Yet Another High-Level Route

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(Plates 56,57)

Seven years ago I had the good fortune to be able to make a 'Grand High-Level Route' from La Bérarde in the Dauphiné Alps to Heiligenblut at the foot of the Grossglockner, over a period of 44 days, solo, and taking in several good summits and over 30 major passes and cols. (Accounts of this route appear in *Climber and Rambler* for April, May and June 1982; *AJ87*, 41–45, 1982; and my book *High Level, The Alps from End to End*, Gollancz, 1983.) Then, looking across through breaks in the cloud as I stumbled along through the Valais and Lepontine Alps, I would imagine another, shorter, but more intensive excursion, running the length of the Bernese and Glarner Alps, from Lake Geneva towards Liechtenstein. This I have now managed to complete, despite mishaps and bad weather. It has taken me two attempts, and I haven't done it clear through in one push, as it ought to be done. But here it is, for anyone else to try. It offers a remarkable, varied and punishing experience.

For a variety of reasons I have done these and other high-level routes alone. This is not a good idea unless you have both the temperament and the experience, and these are two imponderables that one can hardly assess for oneself. The less said about solo glacier travel, the better. In my view the expedition described below would be a superb three-week tour for a party seeking to get all-round mountain experience and enjoyment. There is much to be said for a party of four, since that allows for all sorts of contingencies; but it would require from everyone the same hard-nosed commitment.

Here, then, is a description of a 'Northern High-Level Route'. The aim is to get from west to east by the most direct route through the mountains north of the Rhône–Rhine trench; to take in summits, and to have as many mountaineering days as possible within about three weeks. The starting line is the Col du Pillon above Les Diablerets; the finish is the head of the Linthal valley. For most sections this is the best direction, and it ends with an ascent of the Tödi. The best time to start is early to mid-July.

Section One: Wildstrubel etc

1. From the Col du Pillon, walk or ride up to the Cabane des Diablerets. From here, by far the most pleasant way is to descend north-east, toward the Olden alp, and round to some excellent camp-sites on the snowy terrace below the E face of the Oldenhorn. In the morning, climb the Oldenhorn (3125m) by the face and the E ridge. Early in the season this is a pleasant snowy mountain; later it becomes a heap of loose shale. Descend on to the Tsanfleuron glacier. Descend

the glacier and follow a shallow valley, taking a cairned path leftwards across limestone pavements down to the Col du Sanetsch. There is a small chalet restaurant some distance down the track south of the col that is worth visiting, because for this long section you have to be carrying food for three nights and four days.

2. From the Col du Sanetsch walk up the long but pleasant shaly ridge to the east until you come to a level shoulder below the Arpelistock (3035m). This can be easily climbed from here. Traverse right across steep snow at the head of a cwm, toward point 2598m; cross over the col and traverse hummocky ground toward the lake at 2471m. This can be tough going if the snow is lying deep. Good camp-sites. Walk up snow and moraine into the enclosed south-western cwm of the Wildhorn. Climb up steep snow and bands of loose rock to gain a level shoulder below the last of the rock-towers that descend from the southern summit of the Wildhorn. A magnificent viewpoint! Descend into a boulder and snow-filled hollow and then traverse on scree and steep snow below two prominent pinnacles (some stonefall). Climb up to a level shoulder and then round the foot of a buttress. Beyond, follow a snowy valley on to the upper part of the glacier plateau, from which the summit (3248m) is easily reached by a pleasant ridge. Descend north-eastward by easy snow and rock outcrops, and go down into a curving snow and scree-filled valley. Take to its left slopes to traverse well above the small lake, making toward a rocky shoulder above the lake. In thawing snow this can be an unpleasant section. Follow cairns across limestone pavements and hummocks round to the track over the Rawilpass. Wide meadows provide beautiful camp-sites.

3. Do not go as far as the pass, but head off east of a marshy depression. Follow a steepening cwm that leads to the Wildstrubel hut and the radar station. A well-marked path leads up and over to the Plaines Mortes icefield. Trek across this polar landscape, a marvellous place in the early morning, and climb the Wildstrubel (3244m) by its easy SW ridge. Descend the Wildstrubel glacier to the Lämmern hut. Thence follow paths down to the Gemmipass and Leukerbad. In bad weather you can escape south by retreating to point 2808m on the rim of the icefield and, by passing east of the easternmost stream, descend on very steep scree and steep snow into the cwm known as Les Outannes. From below this cwm an intermittent track runs across steep slopes to the Varner alp, and finally, by means of a *via ferrata*, descent can be made into the Leukerbad valley. Camp-site and provisions.

Note: if there is much late snow, these three days will have been hard work. In cloud some of the route-finding requires great precision.

4. Take a pleasant path up toward the Gitzifurrgu. Reach this little pass by the snowy terrace on the south side of the valley, below the Ferdenrothorn (3180m). This peak can be climbed by a snow couloir that rises from the terrace about half a mile from the top of the pass. Descend steep snow to the Lötschenpass, where there is a small hut. From here, the Hockenhorn (3293m) S face is a recommended route. Take good paths, well marked, down to Lauchernalp, Weritz and either Blatten or Fafleralp. There are no supplies at

Fafleralp, but a useful bus runs up and down the Lötschental. The walk down to Fafleralp is extremely beautiful, with wonderful vistas. There are numerous good camp-sites in the upper valley, but especially at or shortly beyond Gugginalp.

Section Two: The Bernese Alps

This is the highest section of the route, and is extensively covered in the appropriate guidebooks which should be used together with these notes. The route follows a well-established line and there will usually be tracks on the glaciers. It will certainly be best to use the huts and to send your camping gear round by post-bus.

1. Reach the Hollandia hut by the Lang glacier. This glacier is much crevassed and could be nasty; make sure you are on it and off it before the sun is up. The Hollandia hut is usually without a guardian in July.

2. Descend the Aletsch glacier to Konkordia; the section around the promontory on which the hut stands requires care later in the day. If the conditions are good, continue on without stopping, over the Grünhornlücke to the Finsteraarhorn hut.

3. From the hut take the little path and snow-slopes that lead over the steep rocky Gemslücke and across an easy glacier to the Oberaarjoch and its hut. From here descend the Oberaar glacier and walk lengthily to the Grimselpass. A long day.

The number of peaks that can be climbed on this section depends, of course, on the ambition and ability of the party. The great prize is the Finsteraarhorn (4274m) but other tops, well within most capabilities, lie directly above the line of travel and do not require an extra day. This is the finest, most entirely high-mountain environment in Europe, and to cross it in good weather is a wonderful experience.

In bad weather there will be problems; if it is very bad, you will have to descend lengthily down the Aletsch glacier to Fiesch. To descend the Fiescher glacier seems to be a really bad idea; it is very crevassed and awkward. An interesting alternative would be to cross over the Beichpass from the foot of the Lang glacier and descend to Belalp.

4. Establish yourself either at the Grimselpass, or at camp-sites at Oberwald or Handegg, south or north of the pass. There are buses four times a day back and forth.

Take a day off. Have a beer. Sleep. Eat. Eat some more!

Section Three: Furka

Up to now the route has been extremely direct; around the Furkapass there is no obvious line to follow, but there are three or more worthwhile alternatives.

(a) From the Grimselpass reach the Rhône glacier by way of the rocky hills known as the Nägelisgrätli; good paths. From the foot of the Rhône glacier, climb the Dammastock (3630m) and descend its E face to the Damma hut and the Göschenen valley.

(b) From Handegg or the Grimselpass, reach the Gelmer hut. Climb the Tieralplistock (3383m) and traverse the ridge between the Rhône and Trift glaciers all the way around the Dammastock summit; then descend as in (a). At the right time this is superb.

(a) and (b) are both substantial mountaineering days; they would certainly be better in the other direction, because going west to east one must descend the Dammastock E face late in the day. This face has three or more steep but apparently straightforward snow-ice and mixed routes on it, which are quite often climbed from the Damma hut. My intention was to follow alternative (b); but the weather was vile and so I went by (c)! This gives two short mountain days (or one long one), with access to the Galenstock (3583m) and many good smaller peaks.

(c) From the top of the Furkapass (reached pleasantly by walking from Oberwald or the Grimselpass, or by bus) take a good path toward and across the snout of the Sidelen glacier to a small hut; then up a slope of snow and rocks to cross the Unterbüelenlücke. Descend into the glacier cwm beyond and pass below the face of the Gross Büelenhorn and across the snout of the Tiefen glacier toward the Albert Heim hut. It is not necessary to climb up to the hut; cross moraine to find a well-marked path leading round below a rocky promontory. When it starts to descend to Realp, watch out for a painted sign on the rocks reading 'Winterlücke' and 'Lochberglücke'. The Winterlücke leads to the Damma hut; the Lochberglücke track, after a while, winds up across terraces to reach a col west of point 2865m; from here it descends below the Lochberg to a moraine lake at point 2515m, and then down toward the dam. In good weather a traverse of the Lochberg (3074m) from the Winterlücke to the moraine lake is a popular route locally. There are excellent camp-sites below point 2515m on slabby terraces, or on the meadows below the dam.

This alternative is full of interesting peaks. The Gross Büelenhorn (3206m) has two fine ridges and a face on which there is now a 'modern' route demanding a rack of gear. The Winterstock (3203m) is very attractive; a miniature Dru. The Müeterlishorn peaks are superb and easily reached from point 2515m; they give a wealth of excellent routes on good rock. The area is well worth a visit.

The meadows below the dam are popular with German rock-climbers visiting the Salbitschijen; there are great roadside crags in the valley with routes of all standards. There are occasional buses to Göschenen, and a pleasant valley path.

Section Four: Glarner Alps

1. From Göschenen (where there is no camping) one is faced with an immense task – climbing 1700m up the Riental, to cross the Rientallücke into the upper Fellital. This brings the Bächenstock (2944m) and the Schijenstock (2885m) into reach, but this route will be taken only by the purist. The rest of us will take a train through the gorges to Andermatt (where there is camping), and then, with mechanical assistance, reach the Stöckli and follow the military track above the Oberalppass road, to cross the Fellilücke. Fine camp-sites halfway

down the Fellital. From this valley there is much low-altitude climbing to be done; the Diederberg peaks to the west have many summits, and a complete traverse would be a great expedition. To the east there are the face of the Fedenstock (2985m) and the spurs of the Sunnig Wichel. There are new routes to be done here.

2. Descend toward the Tresch hut and climb lengthily and steeply up to the Börtlilücke; there is a wonderful camp-site half-way. Descend to Spillaui Alp and thence to camp-sites below the Etzli hut. A great day of tough walking. The Sunnig Wichel (2911m) is a fine rock-peak; it can be climbed from the pass directly. The Piz Giuv can be climbed from Spillaui by crossing below the little lake and scrambling along the N ridge until at around 2800m it becomes steep and loose; from a small col descend leftward on to the glacier, ascend it and climb by steep snow and loose rocks to the summit (3096m).

3. From below the Etzli hut climb the stony track over the Chrüzlipass and down steeply into the upper Val Strem. Here there is magnificent camping; one can descend easily to Sedrun for supplies. The peaks around the Chrüzlipass are pleasant in July, but stony wastes in August. The S ridge of the Witenalpstock (3016m) is impressive.

4. Climb up grass, moraine and steep snow to reach the col 2841m south of the Oberalpstock (3327m); from here, climb to the summit by a glacier route. A very fine stubby mountain. Descend across the Brunni glacier to the Cavardiras hut. The upper part of the Val Cavardiras is very bleak and stony, but there is good camping further down at Alp Cavrein.

The best break for supplies on this section of the route is to cross the Brunnipass and descend by the pretty Lag Serein to Disentis, returning the same way. There is a first-class organized campingplatz one mile outside Disentis on the Lukmanier road; very good in bad weather.

5. From Alp Cavrein the most direct way is to take a faint trail round into Val Russein and follow paths up towards the Sandpass. There is an excellent 'shelter stone' in the upper part of the Val Russein after which the path and the paintmarks cease. The pass is reached by following a rising grass terrace past an obvious small pinnacle, and then climbing steep snow and loose rocks. On the other side, descend diagonally across the Sand glacier to its left hand (northern) bank and follow the path down, very pleasantly, to the Ober Sand chalets where there is perfect camping on meadows below fine glacier scenery.

The more mountainous alternative is to take the Fuorcla da Cavrein and reach the upper part of the Hüfi glacier and traverse across to the Planura hut (usually no warden). This way, several good climbs can be made – notably, the Düssistock (3256m), the Piz Cambrialas (3208m) and the Clariden (3267m). There are also more serious ways still.

6. From Ober Sand a traversing path rises and falls round the flanks of the Tödi, to the Fridolin and Grünhorn huts, from which the Tödi (3614m) may be climbed to give a magnificent finale to the whole journey. Thence descend at length through fine gorges to Tierfed and the town of Linthal (where there is no camping).

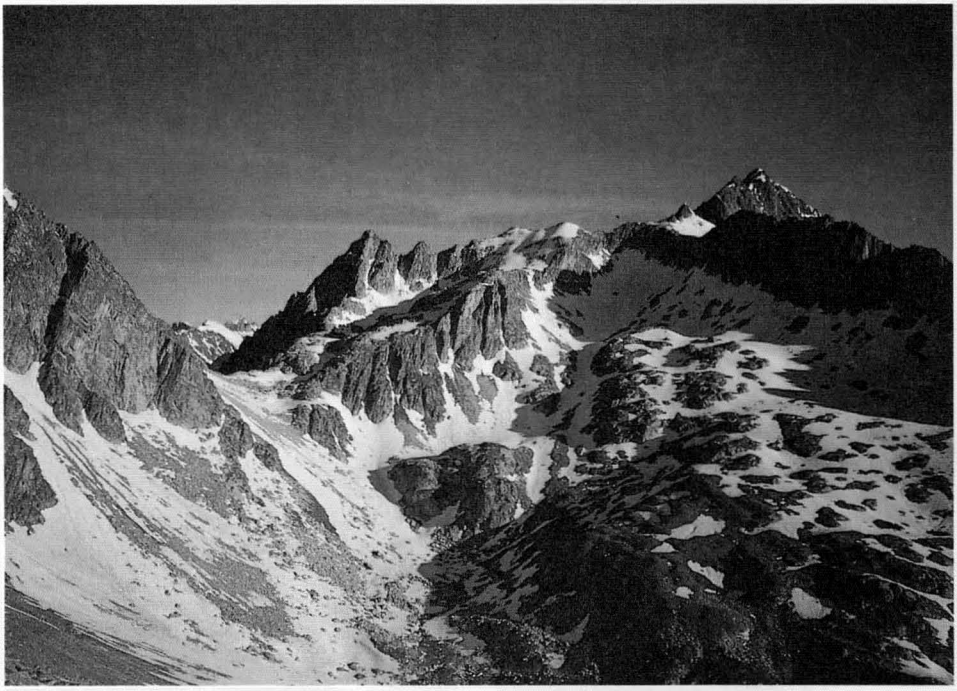
An alternative to this would be to climb the Tödi from the Val Russein by one of the huge couloirs and high cols that lead on to the upper Biferten glacier; this is a very substantial undertaking, full of interest and originality. Though the summits in this region are not very high, the vertical intervals match most places in the Alps.

Beyond Tierfed one could extend the traverse over the Hausstock and as far as the Piz Sardona, but there is no natural line to take. All things considered, Linthal is the best conclusion to a remarkable expedition.

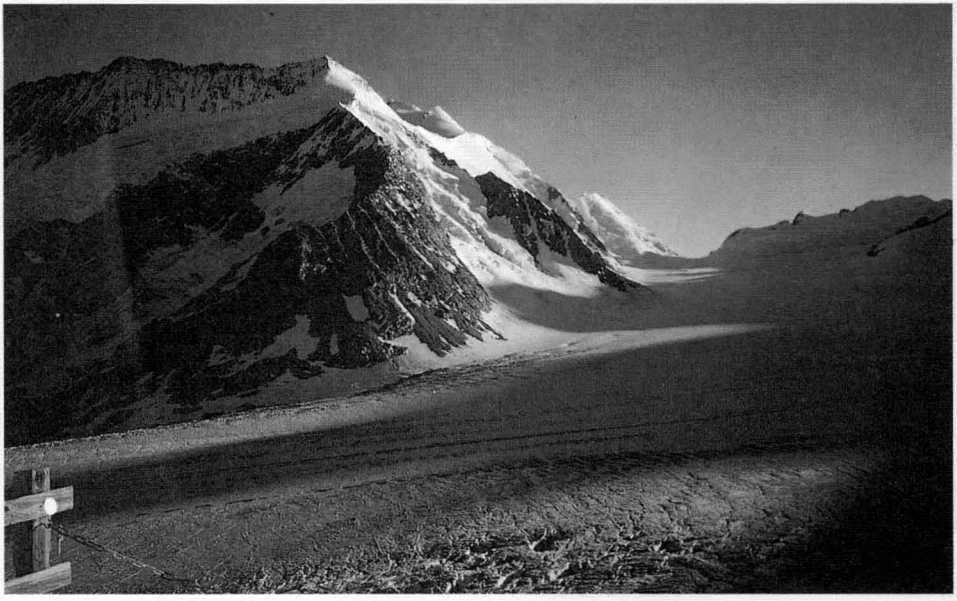
The length of time to be taken will depend on the combination of the weather and the ambition of the party, but three weeks would be a good period to set aside. My time of 24 nights was spread over two attempts, both with some very bad weather.

Equipment? This is essentially old-fashioned mountaineering, made easier with modern materials. The basic rule is – MINIMUM GEAR, MAXIMUM FOOD. The more food you can carry the less you will be rushed and the more choices you can make; thus you have both greater pleasure and more safety. On the whole, British parties carry more gear than they need or use. The only place you will want more than the minimum may be in Section Three, where a good range of rock-climbing can be had; in this case, have a spare sack and send it ahead of you by post-bus. One long axe per rope is a very good thing to have; or better still, a metal ski-pole with detachable basket. A helmet is a nuisance but a rain-cape is a good idea. Yeti-style gaiters should be discarded for short 'stop-touts'. Spare sunglasses and ample sun and lip cream are essentials. The crucial ingredient is the right attitude. Never hurry. Get up early. Think. If is as hard to make the right decisions in this as in any other form of mountaineering. The only way to learn is to get out and do it. Once you have successfully completed a high-level route of this kind, you know you have got very close to an understanding of the mountains.

Of course, the really big one, the Grand Slam of all alpine high-level routes, begins at Nice and ends in Trieste . . . any takers?



56. From Piz Giuv, looking S to the Portilücke and the peaks beyond. (David Brett Duffield) (p 120)



57. Looking W from Konkordia. (David Brett Duffield) (p 120)