

An Ascent of the Bortelhorn in the Simplon Region of Switzerland

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The Bortelhorn (3,194m) lies to the south of the river Rhône, just beyond the historic town of Brig in Kanton Wallis, Switzerland. The mountain is well seen from the right hand side of the main-line trains as they sweep down from the north towards Brig on their way to Italy via the Simplon tunnel. It is a distinctive feature, with its classical conical shape and the permanent snowfield on its western face. In the period 1997-2000 I spent four summer field seasons working under its shadow in connection with a project organised by the University of Basel's Department of Mineralogy and Petrology. I resolved to attempt an ascent of the peak before I left the district for the last time in September 2000.

The mountain is in the Simplon Region and sits astride the Swiss/Italian border. In geological terms, it lies in the Berisal Complex, a Lower Penninic nappes of the so-called Lepontine dome in the central Alps. Other peaks in the area include the nearby Wasenhorn (3,245m) and Monte Leone (3,553m).

The simplest route starts from the small church in the village of Berisal (1,524m), just above the impressive new Ganterbrücke, the bridge that takes the main road across the Ganter valley on its way to Italy via the Simplon Pass. Fortunately, on the morning of my planned expedition I had already accounted for some 600m of the climbing, having stayed overnight at the Bortelhütte (2,113m). This is a splendid hut belonging to the Simplon Ski Club. It is open and wardened for the provision of food and accommodation from July until early October. Its location is not as dramatic as some of the better known alpine establishments, but it offers a spectacular view down the Rhône valley to Les Diablerets, and the Bortelkaffee with the usual choice of additives is pretty good too.

I set off from the hut at 7am in cool, clear conditions and climbed quickly to the bottom of the glacier (2,740m) where I had arranged to meet some fellow climbers who had managed to leave the hut rather earlier than I did. Like many other alpine glaciers, the Bortel glacier has receded significantly even in the four years I was working in the area. Nonetheless it still offered an ascent of some 250m over hard packed snow and ice, with a gradient that increased rapidly as we approached the cleft in the rock that gives access to the south ridge of the mountain.

After stepping onto the ridge (2,986m) I was struck by two thoughts: this ridge is at least as steep and narrow as I expected it to be; but, if the views are as good as this below the summit, we cannot give up now.



Callum on the Summit of the Bortelhorn, with the Breithorn in the Distance

It was now approaching 9.30am, and the sun was beginning to warm the rock. My companions and I remained roped as we began our scramble up the ridge. Technically it was not difficult, but the exposure was formidable and the gaping void on each side was reminder that a mistake could prove costly.

In the Alps it is possible to gain height rapidly, and within an hour we were 10m or so below the northern tip of the summit peak. With one final scramble we emerged onto a surprisingly wide area and a stroll of some 50m took us to the top where we marvelled at the fantastic Alpine scene. The Bortelhorn is a relatively isolated peak that affords magnificent views all around. In the foreground are the lush meadows of the Alpe Veglia National Park, the stunning northern approaches and glaciers of Monte Leone, and the route of the high level Saflischpass which links the lower Ganter Valley to the remote Binn Valley. Further afield to the north, the Aletschgletscher with the Eiger, Jungfrau and Mönch dominate the scene, and to the east the high glacier plateau of the Gotthard Massif is visible. The hills to the south fall away towards to the Po Plains and the road to Milan, while to the west, there are the high mountains of the Simplon, Zermatt and Saas regions.

We signed the Gipfelbuch and, after a lunch of Walliser cheese and dried meats washed down with the traditional swig of schnapps, it was soon time to retrace our steps down the ridge and over the snowfields. The snow had softened in the morning sun and proved ideal for practising our glissading

techniques. From the bottom a good track provided a simple descent to the hut.

Here I met with some old acquaintances from the world of crystal hunting, the so-called Strahlers. We enjoyed a fine Aperero, discussing the day's activities and examining their latest finds. With time ticking on I packed my bag, for I had to depart east along the Simplon Höhenweg to Rosswald, which was to be the starting point for the next day's expedition to the village of Binn via the Saflischpass. But not before an excellent dinner, a little local wine and a view of one of the most spectacular Alpine sunsets I have seen. All together it had been a grand day.

The Moonlit Mountain

A mixture of dreams, moonlight, mountains and reality

Roaming along a broken path
I might never reach its end
Astride the silvery mountain top
Where moon and mountain blend,
Shadowed only by sweeping clouds
Breaking my thoughts again.

This moonlit path across the tops
Showing straight and clear
A way for me to follow on
With stars to let me steer,
The path's an endless way it seems
And the distance bright and clear.

Oh for a life upon these tops
In a land of thoughts and dreams,
Moonlit night, and soft wind's touch
My senses sharp and keen,

They fade, I rouse, I waken up,
Beneath my nice warm down,
Ah well, get on yer breeks and polish yer sheen
It's time to go to town !

Robbie Middleton

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