

# Ötztal Alps Ski Touring Trip

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Dave Bates  
Austria, March 2023



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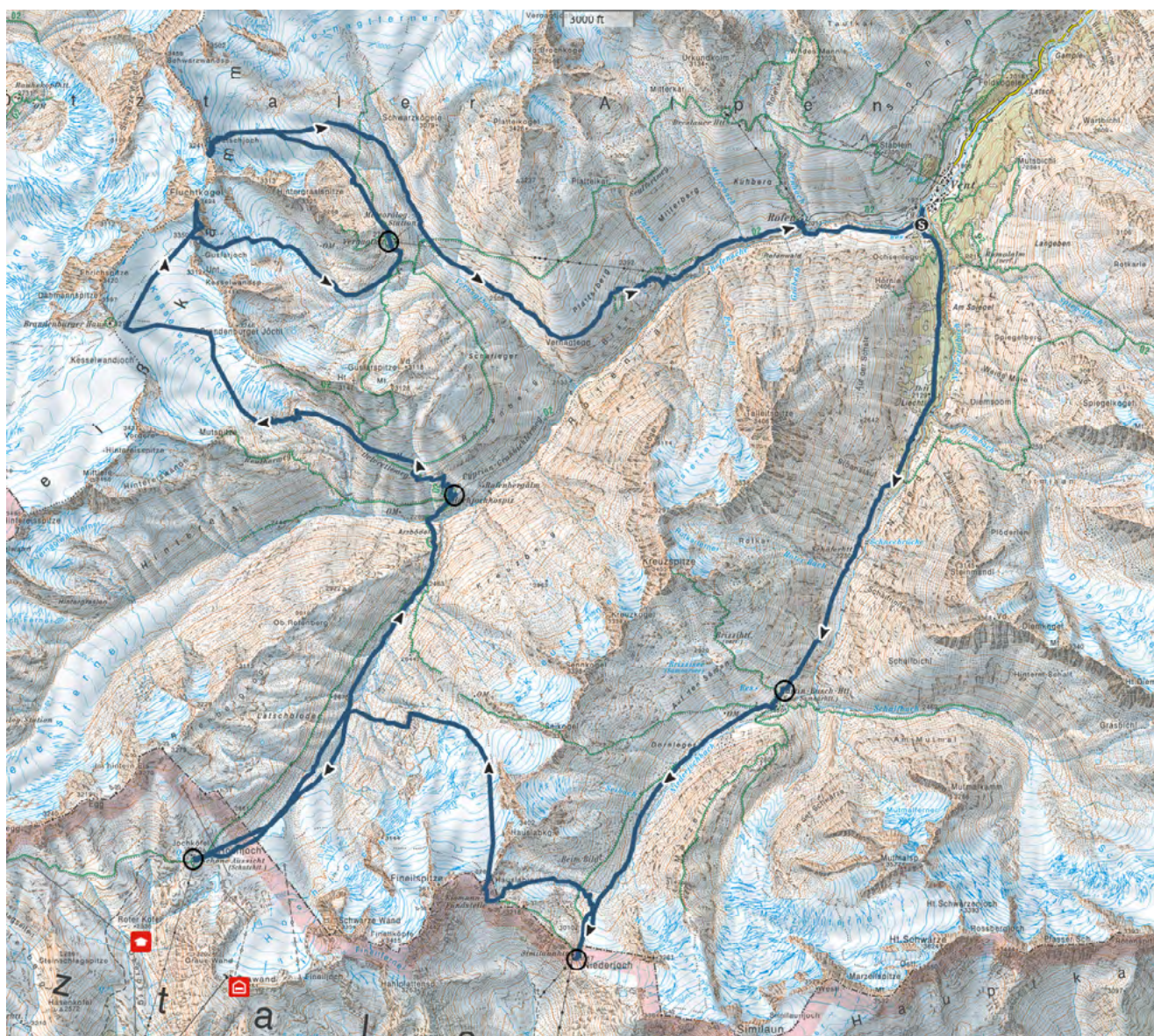
On Friday 24 March I got a text message that a spot had opened up in Gerry Kenny's Ötztal Alps ski tour. As I was going to be in the area, I jumped at the chance despite the awful weather forecast for the following week.



Dave Bates  
March 2023



Austria



The final route  
© Dave Bates

## Saturday 25 March

Arrived in Vent from Sölden around 10:00 and dropped my ski stuff with the Haus Elisabeth. Took a few runs up the Vent ski area. The snow was awful, a mix of rained-on and refrozen ice with some windblown and damaged snow covering up holes going down to the ground. The light was flat and difficult to see anything off-piste, and when I did venture off-piste I managed to fall into a hole onto a rock. With sunglasses there was no light discrimination and my goggles were scratched, and too small to cover my sunglasses. I did a quick check to see if I could see the route up to the Breslauer hut that sits above Vent on the way to Wildspitze. Visibility was sufficient to be able to see the hut, and I toyed with the idea of a quick skin up to it. However, the flat light, the awful off-piste conditions and the lack of a track made me reconsider.



After a couple of hours of warming up, I skied down to the bottom, and called it a day around 13:15. My skis had a gouge out of them where the rock had pulled out a previous repair, so at 15:00 I dropped them into the sports shop by Hotel Post, where the tech said he could repair it before they closed. I also bought some new goggles that would go over the glasses and weren't scratched. To pass the time I went for a walk up to the start of the ski touring trail at the base of the drag lift on the east side of the valley. When I got back the rest of the group had started to assemble – Luke Tasker, a recently qualified Hochtouring Übungsleiter, Dave Brown, a very experienced trainer for the AAC, Gerry Kenny who was leading the tour, and Thue Pontopiddan from Denmark, who had previously toured with Gerry. We met up for dinner at the restaurant opposite the Haus Elisabeth, went through introductions and went through the plan for the week.

The weather forecast had been awful, with snow and high winds predicted for almost every day of the week, and we had adjusted our expectations that while we should be able to get to the first hut, the Martin Busch, from there on we would have to take it one day at a time. The only positive was that it looked like there might be a bit of a break in the weather on Monday or Tuesday but there was very little snow down low, and looking like poor visibility and poor conditions high up. Expectations were low!

Gerry undertook a standard assessment of the following day's risks, routes, and plans, to make sure we all knew what we were doing, and a discussion of goals for the week – which as a group had changed from grabbing at least four 3500m+ peaks including the second highest mountain in Austria, the Wildspitze, to making it to at least one hut and taking every day as it comes. In anticipation of long stays in the huts I downloaded some books to read on the phone.

## Sunday 26 March

At breakfast, Dave Brown was very uncomfortable from a pulled muscle he had done while taking a group the previous week, and decided to pull out, leaving Luke, Gerry, me and Thue as a group of four. We left our ski bags in the ski room, and suitcases with the owner and, after having said goodbye to Dave, walked up to the base of the drag lift. The weather was overcast but with high cloud and good visibility. We put skins and skis on and started up the trail to the Martin Busch Hut. The track is clearly marked and winds its way along the valley through low bushes in classic low alpine terrain.

There was very little snow on the slopes above us and the weather was calm and peaceful. Chatting away side by side, we started to get to know each others backstories, and it became clear to me I was with a very experienced group, with Thue having done a lot of touring in Norway with his family, Luke being a ski instructor from Kitzbühl for nine years until Brexit put paid to that career, and Gerry a key player in the AAC UK branch. We reached the hut after a couple of hours of very relaxed skinning, and after sorting out skins, backpacks, and finding where our rooms were, grabbed some lunch. Afterwards we spent a good couple of hours going over potential plans for the next few days as the updated forecast was not good.

Heavy snow was due from Sunday evening through Monday with 60+km/h winds. Tuesday looked better, with a clear morning, but with high winds. The plan had been to ascend the 3600m Similaun summit on Monday and then ski down to the Similaun hut at 3000m and stay there for the night. We studied the route to the Similaun, and decided that the ascent to the summit was probably only possible if the forecasted snow didn't arrive, but the ascent to the hut, 500m above the Martin Busch looked more safe. There was also a very easy get-out route if the weather came in too strong, just descend back to the MBH along the track. After dinner (classic hut food, soup, goulash and chocolate mousse pudding) we used Gerry's AAC risk-assessment app to check everyone knew what we were planning, and understood what the risks were for the following day.



Looking up the valley from Vent to the Martin Busch Hutte  
 © Luke Tasker

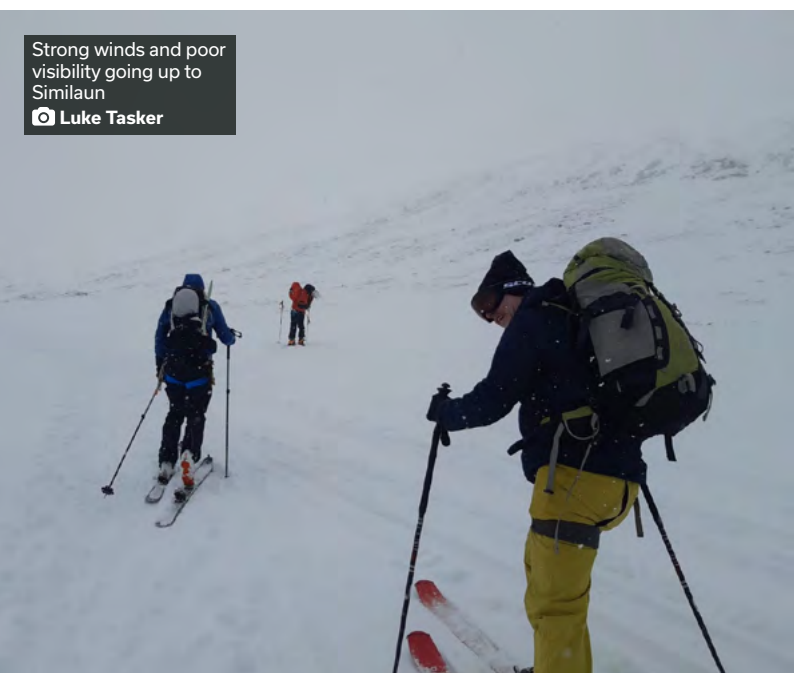
## Monday 27 March

When Monday arrived it was overcast with a little bit of snow coming down, but it hadn't started heavily by the time we had had breakfast. At least two other groups in the hut were also going up to the Similaun, and one group of snowshoers were going to do a local peak. We left the hut on skins, and started the ascent. The going was good at first with the snow coming down but not too much wind. However, once we got over the sheltered part by the hut the wind picked up and was gusting to storm force. However, it was coming from behind us, from the north west, and swirling up the valley, so was at our back, helping push us up the mountain. At times it was strong enough to push over a man, and a couple of times I nearly hit the deck from gusts that must have been over 90kph. Gerry was blown over twice while on the track. The group ahead of us, probably only five minutes ahead, were shrouded in cloud, and their tracks were often not visible, either covered in windblown snow, or scoured away.

However, we were skinning up a wide valley, with no overhanging slopes, so avalanche danger was low. As we toiled up the valley we could see the outline of the red and white marked stones marking the way up the Ötztal trek. These were helpful to make sure we were still on the right line, and as I was leading, we tried to make sure that we were keeping to the right side of the valley and maintaining a steady ascent. After about an hour of going the wind started to drop a little, but the snow started to come down more heavily, and we started gaining a bit of visibility. It was cold, but when properly dressed not unpleasantly so, and felt like a proper mountain experience. Another half hour and we started to be able to see the steeper slopes off to all three sides, right to the Hauslabjoch where the body of the stone age man, Ötzi, was found; left to the Similaun glacier and peak; and ahead to the hut.



Leaving the Martin  
Busch Hutte  
Dave Bates



Strong winds and poor  
visibility going up to  
Similaun  
Luke Tasker

We pushed on and I started to lay tracks into the face of the ascent up to the hut, a 100m vertical ascent over about a kilometre, with lots of fresh snow coming down. The angle was not particularly steep but it was hard going for about twenty minutes, until we breached the ridge below the hut. With very little visibility, I had to be careful not to fall into a large wind scoured trough that had been scooped out just below the rock face. As we got to the top of the ridge, a hut was visible ahead of us up on the cliff face, but it had no windows and clearly was derelict. A few metres further on and the Similaun hut became visible over the ridge, its flag flapping furiously in the wind. As we reached it I side-slipped down into a wind protected trough by the steps, only to hear a shout from behind –



"We're staying in the cheap hut back there." I turned to see Luke pointing at the derelict shack and for a fraction of a second I was taken in before realising he was joking. We got inside, out of the wind, and took skins off, hung them up and unpacked ice axes and harnesses to leave in the drying room, and went to check in. It was barely 11:00 when we got there, so tea seemed more of an option than beer, but we needed to find our rooms, sort our bags out, and defrost, so by the time we got to the cosy *Gaststube*, beer was back on the menu. Hot dumpling soup to accompany the sandwich we'd carried with us went down very well, as we warmed up and thawed out. We then had to work out what we were going to do from here. The weather was intensifying with the winds outside reaching >70kph and gusting much higher, and the snow pelting down. There was no way that Similaun peak was going to be achievable today. The avalanche danger looked like it was going to increase significantly, and I was convinced we would be stuck there for a day or two. We used the opportunity for Gerry and Luke to show Thue and me some basic crevasse rescue techniques, including making a pulley from carabiners, and putting a leg loop on a prussic knot to help get out. With no wifi or 4G we couldn't check the forecast, but Thue managed to find the one spot in the hut where reception was available – the far end of the gent's toilet.

The forecast for the following day had actually improved. It looked like the storm would finish early morning and there would be a window with sunshine from 8am to mid afternoon. Winds were still high, but coming from the northeast, meaning that the wind-loaded slopes would be on the Italian side. While Similaun peak was probably not a good idea, the route to the next planned hut, *Schöne Aussicht* (or *Bella Vista* in Italian) looked good. We were planning on skiing down a hundred metres or so beneath the ridge, back where we had come from, and then going up 300m south east to the *Ötzi* monument, up a west facing ridge and then over the *Hauslabjoch* down to the north west facing glacier which should be on the windward side, so not loaded. The avalanche danger had not increased and was a still 2. However, the wind and snow were still howling outside. After a nap we reconvened for dinner, again standard hut fare, soup, goulash and pudding, and then got an early night.

## Tuesday 28 March

Over breakfast, it looked like the forecast was optimistic. Visibility was poor and the Similaun peak, just outside the hut was not visible, but the visibility seemed to improve over breakfast, even if it was still windy and snowy. Assured by a detailed weather forecast and avalanche info provided by the hut guardian, and with his assurance that the Hauslabjoch would not be loaded with this wind, we set off. As we left the hut the wind was still very gusty, but once we skied down over the ridge it was quieter, and actually had 20cm of fresh powder. The slope down was gentle and as we skied down to where the skins needed to go on, the sun came out for a second. We put our skins on, quickly because it was cold, -12°C, but in the sheltered spot not uncomfortable.

We then started up the slope towards the Joch. It was actually very pleasant for the first hour, sheltered, and with the exercise not particularly cold. However, as we breached the ridge at the top the wind was blowing more strongly, and the temperature was dropping. A few hundred metres along we came to first col – that drops over a cliff down south west to Italy. Turning north with the wind picking up we skied up to the Ötzi monument, marking the spot where the stone age body was found in the ice in 1991. By this point the wind was bitter, and the cold extreme, -30°C with wind chill. Gerry tried taking some photos, but we had to be quick to avoid frostbite. After quick look at the (heavily loaded) slope down to Italy, we carried on up to the Hauslabjoch – a short skin up and then a walk over the rocks at the top and down the other side. There we switched skins off and put skis and boots in downhill mode, a feat made trickier by having no feeling in my fingers.

All of us were talking like our faces had frozen up and hands were freezing. We dropped down onto the glacier as quickly as possible. This was a very flat long descent down, which slowly got less viciously cold. Eventually we dropped out of the wind, and were able to stop and try and warm up fingers noses, and grab a bite to eat. I put my helmet on, and started recording for the first time, and was able to take in the stunning surroundings. As we gradually glided in a straight line across and down the glacier we could take in the surroundings, with clear blue skies and great visibility. Eventually we came to a gently sloping powder field, and were able to get some proper ski turns in. As we reached the end of the glacier, steeper turns and some patches of soft snow were there to be had, although the south facing sides were now wind crust. We continued down off the glacier into a sheltered patch and then switched back to skins, to start the skin up (about 300m vertical) to the hut. Three of my fingers were numb, and the others were painfully starting to warm up. Leaving downhill gloves on and with a fleece still on (unusual for going up), we started off. The weather was clear and the track was obvious. After about ten minutes we met one of the other groups from the Similaun hut (a Dutch group) that had come down a slightly higher descent off the glacier, and I kept going through them to try and warm up. After about half an hour I reached the pistes of the Maso Corto Kuzras ski area and realised I had crossed into Italy



about fifteen minutes earlier. I looked back and saw that the others were still behind the Dutch group, but could see where I was going, so I continued up the pistes to the Bella Vista Hut. I got inside quickly, as the wind was howling still, and sat there trying to warm my fingers up. Three of them were clearly burned from the cold, and my nose was sore – I thought from sunburn, but clearly more from wind burn. The others arrived about 15 minutes later – Gerry had had problems with his skins being frozen and not skinning. It was only 2pm, we'd only done 500m vertical, and much of it had been a lovely ski down a nice easy glacier run, but it felt like an extreme day. However, the beer in the hut was very good, the soup was excellent, and the staff friendly.



As we decompressed we noticed the sauna and hot tub outside. Eventually we managed to stow skins, packs, and dry clothes out, and reconvened for more beers on the terrace. Luke and I tried to work out entrances into the couloirs from La Rotunda, while we had a great view of the naked people running out of the sauna and rolling around in the snow. Gerry and Luke went for it, but I was still recovering.

The Schöne Aussicht is not a normal hut – more a cross between a high end hotel and a mountain hut. We had a 3-bed sleeping room (Gerry had a single!), and plentiful power sockets, wifi, 4G, and proper coffee available. Dinner was a cut above the normal hut, with pasta starter, followed by delicious pumpkin soup, then pork knuckle with an Italian sweet and sour sauce, and delicious sorbet/ice cream/biscuit dessert. A couple of bottles of their 21st Anniversary red wine between four of us meant a good night's sleep.





## Wednesday 29 March

The day brought a new change in the weather. Now it was blowing a gale, not particularly snowy, and much, much warmer. Most importantly, the chair wasn't running. Our plan had been to ski down to the chair, take the lift up and then skin over to the Hintereissferner, up the Weisskugel (3739m) and down to the Hochjoch Hospiz. However, all the lifts were closed due to wind. With no guarantee that the chair would open at all, nor that the passage over to the glacier would be clear, and with visibility deteriorating rapidly above 2800m, we decided to cut and run to the Hospiz by taking the low flat descent down the valley from Schöne Aussicht. We skied off straight from the hut down the piste around 10am after having given up on the chairlift.



As soon as we got off the piste we found fresh powder, and I followed Luke down videoing his turns. He skied on for about 200m then just disappeared. In the absence of any contrast he'd just gone straight off a little drop and landed in a patch of soft snow, unhurt but a bit more wary of the dangers. As we looked back up the valley, the Chair was now moving, but we were too far gone. We continued to ski/traverse down the valley, which was sheltered, without wind, cloudy with occasional snow. The further we got down the more spectacular the gorge became, until we were skiing across the top of a deep gouge in the rock with high pitched sides above it. Thankful we weren't down on those slopes we stopped for a cup of tea, and took in the scenery. A few minutes later the same Dutch group came past, keeping a slightly lower line.

As we set off again we rounded the ridge and came across a beautiful 200m long untracked pitched slope down to a bridge across the river. The Dutch had traversed across the bottom of this, leaving us

untracked powder down to the bridge. Some beautiful turns later we were taking skis off and carefully walking along the edge of the path onto the bridge. On the other side was a 20 minute walk up a steep path, with occasional wires to cling onto, to the Hochjoch Hospiz. Lunch, nap and dinner followed as per previous days, with staple hut fare (soup, goulash and mousse). Again we did the risk assessment for the following day, which looked a lot better weather-wise.



## Thursday 30 March

This was going to be a big day – ascent up to Fluchtkogel, a 3500m peak that can be skied right to the top, followed by a descent through Oberes Guslarjoch to Vernagthütte. The weather looked potentially OK, starting with a bit of snow but clearing through the day. We had decided we wanted to check out the Brandenburger Haus on the way through, so a short detour on the glacier. Given that the weather forecast looked OK for the morning and not to start snowing until late afternoon, we decided to get going early-ish and make decisions on ascending the summit, or bailing out at the col depending on the weather.



Photo taken by another group of our trek across the Kesselwanferner  
 Anon

The skin up from the Hochjoch was uneventful for the first 45 minutes, with the Dutch group in front, and us following their tracks. We then had to carry skis across a steep rocky face down into the Kesselwandtal, not losing too much height but keeping well balanced on the path. With skins back on we then had a spectacular route across the front of the glacier moraine. After adjusting my boots as the insoles had come loose, we then hauled ourselves up one the side of the tongue on the left of the couloir studded moraine in steep winding ski tracks. The first kick turns of the week here went OK, despite the length of my skis, and we reached the top after about 30 minutes of spectacular scenery. This left us on the vast expanse of the Kesselwandferner that sits on top of the mountains from 3100-3400m.

With the weather looking still good, and clouds holding off, we skied across this to the Brandenberger hut but as we neared it we could see that not only was this now perched 100m above the glacier, but the slopes around it were both steep and loaded. So after a quick look down to the Gepatschferner, we skied across the vast expanse towards the Fluchtkogel. Again the weather was holding up, so as we came off the glacier we stopped by the descent for a sandwich before attempting a steep switchback track up the side of the peak, then across into the teeth of the wind to the summit. As we got there, a German group were preparing to descend, so we took some pictures on the cross at the top and prepared

for the descent. From there down to the hut was just one long variation of classic back country skiing – starting with a wind-blown powder face at the top laying down new tracks and across into the steepish Oberes Guslarjoch (30-35deg) for 50m, then out into a beautiful open powder field, laying down perfect slalom turn tracks (well, Luke's were). As we continued to descend the snow, past the German group in front, it became more springlike, but still fresh and eventually down to meadows where it started to get corn-like and eventually sticky and slushy.

The full descent, over a 1000m took less than half an hour. As we came to a halt 50m below the hut, the group we had passed joined us for a very short skin up to the Vernagthütte. As we reached the hut the weather started to close in again, and it was snowing by the time we had checked in, dropped packs, etc. Cue, beers, soup, nap, risk assessment, soup, goulash and mousse.



Atop the Fluchkogel  
 Dave Bates



Descending fresh snow in  
 the Oberes Guslarjoch  
 Dave Bates

## Friday 31 March

This was supposed to be the spectacular long last day up to Wildspitze. However, the weather forecast was against us. It had snowed a bit overnight, and the forecast was again for overcast with low cloud. There would be no point attempting a 3800m summit in snow and cloud. So we opted for a safer itinerary, to skin up the valley and depending on the weather either go up the Gepatschjoch to see the glacier on the other side, and check out the route for further ski tours, then return past the hut back to Vent, or if the weather was bad at any point just ski down to Vent.

We skinned up the ridge behind the hut, on the left hand side of the valley, and then across and down when the ridge ran out, underneath what looked like potential avalanche loaded cliffs one-by-one and quickly through the exposed terrain. As we progressed the weather held, then cleared and as we neared the ascent up to the Gepatschjoch the sun came out and we could see clearly the route up. Some small cornices on the right hand side indicated we should avoid that and I led a track up to the Joch. The view from the top was spectacular, over the heavily crevassed Gepatschferner and up to the back of Fluchtkogel. With skins off, helmet on, and boots in downhill mode we started the descent through powder snow at the top, and then through all kinds of different terrain, down to a weather station just below the hut. The Dutch group that had ascended a different peak came past us with their mountain guide, and we followed them down into the valley, on the faintest of snow trails.



The view over the Gepatschjoch to the crevassed glacier beyond.  
© Luke Tasker

A bit of walking but mainly skiing all the way down to the path at the bottom of the valley was just possible by staying on the one route the previous group had taken, with north facing gullies, bits of packed snow and some grass-hopping, we finally took our skis off with what looked like about 3km to go. We walked for about half that to the Gaierwallhof in Rofen, had a quick beer there, then crossed the suspension bridge, and skied down to Vent. Just in time to get changed, grab another quick beer and catch the 5pm bus back to Ötztal Bahnhof.



### In summary

What looked like a potentially minimal ski tour turned into a fabulous mountain adventure, with three people I had never met before, but had a great time with. Made some great friends, had some stellar ski touring and learnt a lot. Thanks AAC (UK)! PS, the huts worked out at about €60 a night on average with the AAC discount for dinner bed and breakfast. Total cost not including travel to and from Vent, or alcohol was about €440 for a week – 6 nights plus €39 for the Vent lift pass!