

Ski tour in the Ötztal in March 2019

by Leanne Mills and Michael Prowse



Bill and Andrew on the Finailspitze - Steve McDonald

It was billed as “moderately-paced” but in high and serious terrain, with some notable landmarks on the way, including a visit to the Ötzi memorial, and culminating in an ascent of the Wildspitze, Austria’s second-highest mountain. In the event it turned out to be a “Ronseal” tour – we did everything it said on the tin!

The diverse group set off from Vent on Monday March 25. Tim and Michael leading, with Allan, Andrew and Leanne from their 2018 tour in the Tuxer Alps and fresh faces Astell, Steve, Simon, Tom and Bill. Ages ranged from early 30s to early 70s.

After the usual transceiver checks, Michael and Tim reminded us of ÖAV standard practices, STOP or GO deliberations and personal responsibility for safety. We skinned along up the valley for an hour before tackling a very steep incline for the last hour up to the Martin Busch hut, where we warmed up with hot drinks in the boisterous Gaststube. As the evening progressed and the beer count went up we started to get to know each other, with Simon entertaining us with unlikely tales of life as a paediatric surgeon.

A smattering of snow overnight heralded a plunge in temperature and, as we set off for the aun hut, the breeze blew raw and hard, forcing us to stop and layer up. We took the opportunity to practise kick turns, with Andrew using his army and sports coaching experience to impress the technique on our minds. Conditions became increasingly bitter as we roped up for the glacier. The gentle climb scarcely kept us warm until, windblasted and cold, we burst into the boot room. We warmed up for an hour before braving the freezing gale for a crampon walk up to the cairn for transceiver drills. Thankfully, dinner was plentiful and hot. Once the plates were cleared we planned our assault on the Similaun before an early night in our very chilly dormitory.



Cramponing up to the Brochkogeljoch - Steve McDonald

The next morning we headed up the glacier into the biting wind with harscheisen on our skis. A snack at our ski depot refreshed us for the climb up a snow and ice ridge to the fine Similaun summit (3606m). It was Thursday already! We stood outside the hut at 08.20 ready to go. Bill took a group photo and introduced us to the term “saunteering” to describe our steady progress: the ideal attitude for the mature ski-tourer, he declared! In the warm sun we skinned up to the Ötzi Memorial and reflected on the eponymous ice-man, who had lain here undisturbed for 5,000 years. Further up most of us needed crampons to reach the ski depot of Finailspitze. Allan declared that summiting was not necessary to enjoy a tour so he waited with Leanne at the depot as the rest of us cramponed up the steep and narrow ridge to the impressive 3514m peak. By 13.00 we were skiing towards the beautiful, 1927-

built, Hochjoch-Hospiz in sun-soft snow and a little powder. Skins back on we plodded up to the hut in sweltering heat on sugary spring snow in tricky conditions for a traverse.



Tom descending the Similaun - Steve McDonald



Rushed departure from the Hochjoch Hospiz - Steve McDonald

It was Friday, March 29, yes, the day that the UK did not leave the EU! Our careful plans, as well as Theresa May's, were disrupted by news that a supply helicopter was arriving and that we had to clear the hut immediately to avoid the downwash. Somewhat rushed, we set off up a steep pitch for three hours, gaining 700m with only one rest break. We took shameful advantage of Tom, the youngest of our party (and the fittest, with his army training), letting him carry the heaviest rope every day. Steve and Astell, as the next fittest, led the way up the increasingly steep slopes. Towards the top the chill of the valley disappeared and we sweltered on strangely icy slopes in still air. Arriving at the Mittlere Gulsarspitze (3218m) we paused in baking sunshine for a quick photo-op before skiing steep pitches down to glacial powder fields. A final schuss took us to the packed Vernaghütte. Two sun-drenched terraces were perfect for some gulasch and delicious apfelstrudel. A very busy hut did not impede the speed of dinner service and supper was plentiful and hot.

We awoke to the Wildspitze day and several groups, including a party of 21 Americans, were all heading the same way. The glacier started steady and not steep but, as we approached the Brochkogeljoch, we saw the Americans boot-packing up with poles and skis strapped to packs. Two of the party were not feeling well, so returned to the hut. The remaining eight spread out a little on the final slopes, then regrouped to tackle the summit cone (3770m). We were far from alone: the awkward step proved quite exciting but the view from the summit cross was wonderful.

Steve and Astell left the group as pre-arranged, to make an ambitious direct descent to Vent. For the rest of us, the descent was long but straightforward, except for an adventurous 50m abseil on skis from the Brochkogeljoch, ably set up by Tim and Tom and a first for some. It was a tired but happy party that reached the hut.

But nothing ever goes quite to plan! As Sunday dawned we were preparing to leave when Leanne gasped with pain and fell to the bed with a bout of lumbago. After several telephone calls and a group confab, a helicopter was with us in 20 minutes, thanks to our ÖAV AWS insurance. As she took the express route to the valley the rest of us skied pristine spring snow with the finest views of the week with high peaks all around and glorious sunshine. Then we hit the mud! But we all got safely down, said our goodbyes and promised to do it all again next year!