

THE WALKING BUG - PART 2

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To the readers of 'The Walking Bug' in the last number of the *Journal*, the following year's expedition began in a similar manner, but the party this time consisted of Gwen (Dunkley), Terry (Wallace) and myself and we intended to visit only France and Switzerland.

Terry and I travelled south on the long-distance coach and again Gwen arrived first at Gatwick - fast types these Yorkshire bus drivers!

A smooth flight to Geneva and a smooth transition from airport to station to train and once again we were bowling through vineyards en route to Montreux. Down to the lake side where we caught the paddle steamer; it was interesting to see the famous Chateau de Chillon and Vevey from the waterside. The recent elevated motorway may well be a great engineering achievement, but a thing of beauty it is certainly not!

We crossed the lake to the French side and landed at the small border village of St. Gingolph. Here we finally settled on the Bellevue, the only Swiss hotel on the waterfront, old fashioned, even a little dowdy, but very friendly and as it transpired, with good food with 'Le Patron' himself also being the chef. Our adventures had begun and our first meal on the terrace by the lake side complete with swans and ducks, was a pleasant and relaxed setting to start with.

The Customs Post virtually lay in the centre of the village! Walk up from the lakeside, turn right and one was in France dealing in French francs, turn left and one was in Switzerland and prices seemed very reasonable, until one remembered to think in Swiss francs!

Everything sorted out and small bags left for our return we set forth on a hot sunny morning for the 1½ hour walk to Novel. Somehow it wasn't quite as described in the book, Martin Collins' *Walking in the French Alps* and it took longer than indicated to reach Novel. The newly reconstructed road may have been the villain! However at lunch in the village, everything else seemed to fall into place and duly refreshed we enjoyed the climb and the scenery over what we fondly believed was the Col de Bise. It was the descent which brought it home to us that we must have crossed a parallel col, despite local instructions. The day however ended by our making an interesting new friend and spending the night in his spare chalet!

Put on our route next day by our good friend we in future paid much more attention to the so called Grand Randonnée 5 or G.R.5. It was nowhere very well marked and forestry work, new roads and ski area preparations made it difficult to find and follow in many places. The complete Route is one of Europe's grand long distance foot paths, running from the Belgian coast to Nice. We were only interested in the Lac Lemman to Les Houches stretch - then we intended to return to our starting point by a



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route of my choosing, over ground partly seen the previous year. This was an area which I had never covered before and therefore all the more intriguing. We also were to meet up with Ginette (Dallere), a Club member from Paris, at Planachaux above Champéry. Our earlier adventures caused some delay and in order to make up time, we made use of local transport, bus, train and cable car. Our guidebook led us to expect one hut at Planachaux, but it was somewhat perturbing to discover the name extended over a whole 'combe', well supplied with houses, farms, hotels and huts. However, believing that action solves most problems one way or another we got ourselves there and began the process of elimination. We were looked at more than a little disbelievingly, but Ginette had been at work too and lo, in the middle of nowhere - we met! Much excitement, Gallic and Scottish, and reunion accomplished, we exchanged views on where to stay and went back to our 'Hotel' where we spent a very comfortable night in the new dormitory. There was much amusement too for the hotel staff, as they realised we really had been meeting our Paris colleague!

The next four days passed all too quickly, some of Ginette's friends gave us a useful lift down to Samoens, a sumptuous meal and then a ride to the Gite d' Hubert at Sixt. All of which allowed us to escape extremely heavy thunderstorms and to set off next day in watery but clearing weather for the Lac d' Anterne. It did not alas stay dry and fighting up a long stretch of path on steep slippery mud was quite an experience. Terry had a sturdy hazel staff, Ginette her ice-axe, but Gwen and I just had to try and maintain impetus to prevent ourselves sliding backwards! Again we managed to avoid the worst and most spectacular downpour and continued in reasonable if dull weather. From the Col d' Anterne to the Col Brevent we passed through a spectacle of wild flowers, large and small, from the delicate soldanella, to the large crude sow-thistle and the alpine lettuce. It was a long steep climb to the Col Brevent on an excellent path, but calculating the tiring party would become benighted if we carried on to the new Bellachat hut, we dropped down to Plan Praz. It was a mistake as this huge gaunt building now stands dejected and obsolete; apart from drinks to day-tourists, it no longer offers any shelter to travellers. We had one bit of luck however, when Ginette, using her native tongue, managed to delay the cable car long enough for Terry, weary though she was, to break into a trot and make the last cabin down.

So we found ourselves in Chamonix enjoying a reasonable hotel, hot showers and a good supper, a day earlier than expected, while above us the cloud still hung and drifted around the Brevent concealing the top from view.

Next morning was typical of 'Morning has broken', the sun shone, the birds sang and we all in turn rushed to the loo! For photography, it was a loo with a view!

As soon as possible, with help from the cable car, we returned effortlessly to yesterday's 'cut-off' point. We were interested in and tempted

by the passenger flights in hang-gliders, but they landed in Chamonix and we were still upward bound! Terry had a badly bruised toe from an argument with a boulder several days earlier, so we allowed her to take the cabin and our lunch to the top, while we three completed the route in a leisurely manner.

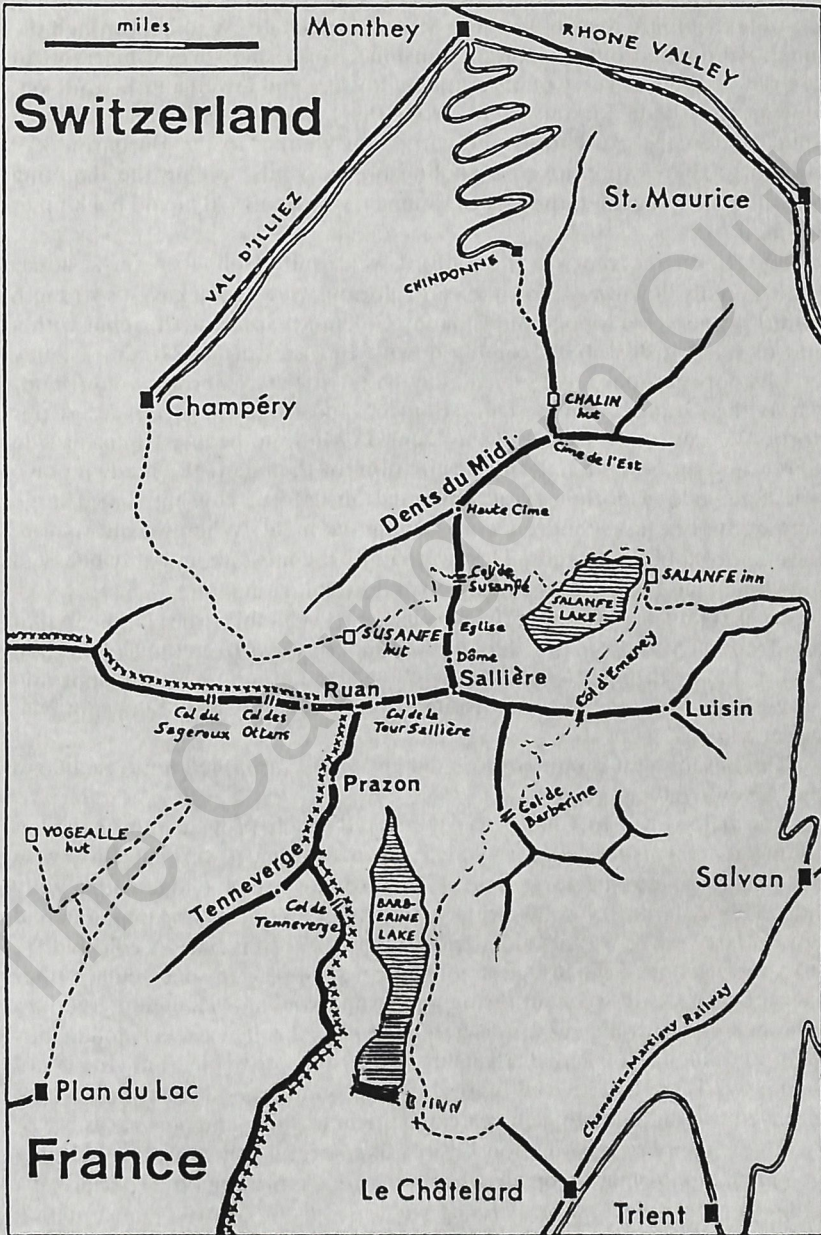
The mist caught up with us and obliterated any sustained spectacular views from the top, leaving us with tantalising glimpses backwards and ahead. We parted again, Terry to the cable car and we to walk down. We passed the pleasant-looking new hut, almost an hour from the top, across the site of a winter avalanche with its pulverised trees, racing past the Merlat animal park, with a distant view of the immense concrete statue of 'Christ Roi'. A dash to the station, where no train was expected, and finally, at considerable risk to life and limb, across the modern high-way to leap aboard the 6 o'clock bus just as the heavens opened and the rain lashed down. The short journey from Les Houches to Chamonix took place in a downpour with thunder reverberating around the mountains. Arriving to find racing gutters about 3 feet wide, we decided to 'run for it' and thus arrived breathless, tumbling through the hotel doorway, to the amusement of sheltering locals.

The next day was a parting of ways, Ginette going south to join her parents, we going back to the mountains to start our return trip. We explored Chamonix further - it seemed greatly improved and cleaner than recalled in past impressions. A farewell lunch and then we were off on the bus to Argentiere. We again spent the night in the spotless dormitory accommodation at 'Le Moulin', making our own supper and breakfast.

These two days we enjoyed quite generous time just sitting around soaking up the sun. A train took us from Montreux to Valloireine, then came a long hot and very steep path up to the E'mosson dam. Lunch below the dam, out of the wind, allowed a close study of the immense concrete structure rearing threateningly above us. Slowly, steeply from 1260 m. to over 2000 m., the path wound upwards gradually revealing its course, until hot and sweaty, we duly found ourselves on an outcrop some distance above and on the opposite side of the dam to our destination, gazing at the beautiful aquamarine Barbarine Lake with its fringe of snowy mountains reflected in the blue waters.

We wandered with 'the tourists' across the top of the dam wall. The very new hotel possessed a clean comfortable dormitory which we had to ourselves.

The Barbarine Lake or E'mosson area as it is now known, is one of the engineering feats of Switzerland. The original dam, built at a narrowing of the valley, was overtaken by modern technology and a new higher and wider dam has more than doubled the length of the impounded lake. A new hotel and new paths now beginning with a mile and a half-long electrically lit tunnel, had to be built and the usual small chapel, tastefully simple, stands on a suitable eminence above a large new car park.



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We had obviously entered a period of settled weather and next morning were able to admire the whole of the Mont Blanc chain. Walking through the tunnel, we popped out into bright sunshine, surprising several marmots at close range. We left Terry photographing flowers and Gwen and I strode on, enjoying the shade for our climb from the lake-side (2124 m.), through Alpine buttercups, rock roses and carpets of gentian to the Barbarine Col (2481 m.). There we enjoyed a cooling breeze whilst eyeing the daunting drop and pull up again to the Col D'Emaney, down to 1970 m and back up to 2463 m.

So well engineered was the path, it went quite well, firm snow slopes took us rapidly downward, fresh tea and glorious views soon gave us strength and in 1¼ hours, we topped the Emaney Col and that included a chat with a party of six British walkers coming down from Le Luisin (2785 m.). They were the only group we had seen all day. A terrific view, showing old friends such as the Grand Combin, Dent Blanche and Matterhorn rewarded our efforts. We saw a new aspect of the Dent du Midi, no beauty from this side and reached the Salanfe hut, our destination for the night. We made a grave error here, taking dormitory accommodation before realising that a large group of Swiss school children were staying the night. When we did realise, we were too stubborn to shift! They were quite the most abominably behaved group that it has been my misfortune to endure for a long time.

So next morning we were up and away early! Climbing the slag-heap that is the Dent du Midi from this side, we had superb views from the Col Susanfe (2494 m.). We dropped quickly out of the wind, found a sunny spot and relaxed in the sun, our picnic enlivened by a close study of the marmot who was studying us!

The Susanfe hut is one of those delightful old-fashioned huts, clean and tidy. We enjoyed our stay.

The path down to Champéry, the Pas d'encel, proved quite exciting, winding its way from ledge to ledge down an almost vertical cliff, with awesome drops into the gorge below. The exciting stretch ended with a gully bridged by a large icy snow-bridge. Watching some lads scamper across above a large cave, we tackled a route below it not fancying a cold plunge into a vast icy hole if the bridge should give way, it proved spectacular rather than difficult! Down we went through pleasant woods, exchanging greetings with week-enders toiling upwards with full packs, through sweet smelling hay fields and along a shaded riverside track into the pleasant resort of Champéry. Terry had arrived before us and found a good 'Pension', where we stayed two nights resting and catching up on washing and post cards.

The Champéry Information Office, like several others we visited, was not a mine of information on anywhere outwith its own region, especially if a border was involved. Several times we were given incorrect information leading to disappointment regarding train or bus times and cable cars or chair lifts not running when expected.

So it was that when we reached Morgin for the climb to the Port du Culet, we had to do it on foot which played havoc with our schedule. Consequently when Terry was offered a lift at Chalet Neuf, we encouraged her to take it and Gwen and I loped off past a sign which stated that Torgon, our destination, was 2 hours away. Still following the maps and signs the next one said Torgon, 5½ hours! We were going the right way and we decided that the 2 hours must have been by road, but that we would be hard pushed to make it now before dark. Almost immediately the route turned steeply uphill and we puffed our way up through herds of curious young cattle, arriving at last on the ridge forming the French/Swiss border. Another storm was brewing and while admiring the views and sky, we fair raced along, not wanting to be caught in an electrical storm in such an exposed situation. We raced from Switzerland into France and back again (just a few large stones marked the border), reached the Col du Criox, took a deep breath and, dodging a lot of avalanche debris, ran down into the Torgon Valley. We were directed to the new ski station and somewhat weary now, had to double back to the old village. A happy ending as Terry had arrived and booked accommodation and amid thunder and lightning we made our entrance dramatically into the excellent hotel.

Next morning, storm gone, our ways parted again, Gwen and I enjoying a beautiful walk to Flon and Lake Tanay, an idyllic situation at 1440 m. We stayed the night, to let the afternoon storm disperse and to see the glorious views on our last day's walk.

Alas, there was no doubt about the storm; it rumbled on most of the night, but it was a surprise to wake up to new snow and a white-out!

Our last grand views were not to be! The obvious relief amongst the hotel staff when we emerged garbed in water-proofs to take a low track down, was quite comical. I suppose that as they were used to day-trippers, and as we had been clad in summer shorts they must have feared that their visitors were not mountaineers!

The rain stayed with us for a long way and the snow could still be seen down at St. Gingolph where we all met up for our last day and the trip home.

Those last views and high interesting tracks have escaped us - or have they?

