

HIGH HUTS.

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A TRUE Alpine hut has one specific characteristic: when the co-ordinates of the location ascribed to it on the 1 in 50,000 map have apparently been attained, the hut is not there, but a few yards horizontally and upwards of a thousand feet vertically removed! This is revealed to the weary traveller only as he rounds the last bend, for the map enters into the spirit of the deception by obliterating the contours by hill-shading. To add insult to injury the final ascent is by a serpentine track which makes several quarter-mile traverses in its desire to reach its objective with a little breath left. Think only of Rothorn, Boval, Requin, or even Hörnli, and the general truth of this axiom will be apparent; at least almost general, for indeed there are exceptions, but only for huts approached from above as a halting-point on a high-level traverse. Then one descends deep into the valley to a hut like the misnamed Hochjoch!

The names of many huts are as music to the climber's ear. Mention of Concordia, Bertol, Tschierva, Couvercle, Hochwilde, Marco e Rosa, Vignette, and scores of others can arouse memories just as pleasant as do the names of the mountains they serve; and it is with sorrow that one hears that the old Torino has been superseded by something large and modern, that the Tschierva we knew has gone, and that old Schönbühl is threatened with reconstruction and a modernised spelling.

There are, of course, huts and huts: the cold, dank and deserted high bivouacs; the easily accessible glacier hotels, overcrowded with day trippers from Saas or Grindelwald; the well-appointed and pleasantly roomy high Austrian huts, with their unromantic names of German towns; and, best of all, the medium sized and efficiently wardened high Swiss huts, of which Bertol, perched on its rock tower and gained by a welcome fixed rope, is a perfect example.

The Alps are now adequately served by the huts of the various Alpine clubs and associated organisations. Membership of one or other of the four major groups—Swiss, French, Italian, and Austrian Alpine clubs—gives access at reduced rates to almost all huts, including those operated by smaller groups such as the Swiss Akademische Alpen clubs or the Austrian Touring Club. Some preference in allocation of accommodation generally goes to the members of the owner club, and on occasion the bulk of the beds may be earmarked for a sectional meet. Otherwise there is no booking and one may never fear being turned away, although at week-ends, for instance at the Innsbrücker or the Bétemps, an uncomfortable night may arise when 100 tourists turn up for 60 beds.

The little Grunhorn Hut on the Tödi was the first of the great chain of huts maintained by the various sections of the S.A.C. and described in their Hut Book. But, for the earliest mountain shelter we must look much further back. In 1779, a certain Mr Blair, according to some records an Englishman, gave four guineas for the establishment, at Montenvers on the Mer de Glace, of Blair's Hospital, which survived until 1812 and served the needs of travellers crossing the Col du Géant or visiting the Jardin. A hotel and the terminus of a mountain railway now stand on its site and climbers pass on to the Requin. This French hut is rather less attractive than many Swiss huts. The beds are harder and narrower, food seems to take longer to materialise from the guardian's quarters, but with it all a hut well worth a visit if only because of the morning view towards the Aiguille Verte and the Dru from the Géant Glacier.

There are certain features of Alpine huts peculiar to the different countries. In Switzerland the main object is to provide shelter and cooking facilities for the climber. Beds are in common dormitories with up to thirty occupants. Occasionally, as at the Weissmies—an old hotel, which, from Whymper's sketch, used to have a street-lamp outside—there are separate rooms for women. Generally there is a room for S.A.C. members and one for Veterans. Beds, low on the



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floor, are now generally provided with spring mattresses, one or two blankets and a pillow, although straw mattresses may persist in a few huts, and then members have preference. In the Glärnisch, before the war, the blankets had a cloth-facing at one end which kept the chin from being tickled, but which in the light of day, proved to be inscribed "Füsse."

In general, no food or drink is provided in Swiss huts, but food is cooked by the guardian, who charges a wood fee as well as the bed charge. Certain huts, such as the Boval and others in the Engadin, and the Bétemps and Rothorn run by Alexander and Alois Graven, provide some food and drink. Such facilities, however, must not be relied on in Swiss huts, and the relevant S.A.C. guidebooks give information which is, of necessity, sometimes rather out of date.

The Swiss warden is generally a qualified guide. In Austria the hut is run by two or three young women, with often the daughter of a local hotel-keeper in charge—as at the Ramolhaus—and the hut itself is a well-equipped but reasonable mountain hotel. Beds or mattress-lager are available, but if facilities for cooking are occasionally provided they are seldom used, and very cheap "Bergsteiger" meals are often on the menu.

Italian huts vary from crude bivouacs to *de luxe* buildings with full hotel amenities—the Helena at Pré de Bar, for instance, has single bedrooms with electric light and bedside lamps and, as has the Torino, a somewhat suspicious Italian Customs post. Fortunately it was post-war and not pre-war that we took the wrong approach path and looked as if we were making straight for the frontier.

The Italians specialise in providing high huts with full catering facilities; and such huts as the Müller, Similaun, Marco e Rosa, and particularly the Regina Margherita at 14,964 feet on Monte Rosa, all provide excellent accommodation for spending a night high up in their respective areas and a welcome change to Chianti from the Austrian and Swiss wines.

The Müller Hut on the Wilder Pfaff is at present in full

use and the Becher Haus being rebuilt—a reversal of pre-war conditions, although we found the Müller Hut just as cold as Smythe reports! Schillings, francs, or marks are willingly accepted in huts in South Tyrol, and sometimes, as at Similaun, easier to change than lira. Even at the Margherita, perched, half-hut, half-observatory, on its rock platform, food and drink are at least as cheap as at the Bétémps far below, and there are twenty good beds for climbers. This hut, the highest in Europe, is not so precariously placed as the Marco e Rosa, tied down on the narrow col at the foot of the final ridge on the Piz Bernina and reached from Italy by several hundred metres of steep rock or from Switzerland by five hours on crampons, nor can it rival in altitude the Refugio General Péron at 6,900 metres on Aconcagua.

But generally very high huts have no resident guardian. Rather do they resemble, in size and amenities, the Solvay Refuge on the Hörnli, although to avoid overcrowding this may be used only in an emergency—not uncommon in this vicinity! Such huts tend to be rather uncomfortable, with a few damp blankets and palliasses and odds and ends of furnishings of a fireproof nature. Fuel is seldom available and their situation often makes them susceptible to gale or avalanche, so that their condition, or very existence, varies from year to year, and local advice must be sought. Examples of this type of refuge are the Cabane Marinelli on the east face of Monte Rosa or the many fixed bivouacs of the Italian Academic Alpine Club. These are of standard design, roughly 7 feet long by 6 feet wide by 4 feet high at the centre, being simply a wooden frame covered with sheet metal and providing primitive shelter for five at most.

Certain of the smaller Swiss huts, such as the Weisshorn or the Topali, are attended only occasionally during the summer; while out of season most huts are closed except for a winter room, which may be open or for which the key may have to be obtained in the valley beforehand. One hut reminds visitors to shut windows on departure—to keep marmots out!

What does one need to take up to a hut? In Austria, literally nothing except luxuries such as sweets and fruit;

a clean pair of socks and up to 10 schillings per hut night for full board, including steaks and wine. The same holds for provisioned Italian huts. In Switzerland and France, apart from Alpine hotels such as Fluhalp, Gandegg, and a few exceptional huts, all food must be carried. Apart from food for the hill in ample quantity—bread, butter, jam, cheese, chocolate, raisins, and a water-bottle—suitable hut supplies include tea, condensed milk, sugar, soup, eggs, sausage, spaghetti, cold meats, and dried fruits. Blankets, crockery, cutlery and hut shoes are supplied; but a torch is useful, even if one is not going out early on a moonless morning, as it gets dark early in the Alps.

This short account cannot hope to detail all the hundreds of huts now available to climbers, or to recall all the incidents associated with hut nights—musical evenings in the Oetztal or the Alpen-glow sunset from the Bertol—or even to mention the individual guardians, their wives and children, who arise willingly at midnight to prepare breakfast for the 1 A.M. departers and are still about providing meals for late arrivals at 9 P.M. For six weeks or so in a good season there is little sleep for them.