

The Ortler: reaching the roof of the eastern Alps

Paul Marginson



Summit of the Ortler (3905m) - Marian Anghel

Heading south over the Reschen Pass, travellers are greeted with a sumptuous vista of Süd Tirol dominated by a striking glaciated peak - the Ortler. It lies above the ski village of Sölden, up a side valley off Stilferstal. At 3905m, the Ortler is the highest peak in the eastern Alps and was the main objective of the Club tour in early July led by Marian Anghel. The party of four was completed by Mark, Neville and Paul.

After gathering in a comfortable hostel in Sölden we hiked up to the Düsseldorf Hut for two nights to acclimatise and practise techniques. The hut lies on the opposite side of the valley to the Ortler. It opened in 1897 and is now run by the fifth generation of the same family. We nipped up Hinterer Schoneck (3143m) after arriving to take stock of the surrounding mountainscape. The following day we ascended the Hohe Angelus (3521m) via its north-west rock ridge, involving some scrambling and a chained section (requiring self-protection with sling and carabiner). The sun broke through a cloudy sky as we approached the summit ridge, giving us panoramic views from the top, including the massive glacier that covers the summit and northern approach to the Ortler (our



Ascending the Ortler's main Glacier - Marian Anghel

intended route). On the descent we practised moving together roped up down the snowfield which abuts the rock ridge. Back at the hut we refreshed our crevasse rescue technique on the balcony, attracting interest from a larger group from Section Flanders!



Summit of Hohe Angelus (3520m - Marian Anghel)

The next morning we walked back down to Sölden and took the chairlift up the opposite side of the valley to 2330m. The onwards route crosses an enormous, grey moraine field before zig-zagging up to the intermediate Tabaretta Hut. We were hit by heavy rain, arriving wet and in need of re-fuelling (aka soup). Once the rain had passed, we continued steeply up to the Payer Hut. This lies at 3027m on a promontory on the rocky ridge leading to the Ortler. During WW1 the hut was commandeered by the Austro-Hungarian army as a behind-the-front-line military post. The forecast for the next day was good – until early afternoon. On the advice of guides (for other parties arriving from the valley), breakfast was brought forward to 3.30am.



Tabaretta Via Ferrata

Our route (the 'normal weg') was a mixed rock and glacier excursion, graded at AD-/PD+. Leaving the Payer, we needed our head torches. Dawn broke illuminating peaks to our east in a golden light. Roping up almost from the start, the first part of the route entails negotiating a shattered rock ridge, along a narrow path with drops to one side, ascending (and descending) to eventually reach and traverse a narrow crest (with one awkward move, avoided by an abseil when returning). The crux is a vertiginously angled, chained section rising 70 vertical metres.

After two hours, and a net height gain of just 150m, we reached the glacier, pausing to put on crampons and bring ice axes to hand. Initially, the route traverses across snow slopes and rock ribs before starting steeply up the glacier. Moving in a series of zig-zags on firm snow, we reached a small flat area an hour later. Finding ourselves in the sun we stopped to refuel and could see the summit cross high above us. The glacier ahead was white and crisp, having frozen overnight. Resuming, the gradient remained angular before and after a tricky passage above steep snow slopes where pitons had been driven into the ice to place the rope around. Eventually we emerged onto the broad ridge which reaches up to the summit. The gradient eased and we could look around and wonder at the multitude of snowy and rocky peaks in every direction.

A final rise up the summit crest brought us to the top, four and three-quarter hours after setting out. The panorama was breath taking; the feeling of being on the roof of the eastern Alps palpable. A party of three Swiss arrived with handshakes all round. Our descent was by the same route. The snow had softened on the glacier, and the final rock section required maximum concentration as tiredness threatened. Back at the Payer hut the Swiss invited us to share their cold platter of cured meats and cheeses, and the accompanying *radler* tasted wonderfully refreshing.

Marian, Mark and Neville rounded off the week by successfully tackling the challenging Tabaretta Via Ferrata, which is graded at E (the highest). Neville Jones writes: 'The idea was to walk down from the Payer to the Tabaretta hut, then to climb the Via Ferrata back up to the Payer and walk down (again). I was enthusiastic when Marian warned us that the route was long and hard. How hard could a Via Ferrata be when there is a metal wire with bolts at intervals running in front of you? The difference between this and others that I have climbed is that there were no rings or plates for your hands or feet. Not really a problem on the easy ground, where we enjoyed the airy positions and fantastic views. The crux was a different matter. I made sure that my cow's tail was securely attached and set off on an energetic traverse with hands pulling on the wire and feet up by my chest, in big boots on minuscule foot holds. It's a long time since I have been so out of breath after a few rock moves. Back at the Tabaretta hut we agreed that it was a fantastic excursion. But I will think again if Marian says "It's long and hard".'

Map: Tabacco 1:25000 sheet 08 'Ortles – Cevedale'