

## My First Trip to the Alps

by Helen Russell

This trip was long awaited as I had first booked several years previously, but it was thwarted by Covid. I was particularly nervous given the length of time I had to think about it, especially as I had never climbed above 2000 metres and I had no idea how I would cope at altitude.

I booked a course called the Swiss 4000ers with Frost Guiding based in Evolene in the Arolla Valley, Switzerland, and as advised arrived in August, a few days early to help get acclimatised. The Arolla valley, unlike other Alpine centres, does not have a ski lift infrastructure, so every trip included at least a 1000m climb to get to any of the mountain huts.



The first day took me up to the Aiguilles Rouges hut – a relatively easy 1350m climb through lovely alpine meadows and then a glorious descent route via the Lac Bleu.

The second day took me above Evolene and after climbing another 1000m, and on the way back I found myself in a beautiful village called La Sage. I came upon a multitude of blue butterflies on the path and a grasshopper that let me take a good photo of him. The restaurant I visited was full of locals having Sunday lunch and I was treated to the most beautiful

looking and wonderful Gazpacho soup!

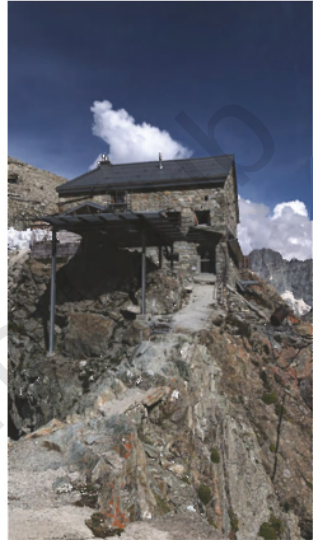
On Sunday evening I met the other guests and guides. Many of the guests had been there before so it was good to listen to their

experiences. The chalet was hosted and we were very well looked after including lots of home baked scones and cakes on our return from our trips during the week.

The first trip took us up to the Vignette Hut (3160m) reached by an ascent from Arolla Village.

The setting of Vignette Hut is spectacular as it sits on a glacier, on the Haute Route and requires a glacier crossing (my first) to access it.

The first objective the following day was the Pigne D'Arolla (3787m) and required a 5am rise. The early start was in the dark with head torches and the need for wearing crampons was disconcerting. I realise now that it was mainly due to the fact that the light on my headtorch was poor and I had little visibility.



As a result I am sure I was hyperventilating for the first twenty minutes! Fortunately, the next section was an easy bare-rock scramble, so it gave me time to calm down before the next steep ice section which required us to be roped up and our guide had to insert a few ice screws. This part of the climb was exhilarating, the ice so solid that it was difficult to insert an ice axe into so we had to rely on front pointing to climb up it.



Ascents in the Alps are a tale of two worlds: mountainous, majestic snow covered and awe inspiring with full winter gear; followed by the contrast of alpine valleys and very hot and sweaty descents!

And so to plan our next trip of the week. Filled with tea and cake we decided to opt for a trip to the Almageller hut to climb Weissmies (4013m). The plan was to stay two

nights there and do an easier climb the first day before embarking on the Weissmies traverse. August is a good month to walk in the Alps; however, it is prone to afternoon thunderstorms and despite an early rise from the hut the next day, we saw one coming in the distance. Our guide hurried us up the peak and I found myself stressed, scrambling at speed. We got off the peak and then walked back along difficult ground for about three hours. I experienced real primal fear when a bolt of lighting was quickly followed by a booming crack of thunder. We got off the mountain safely but I was in shock and it took an afternoon of sleep to recover from it. I also doubted my ability to do the climb the next day, but fortunately, my guide and the others persuaded me to go for it and we had a very successful climb.

Weissmeis starts with a walk in the dark. This was very atmospheric as it is a popular mountain and we were accompanied by a trail of 30-40 climbers, along with their guides, slowly making their way up the mountain in torchlight. There is then an 800 metre scramble which was very enjoyable and not too difficult, followed by a short glacier section to the top. The feeling of reaching the summit was incredible and I felt very happy to have achieved it despite my doubts the night before.



The descent was equally spectacular down and along a 1000m glacier. We travelled roped up and found that there was an art in travelling together that required everyone to walk at the same speed. We were almost down and our guide told us that we should be relatively quick in the next section as the midday heat was liable to cause melting of the corrie below and cause avalanches. Just before we were about to descend into this section we watched a huge expansive part of the ice wall of the corrie break off and create an avalanche. We watched the climbers below run off the path to avoid it. Once again I was reminded of the dangerous terrain we were in, despite the fact that I had an excellent guide supporting me. We were very thankful to see the cable car station when we got down, especially when we could congratulate ourselves with a beer in the cafe. My trip was almost over after conquering

Weissmeis, with only one day left and we were treated to a via ferrata (Via Farinetta, Saillon) to complete the trip. Not as intense as the mountains but very enjoyable even with some shaky legs crossing a steel wire bridge over the gorge.

As a first trip to the Alps I think it was a great choice and despite some scares it was worth every minute and I look forward to the opportunity to do it again.