

Good omens in the Ötztal

By Geoff Bennett



Hintere Schwarze & Similaun from Kreuzspitze - John Sotillo

My first thought was *The magic money tree DOES exist!* shortly followed by *And it's in the EU! Theresa May is wrong.....again!* Moments later *Somebody above us is going to be very, very, anxious.*

Yes, it was literally raining money. €20, €50, €100 notes and even a €500 note floated down as we stood below the Reinhard Schiestl Klettersteig. We collected the notes, tickled the wallet off its perch and counted it all up; over €2,000! Either we were going to have a more luxurious holiday than we'd planned, or someone-else was going home early. Clearly, we couldn't keep it, so I stuffed all the cash in the wallet, put it in my zippered pocket and yanked up the steep start of the route. Soon enough I found the extremely anxious Slovakian owner making his way down. Not speaking each other's languages wasn't a problem: handing the wallet over with a smile on my face was enough for him to beam widely, shake my hand vigorously and reward us with beers at the top. It would appear therefore that the omens for this trip were unusually good.

This was the fifth summer I'd headed for the Swiss and Austrian Alps, having spent previous visits completing hut-to-hut tours, ticking off the occasional peak, various *Klettersteige* and doing some climbing in between. Usually I travelled with my teenage son but this year it was just my brother-in-law John Sotillo and me. 2017's weather had not been particularly stable, and we had struggled to get into any huts at short notice. This year however the forecast and the hut bookings, like the omens, promised better.

A couple of long day walks to the Wildes Mannle and Ramol Haus were useful for acclimatisation, whilst the *Klettersteige* offered some variety before we headed to the huts. The Guslarspitze provided a suitable first afternoon's objective, having made good time to the Vernagt hut. The following morning we made fast progress over the Großvernagtferner to the Hochvernagtspitze, over-taking a couple of slower (and younger) parties. Rewarded with stunning views in all directions, we dallied a short time on the cross-less summit before racing back as we still had to walk on to the Breslauer hut that afternoon.

We'd planned on climbing the Hinterer Brochkogel the next day but, on reaching the Mittekärjoch, seeing how good the weather was and how few people were in front of us, we headed for the Wildspitze instead. Duly rewarded with more stunning views we returned to the hut grinning like Cheshire cats for a suitable calorific treat: Kaiserschmarrn!



Kaiserschmarren for one! The Vorderer Brochkogel in the background - John Sotillo

The Vorderer Brochkogel had been recommended for its views so we duly set off for that next day. We saw no one all day, but were entranced by a family of chamois and many colourful alpine plants. In fact, the scramble up the ridge, though not hard, was quite loose with some appalling drops: the last horizontal 100m to the cross looked distinctly unpleasant, so we descended, deciding that discretion trumped valour.

The Ötztaler Urkund, lying on the ridge between the Breslauer hut and the Wildspitze, presented a quick hit so we made an early start for this 3500m top, only to discover that the last 50m was another hideously loose scree slope: deglaciation clearly has its disadvantages. Nevertheless, it was another beautiful, secluded top and we still managed to get down in plenty of time to pick up John's son, Rob, from Innsbruck.

The weather was about to break, but with an early start we pinched an ascent of the dramatic Hangerer, for Rob's acclimatisation: as we returned to the car, the heavens literally opened! A cold, wet, day was spent resting before we set off for the Martin Busch hut early the next morning with fresh snow above 2200m. From the hut we made our way through

beautifully crisp snow to the summit of the 3450m Kreuzspitze for ethereal views of the Wildspitze wrapped in layers of cloud.



Ötztal Urkund & Wildspitze from the Wildes Mannle - John Sotillo

The *Hüttenwirt* recommended waiting for the fresh snow to melt before heading over the glaciers, so the Fineilspitze was next, as its glacier approach has all but disappeared. This also allowed us to visit Ötzi's monument, something I was keen to do as I'd followed the various documentaries about him. This peak proved a little trickier as a strong, cold, crosswind and slippery snow made the scramble up the East ridge a bit spicier than we'd expected. However, at least it was solid and abounding in good holds and we were relieved to find a more pleasant route to descend. The path to the Similaun hut also gave us great views of the route to the Similaun which we were keen to do next.

With the good weather holding, we raced up and over the delightful Marzellkamm early the next morning and broke trail across the Niederjochferner to the Similaun. Once more there were stunning views in all directions and an easy descent to the Similaun hut and a stroll back to the Martin Busch hut.



Rob & Geoff crossing the Niederjochferner to the Similaun

With one more day of good weather forecast we decided to head back via the Saykogel and down the pleasant Hochjochferner to the Hochjoch Hospiz, where we enjoyed a ridiculously large portion of Kaiserschmarrn which also fuelled our speedy descent to Vent. Sure enough, the promised heavy rain arrived, and the morning saw us packing up and heading home, with smiles on our faces and contentment in our hearts. It's not every summer that you can climb every day you want, every peak you want, in the manner you want, but 2018 was one of those years.