Jura – the Unsung Mountains

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(*Plates 75, 76*)

To most alpinists, I guess, the Jura are no more than green-rucked hills forming the borders of France and Switzerland, whose fame rests solely on the fact that they've given their name to a geological period. The TGV from Paris rushes through with barely a blurred glimpse; from the air they form a doll's house landscape, pastoral, wooded and gentle; by road they frustrate with fragmented views and tease with unfulfilled promise. And it is only by taking to the footpaths and plunging into their heartland that their true worth is at last revealed. Then, ah then . . . then you'll find they have a charm and elegance sufficient to warrant a closer examination.

The Jura range stretches for something like 250km from a point a little south of Basle in the Rhine valley to the valley of the Rhône east of Lyons; a banana-shaped range, narrow at either end and broadening to about 50km in the centre. Produced by the same forces of upheaval that built the Alps, they are the classic expression of folded mountains with a series of parallel ridges imitating one another in character, but in fierce competition with regard to depth of greenery and pastoral splendour. Woods flank the hills and crown many of the summits, while other crests stand bare like the exposed skeletal spines of long-dead dinosaurs. These are limestone mountains, of course, dry on the surface but with fine rivers gouging transverse valleys (cluses) and creating dark defiles here and there. Lakes adorn some of the longitudinal valleys. Cave systems mystify others. Flowers dazzle the meadows and cluster for attention in the crevices of crag and wayside outcrop. Butterflies thrash the air in their summer toings and froings among them; hawks hang motionless overhead; black cherries dangle with temptation from meadowland trees; the woods are sumptuous with wild strawberry, raspberry, blackberry and bilberry – and the only glaciers are those that drape a far horizon, those of the Oberland far beyond the chequered plains of lowland Switzerland, or of Mont Blanc across the sea-like Lake of Geneva.

Remember Belloc in his *Path to Rome*?

> For below me, thousands of feet below me, was what seemed an illimitable plain: at the end of that world was an horizon, and the dim bluish sky that overhangs an horizon . . . One saw the sky beyond the edge of the world getting purer as the vault rose. But right up – a belt in that empyrean – ran peak and field and needle of intense ice, remote from the world. Sky beneath them and sky above them a steadfast legion . . .

He wrote that of the view from the eastern Jura crest at Weissenstein (1284m), above Solothurn. And all along this edge, this highest ruck of ridge, one gambles the opportunity for such views – a bonus in itself, for Jura scenery lacks nothing in its own inimitable landscape of delight.

This edge, it would appear at first glance, holds little for the climber – not along the crest, at least. But that is a misguided judgement, for what it does have of immense value to the crag-happy is, for example, the huge cirque of the Creux de Van near Neuchâtel. It's a horseshoe well, two kilometres long, 1200 metres wide and with a wall some 500 metres high on which some challenging artificial routes have been developed. (Creux de Van is now protected as a Nature Reserve populated by marmots, chamois and ibex, and at certain times of the year climbing is restricted there.) The rim of the Creux (about 1460m altitude) levels to pasture broken by stretches of limestone pavement from which you gaze over the high plateau of La Bied, a strange broad high valley seeming to contain a world all its own.

Climbing opportunities in the Jura are far more numerous and varied than one might expect. (See *AJ78*, 146–152, 1973, which contains 'Mountain landscape – the Jura', an article by Maurice Brandt and Edward Pyatt, outlining the great rock-climbing potential here.) There are classic routes on polished arêtes, steep walls breaking free of forest-clad valleys and enough overhanging roofs to satisfy most tastes when the rain falls on more open, exposed cliffs. But what is missing here is notoriety. One can climb on the Jura's mostly sun-warmed limestone for half a lifetime without finding anyone at home who'll have even heard of the crags you've been working on. Yet the Jura is not without its advocates.

For the walker these hills are second to none. (How can you compare one range with another?) Not hard alpine walking with snowfield and ice-slope to contend with, I'll grant you, but with footpaths that lead to the most delectable of belvederes in order to reveal the rich bounty of nature. Since there are maximum altitudes of not much more than 1700 metres, there'll be vegetation – and a rich and memorable one at that – practically all the way.

The classic walk is the *Jurahöhenweg*, the High Route which runs along the easternmost Swiss ridge. It begins a little to the east of the Jura corrugation in the village of Dielsdorf, midway between Zürich and the German border, and works its way south-westward for 299km as far as Borex, a small village near Geneva. On its way it passes over all the main summits of the Swiss Jura: Mont Tendre, La Dôle, Chasseral and Chasseron among them. It traverses meadow-land and forest. It visits remote agricultural villages full of colour and personality, yet strangely missing from calendars and the lids of chocolate boxes. There are wonderful isolated farms long hours from anywhere where the walker may find an overnight bed on a mattress in the hay and play at pioneer, and long sections of ridge-walking on which there are few signs of man. Everywhere you walk there are huge vistas to enjoy, either of hills plunging steeply to the Mittelland that runs off to the Bernese Alps, or of ridge upon green ridge folding away into France.

It's a grand walk that will take care of a fortnight's holiday. Along it you pass from German-speaking to French-speaking Switzerland, a divide as

architecturally and culturally significant as it is linguistic, and the unfolding of each day's panorama brings with it an hourly challenge. Practically the only other walkers, it seems, are Swiss. They've come up from the plains to weekend in one of several CAS huts dotted along the route, although we had the pleasure of sharing one such refuge with a Dutchman who was so passionate about these unsung mountains that he spends at least one weekend per month walking among them, and was by far the most travelled of all the members of the CAS section he'd joined. It was not difficult to appreciate his enthusiasm and his commitment.

This is a corner of Switzerland (and of France) that time has passed by. Development is there, to be sure, in the form of an occasional ski-tow, but by comparison with the neighbouring Alps it's largely unknown territory. Unknown, unsung, but not unloved.

In winter the region becomes a ski-touring Mecca, and it is then almost inevitable that a far greater number of visitors will be met than on a summer walking tour or climbing trip. Cross-country skiing in the Jura is probably safer than almost anywhere else in Europe, but is in no way a soft option. On the French side there are some 10,000km of prepared pistes, yet it's easy enough to break away from marked trails and take to the higher crests off-piste, although for travel through forests it takes a practised eye to detect the route of a path buried under a metre of fresh snow. Navigational difficulties can occur in poor visibility even in the long open combes, so those who stray from the machine-pisted trails should be prepared to cope with an assortment of challenges.

There are some magnificent tours waiting to be made by ski. By using an assortment of gîte, hut and village hotel such routes as the five-day Circuit of the Val de Joux, the 170km Grande Traversée du Jura (GTJ), or the 149km of the Swiss equivalent, the TJS (Traverse of the Swiss Jura) become a realistic aim.

So what of the Jura mountains? If it is stature, altitude or stark glacial sculpture that are your main requirements, you'll pass them by, as have countless others on their way to more notable peaks. But if you seek somewhere a little different, somewhere whose charm is to be found among more subtle elements, yet bearing an unquestionable charisma, if you care less for the obvious than for a spirit of place that works its magic in the most unexpected of quarters – then the Jura will reward a visit in a truly surprising way.

GUIDEBOOKS

Guide d'Escalades dans le Jura, Vol 1: Sainte Croix-Val de Travers-Bienne.
Guide d'Escalades dans le Jura, Vol 2: Moutier-Raimeux-Bâle-Olten. (Editions du CAS, CH8304 Wallisellen, Switzerland.)
The Jura by Kev Reynolds and R Brian Evans (Cicerone Press) gives detailed route descriptions of the Jura High Route and of winter ski traverses.



75. *The limestone crest of the Jura west of Chasseral.* (Kev Reynolds) (p 152)



76. *The lip of the Creux du Van, rock-climbers' playground in the heart of the Jura.* (Kev Reynolds) (p 152)