

The Peter Habeler round

By Graham Jameson



View down to Pfitscher Tal - Graham Jameson

The Peter Habeler round is a circuit in the western Zillertaler Alpen, named after the famous climber, who came from the Zillertal, in honour of his 70th birthday in 2012. Among the numerous named routes that have sprung up in recent years, it is a particularly satisfactory closed circuit in wonderful mountain scenery. Needless to say, a website description is available.

The hut-to-hut distances are mostly moderate; the longest one can be divided into two stages by a judicious choice of starting point. Nearly all of the route is easy: there are just two points where steep scrambling is involved, both generously equipped with artificial aids. Two of us, with combined age 143, completed the route in August 2016, without excessive difficulty (appropriately, one of us was born in the same year as Peter Habeler). For the younger and more daring, there are plenty of opportunities to include something more challenging on the way.

The website lists a number of possible starting points. You need to study it rather carefully to tumble to the fact that exactly one of them is accessible by bus. This is the lowest point of the circuit, at Touristenrast in the Valser Tal. The bus runs from Steinach, on the route to the Brenner, several times a day. If you start at any other point, for example the Schlegeis reservoir accessed via Mayrhofen, the climb from this point to the actual circuit, and the corresponding descent at the end, will be added to the circuit itself. Also, the first and last days, as described here, would combine into one much longer day.

Doing the round clockwise, we started with the ascent to the Geraer Hütte, made fairly gentle by ample zigzags. If you did the circuit anticlockwise, you would start with the much more demanding climb to the Europa Hütte (of which more later). The next morning we woke to find the ground covered with two or three inches of snow (on 11 August!). However, we were assured that the path to the Tuxer Joch Haus was very good, and that the marking would be easy to spot even in the snow, so we set out bravely, and indeed found that these assurances were true.



View from Tuxer Joch - Graham Jameson

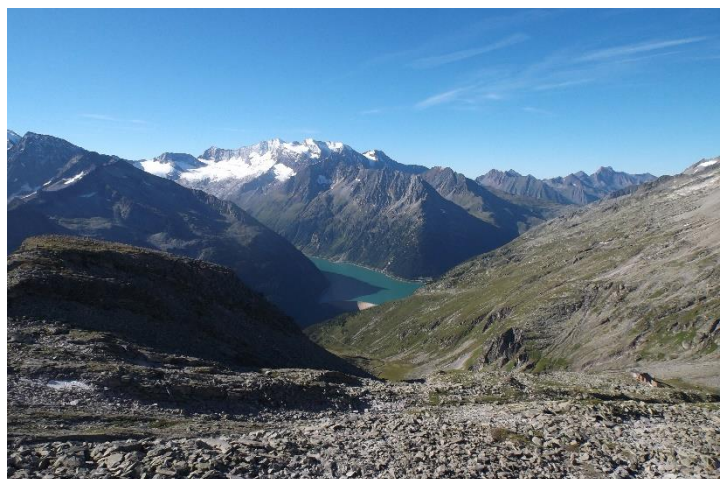
However, the next stage after this goes over the Friesenberg Scharte, which is at 2910 metres and seriously steep on the eastern side. We were advised emphatically that it should not be attempted in the snow. To make our decision easier, drizzle and fog persisted for the whole of the next day, so we stayed an extra night at Tuxer Joch. In these days when advance booking has become common practice, a delay like this could derail all bookings at later huts, but fortunately we had built in a spare day to allow for just this kind of eventuality, so we only needed to notify one hut that we would be there for one night instead of two.

The drizzle actually had the effect of melting a lot of the snow, and our patience was rewarded by brilliant sunshine on the following day. The next destination is the Friesenberg Haus, but a warning is in order here. The route passes the Spannagel Haus, which used to be a hut, but has now ceased to be one and is only the entry to a show cave. However, it is still shown as a hut on most maps and it, rather than the Friesenberg Haus, is indicated on the sign posts, which are particularly important here because the early stages of the route pick their way through a muddle of roads and lifts serving the regrettable glacier skiing development higher up. We had met a pleasant American pair who had no maps and were relying on signposts: they failed to appear at the Friesenberg Haus that day.

There was still snow above 2700 metres on the western side of the Scharte. However, this side is not too steep, though rocky, and it was quite manageable. Fortunately all the snow had melted on the eastern side, where the abrupt descent is made possible for the likes of us by fixed chains and steps. Further down, the path shown on maps past the Friesenberg See is again very steep, but it is being phased out in favour of a new path taking a gentler route via Peterskopf.

The Friesenberg Haus has an unusual history. In the less happy days of the 1920's, Jews were excluded from the Alpenverein. A large group of members in Berlin who objected to this formed a new section and built the hut. It now has the status of a memorial to all victims of religious or political persecution. The slopes above are covered with hundreds of stones stood on end and other stone constructions, presumably erected as a component of the memorial.

From here to the Olperer Hütte is only a hike of about 2 ½ hours. But rising above the Friesenberg Haus is the Hoher Riffler, perhaps the easiest of the major peaks of the Zillertaler Alpen (not to be confused with the other Hoher Riffler near Landeck!) The top is attained after about two hours of sustained, but not difficult, rocky clambering. So it's an obvious idea to claim this summit and move on to the Olperer Hütte the same day.



View from above Friesenberg Haus - Graham Jameson

The Olperer Hütte is modern and strikingly placed with one end overhanging empty space. It commands a really spectacular view over the Schlegeis reservoir to the mountains beyond. For those with the appropriate skill and determination, the Olperer itself can be climbed from here, but this is a serious mountain climb, in a quite different league from the Hoher Riffler. However, it would not be much of a challenge for the female of the warden couple, Katharina Daum, who, among other things, has made a solo ascent of Ama Dablam.

A remark on the huts and their wardens is in place here. All the huts gave efficient and good-humoured service, even when under great pressure. It is remarkable that they offer main meals at such cheap prices, and we repeatedly were given portions that we could hardly finish. All except Tuxer Joch offered a buffet breakfast, typically for 9 or 10 euros, which seems quite expensive in comparison to the price of cooked meals. Decades ago, I used to bring my own breakfast ingredients, at the cost of a full pack, and just ask for Teewasser. We didn't see anybody doing this: we were happy to go with the flow and pay the price: overall, one is still getting a tremendous bargain.

The next stage is to the Pfitscher Joch Haus, just across the border in South Tirol: it also has an Italian name, Rifugio Passo di Vizze. The route is a pleasant high-level contour, without major ascents or descents. The hut is accessible by car from the southern side, and has the character of a hotel rather than a hut. We decided to view this in a positive way, treating ourselves to a superb double room with its own shower, all for a bed-and-breakfast charge of 36 euros each. Compare this with B&B prices in the UK.

The route from here to the Landshuter Europa Hütte, is entirely in South Tirol. The path is very well made and easy, and it took us only 3 ¼ hours (signposts and websites give all variants between 2 ½ and 4 hours). At 2693m, perched right on the boundary ridge, this is the highest hut in the circuit. We met some people who had come from the Olperer Hutte in one day, not indulging in the comforts of the Pfitscher Joch Haus. There is an inviting target to occupy some of the rest of the day: the Kraxentrager is in plain view from the hut, and can be reached in about one hour of easy rocky scrambling (tantalisingly, its height is 2998m).

The circuit is completed by the descent to the starting point at Touristenrast. Though “only” a descent, this is actually one of the most challenging stages of the circuit. The morning dawned cold and overcast, and, having heard lurid descriptions of the route from people who had come up, I confess to having been tempted by the easier descent route to the Brenner (which of course would not have been a proper completion of the Peter Habeler circuit). Fortunately, Bryon dismissed these wobbles unceremoniously, and we duly set off for Touristenrast. The route starts with an hour of very rocky territory and a climb to the Sumpfscharte before the descent begins. Further down, there is a vertiginous drop from the ridge, assisted by iron pegs and a ladder. Forcing the pace, we took four hours, arriving with just ten minutes to spare before the 12.09 bus - the next one would have been more than three hours later. This final stage was, in fact, a very fine route, much superior to the tame descent to the Brenner. A great finish to a great circuit.

Graham Jameson states: “Only one of the possible starting points is accessible by bus - the Touristenrast, Valsler Tal giving access to the Geraer Hutte”. This is incorrect as all the huts are accessible by bus!.The Europahutte is also accessible from the Touristenrast.

Also a regular bus service runs from Mayerhofen up the Zamser Tal to the Schlegeisspeicher giving access to the Friesenberghaus, Olpererhutte & Pfitscher Joch Haus. The Tuxer-Joch-Haus is accessible with the bus from Mayerhofen to Hintertux. That's all the huts on the route.

I do agree though that this is a great walk. I did the Olperer Hütte to Tuxer Joch clockwise section in July 2016 and also found the section from Europa Hütte to the Geraer Hütte the most testing, particularly the climb to the Sumpfscharte, with a steep, narrow, slippery path in places. That year this route was clear of snow when the main passes on the Berliner Höhenweg were deep in snow, so a good option. Anyone considering the route would do well to visit <https://www.mayrhofen.at/en/summer-vacation-family/peter-habeler-route/> which gives information on the route and access points together with a page that allows you to book all the huts from home!

Alan Henson