

The Oberreintal

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Plate 51

Warming up on four climbs on the Tannheimer and Karwendel, we felt that something more classic was needed. The routes, all excellent around grade V+, should have satisfied us; however that vital touch of spice seemed lacking.

The Austrian-Bavarian border extends through mountain groups of Tannheimer, Wetterstein, Karwendel, and eastwards to the Kaisergebirge, all offering tremendous alpine rock climbing. Walter Pause's huge alpine rock book which I had humped from Scotland gave two classics in the Oberreintal, the Schober and Gonda, both great climbs of grade VI, which offer exciting, quality climbing.

Walking in from Partenkirchen, our four-hour walk led through the deep gorge of the Partnach Klamm. Organized as a tourist attraction it cost DM1 to enter. Hewn into the limestone walls, a narrow pathway threads its way above Partnach's fast flowing water — alarming tourists who have to squeeze past climbers and their overladen rucksacks. The ravine's close walls block out the light and tourist and climber collide in the path's black, linking tunnels. Beyond, a sunny forest track brings relief from this murky trench and the immense heat makes many watering stops necessary at the adjacent river.

The Oberreintal hut is reached via a lone gate blocking the track. 'Sigwenda' (that is the best I can pronounce her name) is the lady hut warden, a lively character, who encourages the climbers' pranks. Saying more would detract from a visitor's surprise. Busy, she organizes her hut well, preferring to do all the cooking, including the food carried up by us.

The hut, sited below a rock shelf, is overlooked by three grand features: the 2371m Oberreintaldom in front, and the 1940m Oberreintalturm behind. Between, like a mighty Cioch the perpendicular monolith Unterer Schüsselkarturm commands the high alpine corrie. Here the Schober route takes a direct line to its 2200m summit. The Herbst Teufel, a grade V companion route, runs parallel. Being easier, it was a preferable choice after the long, hot walk in.

My partner, Bob Kinnaird, was itching to start. As it was past noon, his agitation was well warranted, for we had 40 minutes of walking, and 250m of climbing on the Herbst Teufel.

Rid of the creature comforts which one takes to a hut, we raced below the shelf, passing a group of German army tents. This was the Bundeswehr alpine course in progress, or in their case at ease, training having been completed during the cooler part of the morning. 'Do as the natives do,' I pondered upon the saying as I began to break sweat again.

Up in the high corrie, the Unterer Schüsselkarturm towered above us, its cracks and water-carved features now easily distinguishable. The Schober line looked an exciting prospect for tomorrow. Impatient, we were sorely tempted, but the morning's effort and a continuing thirst restrained us.

Upon the N face a climber was negotiating the Schober's overhanging crack. It looked intimidating. Eagerly we surveyed the line; this was the key to its final defence. In silence we wondered if we had the ability.

A wooden board dangling from the Herbst Teufel indicated its start. Apprehensive and slightly overawed by the magnificent situation, we began climbing. Limestone cracks and runnels made side pulls an easy option, whilst adequate friction helped speedy movement. As pitch gave way easily to pitch we found our trepidation diminishing.

By now the sun had angled round and was scorching down the route, making us seek shady belays, thus losing time by interrupting our sequence and forcing us to select new points. The heat nagged at us, our spent energy on the walk-in now taking its toll. We were needing liquid and I cursed the folly of not carrying water. With long leads and parched throats it was simpler to resort to tugs on the rope than to call.

A lead took me to a dark recess without a belay. I squeezed in and scraped around in the gloom for a suitable anchor, the coolness of the dark limestone cleft a welcome relief from the hot sun. Bob glanced enviously at my cool harbour as he passed and I felt impishly pleased that the heat was also affecting him. After two more leads we reached easier ground where it was safe to unrope. In character with the area, with declining steepness we encountered loose rock. Dehydration was affecting our climbing so it was with slow and tedious caution that we finally reached the summit.

The view was marvellous but short-lived owing to our need to find water. A fine ridge ran back to the Oberer Schusselkarturm, a formidable obstacle which we would have to cross. With a combination of crawling and staggered moves we edged along the ridge, our patience strained by having to be abnormally careful. But we reached the scree descent eventually and comparative safety. Caution kicked into touch, we raced down, creating clouds of dust, until a water seepage point was discovered amongst the rubble. Our thirst was temporarily sated, and with improving water stops we descended to the hut. It had been a cracker of a climb, we had seen the Schober and would be fresher tomorrow.

As with Llanberis, the week-end attracts many climbers, and the hut was filling up. Young Germans, some accompanied by their girls, were arriving. The night was warm and many took to sleeping out.

The evening developed a jovial atmosphere. Roars of laughter echoed as an unfortunate hiker was caught by a hut joke, for here in the Oberreintal, climbers rule supreme.

With so many climbers about we needed to be up early for the Schober. I did not relish the thought of queueing whilst it became warm again. Morning found us tiptoeing through the mass of sleeping climbers and some already rousing. We had developed that curious route-bagger's syndrome, fearing that many would be heading for our chosen route.

Bob was already restless and did not need much to get him going. Sigwenda had given him the coffee, which he had ready outside on the grass. Away from the morning's gathering confusion we breakfasted while our plans for the day were finalized.



51 Unter Schüsselkarturm. The Schober route follows the centre cracks going direct to the summit.

Photo: Ian Crystal

When we looked across to the upper corrie the weather did not look so good. A shroud of mist wreathed around the Unterer Schüsselkarturm. Rumour from the alpine guide camp led us to expect deteriorating weather. We became indecisive, since in poor visibility the route would be difficult to follow.

We retraced our steps of yesterday doubtful of the outcome. I recalled times when I had seen this type of cloud recede with the day's heat. Nearing the route two shadowy figures could be seen through the gloom. Someone had beaten us to it. Were we too late?

They were Germans, racking up for the Schober. They surprised us by offering to let us start first. Being diplomatic Brits we returned the gesture, shrewdly thinking it would save us route finding in the mist. This was declined with firm continental politeness. Hang it, this 'After you old chap' situation could not continue. We had the lead and were committed to route-find into the bargain.

Bob hurriedly consulted our climbing topograph — we had come a long way since our first translation from a German guidebook — and with some help he was becoming good at it. Short of paper we had once written the route description on toilet roll leaves. A near misadventure in meeting the requirements of nature caused us to use our improvised guide for its primary purpose, leaving us guideless on a climb.

Mountains tend to create their own magic, the Oberreintal being no exception. Like a magician removing his cloak, the cloud rolled back abruptly, revealing the Unterer Schüsselkarturm. Stifling an 'I told you so,' I craned back to see the route. Seeing the overhangs in their stark reality I half wished that it was an illusion. We were going up there?

The grade VI entry crack started our serious climbing. It was short and enjoyable and Bob led the pitch speedily. Moving through I came to the long pitch of VI. This was to be the most sustained. The rack full, and firing all guns I bridged up the crack. Placing runners easily I continued, beginning to feel a flow of confidence. That most illusive quality foundered when a handhold broke away from an overhang blocking the way into the next crack system.

Faltering beneath the difficulties I was aware that the Germans were nearing Bob. Pride increased the pressure on me and I struggled for inspiration. The move came as one strenuous pull and I gained the next crack. It continued to be steep but now the grade was easing as rope and runners ran out at the belay. Ammunition was indeed exhausted.

Bob passed, seemingly impressed with the pitch, and was on his way as the first German reached me. It transpired that he was a guide with his client, the guide doing all the leading. I noticed that he occasionally used chalk, his dabs being infrequent and economical. I have to admit to carrying chalk, but it was hardly needed, the limestone tending to have a degree of dust.

Helmets and body harnesses being the fashion, I found the chest attachment good for this type of belaying, giving a better rest on the steep walls.

Bob's pitch brought me to a descending traverse, where the route began to weave through the overhangs. The traverse was delicate, my heels in space above the overhang. A balance problem, I saw the walls sweeping down to the corrie floor. That delectable feeling of extreme exposure was sensational as I

edged across. I was wondering where my prusiks were in case I slipped, when I found a place for a 'Friend'. The limestone provides good cracks for them. Soon a wire 'Rock' consolidated my security and I was able to move up on steady V terrain with the occasional peg runner. By British standards there seemed to be many pegs, but it would be foolish to rely on them, and on these long routes it is vital to climb ably between the pitons.

Bob had an awkward start into the overhanging crack. Here I could see the holds, but it still looked fearsome. Bob had done a good job on the pitch and when I followed I found that the awkward start gave way to excellent holds in the crack which continued with a mixture of steep, exposed bridging.

The major difficulties over, grade III and II climbing led us to easier ground where we speedily drew away from the guide and his client. Our condition when we reached the summit was fresh in comparison to yesterday. Having the afternoon left to descend, we lingered to savour the grandeur.

Relaxing beneath the large maple trees surrounding the hut is a pleasant way to while away an afternoon. Time to reflect on the climbs. The Oberreintal has many good routes. Similar to the Schober but not as fine was the Byrch, a grade VI on the Oberreintalturm. On the Oberreintaldom the Gelber U, a grade V+, looks spectacular when seen from the hut but only provides a few reasonable pitches. More equal to the Schober is the Gonda, a grade VI. This seems an exciting challenge for a return visit.

Of Schober himself, it was 1938 when he pioneered his route. It was the breakthrough of that period. With a handful of pitons he forced his way through the overhanging sections on the Unterer Schüsselkarturm taking a nearly direct line to its fine summit. Schober was not to survive the following war, or he would surely have found greater acclaim. They say that where you find a Schober route it is one of quality. If others compare with his route on the Unterer Schüsselkarturm, I would agree.