

# Walking Tours in the Alps

by Judy Robertson



*Braunschweiger Huette from the path to the Pitztaler Joechl - Judy Robertson*

It all started in 1996 when my husband Ian and I arrived in the mist at the Cabane du Mont-Fort above Verbier. The hut warden explained that normally the lights go out automatically, but as we were the only occupants of our large *Matratzenlager* we could decide our own *Hüttenruhe* time and just unscrew the light bulb when we were ready.

Our first – and longest – tour, back in 1992, was the Alpine Pass Route across Switzerland from Sargans in the east to Lake Geneva in the west. We enjoyed the walk and it gave us a great sense of satisfaction and achievement, but every day involved a long ascent from one valley to a pass then back down to the next valley. So, in 1996 we decided to try a higher level walk – the Walkers' Haute Route from Chamonix to Zermatt which involved several nights in huts. When Switzerland became too expensive for us we switched our affinity to Austria, where we have enjoyed many wonderful holidays, starting in 2003 with the Stubai Horseshoe in the Tirol.

Since then we have stayed in a wide range of huts, large and small, in Austria, France, Switzerland, Italy and Slovenia. We usually base our routes on suggested hut-to-hut tours in Cicerone guides, but sometimes put together our own shorter or easier routes. We always pre-book accommodation, specifying that we are Alpenverein members, and request a *Zimmer* rather than a *Matratzenlager*. In many of the huts where we have stayed we have been lucky enough to get a two-bed room, once even with our own washbasin! We particularly like the smaller huts, where we have typically found the warden and other staff to be friendly, helpful, sociable and full of fascinating local information. They are wonderful people – calm and patient even when serving dozens of meals and checking in tired, sometimes distressed walkers, able to advise on the condition of the paths (often they are also involved in maintaining them) and the weather, and frequently with a great sense of humour.

Larger huts can be more impersonal and less relaxing, especially if they are on popular routes. Having said that, it was entertaining last summer, after arriving exhausted and soaked to the skin at the Memminger Hütte on the busy E5 Germany to Italy route, to join a group of very organised German girls in the queue for the one women's shower. They had introduced a kind of production line to minimise queuing time and maximise value from our shower tokens!

### ***Our Top Tips for Successful Hut to Hut Tours***

- Plan your tour carefully. Make the most of the dull winter months to research next summer's trip – there are excellent guide books available now, especially the Cicerone guides. Select a route that matches your abilities, preferences and the amount of time you have available. If you suffer from vertigo, then avoid paths that state “*absolute Trittsicherheit und Schwindelfreiheit erforderlich!*” High level routes may offer great views but walking lower down on grassy alms, accompanied by the sound of cow bells and with the possibility of stopping at an Almhütte for a glass of fresh milk has its attractions too.
- Always pre-book your accommodation. You can always cancel up to a couple of days before if you have to change your plans. We also recommend booking *Halbpension* (half board) as this is generally excellent value and ensures you get a hearty evening meal and breakfast. (*Ed: From 2017 huts may levy a charge up to €10 for cancellations made less than 5 days in advance.*)
- Set off early and arrive early at the hut, and do believe what local people tell you about the weather. We were recently advised to set off from the valley before 8am and arrive at the hut by 2pm to avoid afternoon storms – we set off at 8.30 and spent the last half hour walking down from the Seescharte to the Memminger Hütte in thunder, lightning and hail. The first time this happened to us (and you're only supposed to ever let it happen once ...) we were descending steeply from the Sefinenfurgge between Mürren and Griesalp in the Bernese Alps in Switzerland holding on to metal fixed rope when the thunderstorm arrived.
- Build in a rest day every 3 or 4 days to wash and dry your clothes and for flexibility.



*Clothes drying at the Memminger Huette - Judy Robertson*

- Keep your pack as small and light as possible.

### ***Our Favourite Routes***

- The Stubai Horseshoe – a high level circular walk above Neustift in the Tirol, taking in eight huts. See the Stubai Rucksack Route in “Trekking in the Stubai Alps” by Allan Hartley (Cicerone).
- Chamonix to Zermatt – a 14-stage walk (allow 3 weeks) through the Swiss Alps with lots of variety. See “Chamonix to Zermatt – The Walker’s Haute Route” by Kev Reynolds (Cicerone).
- Rätikon/Silvretta – an 8-stage walk in the west of Austria from Brand to Ischgl, with six nights in huts, mainly in the Vorarlberg but briefly crossing over the border into Switzerland and ending in the Tirol. See “Walking Austria’s Alps hut to hut” by Jonathan Hurdle (Cordee).
- GR5 (southern part) – 15-stage walk from near Montgenèvre (near Briançon) to Nice. See “Walking the French Alps – GR5 Lake Geneva to Nice” by Martin Collins (Cicerone).
- Ötztal Alps – a 5-stage west-east tour in the Tirol, with four nights in huts (Gepatschhaus – Taschachhaus – Riffelseehütte – Braunschweiger Hütte), ending up in Sölden.



*Enjoying a litre of milk at the Riffelseehuette - Ian Robertson*

- Lechtal Alps – from Zams near Landeck via the Memminger Hütte to Holzgau and back to St Anton am Arlberg via the Stuttgarter Hütte and Leutkircher Hütte.
- Around the Gosaukamm in the Dachsteingebirge, from Hallstatt to Filzmoos, with three nights in huts.
- The Wildstrubel Circuit in Switzerland (Leukerbad - Kandersteg – Adelboden - Lenk – Crans – Leukerbad).
- The Ticino (Italian-speaking Switzerland) – a 5-stage circular walk from Airolo including two nights in huts (Capanna Cristallina and Capanna Basodino), where one of the highlights was watching the cows being milked in a mobile milking parlour.



*Mobile Milking Parlour Robiei 1 - Judy Robertson*

- The Gran Paradiso in Italy.

Our AAC membership has proved invaluable to us over the years. We love what the Alpenverein stands for – the huts, maintaining the paths and access to the mountains. As members of the Alpenverein we have often received special treatment in huts – to the point of embarrassment on one occasion in Slovenia when hungry non-members watched as we were brought a huge evening meal to which they were not entitled!