

AN AUSTRIAN ÖTZTAL ODYSSEY?

by Jeremy Robbins



Jeremy, Al and Antonia on the Dahmanspitze summit - J Robbins.

Well maybe not an odyssey (long adventurous journey), but a varied 10 days this summer for 3 members of the AAC(UK) in the Ötztal included 2 klettersteig routes, 5 days on glaciers and, *inter alia*, the summit of the Wildspitze (3774m), the second highest mountain in Austria.

Asked some years ago to define mountaineering, I plagiarised the following from the Mountain Skills Training Handbook: 'Mountaineering is about enjoyment and recreation, meeting physical and mental challenges in the extremes of our rich and varied mountain landscape'. To this I added that, for me, it is best 'in the company of family and friends'. Al and I have been walking and climbing together on and off since we met at school aged 13, forty seven years ago! Having spent the last few summers variously in the French and Swiss Alps, the Stubai, the Slovenian Julian Alps and the Bavarian Alps, we decided to explore the Ötztal region this year, and were joined by my daughter Antonia on a short sabbatical from being a vet.

The Ötztal is known for one of the classic high level alpine routes, the circular and varied Ötztal Trek. The full trek, starting and finishing at Ötztal Bahnhof, breaks into 21 sections so, with only 9 walking/climbing days, we decided to dip in and out at various key points.

We gathered on Friday 13 July at Ötztal Bahnhof, from where buses service the whole valley. Our first full day included the somewhat touristy but nevertheless spectacular Klettersteig beside the Stuibenfall waterfalls, before hiking from the hamlet of Gries up to the Amberger Hütte (2135m). The next day we crossed the

glacier over the Wutenkar saddle (3103m) towards the Hochstubaiahütte, refreshing our glacier rescue techniques, before returning to the Amberger.

The following day Antonia and I made a steep hike up to the Gaislehnscharte (3052m), before a wire protected climb down a rock ridge onto the spectacular and isolated Bachfallenferner glacier, and a walk down to meet Al at the Winnebachseehütte (2361m). Apart from the huts, we encountered only two people all day.



Al with Brandenburger Haus in the background – Öetztal – J Robbins

Sunrise saw us return to the valley and drive south to the pretty village of Vent, followed by an attractive riverside walk up to the Hochjoch Hospiz (2412m). The next day we moved on to the impressively located Brandenburger Haus (3277m), perched on the rocky flanks of the Dahmannzpitze (3397m). A short hike over low angled snow gained the summit and gave us superb views into Italy, Austria, Germany and as far as Switzerland, set amidst a 360° sea of ice. The next morning found us atop

the nearby Fluchtkogel (3,497m), with equally panoramic views, including the next day's destination of the Öztaler Wildspitze. A sharp descent over the glacier was followed by a traverse over scree and high alpine flora to the Breslauer Hütte (2,844m).

An early breakfast allowed us and a number of guided parties to leave just after dawn for the Wildspitze via the Mitterkarjoch. We donned crampons on the final remains of the glacier, before ascending via a snow filled gully to cross the joch over on to the more extensive ice field to the north, finishing with a final simple snow free rock and scree scramble to the south summit of the Wildspitze. We returned by the same route, but down climbing from the Mitterkarjoch on the wire protected rock to the west of the gully. The most significant objective dangers appeared to us to be the risk of rock fall precipitated by other parties, and trailing ropes on easy scrambles, where we much preferred to move unroped and having removed crampons once off the ice.



-Al leading the snow gully to the Mitterkarjoch, en route to the Wildspitze – Öetztal – J Robbins

Back down to the valley, and Al had to leave us in Obergurgl. Antonia and I made our way in drizzle through scenic stone pine woodlands towards the Langtalereck Hütte (2430m), soon leaving the apparatus of the ski area and then the woodlands behind us. The next day, in rather gloomy weather, we tackled the nearby Schwarzenkamm Klettersteig. Starting at 2410m this involved a 700m climb topping out at 2760m, on a straightforward but impressively situated route. The Hochwildehaus, 40 minutes beyond the top of the klettersteig, is now shut, so we walked round and up towards the Ramolhaus and then retraced our steps back towards the Langtalereck. Sitting on a grass bank watched by suspicious and noisy marmots, we ate a late lunch before returning to the hut for our last *weißbier*, last meal and last night in the mountains. The next morning involved a walk back to Obergurgl and bus to Ötztal Bahnhof.

We had achieved our aim of an introduction to the Ötztal, with many more huts and mountains to include on any future visit, as well as the spectacular scrambling ridge of the Mainz high trail. Once again the Austrian Alps proved themselves accessible, their scenery spectacular, their huts comfortable and hospitable, their food delicious, and, despite a depreciating pound, their prices reasonable compared to other alpine regions. Surprisingly, unlike other areas in the Alps, we met no other British on our trip, nor saw many names in the hut books. To plagiarise the words of another famous Austrian, Arnie, 'we will be back'. Perhaps we will see you there!



Father and daughter on summit of Fluchtkogel, with Wildspitze in background. Photo J.Robbins