do a jig on stuff like this. The famous gap wasn't as bad as expected. Then suddenly we're at the cross. All you've got to do now Graham is do it all again but in reverse. Back at the Erzherzog Johann Hütte the relief is palpable but so is the joy of achievement.

Our descent the following day was via the Salmhütte (2638m) to the Luckner Hütte (2241m) on a wet and snowy day. The Grossglockner has its own climate so we were very lucky to get a small weather window. As for my ice axe, it was stolen at the high hut! Perhaps that was an omen.



Thanks to my fellow Oldies and particularly to our leader Allan Hartley.

President Allan Hartley: Graham Willoughby