

A WALK ACROSS THREE COUNTRIES

by Robert Carson



Wolfendorn from Faltschspitze in S Tirol - Robert Carson

In the middle of July 2013, my friend Stephen and I, both then in our sixties, set off on our annual walking holiday to foreign parts. We had planned a hut-to-hut tour in the sunshine of the South Tyrol and the adjacent Zillertal area of Austria. A flight from Edinburgh to Munich was followed by a train journey across Austria into Italy to reach the starting point for our walking tour, Vipiteno (Sterzing in German), a small town just south of the Brenner Pass.

Before setting off next morning, we decided to 'phone our first planned hut, the Hühnerspiel Hütte. The number was unobtainable - not an auspicious start. On making enquiries at our hotel desk, we discovered that this hut has no overnight facilities, although our research had indicated that it had 8 places. As we could not risk having nowhere to lay our heads, we decided to compress our first two planned stages into one, and instead booked into the Enzianhütte.

After a long, warm and tiring day, we gratefully sat down to a typical Tirolean meal. Next morning our plan had to undergo further adjustment, as when we 'phoned the number for the Grubbergalm hut we were told it was now closed! There was nothing for it but to combine the next two stages as well, so instead we booked into the Landshuter Hütte. We duly set off and had a fairly easy ascent to the main ridge of the Zillertal Alps and began to follow the ridge north-east. We reached the summit of the Flatschspitze (2566m), which was to be our only peak. The path then continued along the ridge to skirt the summit of the Wolfendorn on its south side, where unfortunately we encountered a steep snow-filled gully. We managed to cross it fairly precariously with our ice axes driven into the snow close to our faces. This turned out however to be the crux of the route, although we encountered more snow, cabled sections and boulder fields. Progress was slow, but we arrived safely 'though very tired at the hut.

The following four days passed without any significant problems. The next stage was a fine contouring path south of the ridge to the Pfitscherjoch-Haus, traversing large snowfields. Here we crossed the border into Austria and continued to contour high above the Schlegeisspeicher (reservoir), with splendid views of the glaciers on the north side of the Zillertaler Hauptkamm. After nights at the Olpererhütte and the Friesenberghaus, a steep descent took us to the huge Schlegeis dam, where we were able to catch a bus into the large resort of Mayrhofen in the Zillertal for a day of rest and recuperation.



Hoher Riffler above Friesenberg Haus in S Tirol - Robert Carson

We were by now beginning to have serious doubts about our planned route through the Zillertal Alps on the north side of the border ridge, as there was obviously an unusual amount of snow still lying, in mid-summer. We therefore made a decision to leave the Zillertal Alps and instead head for the lower-altitude Karwendelgebirge on the north side of the Inntal. We managed to buy a map and quickly planned a route. Next morning, we took the train down the valley to Jenbach-im-Inntal, followed by a taxi to the Bärenrast car park high above the town of Schwaz. Here there is a monument commemorating the killing of the last bear in the north Tirol in 1898. After more than 100 years, however, Austria now has a small population of bears again.

The weather was still warm and sunny as we set off on a rough track up the Stallental, then continued on a path through the forest to emerge below our first hut, the Lamsenjoch Hütte. After crossing the east and west Lamsenjoch passes we descended steeply into the Engtal, then ascended to its head at the Hohljoch, before contouring across a steep scree slope to the Falkenhütte, our night's stop. The scenery in this area is very grand with towering walls of limestone all around. Other than the physical effort, there had been no problems so far with our route, and we felt that we had made a good decision to come to the Karwendel.



Gamsjoch above Engtal in Karwendel - Robert Carson

We now descended into forest again and reached the Kleiner Ahornboden, followed by an easy ascent to the Hochalmsattel and the Karwendelhaus. Next morning, we parted company with the Adlerweg, which we had been following, and set off on the Gjaidsteig, a narrow path which contoured high above the Karwendeltal. It was obviously little used and we made slow progress, eventually reaching the German border at the Bäralpscharte. The map indicated a short section of *Klettersteig*, but we had convinced ourselves that there would be no problem. Immediately after a “*Nur für Geübte*” sign, however, the situation turned quite serious. There were cables for security in places, but at one point we found ourselves stretching above our heads to reach the wire rope, while our feet were trying not to slip on shattered limestone. After what seemed like ages, we reached the end of the *Klettersteig* and began a long descent of a scree slope which was almost enjoyable by comparison. At last, we gained the safety of the woods of Hüfachtboden, and reached Vereineralm with the adjacent Krinner-Kofler Hütte.



Engalm in Karwendel - Robert Carson

Our final walking day was a pleasant contouring "Jägersteig" path through the woods, ending in the village of Mittenwald in the Isartal, where we spent the night. Our journey home was uneventful - a train to Munich, and a flight home to Scotland the next day. It had been a most enjoyable tour even if our route had been very different from the one, we had originally planned.