

KARNISCHER HÖHENWEG

by Wayne Pettigrew



The Carnic Alps near the Gartnerkofel summit – Wayne Pettigrew

The **Karnischer Höhenweg** or “Carnic High Trail” is a well-known alpine long-distance hiking trail in the European Alps that traces the Austrian-Italian border.

Traditionally it runs from Sillian, Austria, near the Tirolean Alps in the west to the Thörl-Maglern area in the east just south of Villach, Austria. Hikers on this trail encounter everything alpine, from idyllic alpine pastures and dense Austrian stone pine forests to barren mountain meadows, rubble dumps, rocky mountain paths and adventurous peaks. Much of the trail is a ridge walk, as the hiking trail runs along the main ridge that separates the two countries. Hikers are treated to fantastic views of some of the range’s most powerful peaks, including the Sesto Dolomites, the Julian Alps, the Hohe Tauern and the Gailtaler Alps.

The hike is generally done from West to East in 8 to 11 daily stages. However, I decided to hike the Karnischer Höhenweg in reverse from east to west. Due to time constraints, I only had 7 days to complete the hike which required doubling up on some stages.

The hike on the Karnischer Höhenweg includes around 111 miles (178 km) through the mountains, forcing hikers to contend with a total of around 56,000 feet of elevation change. Fortunately, the altitude difference is evenly distributed over the stages with countless smaller summit ascents making up much of the altitude gain. The ascents and descents are balanced through much of the trail with elevation ups and downs of generally less than 7000-8000 feet per day.

The Carnic Alps are a geologist's wonderland. The area is one of the better preserved Palaeozoic sequences of the world. This narrow region underwent compressional as well as extensional deformational events which created a complex structural framework of folds and uplifts. Fossils, mainly bryozoans, brachiopods, trilobites and gastropods are abundant.

Hikers cross the border between Italy and Austria over and over again since the border of the two countries is the ridgeline. During World War I, the main ridge was the front line and soldiers' cemeteries, bunkers and fortified positions are still visible along the trail. Since the end of the war the route became known as "The Carnic Peace Trail" and an outdoor museum is maintained near one of the accessible passes along the trail by the governments of the two countries. Hikers often find remnants of the battles that took place during the war.

There are high Alpine huts and guest houses along the trail where hikers are accommodated. The Österreichischer Alpenverein is responsible for many of these huts. Huts are sparse and hikers need to carry provisions for much of the period on the trail.

Carnic High Route – Stage 1 *Thör-Maglern to Nordio Deffar – Reverse Karnischer Höhenweg, Ascent 1770 m Descent 940m (or approx 9000 ft of elevation change)*

During the first stage of the Karnischer Höhenweg, you are mostly walking on good paths and upwards through forests of the broad mountain ridge, but the long ascent is certainly a challenge. Hikers follow the 403 route from the Klagenfurt basin. The trail continues steeply upward and about 3500 feet of elevation change awaits you in the first 5-6 km. From the viewpoint at an area called "hawk view", the Italian, the Austrian and the Slovenian mountains offer a marvellous alpine panorama.



Along the ridge, the trail continues between the trees to the Göriacher Alm. The broad Gailtal valley gives a wonderful view of the striking rock face of the Dobratsch mountain range and you can see to the east where the mighty Klagenfurt basin opens. The strikingly straight furrow of the Gailtal Valley is part of the Periadriatic seam, which separates the Southern Alps from the Central Alps for those of you interested in geology. The path winds down until you reach the Bartolosattel mountain pass which is covered with picturesque meadows and then scales back upward to the Almdorf of Achomitzer Alm.

The area also has a growing population of European Brown Bears for which they have signs posted to be aware of. The 403 route continues here into the Freistitzer Alm which has a large number of chalets. The old power station there, which was uninhabited for a number of years, is now called the Fledermaushaus (Bat House) and houses a colony of small horseshoe bats which can be observed inside the building.

From there I went downward and back into Italy where my hut for the evening was located (Rifugio Nordio Deffar).

Carnic High Route - Stage 2 Nordio Deffar to Nassfeld – Reverse Karnischer Höhenweg, Ascent, 530m Descent 1350m (or approx 9500 ft of elevation change).

From the Rifugio Nordic Deffar you follow the route 403 as the Karnische Höhenweg leads steadily uphill through hiking paths and farm roads.

As I continued through the forest I saw several signs that warned of bears in this area. The European brown bear, which can weigh up to 650-750lbs, is making a comeback in Austria but they rarely attack people. Their diet consists of about only 25% meat and so far, there have been no reports of hikers being included in that percentage.

Near the Schultersattel ridge the trail crosses the border back into to Austria. A final descent awaits you right at the end between Gartnerkofel summit and Garnitzenberg as you head down to the Nassfeld pass.

In 1799 a botanist named F. X. Wulfen discovered on the slopes of Gartnerkofel an endemic flower, now named after him (Wulfenia Carinthica). In the Alps this is the only place where it can be found. Early in summer each year a day of wulfenia is held when local residents go out in search for the flower.

The accommodations available for the evening are The Alpenhof Platner in the Austrian ski area of Nassfeld and several other ski lodges.

Carnic High Route – Stage 3 Nassfeld to Zollnersee Hütte – Reverse Karnischer Höhenweg Ascent 1060m, Descent 940m (or approx 6,600 ft of elevation change)

The third stage takes you through the picturesque mountain meadows that characterise the landscape of the eastern Carnic main ridge. While it begins with a steep climb out of Nassfeld, there are also slight elevation changes of a few meters or more on this long stretch of almost 24 km.



The sun illuminates the ridge near the pass leading to Nassfeld - Wayne Pettigrew



Beware of the bear – Wayne Pettigrew



From the Alpengasthof Plattner, you hike through the meadows and villages of Nassfeld up the slope of the ridge and over the summit of the Madritsche where there is a ski station. Here the Karnische Höhenweg runs through a depression on the northern slope. At an area called the Rudnigsattel you finally cross the pass between the Trogkofel and Hinterrosskofel summits. At the striking rocky summit of the Trogkofel you pass on a narrow path to its impressive southern flank.

The Trogkofel area was a deadly area during World War I as the front lines of the Isonzo front converged here. Ernest Hemingway's book *A Farewell to Arms* is partly set in the events along this front. There are many remnants of the war that remain along this part of the route.

From here you continue around the summit group on a moderate decline from Italy over the Rattendorfer Sattel to rejoin the ridge. The path then leads just south of the cliffs of the Ringmauer summit.

The path then follows a shallow side summit of the Karnischer main ridge down through a sparse mountain forest and opens up the view of a wide, hilly plateau. This plateau forms the pastures of the Straninger Alm. The farms in the village offer direct purchase of their world famous Gailtalian cheeses and dairy products and feature a cheese tasting. Past this a contouring path that is narrow in some places runs for about 2km below the Waideggeralm-Sattel and then up to the Nobling Pass. You then pass the Zollnersee lake, which makes a wonderful photo opportunity against the mountain backdrop.

Accommodations for the night are at the Zollnersee Hütte where a well-deserved beer is a great way to stop inflammation!

Carnic High Route – Stage 4 *Zollnersee Hütte to Wolayersee Hütte – Reverse Karnischer Höhenweg, Ascent 1770m, Descent 1560m (or approx 11,000 ft of elevation change)*

The fourth stage of the Karnische Höhenweg forms the transition from the quiet alpine landscape of the eastern part of the long-distance hiking trail to the rough high mountain landscape of the western section.

From the Zollnersee Hütte the path snakes over the mountain pastures and barren mountain meadows on the northern slope of the Carnic ridge. From the valley, you hike past the Koder Alm and up to the summit where the trail goes parallel to the main slopes of the ridge. At the Köderkopf you can see magnificent views of the Carinthian mountains and the peaks of the Karnien main ridge.



The path then goes steadily downhill through mountain forests and sun-kissed mountain meadows as the Karnischer Höhenweg meanders toward the pass, parallel to the main ridge, through the valley of Angerbach.

The Plockenpass dates back to early times as an ancient trade route. In 15 BC Roman general Tiberius rebuilt the road to reach the recently conquered lands north of the Carnic Alps. There is an open-air war museum here at the border (2km north of where you cross the road but bus service is available) that is free to the public and contains substantial trench works and fortifications from World War I.

You continue past the Gasthof Valentinsalm in a steep climb to the pass that has stunning views in both directions. Overnight is at Wolayersee Hütte which sits right on a high alpine lake. The lake dates back to the last ice age and was formed by a collapsed sinkhole.

Carnic High Route- Stage 5

*Wolayersee Hütte to
Hochweißsteinhaus – Reverse
Karnischer Höhenweg Ascent 840m,
Descent 920m (or approx 5800 ft of
elevation change)*

On the section between the Hochweißsteinhaus and the Wolayersee hut, the Karnischer Höhenweg leads through the picturesque Val Fleons, an untouched high valley on the Italian side of the ridge. The trek lets you enjoy the view of the towering rocky peaks above you.



The route leads uphill northwest along the trail along the northern slope of the Carnic Ridge to the junction with a dirt road and then loops around to the east below the Kreuzleithöhe ridge and through a boulder field to the Giramondo Pass. This area is ripe with ruins from old WW1 fortifications.

After going through a second pass (Passo di Niedergail) the shores of the small mountain lake Lago Pera appear just below the path. The valley continues for a ways and then the long descent from the pass Sella Sisani begins with great views of the Carnic ridge. After passing a couple of farmsteads, the path then leads back upwards to the Ofner Joch pass which features a statue of a shepherd bringing home a lamb. The trail then leads back into Austria and downhill to the Hochweißsteinhaus.



Hochweißsteinhaus – Wayne Pettigrew

Carnic High Route – Stage 6

Hochweißsteinhaus to Filmoorhütte– Reverse Karnischer Höhenweg Ascent 1380m, Descent 980m (or approx 8100ft of elevation change)

Almost the entire route of this stage runs directly along the summit ridgeline of the Carnic ridge. In the constant ups and downs the walk is on narrow rocky paths to the numerous peaks along the way. The flora is amazing with mountain roses in bloom and edelweiss in abundance.



Alpen roses blooming on the Karnischer Höhenweg

Once you reach the Luggauer Sattel it is a border walk for much of the day with one foot in Austria and the other in Italy.

The path first heads uphill to the waypoint to reach the Steinkarspitz. From here there is a great view of the mighty summit of the Hochspitz. There is no direct access to the summit here, so the Karnischer Höhenweg leads you over a rocky slope south to the summit. The Karnischer Höhenweg then runs over mountain meadows only a few metres below the ridge and leads around the Gamskofel and the Mosescharte peaks and then through to the Winklerjoch Pass to just below the Reiterkarspitz peak.

The route then gradually slopes uphill to the Bärenbadegg peak. Towards the north, you can easily see the parallel mountain range of the Gailtal Alps and, in the south, the rocky slopes of the eastern Dolomites are visible. From here, the Karnischer Höhenweg winds steeply downhill from the summit of the Bärenbadegg.

The small Filmoorhütte offers folk music and plenty of good Austrian food and beer. The Austrian innkeeper even makes his own Schnapps which he hands out complimentary to guests!

Carnic High Route – Stage 7

Filmoorehütte to Sillian – Reverse Karnischer Höhenweg, Ascent 440m, Descent 880m (or 4300 ft of elevation change) Final Stage

The trail runs through a huge rubble-filled cwm and you have a breathtaking view of the towering Pfannspitz directly above you. Behind you to the east, you can see the striking rock peaks of the little ones and the Great Kinigat. The hike is continually uphill until you reach Pfannspitze. From the



Early morning under a full moon on the Karnischer Höhenweg

summit of the Pfannspitze you have a wonderful view of the mountains of the Sesto Dolomites and the Friulian Dolomites.

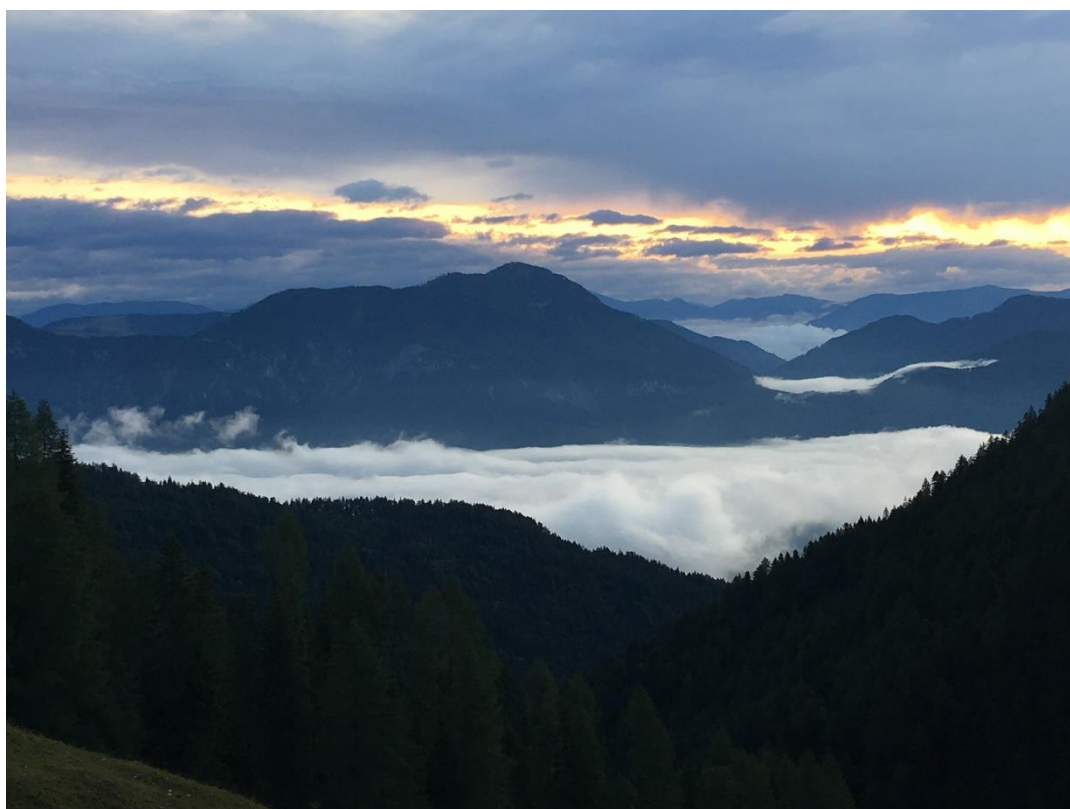
The last stage of the Karnischer Höhenweg leads you down from the barren mountain meadows of the Carnic Ridge to the green slopes of the Drau Valley while taking in the scenic view of the rocky peaks of the Sexten Dolomites. The path initially meanders along the wide summit ridge. There are only a few sections of long upwards altitude increase on this entire stage but some areas are so steep that they require cable assisted climbing. There are numerous remnants of the fortifications from WW1 along this part of the route.

The Sillian Hütte, which was completely renovated in 2018, offers hikers accommodation and you can take a break here and have lunch when hiking from west to east. After passing the Sillian Hütte, the path descends down some wide mountain meadows through a sparse mountain forest. The narrow mountain trail becomes a farm path and eventually opens onto a wide gravel road leading to Alpengasthof Leckfeldalm. Leckfeldalm, which serves as a west to east starting point for some, has a shuttle to Sillian's bus and train stations and several other connections.

Hikers are rewarded with a fantastic view of the Dolomites to the South during the length of this stage.

I would certainly recommend the east to west route for this hike since the sun was generally at my back rather than in my face during the mornings and it made for some beautiful picture opportunities. The climb is also more gradual in this direction giving trekkers the opportunity to acclimate and prepare their legs for the higher mountain passes as the hike progresses. The entire completed hike was 180 km long with a total elevation change for the entire hike of 56,000 feet in seven days.

A special thank you to John Hayes whose Cicerone guidebook provides valuable insight along this route.



Heading up the trail from Arnoldstein above the clouds below