

Bergferien at the Gufferthütte

by Jane Ascroft



Group photo at Guffert hutte. Credit J.A. Lynn

The ÖAV organise Bergferien for families with children aged between 5 and 14 in some of the quieter mountain huts in Austria during the summer months. They hope to introduce children to huts and mountain activities in a fun way which is exactly what we wanted for our 7 year old daughter, Hannah. Although Hannah had done a lot of hillwalking and scrambling in the UK she was new to the Alps and to mountain huts.

So this is how we found ourselves at the Parkplatz for the Gufferthütte near the Austrian/German border on a sunny Sunday afternoon in August 2018. Here we met five other families, four German and one French, in total 10 adults and 10 children, plus Florian, our leader for the first few days. We played a quick game to introduce everyone to each other then started on the 2.5 hour walk up to the hut. Our luggage was transported separately to the hut leaving us only with day sacks. The walk was at a leisurely pace with no pressure on the children to hurry and this approach was to continue throughout the week.

On arrival at the hut we were shown to our sleeping quarters and then it was dinner and bed. We had chosen to sleep in *Matratzenlager* (for the real hut experience!) but most families chose to upgrade to a private room.

The next day dawned hot and sunny and we were briefed about the day's activity which was to be a short walk up the Halserspitze (1862m). We also met a second leader, Helmut and his dog Django, who would be with us all week. Django played a huge role in motivating the children as they took it in turns to hold his lead and be pulled up the hills. He was completely unperturbed by 10 children stroking him, looked cool in their sunglasses and ate vast quantities of Wiener Schnitzel. The pace up the Halserspitze was leisurely with lots of breaks for snacks, playing in streams, climbing trees, picking wild raspberries and looking at plants and animals. The view from the summit was extensive – Zugspitze, Zillertal, Stubai, Großvenediger, Wilder Kaiser plus the hut below us and the ever present Guffertspitze from which the hut takes its name.

Hannah spent the first day worrying about the language barrier between her and the other children but by the second day the group had started to bond and her shyness wore off. We had a short walk in the rain to visit some Rätische inscriptions that were over 2000 years old. Florian, Helmut and Django then took the children off for a game of hide and seek in the woods while the adults went back to the hut for a few hours peace and quiet. Although the week was aimed at German speaking families all the adults spoke embarrassingly good English, as did most of the older children, and my German is passable, so we didn't have any language difficulties.

The weather improved by the third day and this was to be a day of rock climbing at the Abendstein, a small crag about an hour's walk from the hut. For this we were accompanied by a qualified mountain guide. I left Hannah with my husband and the rest of the group and headed alone to the Guffertspitze which had beckoned temptingly to me all week. The approach from the north was long and challenging and as a result it was wonderfully peaceful and unspoilt. On the lower slopes I saw deer and marmot, beautiful alpine flowers and picked wild raspberries, blueberries and strawberries whilst the upper slopes were steep with lots of good scrambling, some protected by wires. After a speedy ascent and descent I made my way to the Abendstein and re-joined the group who had enjoyed a day of climbing intermingled with hide and seek and looking after Django.



Rockclimbing at Abendstein. Credit J.A. Lynn

The last day was to be a longer walk along the Blauberg ridge finishing near the summit climbed on the first day. We had a lengthy stop at the Blauberg Alm where we sampled the local produce and rested before the climb up to the ridge. Unbeknown to us the other younger children had opted to return the same way so Hannah found herself on the Blauberg ridge with a small group of adults and a couple of teenage boys. She coped admirably and it did mean that to her delight she had sole charge of Django, even if he constantly veered from the path in search of shade. Again the views from the ridge were superb with the added excitement of walking with one foot in Germany and the other in Austria. We made excellent time and arrived back at the hut before the other group who had been waylaid by *schnapps* and stories at a shepherd's hut (with lemonade for the children.....). On the last evening the children were presented with certificates and then enjoyed marshmallows over a campfire.



Blauberg Ridge. Credit J.A. Lynn

So, was the week a success? Undoubtedly. Hannah forgot to be shy after day two and by the end of the week did not want to leave. We all benefited from a week living a more simple life – without TV, internet or cars and at times with a shortage of water. A final unexpected benefit was the chance to meet “ordinary” European families and to discuss with them their lives, values and hopes for the future – and to find that they are not so very different from the British after all, with or without Brexit.

Bergferien for families run by the ÖAV and individual huts are advertised on <http://www.alpenverein.at/portal/jugend-familie/Familienangebote/Veranstaltungen.php> Information is only in German. The prices usually include all meals, activities and equipment and luggage transport to the hut.