

A GLACIER WALK, WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM FRIENDS

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Most hill walkers and climbers enjoy the occasional through-walk; along drove roads, old military routes or valleys. There is a satisfying sense of progression, of the view unfolding and an objective being reached. Summits are avoided but nevertheless the scenery is often splendid. Glacier walking is a special version unobtainable in Scotland, but possible in the big mountain ranges, the closest of which to home is, of course, the Alps. This is an account of such a walk which I undertook in late August 1995.

The walk was organised by a Swiss mountaineering school, for experienced hill walkers with no particular climbing expertise, and the group was to be led by a professional guide. The intended route started at the Jungfrauoch (3475m), heading down to the Aletsch glacier to the first night's hut, the Konkordiahütten (2850m; see map). Then the route went west; along the Aletsch glacier, up the Grosser Aletschfirn (ice field) to the Lotschenhütte (3187m) for the second night, and down the Langgletscher to Fafleralp (1787m), off the glacier for the third night. We were then to head north up over a bealach of the Lotschental and on to ice again to the Mutthornhütte (2898m), an island in the Kanderfirn. The fifth and final day's walking was to be a descent from the Kanderfirn and Tschingelfirn into the mighty Lauterbrunnen valley, eventually connecting with the Swiss railway network. I was particularly keen to walk this route, as I had previously descended from the Jungfrauoch to Konkordia, and then walked east via the Finsteraarhornhütten. The views had been magnificent, starting in an amphitheatre formed by the Jungfrau and Mönch. I had found the crevasses, the major hazard of glacier walking, a demanding but not terrifying presence. A skilled guide, and disciplined walking by the roped group kept the hazard in the background and even allowed some of the more spectacular, cavernous crossings to be oohed and ahed at, in the best sight-seeing manner. So I was all set and raring to go.

The group needs to be described. Our guide was Hans Krebs, immensely experienced, with a Father Christmas beard and a twinkle in his eye. He had led my previous glacier walk and I was delighted to be in his company again. All the walkers were experienced, and except one, British. In the under-thirty years age bracket were Andreas, Swiss medical student and climber, Lara, geology student and climber, and Stephen, geologist and marathon runner. The under-fifties were Mike (father of Lara), climber in youth, Alan, competitive mountain biker and cross country skier, and Chris and Philippa, downhill skiers with Alp and Bavarian trekking experience. Over fifty years of age were Dave (father of Stephen), a marathon runner, and the author, a mere Munro-bagger.

The group assembled for practice on a handy low-level glacier. We spent

the day hacking ice, clumping about on crampons, fixing ice screws and lowering light persons (ladies) into crevasses, and then hauling them out again.

Day one. We assembled at 08.30 at the railway station in Meiringen, where the mountaineering school is based, and started a train journey to Lauterbrunnen, where we would change to the narrow-gauge train to take us up the famous tourist route through the Eiger to the 'Top of Europe', the Jungfrauoch. The weather forecast had been on our minds, and during the ascent we saw it confirmed; low cloud, strong winds, snow. From the smart Jungfrauoch restaurant and observation platforms we looked glumly out into a blizzard. Coffee and cakes helped settle our anxiety, and we waited for Hans to telephone around for more information about weather and conditions. On the basis that Konkordia had better visibility than we were experiencing, he decided we should set out. After all it was only 7.8km downhill from us, and on my last trip we had walked there in three hours in bright sunshine.

By the time we had sorted out our gear, particularly our packs, which weighed about 14kg, descended into the service tunnel and roped up, it was 13.30. We walked out of the tunnel into a moderate blizzard, with Hans leading the first rope of five, me at the back. Andreas led the second rope, following the exact footprints of the first. The snow was dry powder, knee-deep, but the going was not too difficult because we were descending. Visibility fluctuated at around twenty metres, so we saw nothing of the Jungfrauoch or Mönch, but Hans was able to track along the edge of crevasses, searching for the points where the walls were close enough to support a snow bridge over which we could safely cross. Probing with his ice axe, Hans would assess the snow and move forward. If the snow support collapsed he would spread-eagle himself, diving forwards on a slack rope, and scramble across. The rope would hold him if the snow bridge failed catastrophically. Sometimes the snow yielded under the weight of someone further along the rope, but the routine was much the same. In other cases the hard ice edge of a crevasse appeared, giving a firm take-off point for a 'bad step' across. I soon realised that although the snow was an obvious nuisance, disguising crevasses and obstructing the view of their ice-blue walls, it was also helping us to cross the narrow sections, which in turn helped reduce the amplitude of our zig-zag route. I never really understood how Hans, who was following a compass bearing, compensated for the seemingly erratic zigs and zags we were forced to follow.

So we proceeded, rapidly perfecting the use of a slack or a tight rope, and resigning ourselves to the fact that when you are sprawled, often lop-sided in deep snow, with one foot pushing against thin air, there is no neat and dignified way out. You just get on with it, with a little help from your friends fore and aft. After a couple of hours we stopped for a snack and Hans admitted he was disappointed we had not descended into better visibility. At least the wind

was still in our backs, but the terrain was worsening. In the next section we navigated around very extensive crevasses, and several times did what I really dislike on glaciers, walked along a narrow isthmus of ice between crevasses. Here the protection afforded by the rope is at a minimum. On one occasion we became 'crevasse-bound', and followed a huge circular route to get out of difficulties. After a further two hours I began hoping for evidence of the Konkordia junction (see map). Hans' compass bearing should take us to the base of the rock cliff, at the top of which the hut was situated. I took comfort in some brief glimpses of black rock on our port bow, but after that, nothing.

We halted again for a snack and I noticed that Hans was discreetly using his radio. We continued plodding, zigging and zagging, hopping over bad steps and wading through powder snow on the snow bridges. The dim, eerie light of our private blizzard was darkening, the wind was not slackening nor the snowfall lessening, but the misty cloud was thinner and we had somewhat better visibility. Excitement rose when we came across surface streams, which, with an increase in the presence of surface rock and debris, suggested that we were close to making a landfall. Surface streams on glaciers can be an awful nuisance, and the ones we had to cross were full of a mushy, rushing slurry of ice, the worst possible way of getting very wet feet and legs. Most of us were lucky. Then, without warning, we realised we could see two figures on our starboard bow. They had spotted us and we both changed courses to meet. Much hailing preceded the first handshake between Hans and the two figures; the rest of us on the rope kept in position and just hailed heartily from the rear. We learned that they were Swiss Army soldiers who had come out from the Konkordiahütten to guide us in. Our spirits soared; we had been more anxious and tired than we had been prepared to admit. Now we could reasonably anticipate a happy ending to the walk. Hans' navigation had been good. We had been heading for a point upstream of the Konkordiahütten, to ensure we did not overshoot the rocky promontory on which it is situated. We would have made our landfall and worked our way south-west, along the foot of the cliff, to find the stairway which leads up to the hut. The soldiers had been able to follow a more direct route from whence they had come, and they also broke trail and navigated round crevasses with fresher legs than ours.

Gradually a rock cliff emerged from the gloomy blizzard, and I could make out the famous Konkordiahütten staircase, bolted onto the vertical rock, uncannily like a fire escape on a Manhattan office block. At the foot of the staircase, a chaotic region of ice, moraine and boulders, the soldiers carefully checked that we could manage the ascent with our packs. We could, so we started up, first the amateurish wooden ladder and then on to the more convincing aluminium section, now heavily iced, but surely a route to heavenly bliss, like hot tea. The ascent must be at least 100m, very exposed, and in the present conditions the wind was very strong indeed at the top. The stairs deposited us on a wooden platform, but there was still a bit of a scramble

before the hut proper was reached, passing latrines perched on the edge of the rock wall in the traditional Swiss Alpine Club style of architecture. We clambered into the hut, ten iced-up, puffing but beaming bodies. We had made it! The hut warden was there to help us get our ropes and harness off, an indication of the alert we had been involved in, and the two soldiers fussed over our two women. Frozen hands gradually coped with zips, knots, buttons and the rest of the paraphernalia familiar to winter walkers. Our 7.8km walk from the Jungfraujoch had taken us 6.5 hours!

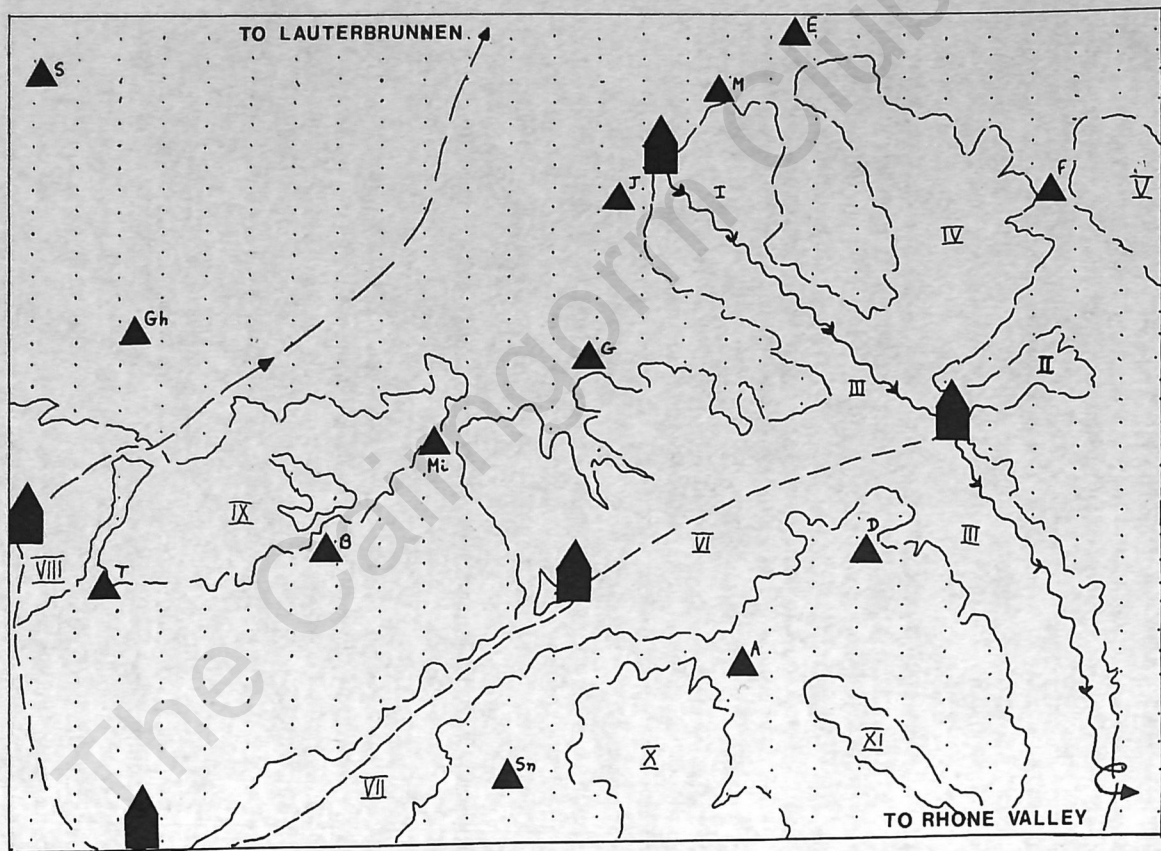
We sorted out our gear, finding that we were not very wet at all, but I noticed that my water bottle had acquired ice, an indication of the very cold conditions. Over the hot meal we found that our two soldiers were part of a group of five who had recently climbed the Finsteraarhorn for recreation and were making their way back to base. They belonged to the Swiss Army mountaineering school and were therefore highly competent. Just the right sort of company we would have chosen in the circumstances! We turned in for the night in good spirits, despite the rising wind shrieking and howling outside.

Day two. Dawn brought no improvement in the weather, but by breakfast time the wind was merely very strong and we could see glimpses of the glacier below. Hans and the senior soldiers discussed the situation, and decided that we had no hope of crossing the glacier to the Lotschenhütte as planned. The options were that we could stay where we were, or attempt an escape route, continuing down the Aletsch glacier with the wind in our backs, and turning east into a side valley where there was a small hut. In any event we could get off the glacier. It would be a long walk but the soldiers would lead, breaking trail and sharing the navigation round the crevasses. So by mid-morning we were roped up and ready to descend that awful scramble and staircase. Down on the glacier the wind was not too bad, and visibility better than on the previous day although snow continued to fall. "Have a nice day", we said to each other and started walking. The soldiers, a rope of two and one of three, made good progress and saved us a great deal of hard effort. But after two hours of plodding Hans called a halt and put it to us. We were progressing rather slowly. We could return to the hut, or push on if we were prepared for a very long day's walking. We looked back up the glacier, into driving snow and decided to continue. After a further two hours plodding, bad-stepping and digging ourselves out, we had quite a jolly lunch break. We could see the mountains on either side, which did not look very high, but we were standing on top of well over 1000m of glacier ice which filled the valley between. We were on the eastern side of the Aletsch glacier, intent on finding our side valley, up which we fondly imagined ourselves strolling.

We continued walking with two ropes of soldiers scouting ahead, and eventually, like a fleet of four tiny boats manned by drunken sailors, we made landfall at a rock promontory, just upstream of our side valley. Hans

and the soldiers climbed the rock cliff to reconnoitre. They were looking for a cliff path to the hut up in the valley. Hans descended, convinced that we had made a lucky landfall, because there were pitons in the rock. He took the first rope up; a muddy scramble at first then an unpleasant sloping ledge, curving up and round a shoulder. The ledge was too narrow for hands and knees, but an overhang prevented an upright stance. Various protuberances attempted to nudge my rucksack, and me, off into space. The belay was very oblique and doubtless totally firm, but my knees were not. I did not fancy ending up smeared as a human pendulum across the rock face. After the ledge there was a straightforward climb and scramble up a slab, with plenty of muscle to help, but it was all very exposed and wintry. The blurred upturned faces of the second rope party, patiently waiting below, spurred us on. We reached the intended resting spot, and while Hans descended to bring the second rope up, we tried to admire the view through driving snow. We were interrupted by one of the reconnoitring soldiers who had come back to report that the route was very difficult, and they had discovered that the correct path, complete with fixed ropes, was some 300m further along the rock cliff. Our landfall had not been lucky after all; we would have to descend. The steadily driving snow encouraged this and the soldier rapidly fixed a line to winch us down the slab section. Hans then belayed us individually as we somehow got round and down the unspeakable curved ledge; the final muddy scramble was a joy. Back on the ice we re-formed and had to walk right out on to the glacier before looping back to make a fresh landfall, such was the turbulence of the ice and crevasses in that area. It took at least another hour while the soldiers waited on their various perches high up on the rock cliff. We found the comforting fixed rope path, and after a stiff climb, realised we were off the glacier, on to Bergweg paths and safety. Our joy at being miles from anywhere, close to dusk, after eight hours walking in winter conditions, is an interesting reflection of our state of mind. Pressing on, we found the hut closed with no winter room (a permanently open section providing shelter), and so we had to prepare mentally, for a further walk into ski-tow territory where we would probably find shelter for the night. We tramped on along Bergwegs, crossing over into the Rhone valley. We saw distant lights below, then the ugly ski-tows and finally reached a ski station. One of several hotels was actually open - we entered and found our soldier friends refreshing themselves inside. It was a good opportunity to thank them again. They would be taking the last cable car down to the town of Fiesch; we would sleep in the hotel lager (bunkhouse). The wind was moderating and it had stopped snowing as darkness took over. The walk had taken more than the ten hours which Hans had privately estimated, but the escape route had worked.

Days three to five. Next morning the mood at breakfast was cheerful but inevitably somewhat subdued. Snow was falling and we had to decide how to continue our walking holiday. The glacier walk was no longer possible,



but Hans was keen to get us back into glacier territory, if only for a day. Our best option was to use public transport to reach Fafleralp, and walk from there. According to the warden of the Mutthornhütte there was a metre of snow up on the Kanderfirn, and he was firmly discouraging climbers from trying to get there. However, Fafleralp proved an agreeable second-best and we enjoyed two days walking and managed a short trek up the Langgletscher in good weather.

As we walked out at the end of our final day the snow level was receding fast, the cows cautiously emerging from byres on to their high pastures, and the sound of their bells filled the valley. Summer was returning to the Alps, and we were on our way home.

Key to the map opposite:

THE GROSSER ALETSCHGLETSCHER AND ASSOCIATED ICEFIELDS, GLACIERS AND MOUNTAINS IN THE BERNESE OBERLAND

The route from the Jungfrauoch to Konkordiahütten and south to the escape route is shown by the line with arrows. The intended route west of Konkordiahütten is indicated by a dashed line.

White - glaciers and ice fields.

1, Jungfrauoch; 11, Grünneggfirn; 111, Grosser Aletschgletscher; 1V, Ewigschneefeld; V, Wallis Fieserfirn; V1, Grosser Aletschfirn; V11, Langgletscher; V111, Kanderfirn; 1X, Tschingelfirn; X, Oberaletschgletscher; X1, Mittelaletschgletscher.

Stippled - mountains and high valleys.

A, Aletschorn; B, Breithorn; D, Drejeckhorn; E, Eiger; F, Fiescherhorn; G, Gletscherhorn; Gh, Ghuderhoren; J, Jungfrau; M, Mönch; Mi, Mittaghorn; S, Schithorn; Sn, Schinhorn; T, Tschingelhorn.

Buildings, from top clockwise; Jungfrauoch, Konkordiahütten, Lötschenhütte, Fafleralp, Mutthornhütte.

