

## Pressed for time in the Ötztal by Simon Gwyn Roberts



*Above Gries – Simon Gwyn Roberts*

For the lifelong mountaineer, no matter how modest their ambitions, the onset of middle age is a frustrating time. The pressures of job and family grow by the year, while the time for leisure in the mountains becomes vanishingly small. There is, to my mind, one obvious solution: speed up.

Swapping hillwalking for fell running, for example, makes a lot of sense for the time-pressed. Over the past eight years or so, we have refined a model of short intense trips to the Alps and elsewhere and it has worked rather well, combining the odd higher peak with bouts of rock climbing. In wet weather, we go for a run in the hills. The relaxation part comes in the evening, with quality beer the perfect way to refuel.

The most recent of these short and intense Alpine trips took my climbing partner and fellow AAC (UK) member Vic Belshaw and I to the Ötztal via Bavaria in September 2016. As usual, time was absurdly tight. An evening flight from Manchester to Munich, a night in Bavaria, then three nights in the Tirol: that was it.

After a wet warm-up, jogging up Kofel from Oberammergau, we drove over the Fernpass into Austria. After some mercifully dry climbing at the entrance to the Ötztal, we walked up to the Amberger Hut (2135m) with eight minutes to spare before dinner.

Rather high for an acclimatisation peak, the Schrankogel (3497m) is a fine mountain that had the added advantage of getting us into the heart of the Stubai Alps before our planned ascent of the higher Wildspitze in the Ötztal Alps later in the week. The two ranges are quite distinct, although both can be accessed from the main Ötztal valley. Fresh snow had fallen above 3000m so we packed a short rope as precaution, although we wore approach shoes throughout as there is no glacier to cross on this route.

In the dim morning light, with a fallen signpost, I failed to spot the line of the normal route going up the south-west ridge. This was no bad thing, however, as the moraine path was truly wonderful and took us up to the Schwarzenberg glacier high above. Some rubbly material at the top of the moraine made this rather dusty, and steep and arduous for a while. Above, however, we arrived at a plateau with the east ridge towering above: clearly a better and more interesting option than the normal route, plastered with a good few inches of fresh snow. The weather was absolutely superb: deep blue, cloudless sky and crystal clarity in all directions. The snow made things trickier in places, but there were no real difficulties: it was rather like a giant Crib Goch.

After more rock climbing next day at the superb valley crag of Oberried, with lots of varied routes in a wonderful setting next to tranquil valley pastures, we headed up the Ötztal for a late lunch before driving up to the final village of Vent. From here, we got the chairlift to Stablein, then enjoyed a relaxed walk-in over the dramatic Rofenbach to the Breslauer Hut (2844m) in great weather. Another fine hut: more traditional, atmospheric and crowded than the Amberger.

The highest peak in the Tyrol, and the second highest in Austria, the Wildspitze (3770m) is also a very beautiful objective. It takes the form of a tent-like pyramid soaring above extensive snowfields. It was an obvious target for our short trip, and is unsurprisingly popular. It gives a straightforward but excellent route over the Mitterkarjoch: much more interesting and varied than we had anticipated, as it breaks down into four distinct parts.



*Summit of Wildspitze – Simon Gwyn Roberts*

The route up was pleasant, frozen solid after a cold night. A shrunken, decaying glacier gives way to a small bergschrund and then a 150ft via ferrata section, which takes the couloir on its solid left-hand side up a series of cables. Presumably, until fairly recently, this couloir was a tracked out snow plod. Now the cables take you on to fairly solid ground up the left walls. Some surprisingly strenuous hauls were needed, tricky work in crampons, and we were initially stuck behind the one small guided party that now remained in front of us. However, the steepness eases quite quickly and gives way to a long and very enjoyable diagonal traverse, eventually gaining the atmospheric Mitterkarjoch itself, where the environment and



ambience changes suddenly from rock to snow as you enter the white world of the upper snowfields. The small col gives access to the summit glacier and is a tremendous spot with new views to the west over the Pitztal to Glochturm and a galaxy of other peaks. Cloud in the valleys just added to the atmosphere, particularly as wisps enveloped us from time to time. We geared up for the glacier crossing, which was a delight. Horizontal initially, it then rears up and crosses three or four large crevasses before the rocky final summit pyramid. Verglassed rocks and my ancient Alpine boots made this simple scramble a little trickier than it might have been.

Banks of cloud filling the Ötztal and Pitztal, with the high summits rising above, provided a spectacular view. Looking over the Stubai to the Schrankogel was particularly satisfying, and the nearby peaks on the Italian border were also notable, like the Similaun and Weisskogel. We deliberately timed the descent to perfection after a pleasant break on the summit, avoiding the biggest guided parties on the scramble, then romping down the glacier to ensure we had the couloir to ourselves. A long trudge through the moraines led back to the Breslauer Hut for pasta and coffee. Thus fortified, we made our way down to Stablein in hot sunshine. We flew back to Manchester from Munich next morning and spent the next week catching up on our sleep.



*Descending to Breslauer Hut – Simon Gwyn Roberts*