

Travel Hiking in the Mountains

by Tom Briggs

SYNDICATED TRAVEL NEWS — There's a way to beat some of the staggering costs of European travel for next year and still enjoy a spectacular holiday. Involves travelling by foot, carrying a few essentials in a knapsack, using small hotels as a base and, wherever practical, staying at mountain huts.

This means passing up the elegance and cultural attractions of the big cities for the inspiring scenery, fresh air and sweet scents of the Alpine regions, plus close contact with the regional people of Europe, their food and hospitality.

There's a choice of several countries, too: Austria, Italy, France, Switzerland and Germany, all share great chunks of the incredible Alps.

What few North American visitors to Europe realize — especially those who haven't ventured beyond the London-Paris-Rome circuit — is that the seemingly impregnable Alps, that massive hub of Europe, are now crisscrossed by an intricate web of walking trails which link hundreds of high-level "huts". These intimate little inns, built of timber and stone well above the tree line, cater mostly to mountain climbers, but energetic wayfarers find a welcome, too. By choosing trails which put a hut within a day's walk, it is possible to hike the length and breadth of the Alps these days.

If this sounds rugged and primitive — a vacation intended only for the strong, young and adventurous — then think again. The Europeans who flock to these mountain trails in the summer come in all ages, shapes and sizes. Take the

unusual case — and one of my favourite recollections — of a 63-year-old German steadily making his way last fall along a trail leading to one of the minor peaks in the Ortler group of the Italian Alps... on an artificial leg, the result of a climbing accident a few years earlier.

All it takes, really, is a genuine appreciation of Alpine country and a little active training and preparation before you go. You'll need money, too; for take note that while this type of vacation is less expensive than living it up on the regular tourist routes, it's still not cheap. Over two weeks, living costs can average out at no less than \$25 a day each and that's scrimping.

Contrary to common impression, Italy is an alpine country, its entire northern frontier stretched out along the Alps, including all of the highest peaks. Besides that, it is still the least expensive of the alpine countries for the traveller. So it's a good place to start planning a mountain walking holiday.

One area of overpowering magnificence, little known even to Europeans, is the South Tirol (Alto Adige) in the eastern Italian Alps, between Bormio and the regional capital of Bolzano (Bozen). Taken over by Italy after the first World War, this area is still so thoroughly Austrian that all the place names appear in both Italian and German — colourful but confusing.

We headed for the little resort town of Solda (Süden, not to be confused with the Austrian town of Süden about 60 km straight north). The Solda valley is right out of an old children's picture book: lush green meadows, rushing streams, belled cattle,

quaint barns, and every building — from simple farm dwelling to posh hotel — reflecting the same general wood-and-stucco design. And always in the background loom the snow-capped peaks — half a dozen of them well over 3,500 meters — starch-white against the clean blue sky. Very little traffic mars the serenity of the scene.

This, then, was our base for a week of walking — in the brand-new Hotel Süden, up on the hill three kilometers from town. For \$30 to \$35 a day per person you get two sumptuous meals (all the local wine you can drink), a packed lunch, and top drawer accommodation so relaxing it might threaten to divert less-determined walkers from their main purpose: to experience the high hills.

Nearly a two-stage cablecar whisks hikers and climbers in summer (skiers in winter) up the 800 meters to the Citta di Milano hut, or "rifugio", opposite the imposing black-rock face of the Gran Zebru (Königs Spitze), at 3859 meters one of the dominant peaks in the area. Without the cablecar, it's a two hour hike to the hut.

The hut's bar and adjoining sun-drenched patio is a meeting place for both strollers and serious climbers. Robust meals of sausage, schnitzel, cheeses and whipped-cream desserts can be bought here for less than \$3 (good beer at 75 cents and local wine at \$2 a bottle); not bad when you consider everything has to be hauled up by cablecar.

But if you are intent on moving about — as we were — following the trails, climbing the scree and snow slopes, searching out alpine flowers and soaking up the views, then a knapsack lunch is the answer, either packed by the hotel or bought in the town's shops: morning-fresh rolls, interesting meats and local cheeses.

Armed with a fine-detail map of the immediate area (available at hotels and sport shops) strangers don't have any problem finding their way on the trails for one-day outings, and the local people love to be helpful with directions and suggestions. The map quickly reveals that there are enough walking trails in the Solda valley alone to keep an energetic hiker busy for weeks.

On another day we took the Pulpito chairlift up



above the tree line to 2150 meters, then followed the trail beyond the Serrestori (Zaytal) hut toward the Little Angelus peak, surrounded by icefields and spectacular hanging glaciers. This is where we encountered the irrepressible German mountaineer,

determinedly picking his way along the rubble-strewn route with the aid of an ancient alpenstock and an artificial leg. Overhearing our English chatter, he stopped, introduced himself (Karl von Braun is his name), spoke about these and other mountains

he knew, and wound up reciting for us verses from two of his favourite poets, Burns and Longfellow. Then he moved on for he had to scale the Little Angelus and get back to the hut before dark. A remarkable mountain man. If Italy's Solda valley of

fers an almost complete escape from the bustle and sophistication of the city. Switzerland's Zermatt offers an almost ideal compromise for the vacationer interested in walking. Trails abound, and in typical Swiss precision, they are elaborately marked for the visitor, complete with reasonable time estimates to the next inn or rail stop.

True, Switzerland is now more expensive than ever, although a determined effort has been made by the tourist industry to keep resort-area prices at only slightly above last year's. But Zermatt has that classic, incomparable view of the Matterhorn, and to enjoy it you pay for it.

Swiss mountain huts are what you might expect: clean, comfortable, attrac-

tive in an aging sort of way, and well run; reservations don't get lost. They range from compact hotels, such as those along the Gornergrat railway, to more basic shelter at the Hornli hut where climbers stay on their way to the Matterhorn summit. In short, hiking in Switzerland is both leisurely and civilized, with infinite scope and variations; Zermatt is simply the most agreeable of its many mountain towns.

Another region I recommend to the hiker seeking inspiration from towering peaks and charming valleys is Chamonix in the shadow of Mont Blanc, the biggest peak of them all. The trail network is well-maintained and coded for difficulty according to a color system.

Twenty "refuges" operated by the French Alpine Club are spread throughout the area, which doesn't include many more unattended little sleeping huts or some nice little hotels up in the hills. Prices in France are a bit less than in Switzerland, considerably higher than Italy.



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