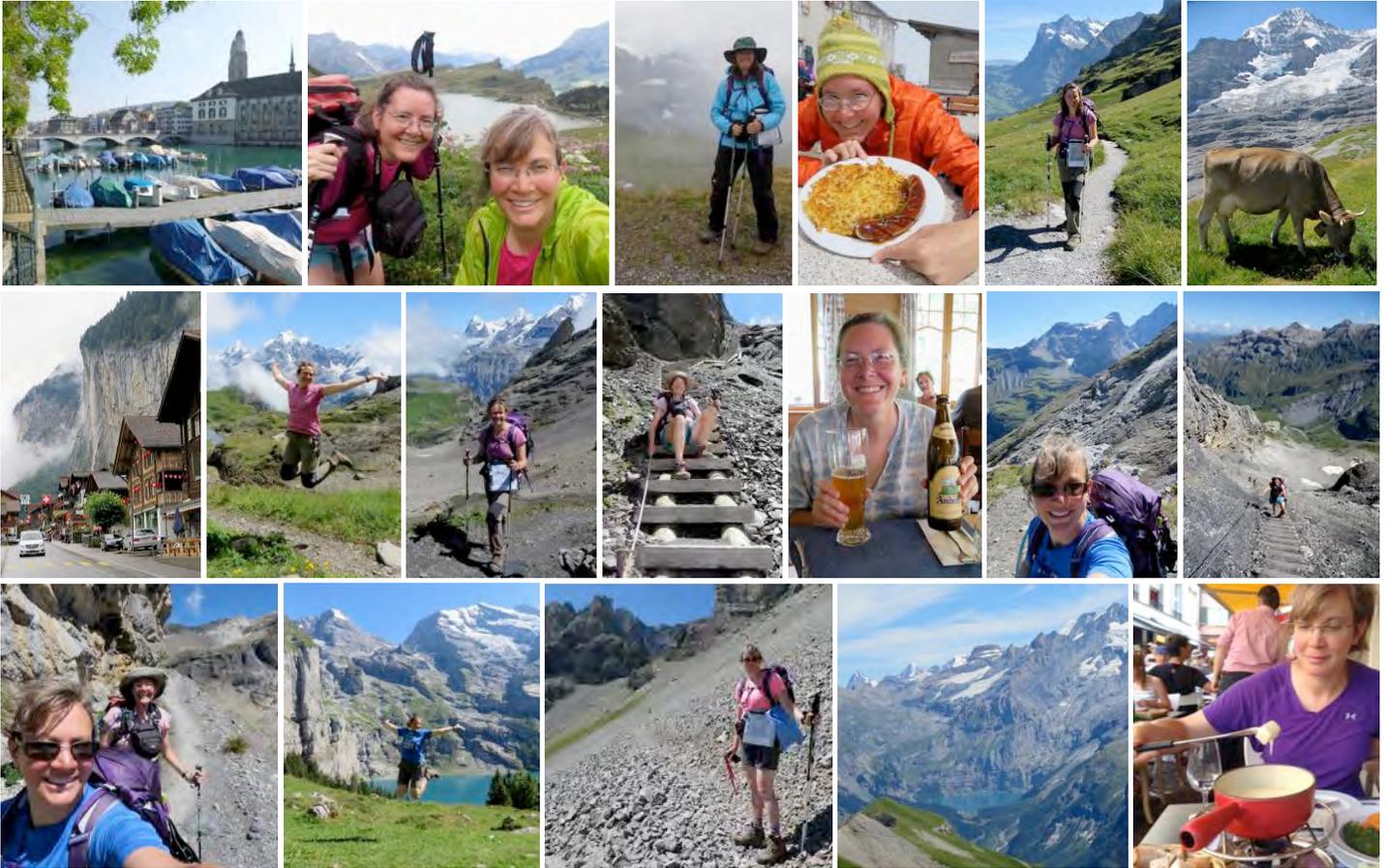




Via Alpina Bernese Alps – Not a Good Descender

Two Sisters “Self-Guide” from Engleberg to Launen, Switzerland



Left to Right: (top) Zurich, Truebsee Lake, misty Eiger, misty rosti, Wetterhorn from Eiger, Monch-y cow; (middle) Lauterbrunnen, Jungfrau jump, Sefinefurke, stair/ladder & post-descent beer, climbing Hohturli – Sefinefurke behind; (bottom) descending Hohturli, jump-worthy Oschinensee, Bunderchrinde approach and view to Eiger-Monch-Jungfrau & Oschinensee, celebratory lady fondue

Introduction and Self-Guided/Supported Trip Preparation

The Via Alpina represents the PCT of the European Alps, beginning in Slovenia and ending in France. The best resources for this hike are the Via Alpina website and a well-written firsthand account by Brandon Wilson ([Over the Top & Back Again](#)). Our Swiss hiking segment covered one of the most dramatic and popular sections, representing the Bernese Alps between Engelberg and Launen – well-summarized in the Cicerone guidebook [Alpine Pass Route](#). While focal points for this portion include the Wetterhorn, Eiger, Monch, and Jungfrau, it does not pass the Matterhorn (a tough decision for me in terms of skipping – but a good reason to return!).



GoogleMap downloads - Switzerland (border in gray) and our Via Alpina section, and detail with major towns relative to Alps glaciers.

This trip was inspired by a fully guided trip that is run by one of my usual adventure travel companies – but the cost was astronomical (over 7K per person); in fact, Switzerland cost more than any country I have ever visited, which I wasn't fully expecting – having assumed nothing could be worse than Norway! Earlier this year, however, Ellen tried out a new trip format: self-guided but supported

travel between villages along Portugal's coastline (i.e. you hiked guide-free while your luggage was moved between towns by staff). Remembering this and hoping to entice Ellen on this tough traverse, I started researching analogous trips – quickly discovering several options and ultimately choosing Sherpa Expeditions – a well-rated British company. The cost was about \$2K per person for 14 days, including all hotels, all breakfasts, and over half the dinners – plus luggage transport (in this case, moved via train and managed by hotel staff on each end). I even found an excellent blog by a hardy British couple that used Sherpa for this itinerary and shared excellent insights via email. Unlike Huw and Carole, who blog-described themselves as “good descenders” and were purists (i.e. they hiked EVERY mile of the route, barring one day of bad weather), I am a BAD descender (hence the title) and we were NOT purists... actively using MANY kinds of assistance (i.e. gondolas, buses, trains) when available to reduce what are obscene daily gains and losses (anywhere from 3500 to 5000 feet). Knowing from the start we were not going to be purists, we smartly invested in the Swiss “Half-Pass” (\$120 per person, unlimited duration, half-off all transportation) – as recommended, but not covered, by Sherpa. Having said that, there are three ginormous, high-commitment passes that must be tackled in full (i.e. no assistance options!) and they are hard, scary, and crazy-crazy steep. As someone who is sometimes afraid of heights, I was living RIGHT on the edge tackling those things... it is frankly a miraculous reflection of my will-power - how badly I wanted to hike those legendary things - that I pushed myself so hard. It is also a reflection of the fact that, as with my 2004 John Muir Trail trip, I committed to training for this traverse a full year in advance – actually hiking more and harder than I did for the Sierras. Consider that our final spec's – even with selected assistance – were about 100 miles with 30,000 feet up/down over 12 days of hiking. Definitely, the steepest hiking I have EVER encountered.



Left to Right: view of old town from university, chocolate, along canal/waterfront, on the train to Engleberg

July 22-26: To Zurich & Engleberg

For this trip, Sherpa recommended flying into either Zurich or Geneva; I chose Zurich because I'd never been there before. To combat jetlag, I arrived 3 days early and spent the farm on a centrally located old town hotel. Although I'm not sure it was worth \$275 a night, the rooms were moderately spacious, the bed was full-size, and the breakfasts would have easily cost \$60 if I'd had to buy them in that part of town. Every day, I hill-walked the major sites a couple times on each side of the canal, enjoying the fact that Zurich was scenic, clean, and not too touristy. My only regret was not making my way to “needle park” – now said to be cleaned up and family-friendly... although it seems heroin has been replaced with tobacco; indeed, MANY Swiss people are BAD chain-smokers – something I NEVER enjoy. While on my own, I restricted my lunch and dinner to cheap piecemeal stuff from the nearby Coop (this excellent grocery chain was available in nearly every town we visited). Ellen then arrived (1 day early) and we spent the farm on candy and restaurant food that was less exciting than it looked/smelled. On the 26th, Ellen and I hauled our giant packs and luggage to the massive, intimidating, and smoky train station (over a dozen above-ground tracks exploding out from the complex, MANY more underground) and began our journey into the mountains. Although my first impression of Swiss trains was not great (i.e. all trains originating from major cities were CROWDED, there was hardly any room for luggage, and the bathrooms smelled like piss), the situation improved greatly when we changed trains at bustling Lucerne – our final train finally winding and climbing to Engleberg. In total, it took about 3 hours to travel from Zurich to Engleberg, our arrival around 2.



Left to Right: walking down hill from hotel to town, church with Titlis flanks, interior with bejeweled skeletons, monastery and alps

Growing up, I had some knowledge of key towns we would eventually visit (e.g. Grindelwald and Lauterbrunnen) because our dad loved Switzerland. But I'd never heard of Engleberg, our official Via Alpina starting point. A month before this trip, I was faced with a questionable mammogram and underwent a biopsy – which ultimately was negative. During this short but stressful period, I was talking with Jenn – who has traveled many times to Zurich on business... followed by pleasure. Much to my surprise, Jenn knew ALL about Engleberg because she had skied Mt. Titlis, which famously rises over said town. As now-famously noted by Jenn, I would not be titless at Titlis... although we never really saw said peak in full. But I digress: relative to more famous towns, Engleberg seemed like a backwater – small, quaint, quiet... a FINE introduction to this traverse. This is not to say there were no tourists (Bollywood-featured Titlis has become some major Indian attraction) but, walking around town that afternoon, things were almost serene. Our first hotel was 10 minutes from the center of town, up on the forested hillside (notably right by the trail), and nearly empty. Although the skies were white with high clouds, there were mountains encircling the whole town – some snowy and Alp-like and others more rocky and Dolomites-like. After hauling our luggage up the hill and briefly cleaning up in our room, we proceeded back into town for a few hours.

Other than Titlis (which requires a bunch of crowded and \$\$\$ gondola rides to visit), the big attraction in Engleberg is the 12th Century Benedictine monastery/church complex – which famously makes all kinds of dairy products for sale. Heading straight for said shop, we were surprised how modern it was... as we tasted MANY delicious cheese samples. Because we hadn't eaten a proper lunch, we shared an open-face cheese/pear/bacon sandwich (shown below... one of many reasons I did not lose weight on this trip!) and each downed one of the local specialties: hazelnut yogurt, FANTASTIC!



Left to Right: monastery cheese shop, cheese-maker on display in fishbowl, lunch; bakery bun bench, re-engineered room

We continued across the courtyard to the church. One of the creepily unexpected things inside were cases with bejeweled skeletons of presumably beloved (and/or rich) priests. Although they looked very Mexican Day of the Dead, we learned this was a Swiss/Austrian tradition. For better or worse, Ellen erased her skeleton pictures because we thought having them was Brady-Bunch-Tiki-Doll bad luck. Of course, then we walked through the gardens and cemetery, the latter of which featured lots of edelweiss and a few "old hiker man" graves complete with hiking photos, sticks, and hats. From the graveyard, there was a good view up the impressive valley behind Titlis – a serrated line of glaciated peaks forming a long cirque, along which the Via Alpina ran (the section before our segment). Heading into downtown, we were on a mission to find a bakery so Ellen could get some bread for her monastery cheese and tomorrow's hike. Although I bought some rolls for long days, I intentionally carried over a LOT of lunch food (PB pretzels, jerky, energy gummies, Mojo bars, and squeeze-y baby prune mush, as Ellen called it). After a short walk in the woods along the main river (hoping for more views of the Alp-y cirque – but finding delicious wild strawberries instead), we returned to the hotel in a mild sprinkle of rain. Indeed, we knew tomorrow was not going to be a sunny day. Although organizing our daily packs for this trip was a fairly straightforward task, the amount of junk in our main luggage was – in retrospect – too much; I could have easily cut back on extra clothes, although I'm not sure I regret bringing so much lunch food. Accommodations on this trip varied widely and this hotel was "passing." As with many places, the bed-frame was fixed king-sized but there was enough floor-space for one of the twin sized foam mattresses such that the snoring middle-aged women were not sleeping fully next to each other (i.e. I slept on the floor). Following a pleasant sauna, it was time for dinner. Tonight's meal was included but it also was only passing, largely because the proprietress seemed uninterested in being at work and the non-meat option was poor. In order: we ate teeny-tiny Caprese-style salad, creamy soup, pan-fried veal with vegetables or big bowl of cheesy spaetzle (we each had one and shared), and strawberries with vanilla ice cream. As noted by Sherpa, booze is not included and you will pay dearly for that. Finally, we were surprised to meet another Sherpa couple who was also hiking this route; as discussed at dinner, we agreed we should all check in at the end of each day. Indeed, Ellen and I were somewhat relieved to know we weren't completely on our own. What did not relieve us was that tomorrow's accommodations at train-inaccessible Engstlenalp meant we would not have access to our luggage (i.e. we had to pack/carry accordingly).



Left to Right: (top) lower gondola to Gerschnialp, road-hiking, trail-route to Truebsee; (bottom) trail to Truebsee

July 27: Engleberg to Engstlenalp – Just Over 6 Miles With 3100 Up, 1200 Down (Our Version!)

If you are a purist, pretty much EVERY Via Alpina day involves around 4000 feet of work (indeed – Cicerone's version of today involves going all the way to Meiringen, an OBSCENELY hard/long day!). Knowing we were not into that much exercise, I spent a lot of time before this trip researching ways to keep our gains/losses in the 3000 range so as to conserve energy for the ginormous pass days.

Today's pass was the Jochpass and, while there were available lifts ALL the way there, we spent \$8 each (the Half-Pass rate) just to Gershnialp, eliminating 900 feet of climbing. No love was lost given that it was cloudy and much of today featured UGLY ski-garbage and development. But the weather was better than it had been overnight – raining and 100% fogged in around 5 a.m. Most hotels, including this one, started breakfast at 7:30 a.m. All breakfasts were excellent and filling, featuring – minimally - delicious brown bread, cereal, yogurt, and ample drinks. Sherpa did ask that clients not sully their reputation by stealing breakfast items for lunch, something we did honor 90% of the time (even though I readily steal breakfast buffet food in my regular life). Ellen and I headed for the lift station (10 minutes away) by 8:30; although Engleberg had been quiet the day before, there were over 30 tour buses in the parking lot (the VAST majority Chinese) and it was a total clusterfuck inside. After a 20-minute line-up wait, we were being whisked up the forested mountainside. We then walked a road for a mile or so (anyone who does not like hiking roads will NOT like the Via Alpina!), before climbing through wet green cow pastures that were openly visible to the gondolas above (i.e. peeing was hard unless you wanted to put on a show). Fortunately, the trail entered some trees and began a strong but well-graded climb up this gully directly under the gondolas. Although today was not the prettiest day, we both appreciated the decent trail grade and quality – particularly relative to the crazy steep grades to come. The Truebsee complex was annoying massive and growing – a HUGE construction project adding more lodging to all the ugliness. Amidst attempts at being posh were schematic signs explaining how to use Western toilets, requests not to vomit in the bathroom sinks, and blatant signage for “Indian Groups.” Needless to say, we were NOT into this scene and continued up the now-lakeside trail (note: anything with “-see” at the end – like Truebsee - denotes a lake), hoping to find a more natural place for lunch. While we didn't find what we were looking for, we enjoyed picnicking in this old gondola set up in a lakeside play area – particularly because it offered protection from a cold wind that had picked up.



Left to Right: lunch a la gondola, a nice wild trail with great flowers... until we reach the Jochpass!

Thankfully after lunch, we hiked a real trail with lovely flowers that looked like begonias – NO gondolas in sight until the last 15 minutes. Sherpa said the old path, one gully over under the chair-lifts, was now relegated to mountain biking. The new hiker-only trail wound in and out of meadow draws, offering views over Truebsee. I'm sure the views of Titlis would have been great – but today offered only sparing glimpses of its HIGHLY receding glacier. I definitely lost some steam after lunch and took more rest stops than Ellen near the final rocky switchbacks to the Jochpass, which was quite chilly and windy... so much so that we patronized the restaurant for what we thought was going to be a light barley soup. I'm not sure the Swiss are capable of doing light anything, however; we were presented with HOT stoneware filled with mostly cheese, speck (smoked pork), and highly broken down barley/beans... so thick you could stand your spoon up in the gruel. Neither of us could finish the stuff, which made us feel even sicker than the \$30 we paid for that and tea. But we were warmed up and motivated to make the final descent to our mountain inn at Engstlenalp.



Left to Right: (top) descending from Jochpass, marmot, Engstlensee; (bottom) Engstlenalp inn, room, slippers, light dinner

Although Sherpa directions were generally good, they did tend to exaggerate difficulty on some very simple sections – and the descent to Engstlensee was one of them. Indeed, said trail was neither very steep or particularly eroded. Although it passed directly under chair-lifts during the upper trail half, the lower half was more natural... although the views were not very good in terms of seeing mountains. But the flora and marmot sighting were redeeming. Ellen and I did debate about doing an alternate section here, which

other hikers (not with Sherpa) seemed to be doing: namely, taking this longer ridge-walk that climbed away from the chair-lifts and went farther right to an adjacent valley with a place called Tannalp before traversing and descending to Engstlenalp from another direction (note: “-alp” means farm and can refer to anything from a tiny village to just a farmhouse that may or may not be occupied and/or sell mountain cheese). In the end, we thought Tannalp might work better with tomorrow’s itinerary. Anyway - as we neared Engstlensee lake, the terrain became more rolling bowls, the gentle green hillsides sunnier. The highly visible mountain inn was adjacent to a big dairy farm – the farmers yelping and calling, running the cows down the hills into the watering area. So as to be clear, Engstlenalp was not a rifugio – although it did offer one dorm-style floor in the style of a rifugio. We were in the private room area with “real” twin beds with bedding (i.e. you did not bring/use a liner), although the single no-gender bathroom was shared and the one shower was a coin-op/timer thing (a key reason I wanted to arrive early and not do the extended hike to Tannalp). Indeed, we were checked in by 3:30 and enjoyed cleaning up without a lot of people, which there were come dinner. This was one of the few places without an included dinner; Sherpa warned that they were expensive and had limited offerings – but we really did not find this to be the case (of course, we went light after being bacon-bowl-burned at lunch!). Having said that, we paid \$50 for carrot soup with bread, tea, water, a chef salad, and desserts. The salad featured great but WAY over-dressed lettuce (a problem throughout Switzerland) and six mounds of slaw-prepared vegetables. Although Ellen and I enjoyed good initial service because it was quiet, things slowed to a near standstill as more and more people showed up and the staff became totally overwhelmed. Even though the inn/room walls were paper-thin and conversations could be readily heard in the afternoon/early evening, people were surprisingly quiet overnight.

July 28: Engstlenalp to Meiringen – About 10 Miles With Minimal Up, 1400 Down (Our Version!)

Today’s route (option 1 below) should have involved a 4500 foot drop but, honestly, much of what we wound up doing was regrettable. Pre-breakfast views, though, were promising: down the lovely Gental Valley, the backside of the HUGE massif with the Eiger, Monch, and Jungfrau floating meringue-like (pun intended as Meiringen is the source of said bakery item) atop dynamic clouds that settled back over said mountains within the hour, determined not to clear for several days. At issue - too many choices: (1) the Sherpa-endorsed route was a mid-level trail that contoured from the inn all the way to Reuti – and then plummeted to Meiringen via a path described as knee-crunching; (2) the Via Alpina organization-endorsed route was a high trail climbed via aforementioned Tannalp to the open, knife-like Planplatten ridgeline, before dropping to Reuti; or (3) a wussy low alternative that followed valley-bottom roads all the way to Meiringen. Both Sherpa and Cicerone alluded to trail (1) as rough, often muddy, and exposed... none of which excited me. The only certainties in my mind were that option (2) was out because the weather was closing in, and – if we happened to make it to Reuti – we were taking the gondola down to avoid crunching any knees unnecessarily.



Left to Right: (top) promising views, bargain dairy, option 1 trail – rocks, brush, shud; (bottom) option 3 views and roads

After patronizing the adjacent bargain cheese/yogurt shop (which sells hazelnut yogurt for an astonishing \$1 a cup!), we set out on option (1), knowing we could downgrade to (3) if need be after a few miles. During the first stretch between Engstlenalp and Baumgart Alp, the way was more primitive than anything from yesterday: narrow, rocky, brushy in areas with trees, indistinct in meadows, and HIGHLY muddy-shuddy when crossing any number of streams. Indeed, visions of epic mud/shud from Allison/my 2005 Tour du Mont Blanc danced in my head frequently (shud = shit-mud, a term we coined on said trip). In what remains a bad confluence of negative energy, Ellen and I met up with the other Sherpa couple at Baumgarten and pow-wowed about frustrations/concerns; ultimately, the most unnerved pair members – i.e. Sherpa wife and I - were asked to make the call and we elected to drop to option (3). Where I felt I understood that this choice meant committing to a road-walk, the couple felt the literature was not clear (i.e. they assumed we would still be on a trail). Needless to say, we all felt even more frustrated and stupid the rest of the day – particularly because the road was paved, busy, mostly one-lane (with hardly any room for walkers)... and it just went on and on and on and on. For the first couple of miles, we did enjoy the scenery: a collection of waterfall springs, a meandering river, fields of fly-covered cows, views of the cliffs under the option (1) route we had opted out of. After lunch by a small reservoir, we thought we were onto a trail system – but it was only a short-term gravel road winding through the woods. At a couple points, there were signs indicating trails up to Reuti – but, by this point, we kept thinking it had to be shorter to just keep descending. Around 2, we re-joined this long, winding paved road that zigzagged FOREVER through farms down this green hill. As we dropped, it was clear we were coming to a more substantial highway and town (Wiler). Although there were a few trail-cutoffs here (i.e. signs that let you cut across road switchbacks), nearly all were shockingly

steep and unkempt. Once we hit the highway, we realized – based on signs with distance/hours - we were still 2 hours from Meiringen and the WHOLE way was going to be on pavement along a busy highway. I will say that this time/distance was NOT clear in Sherpa literature. It was then that we said FUCK IT and jumped on the next bus to Meiringen. Riding some 30 minutes (with many stops) – including over an impressive pass representing the Aareshluct Gorge (a recommended side-trip we had considered) – the folly of hiking all the way to Meiringen was more than clear. Thankfully, the bus dumped us literally across the street from our hotel.



Left to Right: SMOKING, basic rooms, meringues, tazlewurm, umbrella steeple church, tomorrow's route with Reichenbach Falls

Alas, bus station proximity was one of the ONLY redeeming features of tonight's hotel. Where to begin? Well – let's start with the sign on the front door (shown above); indeed, the entire dining room and outdoor area was FOR smokers. Next, the staff was clueless, unhelpful, and borderline rude. They didn't know where our luggage was, and they didn't seem to understand how things were supposed to work. The obvious owner, a large old Swiss man, spent most of his time holding smoking court with his brethren at the bar while his staff (a possibly purchased wife/family) of SE Asian women sort of did everything else. Although the rooms were dormy-basic, they did the job, were reasonably clean, and there were actual twin beds. Given no luggage (yet), we hit the streets for pastries (meringues and something called a tazlewurm – a local folklore cat-worm hybrid) and drinks/lunch materials for tomorrow from the Coop. Thankfully when we returned, the luggage had been found... where is anyone's guess. Following showers and gear organizing, we held our ground and/or picked a fight over the dining room smoking situation and were seated in the adjacent breakfast room – which did not allow smoking. Dinner was fine: a nice salad, a thin broth soup, a meaty version of beef stroganoff, and pineapple ice cream. We took another stroll around the city, which had apparently burnt down several times (smoking perhaps?) and was considered more utilitarian than quaint. Had the weather been better and had we been in better accommodations, I actually would have enjoyed a down day in this town to explore more... because we did not get to see the aforementioned gorge, the Sherlock Holmes Museum, or nearby Sherlock-famous Reichenbach Falls. The short and obvious gondola ride up to Reuti also offered a whole plateau of fascinating hiking and beautiful terrain – all overlooking tomorrow's exciting massif of HUGE glaciated peaks.



Left to Right: Schwarzwaldalp, fireweed under massive Wetterhorn, looking back down pass, minutes later – rain!

July 29: Schwarzwaldalp to Bort – About 7.5 Miles With 400 Up, 1200 Down (Our Version!)

Were one to hike from downtown Meiringen to today's Grosse Scheidegg Pass (as Huw and Carole did), the gain would be nearly 5000 feet... not to mention mostly in the woods and near the bus-route – which goes ALL the way to Grindelwald. Had the weather been better, my plans were to take the bus to Zwirgi (knocking off only 1000 feet) and then slogging up from there. But as it stood, rain was scheduled for the afternoon and so we took the bus ALL the way to Schwarzwaldalp (knocking off over 4000 feet in under an hour) and then hiked this upper, more scenic nature trail from there to the pass. Perhaps because it was a weekday, the bus was notably filled to capacity with an over-60 crowd, many in hiking gear. Although hiking up a long steep hill in thick wet woods next to a road is not my idea of fun, I will say that the route was VERY exciting, passing by the most glorious river on this trip - the swirling cut-rock gorges reminiscent of Deer Creek Narrows. En route, we caught a brief glimpse of Sherlock-famous Reichenbach Falls, a free-fall product of said river. Higher up, we briefly spied hanging glaciers and soaring rock spires – a worthy prelude to the massive peaks we'd be seeing for days to come (once the clouds lifted!): Wetterhorn, Schreckhorn, Eiger, Monch, Jungfrau, etc. At Schwarzwaldalp, we were the only ones to get off the bus and hike. Here, there is a more natural trail for about a mile that leaves the roadside, climbing to a soaring meadow with views to the Wetterhorn's waterfall- and hanging glacier-laden face. Had you asked me before this trip which mountain I was most interested in seeing, I would have said the Eiger. After this trip, I would rate the Wetterhorn as my favorite. The fact that I read the Eiger was purported to be one of Hitler's favorite may have rubbed off some of my earlier opinion. Anyway – the trail rejoined the road as a light rain began to fall. It was one of the only times we wore rain-gear (by chance, we both were wearing the SAME color scheme... twinnies!) and/or used the umbrella on this trip. By the time we reached Grosse Scheidegg proper, there was a cold wind and sideways rain coming at us – causing us to retreat to the inn/restaurant... which was becoming very busy with wet hikers. Fortunately, they served a delicious light vegetable soup and cocoa (alas – no pictures!). It should be noted that Ellen was, by this point, getting squirrely about the weather. Less than 48 hours before starting this trip, she had been in Iceland a few weeks, enduring through one of their coldest and wettest summers in recent years. I think she thought it was the beginning of the end – perpetual rain, no views, hard hiking decisions. As always, though, I was confident in the Accuweather forecasts – which were correctly predicting an

upturn in the next 24-48 hours. Watching the weather, we spent some calm time in the inn's roomy bathroom/shower area gearing up before committing to keep hiking... the lure of taking the bus down to Grindelwald present but not over-riding. Although prior lifts and buses had been relatively cheap, everything near Grindelwald seemed 2-3X as pricey – likely influencing our choice to keep hiking. Initially, we walked on a flat, high route towards the First gondola station; from there, we descended to the lowermost station at Bort. Although most of what we hiked was on gravel or paved farm roads, the day did not wholly suck. Real rain did not take hold until around 3 – when we took the Bort gondola into Grindelwald proper. En route, we had cloudy views of the Wetterhorn, Schreckhorn, and the lower flanks of the Eiger. Hiking across the undulating fields of velvet green, we passed farmhouses with honor-system fridges containing cheeses and sausage for sale, a picnic area with marmot art and a porta-potty... virtually NO people. Once we made the decision to drop to Bort, the "road" became shockingly steep... steeper than a good trail in Oregon. More than halfway down, we arrived at the Schreckfeld intermediate gondola station. Hungry again, we enjoyed trail-lunch on a nice bench on a covered deck – with toilet access. Although many places in Switzerland (and Europe) can be frustrating because they want to nickel-and-dime (well – more like dollar!) you to use the bathroom, we found ALL gondola, bus, and train stations to offer reliable free toilets.



Left to Right: (top) Wetterhorn from trail to First, Eiger flanks, farmhouse, Ellen & marmot... and honor fridge; (bottom) good hotel, improving view behind Schreckhorn & Eiger, good but \$\$\$ Indian food, nightly entertainment, Wetterhorn alpenglow

Although Ellen thought Grindelwald was WAY too touristy, it was my favorite town... even though our hotel was a 20 minute UPHILL walk from the town center craziness (i.e. near the gondola, bus, and train station). After the Meiringen debacle, the Grindelwald hotel was a pleasant surprise of boutique-i-ness. Good points - quiet, twin beds, and a free hot water station downstairs; less good points – distance, no dinner on site, and a TINY bathroom with a glass door that didn't fully close (this drove Ellen crazier than me). After cleaning up, we headed back into town – obsessed with Indian food after passing a good-looking place during our 20 minute UPHILL walk (did I mention that?). Although the wait was funky-long (earning us free naan!), the food was delicious but expensive: samosas, palak paneer, lentils, gulab jamun, and water total = \$75! With views clearing, we enjoyed Grindelwald's nightly entertainment – folksy dancing and singing, and one obnoxious (probably drunk) rock band – before the 20 minute UPHILL walk back to our hotel (did I mention that?). Tomorrow, we would enjoy our first rest day – which eased the usual nightly stress of packing again!



Left to Right: handsome goat, viewless Bachalpsee, brief moments of sun on the ridge, Faulhorn – in distance, hut

July 30: "Rest" Day Hiking Bachalpsee & Faulhorn – About 9.5 Miles With 1700 Up, 2900 Down

Hoping for good weather (which Accuweather was predicting but our surly hotel proprietor was not), we used our rest day to do one of the most famous hikes out of Grindelwald. Spending a small fortune, we took the gondola all the way to First – riding through eerie mist the entire 30 minutes. From First, a wide trail climbs gently to Bachalpsee; on a good day, there would be this CLASSIC view of the Matterhorn-like Schreckhorn rising across the valley above the lake outlet. No such luck today. But we did see some handsome goats and lovely flowers. Because no rain was forecast (everyone agreed on this point), we climbed Faulhorn, an unassuming highpoint along the ridge at over 8800 feet. Despite some dynamic sunny spots earlier in the day, we were IN a cloud on Faulhorn... BUT they made the BEST rosti and sausage on the entire trip (see cover shot). After using the coin-op toilet (required even if you bought food!), we descended a different trail down to Bussalp. The upper parts of the trail were steep and rocky, eventually giving way to grassy

pastureland with farm-roads. Bussalp means what it sounds like: a bus station among the farms. Ellen was very excited to talk with a Japanese family/guide during the long, steep ride down the mountain. Dinner tonight was care of the Coop – fruit, salad, rice, lentils, bread, and orange-carrot juice... of course, I think it still cost us over \$40! *Note – in sorting Eiger Trail pictures, I found a nice one showing Grindelwald valley and our route. The hiking trail goes behind the peak in the foreground – Faulhorn is visible on left.*



Left to Right: yesterday from Eiger trail (pink = hike, blue = lift), Eiger detail - Kleine Scheidegg, me & Eiger, Ellen & Wetterhorn

July 31: Alpighen, Eiger Trail, Walk to Wengen – Over 9.5 Miles With 2600 Up, 3800 Down

As with Grosse Scheidegg, today's climb COULD have been beastly – both in gain and rail-side monotony. And so we doubly diverted from the official route to the Kleine Scheidegg pass: taking a surprisingly and pleasantly cheap train to Alpighen, climbing the wild and civil Eiger Trail to 1000 feet ABOVE the pass, and then dropping to the pass... before the LOOOONG but gentle mostly gravel road descent to Wengen, where we took another train to Lauterbrunnen to avoid a cliffy and knee-crunching trail. Following another fabulous breakfast, Ellen and I were on time for the free city bus but IT was 4 minutes late (!) – which was enough to cause us to be late for the target train to Alpighen. After thus twiddling our thumbs for 30 minutes, we were finally on board – along with a few dozen British Girl Scouts. Had this elderly hiker not pulled the stop cord, I'm not sure Ellen and I would have gotten off the train at the correct stop. But we did – and promptly hit the lovely trail. Of all the trails we hiked in Switzerland, this felt the most well-graded and Cascades-like. Climbing steadily, we hiked through meadows to the more rocky base of the Eiger – and then contoured under the north face. Although it was definitely a scenic and exciting place to be, I felt the quintessential Eiger profile was a little lost in the shadowy angle from below; nonetheless, I felt the views of the Wetterhorn were the most magnificent from this hike.



Left to Right: magnificent Wetterhorn detail, famous Eiger windows, Ellen in/and the Eiger shadow, rockstar handprints

A little more than halfway across, we entered the chilly shadow-zone cast by the Eiger's north face – a parade of people descending (they took the train all the way to the pass and were hiking in the opposite direction – clearly the more popular route). After climbing an impressive scree slope, we were just about to emerge into the sun when these whooshing noises sounded: base-jumpers in wing-suits whizzed just above between us and the face – flying towards this impossible mini-pass with hoards of onlookers... their chutes opening at the last possible moment. Quite surreal. If the climb to the sunny mini-pass was a little exhausting, the next drop and climb to the highpoint was REALLY exhausting – not to mention high (at nearly 8000 feet). Near where the trail rounded the highpoint corner to the uppermost Jungfrau train station and tunnel was an obvious wall of memorabilia. At first, we figured it was a record of fatalities... but it was actually more analogous to a Hollywood walk of fame of Eiger climbers (although we did not recognize a single name). Just as we were contemplating going into the train-adjacent inn, Ellen spied this non-descript/unsigned side-trail that led to this empty little hill surrounded by the Eiger, Monch, and Jungfrau... rock and ice screaming down all around. Obviously, this was lunch.



Left to Right: heading up mystery hill, Wetterhorn, Eiger, Monch (me and my prunes), Jungfrau, and view west towards Sefinefurke

After lunch, we took a LOOOONG time making our way down to Kleine Scheidegg. While part of it was the scenery, an equal part were the INSANE numbers of tourists clogging EVERYTHING. In some ways, it did take something away from the experience for me – not

to mention the fact that you could not take a picture without junk in the way (train tracks, cables, structures, fences...). It is important to realize that Switzerland has only one national park... and it is not here (or along any Via Alpina segment we hiked!). Kleine Scheidegg proper seemed less crazy than I was expecting – although all we did was head for the PLENTIFUL train station bathrooms. Both of us were expecting to see hardly anyone once we left the pass – but a good 30 people were in our midst as we headed down the mountain to the supposedly car-less town of Wengen. Walking gravel roads the whole time, we were also near the train tracks much of the way. Although the mountain views were amazing during the first couple of miles to the Wengeralp train station (where you could catch a train to Wengen), the rest of the way was less interesting – although there were notable views across the valley to Murren, Sefinefurke (the next big pass), Wengen, and the massive cliffs surrounding Lauterbrunnen (when, that is, you were not in the woods). Although the outskirts of Wengen were cute, the town lost some of its charm as you got close to the too-busy/crowded center – in part too because there were a surprising number of cars in the supposedly car-less town (most were hotel/luggage transport vehicles). Crabby, tired, and hungry, we boarded the shocking steep and cliff-hugging cog-wheel train to Lauterbrunnen.



Left to Right: near train tunnel into Eiger, Eiger & Monch, Kleine Scheidegg, approaching Wengen, Jungfrau & Wengen

I thought Lauterbrunnen was going to be all posh and richy like Grindelwald... but it had a pleasant lower-brow character than I was expecting, possibly because there were many public campgrounds serving a broader array of people. That we entered the town by direct way of the gray and slightly gritty train station also gave it a less charming edge. Thankfully, our hotel was just 2 short blocks up the hill – and immediately above the Coop. Although the main hotel building looked more upscale (and bore a prominent “Rick Steves” endorsement sign), we were taken across the street to a simpler, stand-alone “apartment” run by the hotel – because they overbooked their regular rooms. Much to our amazement, we were given a 5-room apartment for the night – and we were so excited that I had to devote a whole row of photographs. Ellen will tell you that I was especially excited by our full-on kitchen nook, and made several references to Aerosmith visiting Wayne/Garth on the nook-cam. Dinner, which was included, was hit and miss: the open salad bar was super-appreciated and great, the soup was good, but there was only a fish option – so I paid extra to substitute the pike with a disappointing, sub-par rosti/sausage. Dessert was some kind of layered ice cream thing, which was tasty. Although we loved our apartment, a VERY noisy family arrived late and stomped around the upstairs apartment FOREVER as we tried to fall asleep!



Left to Right: (top) our Lauterbrunnen “apartment” – my room, Ellen’s room, kitchen with full nook, leathery livingroom (bottom) setting out, festive national day decorations, Staubbach Falls, main walking path and mist, upvalley view of town/falls

August 1: “Rest” Day Walking Lauterbrunnen Valley, Gimmelwald to Murren – 5 Miles With 1000 Up, Minimal Down

Unless you make (and pay for) a special request (as we did), Sherpa has you staying two nights in Lauterbrunnen, with today as a rest day. The issue: the next hiking day is one of the ginormous passes (Sefinefurke) and hiking the entire way from Lauterbrunnen to Sefinefurke is INSANE (over 5500 feet up, followed by 4000 feet down). If you are Huw and Carole, you use today’s rest day to hike up to Murren, and then you take the gondola or train/gondola back down – just so you can officially say you did it. If you are Ellen and I, you ask/pay to move to Murren (about \$100 extra per person) AND you take the gondola. But that is not all we did... and thankfully the weather was not so bad much of the day. Anyway - after a good breakfast, we executed our plan to walk 3-4 miles down the length of the waterfall-laden valley to Stechelberg, the gondola station that takes you to Gimmelwald and Murren. It should be noted that there is

a gondola right by the hotel – it takes you straight up the cliff-face and then you can ride a short, cliff-side train to Murren (this is how Sherpa advises getting to Murren to begin the hike to Sefinefurke). Although the forecast was for more rain and we set out in raingear, it was warm with interesting mist and fog dynamically moving about the cliff faces – and the rain did not come until around 3. Heading upvalley on the main walking path, we passed several waterfalls – the biggest and most famous being Staubbach, which falls right above Lauterbrunnen. Although all the open falls were running, none were impressively white and raging. We continued by campgrounds, farms, and smaller falls – the big goal being Trummelbach Falls. We were not entirely sure what to expect but it seemed highly recommended – although it did cost \$12 each to enter (no Half-Pass discount!). Trummelbach means tunnel waterfall or water in the rock. It was like a vertical slot canyon with a raging whitewater creek/fall system cutting through the rock – VERY Deer Creek Falls meets upper Cares Gorge (Picos de Europa, Spain) - most of said water notably derived from the Eiger/Monch/Jungfrau.



Left to Right: (top) Trummelbach crack, outside platforms, tunnel platforms, falls, slot canyon; (bottom) more Trummelbach narrows, brief view of Jungfrau flanks from Gimmelwald, Gimmelwald's new cheese-lady, her cat, and more decorations

After paying the entrance fee, we rode this odd platform elevator that went four-ish stories up at a steep angle. You then walked a series of inner and outer platforms and stairs through about 10 stations with viewing areas over or inside the wild rock-cutting river/falls. It was sometimes dark, wet, and noisy; little kids were not allowed. After the final station, you walked a set of external paths and stairs 10 minutes back to the valley floor. At some point en route, there was a great down-valley view of Staubbach Falls and Lauterbrunnen. Ellen and I gave Trummelbach a big thumbs-up – TOTALLY worth the money. Trummelbach was 15 minutes away from the Stechelberg gondola station; we arrived there 5 minutes before the hourly gondola was about to head up to Gimmelwald – and then continue to Murren. Although I was hungry and NOT enthusiastic about hiking 1000 feet up to Murren, we only paid the fare to Gimmelwald – the massive cliff-face impressive during the straight-up feeling ride. And then we found a bench above some farms and ate, a brief view of the Jungfrau flanks appearing. Gimmelwald is a place I know from Rick Steves... his portrait of this area is almost mind-blowing in its level of ga-ga charm (e.g. watch the Christmas in Europe episode where they sled to Gimmelwald by moonlight and torches). In impending rain, however, I cannot say Gimmelwald was mind-blowing: it was farmy and low-key, there were no obvious hotels, there was hardly anyone about, and we had to go looking for someone selling homemade farm-cheese. Indeed, the woman we eventually found said the original cheese-lady featured in Rick Steves' stories had long since retired.



Left to Right: the wide, clifflside path to Murren, separate bedrooms (sort of), rainy national day parade – but the bells were cool!

Ellen will tell you that, despite food in my belly, I continued to grumble about the 1000-foot climb to Murren... but I trudged up there in 30 minutes. I SWEAR it began raining JUST as we arrived. Murren definitely had too many hotels and we took a more circuitous route than necessary to get from the walking path to our main street hotel (which bore another prominent "Rick Steves" endorsement sign). We were then led WAY, WAY, WAY upstairs to our odd but spacious room, which featured a separate living room. Needless to say, we re-engineered this into Ellen's room – while I took the bedroom. And then – despite an utter downpour - it was time for some actual shopping; indeed, I dropped my first cash on gifts in this town. Although dinner was not included, we patronized the hotel restaurant because it looked so inviting. Indeed, we enjoyed one of our nicest light meals on this whole trip: salad, curried chicken breast with fruit, crisp rosti side-order (which we split), and a blackberry crepe (which we also split). After dinner – again, in an utter downpour –

the national day parade commenced, GIANT cowbells clanging down the street, followed by children with Swiss flag lanterns and a sea of umbrellas. Other than the rain, the only other downsides to our brief stay in Murren was (1) this hotel didn't serve breakfast until 8, which made me anxious because tomorrow was the first of the ginormous pass days; and (2) tomorrow's inn at train-inaccessible Griesalp meant no luggage (i.e. we had to pack/carry accordingly).



Left to Right: leaving Murren, early trail with Eiger, the first challenge – Bryndli, steep switchbacks, civil bench near “top”

August 2: Murren to Griesalp via Sefinefurke Pass – About 9.5 Miles With 3200 Up, 4000 Down

Today represented the first of our three ginormous, high-commitment passes. Going into this trip, Sefinefurke scared me the most because it has a legendarily steep and exposed stair/ladder, which features boldface warnings NOT to fall in Cicerone (Sherpa seemed less scary about these details – but they clearly said no one should attempt the pass if there is any sign of bad weather). Looking back, Sefinefurke was the easiest... and I LOVED all stairs/ladders because they were so secure compared with wild west scree descents. While our hotelier kindly let us start breakfast a little early, we didn't hit the trail until 8:30... and, ironically, the other Sherpa couple (coming up from Murren via gondola and train) caught up to us within 90 minutes. Hitting the trail, we thought what were lots of thin clouds would clear out by 9-10... but stubborn patches clung to many of the big peaks – and MUCH of the other side of the pass remained in a thick, wet fog all day. After a mile on a wide, paved path, we slopped through a muddy-shuddy section of cow-strewn woods, broke out into some open grass fields, and crossed through a farm under obvious Bryndli peak – a rocky, castle-like tower blocking all views beyond. And then it was pretty much straight up the left side of Bryndli (see images above) via rocky, tight, endless switchbacks. Near the top of the trail, several civil benches were strategically placed, which we appreciated. At some point during this climb, we met another American couple who were – TODAY - starting a four-day self-guided hike using a different company; they had landed yesterday and THIS was their first day. Even though our first 3 days were retrospectively lackluster, we would NEVER advocate showing up and trying to JUST do the BIG passes... THAT is a CRAZY itinerary! Although the couple did manage to drag themselves to Griesalp, they were not able to continue because Sefinefurke tore them up.



Left to Right: (top) stubborn fog and clouds, Rostockhutte, climbing up from hut, mini-pass; (bottom) BIG views, FINALLY we see Sefinefurke, the trinity: Eiger, Monch, Jungfrau!

After ascending the Bryndli switchbacks, the trail gently contoured steep hillsides of plush green meadows for at least a mile. Here, views of all kinds of big-glacier peaks would have been SCREAMING HUGE but the fog and clouds were quite stubborn. Ellen was more upset than me about this fact – probably because I was stewing about the pass. At some point, all the self-guiding Americans amassed and hiked together to the Rostockhutte – the only hut along this section. Given that most of the big pass days lacked regular huts, Ellen and I were fully packed with lunch-food – but we joined the other two couples for a sit-down drink. Given that we downed our cold pear juice promptly (everyone else ordered coffee), Ellen and I continued... I was very antsy by this point – in large part because it felt like we'd been hiking a long time and we had yet to even SEE Sefinefurke. Although the initial climb from Rostockhutte looked gentle as it meandered through green meadows, I felt like we were moving at a snail's pace. Eventually, we reached this intermediate mini-pass that reminded me of the Dolomites/Croda di Lago. A large party was enjoying lunch here, having come from Griesalp. Ellen and I continued around the corner, finally seeing Sefinefurke... which didn't initially look THAT bad. Given that the

meadows were about to end, we decided to eat lunch here. Plus – the views across the valley to the Eiger/Monch/Jungfrau were finally stabilizing... and we could, if we wanted, study the route up Sefinefurke. Now, the scree-filled route looked and was shockingly steep, although there were a reasonable number of switchbacks 70% of the way. The path was all loose shale and thankfully our conditions were perfect: not wet enough to be scary, but just a little moist to keep junk stuck together and not dusty.



Left to Right: Sefinefurke ascent (top) overall route shot from Wengeralp, route detail shot from lunch spot, a vertical-feeling view looking down; (bottom) the final few hundred vertical feet, Ellen nearing the pass, at the pass... POTATO CHIP TIME!

Because the pictures should be enough to illustrate the climb, I won't say too much more. It only took us 45 minutes to go from green to top – and I was never very nervous climbing. I did sometimes look DOWN and think: SHIT, that would suck to descend! Indeed, many people descending were moving PAINFULLY slowly – and I knew that would be me on the other side. Famously narrow Sefinefurke pass was scary to me; it has room for 6-8 people as long as they sit still (and don't nearly poke Ellen in the eye with their trekking pole!). We shared the pass – and some so-so celebratory potato chips - with these ultra-marathon twins from Finland who were hiking with their mom (still coming up). The other nerve-wracking part of the pass is the view over the straight-down stair/ladder other side – although watching others go down didn't seem too bad. One of the couples, it should be noted, thought our route continued to climb UP to the left – and actually started scrambling the wrong way; while there is a marked climbers route over there, Sherpa's description clearly indicated that down was via the obvious stair/ladder system. When it came time to descend, I thought I was going to hold the cable and use one trekking pole... but that turned out to be a TERRIBLE idea because the cables were TOTALLY insecure (worse than the ghetto things up Half Dome!). Consequently, there was a lot of sitting, whining, and adjusting – NOT helped by this INSANE pair of guys carrying up bikes (YES BIKES) to do god-knows-what down the other side! STUPID!



Left to Right: (top) pass view/climbing route, crazy bikes, stair/ladder; (bottom) scree, FINALLY green, blue skies – Bluemlisalp!

Almost at the bottom of the stair/ladder, the fog closed in. While the upper scree sections were well-graded, the middle sections were slippery and steep. As expected, I moved PAINFULLY slowly and tested Ellen's patience (more, she admitted later, than she tested Bruno's in Iceland!). Eventually, green began appearing – along with sheep, cows, and blue skies – and we arrived at an empty

farmhouse. From here, it was a LOOOOOONG gravel road hike to the teeny-tiny community of Griesalp/Golderli. To this day, I am not sure whether Griesalp and Golderli are two different place and, if so, which one we stayed in; had we not seen one of the other couples by the inn entrance (long since down and fresh from showering), Ellen and I would have missed it and continued down the road some more. As with Engstlenalp, this place was a mountain inn; while we had our own room and shared the bathroom, there were more showers (FREE and bathrooms/showers were gender-specified!) and dinner was both included and scheduled. Following a shower, I took a nap while Ellen played with the alpaca herd that appeared around five – followed by a stick-bearing man herding his cows.



Left to Right: almost there, alpaca's arrive, candle-lit dinner with Ellen (ha ha) and matrimonial bed (ha ha ha)

At 6:30, all overnight parties amassed in assigned seats – the upscale, candle-lit room about 70% full. In Marshall's name – and because I deserved it – I ordered a ginormous Hefeweizen... it was delicious. Although our multi-course meal could have used more fresh vegetables, it was the perfect meal at the end of a hard day (not to mention – to load up for tomorrow's even harder day!): blended bread-root vegetable soup, liver pate slice with jam, pickles, and bread, mystery meatloaf (alpaca?) with mashed potatoes, and tiramisu cake. The funniest moment of dinner was when they brought out the tiny plates of pate... a couple parties could be concernedly heard asking: Is THIS the main course?!? Even Ellen and I were a little worried that this was it... particularly because out on the terrace, day-visitors were ordering from a very different menu – lots of fresh green salad, and even TACO- and NACHO-like dinners could be seen leaving the kitchen. After dinner, we retired early because tomorrow's pass was the biggest, with breakfast starting at 7 a.m. Unfortunately, we were given quite the matrimonial bed... the snoring so close and bad that even I – in earplugs – had to reconfigure mid-night such that I was sleeping head-to-toe relative to Ellen's noisy upper respiratory tract.



Left to Right: (top) Hohturli route up – up then behind rock wall to hut (dot), setting out, steep grass, view out to Interlaken, snack time; (bottom) good scree, bad scree, boulderfield and crumbling wall with funny signs saying – move quickly because of rockfall!

August 3: Griesalp to Kandersteg via Hohturli Pass – About 8.5 Miles With 5000 Up, 4000 Down

Today represented the second – and highest (over 9100 feet) - of our three ginormous, high-commitment passes. Going into this trip, Hohturli didn't sound as scary as Sefinefurke; I was more concerned about the weather and NOT being able to do it given that this was the one pass Huw and Carole couldn't do because of storms. Indeed, I REALLY wanted to hike Hohturli because it was the highest pass along the Swiss Via Alpina, it was beautiful, and it led to Lake Oeschinensee – THE place (based on pictures) that most inspired my wanting to do this trip. In the end, Hohturli was our FAVORITE day and pass – even though it took us (ME) TEN hours to hike and was harder than Sefinefurke in all respects. Although we were tired from Sefinefurke, we were in good shape and our spirits were high because the weather was PERFECT... AH-MAZING! Packed and ready by 7, we ate and headed out. While most parties walked UP the road and followed some unmarked meadow trail, we followed Sherpa's directions, going DOWN the road to an official nature trail (notably by a posh-looking inn). After 30 minutes hiking through woods, we met everyone else at the same spot at the same time. From this point, we hiked roads and steep meadow cut-off trails in full sun up to Bundalp – the last food/drink place at the end of all pavement. Looking down at the 1000 feet of nondescript forest and road we had climbed to get here – and then looking at the pass/hut WAY in the distance – I did wonder why we couldn't, like, pay someone/hitch a ride to this point (???). Clearly on a mission, we skipped stopping for drinks – a mistake, in retrospect (i.e. we ran out of water, had to restock at the expensive pass hut, and did not

drink enough all day). From Bundalp, the route went straight up grassy meadow: no real switchbacks, exhausting, lots of parallel rutty social trails... which would have sucked had it been muddy/wet! Bonking, we sat down on this 40° slope and snacked – the massive valley, Sefinefurke, and the Interlaken lakes in view. From this point, the way become more scree-covered – first climbing pretty much straight up, and then contouring up slippery slate to a benchy boulderfield – all beneath this crumbling fin-like wall. On the ground, a sign in many languages advised hikers to move quickly through this area because of rockfall. It took less than 10 minutes to zigzag up through the rocks under and by the giant wall, accessing – on its backside - this impressive chute that is not visible from below (i.e. where the route vanishes in the first image). Hohturli means “little door” – so perhaps this final chute is the little door to the pass.



Left to Right: (top) the final push to Hohturli... note Sefinefurke across valley with Wetterhorn peeking through in second to last shot from right; (bottom) views from the pass... yes, the hut is higher, Bluemlisalp mountains and glacier

After mostly contouring under the cliffs, we reached a LONG set of stairs (longer than Sefinefurke). We spent 45 minutes climbing these (500-700 feet gained) – with a nice bench-sit stop partway up. All the while, we could see Sefinefurke across the valley – and even the Wetterhorn peeking in from the side. The final 100 vertical feet were gentler – a series of logs defining well-graded switchbacks to the pass. Another 100 feet above the pass was the Bluemlisalphutte – but I chose not to go up there because I was tired and some of my toes were throbbing weirdly (I can only assume it was because, in my fear, I had been curling/gripping the ground harder than usual). Ellen did, dropping \$10 on a 1.75 liter bottle of water, which we split. This pass was very roomy, with plenty of space to spread out and enjoy lunch. While the stair/ladder ascent chute was scary to look down, the descending trail seemed tame and civil... meaning I could enjoy lunch more, and massage out the kinks in my stressed-out toes. Many pictures were taken from the pass... too many to adequately represent the feeling of being this high up after such a long and steep ascent.



Left to Right: (top) decent steps at the top, contouring above cliffs; (bottom) giant glacier, on the moraine, stretching those knees!

Although the descent was gentler, I was REALLY slow... ALL parties FAR faster than me. There were intermittent log-stairs but the nature of the trail was mobile grit on solid ground – a lot of ball-bearing action. After a mile of rock, we came to this flat/contouring section along a meadow between cliff bands – quite visible from above – and then it was a messy descent to a sometimes knife-edge

moraine. Between these sections, there was a Sherpa warning and a rock pile barrier to steer hikers TO the edgy moraine (and away from a flat meadow). In my mind, we should have been at the lake (Oeschinensee) but NO – we still had two HUGE descents: first down the moraine terminus and through a nerve-racking rocky meadow to a riverside farmhouse with cows, and then down a wide but cliff-hugging road-like trail to the lake. By the time I arrived at the farmhouse, I had HAD it with descending. I was fried and tired of minding my feet CONSTANTLY. At the farmhouse, there was an option to take a longer climbing balcony trail above the lake, which Sherpa described as having some exposure (visible/obvious from where we stood). Although I'm sure Ellen wanted to do this option, I didn't think I could handle it... and we didn't want to split up because it had been a long day and we weren't finished yet. Looking back, I do regret not doing the balcony option – first because it was probably no worse than any of the other trails I'd managed, and second because the most CLASSIC views of the lake were photographed from along that thing (i.e. the shot that inspired this trip).



Left to Right: (top) moraine descent – looking down, looking back, cows, river-crossing by farm; (bottom) balcony trail above cliffs, our easy trail through the cliffs, upper inn and Mt. Dundenhorn

Just past the bottom of the cliffs, we passed a colorful inn where Ellen asked when the last gondola left for Kandersteg. Setting out, neither of us thought we'd take until 6 (the answer) – but now it was 4:30 and we were concerned. After taking a few lake pictures and crossing another bridge, the trail entered mostly shady woods... BUT then began undulating above the lake, which was exhausting. At times, the trail dropped to the lakeshore where beaches of people were relaxing in the sun, begging the question: WHY were we hiking 10 hours and not lazing on the sand? Unlike Ellen, I had saved some gas in the tank for a big last push at the end of the day... and so I was hiking super-fast, arriving 20 minutes before her at the main restaurant/boat-launch complex. Our final insult of the day was that the gondola required a 20 minute hike UPHILL from the lake outlet; we notably arrived there around 5:30.



Left to Right: (top) Oeschinensee – upper to outlet; road-walk; (bottom) Kandersteg – entering/church, hotel, rest day treats

Of course, the hotel was a 10-minute straight (and flat) shot from the gondola station – via a wide walkway through an affluent park-side neighborhood. Tonight's hotel – at the end of this path - was one of our favorites, which was good because we were staying here 2 nights (PRAISE JEEBUS tomorrow was REST DAY!). That said, the bed-frame was a single – so we had to put one mattress in the

cave-like foyer (i.e. I slept on the floor). Although there was a sauna, you had to schedule it – and we were too late for an appointment today. Tonight’s included dinner featured several fancy – but almost too-small – courses: soup, a vegetable terrine, pork schnitzel with fried potatoes, and crème brulee pudding. With clouds darkening outside our busy terrace as we washed/hung clothing, we felt lucky with the weather... because, come nightfall, there was rain and thunder – with more on the way tomorrow!



Left to Right: mid-town Kander River, another church, Scottish Boy Scouts, International Scouting Center, car train

August 4: Kandersteg REST DAY (and yet we were still walking...)

Today represented our third rest day and, in contrast with the previous two, we did not go hiking. That said, we did a 3-hour flat walk around the town - running errands and shopping. Although our park-like entrance into Kandersteg last night felt posh, the town – upon further inspection - felt less affluent, with more struggling businesses and outright closed shops/hotels. Looking up at the surrounding dolomitic mountains and cliffs, Kandersteg reminded me most of Canazei, in the heart of the Dolomites – even though it (and remaining towns on our route) is closer to France (and more French). Anyway – we visited a few open shops, used the restrooms in the train station, crossed the river, and made our way along a wide walking path through green fields under giant cliffs. Here, we started getting passed by many groups of teens from Kandersteg’s International Scouting Center (the best were the Scottish boys in their kilts!). Walking by the main scouting facilities, we re-crossed the river and were surprised to see all these strange-looking trains carrying passenger cars in these open boxcar ferries. After a little research, we determined that this is a unique thing in the area: the car-train runs through this tunnel, arriving in Lotchtental/Aletsch Valley in less than 30 minutes (vs. driving hours between these points around the mountains). Continuing back towards town, we passed the scout tent city (each sub-village designated by a country-of-origin flag). En route, we pass more closed shops – and then patronized this bakery for tea and tarts; ironically, they had more creative meringues than those in Meiringen – including suns and ladybugs. We ended our walk in the most economically-depressed part of town – driven out of a bargain sports shop by this band of too-aggressive old-lady-saleswomen who followed you around and jumped all over you if you touched any of their cheap clothing. Following our walk, I took a nap while Ellen worked on lesson planning... and then it was sauna time. For dinner, we visited a local “rosti-ria” that was in the economically depressed part of town. Although the food was fine (second best rosti on the trip – and our first encounter with alp-macaroni... yes, that is a real thing – with apples and bacon too!), the meal was interrupted by intense cigarette smoke, which – no surprise to anyone – was not being successfully confined to the glass smoking fishbowl area. Needless to say, we promptly paid our bill, headed back to the hotel, and, in my case, took another shower!



Left to Right: Bunderchrine from Hohturli, lower section, our only pit-toilet, route through the cliff-band, looking up and on this route

August 5: Kandersteg to Adelboden via Bunderchrinde Pass – About 9.7 Miles With 4300 Up, 4800 Down

Today represented the last of our three ginormous, high-commitment passes. Given that many shorter hiking tours end in Kandersteg, Bunderchrine seemed less traveled, maintained, and popular. Going into this trip, I was not as well-read or aware about Bunderchrinde as I was about Sefinefurke and Hohturli; I think I only figured out how big it was, like, a week before. Perhaps as a result of all these things (because I prefer to know too much about stuff going in), Bunderchrinde was the least satisfying and most challenging of the passes. Ellen, on the other hand, prefers to think that I allowed myself to be mentally done with the trip after Hohturli. While both of those things are true, I was also PMS-/hot-flashing... so it should be no surprise that I - as long promised – finally had a meltdown going over that stupid thing! But I actively elected not to bail for several reasons – the most important being that it was Ellen’s birthday, she wanted me to go, and the weather was beyond perfect... it would be silly to pass up such a gift. Thus, after a filling breakfast, we headed out by 8 – walking yesterday’s path down to the International Scout Center, and then UP, UP, UP through the forest... the rooty path featuring few switchbacks. For better or worse, the other couple joined us for much of the day; although I was never sure why, I wondered whether it was because today’s Sherpa directions were very complicated and they knew this pass would have fewer people for, say, following. It was definitely NOT because we were faster or stronger. Nevertheless – for much of the climb, I set the pace – which was slow but determined. After climbing through the rooty woods, we walked a short section of road and then followed another trail along this steep dry riverbed (another funny sign saying: move quickly through this section because of flash-flooding!). After hiking through some more woods and meadow, we arrived at another road winding up this open valley – where we promptly patronized a cafe selling great apple-juice at a fair price. It should be noted that this was the only establishment we encountered with a pit-style toilet. Unfortunately, I could not enjoy this brief rest-stop much because the TOTALLY SCARY trail was looming above: you could see it

zigzagging straight up this narrow patch of green through this giant cliff-band... then it contoured this skinny sloping green band between two giant cliff-bands - exposure all over the place. Definitely worse than the crazy balcony trail above Oeschinensee that I chose not to do because I didn't think I could handle it. Ha.



Left to Right: (top) heading up, steep (!), almost there, contouring; (bottom) some exposed slate, more contouring, Alpschele

From the pit-toilet cafe, the route pretty much headed straight up. While you could walk a gravel road that made many curving switchbacks, the hiking trail cut straight up the middle of the car-route, which is what I chose to do. At roads-end was an old white Subaru Justy, testimony to the insane numbers of Subaru's we saw all over Switzerland (a fact/observation I have – perhaps shockingly to Ellen – not yet mentioned, despite my constant enthusiasm over all the sightings!). From here, a rough, steep, and rocky trail made NUMEROUS tight zigzags up the narrow green chute between the huge cliffs. Part-way up, we met an amusing, overweight couple descending awkwardly; the man's memorable words to me about what lay ahead: You must be brave to do this pass! BRAVE!?! This only made me more nervous, exacerbating my state for the eventual meltdown. Within the hour, we came to the more contouring section between the cliff-bands – the way mostly green, but interrupted a few times by edgy slate rubble piles with mild exposure. Overall, though, the way was FAR less scary than it looked from below. Soon, we arrived at the primitive Alpschele milking hut – which happened to also be open selling a few drinks. Not wanting to buy anything or offend anyone, Ellen and I walked 5 minutes up the trail and ate our packed lunches on some trailside rocks – the views across the valley massive: over all of the Hochturlri descent as well as up to these new peaks up the Gasternal and Gemmpass areas.



Left to Right: (top) final pass crux from below – and on variable scree, birthday girl; (bottom) pass, not happy girl looking at FARAWAY Adelboden, CRAZY-steep descent and looking back... title-earning “not a good descender” section

From Alpschele, the trail made a long ramping ascent first away from Bunderchrinde through solid meadow – before making a sharp turn and heading back toward the pass, the way now all slippery and sloping scree. During the most indistinct sections (where it was challenging to call the route a trail), I started to lose my nerve – particularly because those areas corresponded to the steepest parts, all leading up to this cliffy balcony right before the pass. The pass itself was only twice the size of Sefinefurke – and narrow to the point of

being blade-like. I had to sit down and actively focus on NOT looking down either side for several minutes while trying to reduce my fear-level. While the distant views back to Hohturli were entirely impressive, the rocky mountains surrounding the pass and Adelboden (our town/goal for the night) were – in all honesty – not that impressive to me... reminding me, at best, of the just-OK areas in the Pyrenees. Perhaps Bunderchrinde pass could read my mind as I pondered its “just-OK status” - and that’s why it got me back on the obscenely steep chute that defined the first couple hundred vertical feet of the descent. With the other couple and Ellen – all good descenders - in the lead, we started down. EVERYTHING was loose scree, ball-bearing garbage – no sign of relief. For the first sustained time on this trip, I was on my ass – five-point-scooting my way down just to keep up (alas, there are no pictures... although, for the record, Allison would DEFINITELY have documented this!). I did not like holding people up, I did not like folks offering to take my things to try and make me go faster, and I did not enjoy the trail. I just wanted to be done, in general, with steep scree. Although Ellen found me inconsolable, I joked later that she should have said “machine gun bacon” – a stupid ‘merican story that had made it onto BBC the night before, causing me to laugh and then consider staying in Europe for good.



Left to Right: (top) calmer descent, Ellen approaching and in the green; (bottom) cows, road, boy with basket of kittens (seriously!)

After maybe five minutes, the couple continued on and Ellen and I proceeded at my pace... sliding 300 feet before the way finally eased and upright descending didn't scare the shit out of me. Indeed, the trail moderated into a long, shallow ramp that dropped reasonably to welcoming green meadows below. Descending slowly nevertheless, we could hear and then see this large herd of cows being driven down the adjacent hillside – bells clanging and people whooping and yodeling. The way through the upper meadow was on a twisty, rocky trail that took us by a service-less milking shed where we stopped to stretch as the cows arrived – a large-tongued one under the assumption we were salt-licks. After some happy cow-petting, we continued down the still-curving trail, eventually dropping down to this super-basic rifugio/café (up at the pass, a group of women trekkers told us they'd slept there – describing it as laying down in a hay-barn right next to the cows and all their products). While we never saw the sleeping facilities, we enjoyed the family who ran the place – not to mention their delicious local grapefruit soda. The cutest thing, though, was the adorable boy who didn't speak any English but politely served us drinks and then brought down his basket of kittens. Knowing we still had a LONG way to go – not to mention a dreaded CLIMB into Adelboden at the end – we put the kittens back in the basket and headed down, down... 60% on roads (gravel up high, pavement down low) and 40% on woody trails. None were challenging to walk or follow – but they were monotonous and lacked much in the way of scenery. Consequently, we chatted with a German couple we'd met at the rifugio/café; the twenty-something man had recently begun a new position as a pilot for German Wings.



Left to Right: looks just like the Pyrenees, idyllic Adelboden valley, looking up at Bunderchrine notch, hotel

The low-elevation point of today's descent was a bridge over the Entschlige River – with Adelboden about 100 vertical feet above... and our hotel another 300 vertical above that. Although we had long known about this end-of-day climb, it did not make it any more palatable... nor did it help that confusing construction blocked the most direct route up, and the hotel's name did not match what Sherpa called it (even though the hotel claimed this had been their name for over 3 years!). Adelboden, a more affluent town than Kandersteg, was near a LOT of ski development and had a more Grindelwald-like vibe. Our hotel was very large and bustling with tourists. Even so, it would have been nice to have a rest day here because the hotel had MANY nice amenities (e.g. an amazing

indoor-outdoor pool with hot tub features) and Adelboden deserved more exploring. Our bed had a king-size frame but this time Ellen moved to the floor – even though it was her birthday. We took our time cleaning up and dealing with emails/internet before heading to dinner – this HUGE windowy-dining hall that easily seated 120+ people. Although the service was chaotic, I did manage to communicate to the staff that it was Ellen’s birthday (more in a moment – although we do not have pictures!). It also took us awhile to figure out that half of the pre-set menu items were in the form of an open buffet. While the buffet was good (salad, soup, bread, tea, and cheese/nuts), many items were out/low and it seemed like a tornado of people had gone through the place (i.e. it was picked over and messy). The main course was ordered (Ellen ate Asian-inspired vegetable dumpling and I had shrimp with rice) as were the desserts (Ellen had minty pudding and I ate chocolate truffles). For the latter, 5 staff-members arrived singing full-on HBD – Ellen’s dessert bearing actual fireworks that shot real sparks a foot into the air (it is doubtful any American restaurant would have served that indoors for liability/safety reasons!). Alas - I am not sure whether the shrimp or the gummy buffet made me ill... but I definitely had an upset GI tract the next day. After dinner, Ellen and I snuck down to the empty pool and swam 30 minutes after the closing time... until the lights just went out and we had to stumble back.



Left to Right: Wildstruble from Adelboden, bridge wash-out, temporary replacement, road-walk (vs. the real trail – in trees!), snail

August 6: Adelboden to Lenk via Hahnenmoos Pass – About 6.5 Miles With 2000 Up, 1000 Down (My Version)

Today represented the shortest and easiest thru-hiking day of this itinerary – and the most boring. Knowing this, we intentionally got a late start – leaving the hotel around 10 and then doing some shopping. Indeed, I actually dropped the most cash in Adelboden because they had the best wood-carving shop I had yet seen. Sherpa’s hiking directions seemed clear, but it was obvious there was a LOT of development all the way to the pass. Indeed, one could ride at least half a dozen lifts to the pass or in multiple scenic directions. The hotel provided us each with a free pass for ONE lift (our choice) – I used mine on the final/uppermost gondola... but Ellen did not (hence, the “my version” route reference). Anyway - after hiking through town, we dropped to the river only to find the walking bridge washed out (this had happened only TWO weeks before!). Not noticing that a low temporary bridge was placed 100 feet upstream, we rock-hopped, wetting our boots; the harder task was getting up the high, eroding cut-bank to the main trail. Unfortunately, this is where we also lost the route... starting up a jogging/work-out path instead of the Via Alpina. By the time we figured out our mistake, we had climbed a good distance and decided to just walk the farm-side roads up the valley to Berlager (vs. using the foot-path, which would below along a forested river). At ugly Berlager, there were many lifts and the car-accessible road ended... but a paved path continued through slightly more natural surroundings. For the first half-mile, we shared said path with scooter-bikes (the summer substitute for skiing – people rode the lifts up and then scooter-biked down, most WAY too fast!). Fortunately, hikers then left the asphalt and used a gravel path through uninteresting logged forests. Although we were both tired, I was also a little sick... so it was a mopey slow climb – interrupted only by an ant-ridden snack stop and some rubbernecking when a helicopter landed on a scooter-bike path across the valley; the chopper team hauled an injured human off the road - a lone car and a pack of scooter-bikers upstream. We hypothesized that an errant car took a wrong turn, wound up on the path, and hit one of the scooter-bikers. Much as we appreciated Switzerland’s many wide asphalt “walking” paths, we were often surprised to see cars of tourists “accidentally” driving down them... and the combination of too-fast scooter-biking and cars seems quite dangerous. After another 20 minutes, we arrived at Geils – where I used my free pass, and Ellen continued up the path... meeting at Hahnenmoos Pass in 30 minutes.



Left to Right: Wildstruble from pass, hotel, Ellen’s marsh-walk, sunset walk views – Wildstruble and Simmenfalle details

Hahnenmoos was the least scenic and interesting of all the passes on this route – hazy skies or not! Not even Wildstruble looked very impressive from this side. While there was a nice cafeteria-style eating facility and many people flying mini-gliders, there were also unkempt buildings that seemed like ski-season boneyards. After some fro-yo, we started down a steep gravel road towards Lenk – a visibly small village in the wide green valley below. At my insistence, Ellen and I agreed that we would hike down 1000 vertical feet to Buelberg and then catch a bus to Lenk, eliminating hiking down 2000 MORE vertical feet of roads, roads, and roads. Luckily, we timed our arrival to Buelberg well – arriving 10 minutes before the hourly bus pulled up. Riding down the zigzagging roads through steep hillside neighborhoods, we were both satisfied to have chosen the bus. Tiny Lenk was easy to navigate and we found our hotel near the small town square. Overall, we liked this hotel a lot; it was not fancy – but you could tell that the young owners were interested in service and genuinely trying hard. The room and furniture was dorny – but it had separate beds and a nice deck. The BEST feature,

though, was the indoor pool and jetted hot tub. While Ellen – who apparently had not walked enough – went on a long walk down the valley (in search of some marsh she saw during the bus-descent), I did about 100 laps in the pool – interspersed with 3 great soaks in the hot-tub! We also enjoyed the included dinner, which was Asian-inspired: salad, mango-carrot soup, chili-chicken and rice noodles, and fried bananas with coconut ice cream. After dinner, we took a moderate walk to the outskirts of town to admire what become lots of lovely alpenglow across Wildstruble and the Simmenfalle cirque.



Left to Right: early, pleasant mostly forest hiking – Lenk, one of my beloved green Foresters, lynx sign, riverside trail

August 7-8: Lenk to Launen via Truttlisberg Pass – About 8.7 Miles With 3200 Up, 2600 Down – and Back to Zurich

Today was our last day of hiking and, although there was at least one lift option that could have lightened the demanding load, we were committed to hiking the whole thing. Because it was THE hottest day of the trip (low 80's), however, we were up sort of early – on the trail by 8:30. For the first time, Sherpa clearly said NOT to use Cicerone's route – which involved a longer gorge-walk. And so, as directed, we followed signs - first through town and then in shady woods above town – to Wallegg, hiking half on trails along a sulfurous creek, and half on roads. As we neared TINY Wallegg, yet another green Forester was parked... and so I finally took my car-hugging picture (much to Ellen's chagrin – mostly because she thought the owner was going to come out and yell at us). I'm sure the café owner (busy setting up outdoor tables) thought we were going to drop some cash – but, no, we were on a mission... and we just kept climbing straight up the ragged meadow trail along an open and very sunny ski-run... NO switchbacks! Although we were concerned this was going to be the shape of things to come, we soon came to a lynx-signed junction (the area noted for these felines!) and were pleasantly surprised when the route turned into a very west coast-style trail that gently climbed along this river gorge (reminiscent, for me, of Eagle Creek in the gorge) – all in cool and shady forest. Sadly, though, this lasted only an hour.



Left to Right: gravel roads and poor meadow trails; Wildstruble AND LAST view of Eiger and Monch (close-up, with paraglider!)

Indeed, the next hour involved lots of gravel roads interspersed with poor meadow trails (some muddy and shuddy!) through farmland. While not mind-blowing, the views were decent but distant – albeit marred by haze from a fire across the valley: Wildstruble and, shockingly, the Eiger and Monch impossibly poking up along a faraway ridgeline. At closer proximity, the terrain was all rolling green meadow/farmland with occasional stands of trees and houses or barns; in general, the buildings were old and run-down – NOT rich (a la Lauterbrunnen or even Kandersteg). Some houses were in use – with tattered clothes and linens flapping out open windows or on lines. Shortly thereafter, the quality of even the gravel road deteriorated a LOT – the steepness, deep ruts, and embedded rocks worthy of a class II jeep-route. I was definitely bonking – not to mention thirsty and worried about running out of water. Just up the road (under an impressive rock outcrop), there was a super-rundown farm-shack that did not seem to match Sherpa's descriptions; given its appearance and the poor road, we assumed it was unoccupied... save for cows. When we hauled our tired asses up there, however, we were shocked to find a rudimentary hand-made sign indicating available drinks... which we were not going to pass up given the heat. So – if there is such a thing as a Swiss Hillbilly Man-Cave, we found it – NO doubt about that. The adorable skinny little old man (ASLOM) who seemed to be living there spoke hardly any English but conveyed that he could offer up apple-juice (which we accepted) and cigarettes (which we declined). Vanishing into his medieval shack (no sign of electricity or solar), we tried unsuccessfully to talk with one of the other male occupants (there were five total ranging in age from 10 to 70+) as they cleared some space on their deck table. Miraculously, ASLOM procured a medium-sized ceramic pitcher of cool-ish and cloudy apple-juice with two glasses. I could tell by Ellen's flashing glance that she was quite nervous to drink it – where I was, like, NO TURNING BACK NOW... bottoms-up! Tasted fine. Of course – it took a good 20 minutes to drink the whole pitcher (about 3 glasses each) – and it was hard to decide who was the show and who was the audience given that ALL the males sat assembled at the table as we drank. Even though we could not communicate much, it was definitely a "Rick Steves Moment" – in the adept words of Ellen. When we were finished, the little boy briefly took us into the main room of the shed where we think we learned that the GIANT black kettle on the open fire was filled with fresh milk they were making into cheese. However, there were still NO signs of electricity, refrigerators, etc. anywhere. Although ASLOM only wanted to charge us \$3 total, we placed \$10 in his hands and INSISTED... right before taking a few shaky pictures of the memorable group/experience. And for the record: we tried to give him \$20 – but he seemed upset by this offer! Following rest and hydration (howsoever questionable), we had a 20-minute burst of energy as we plodded up the bad road. Said burst ended when the pass, which we THOUGHT was RIGHT there, was MUCH farther away. Shortly thereafter, we were back on a sometimes-muddy,

undulating trail through the grass and we met an older man out with his grandson (down in this creek draw below playing in the water); he said their family was on holiday, renting one of the mountain houses for the week. He thought the pass was still an hour away, which – honestly - was about right... contrary to our expectations. Some good things: the remaining distance was on a gentle trail that was mostly dry and distinct, the comprehensive views wilder and more scenic.



Left to Right: (top) class II road with Swiss Hillbilly Man-Cave, Rick Steves Moment, climbing above the man-cave, final climb to pass; (bottom) FINALLY at the pass, looking back at pass, charcoal anti-toxin, upper meadow descent

Truttlisberg was BARELY a pass; it was, in fact, hard to distinguish it from several other dips in the terrain. In contrast with Sherpa directions, there was not an abundance of gentian (or any flowers!). It was also not very scenic and so, left with few options for lunch, we sat on this barren mound that was a low point relative to grassy knolls all around. Eating lunch, Ellen asked whether I thought we were going to be sick from the apple juice. As I microbiologist, I did question the sanitation level of the suspect storage and drinking environs – enough to pop a prophylactic pepto-bismol chew with my lunch. Despite concerns, though, Ellen was not interested enough to follow suit. Later, I encouraged her to eat some charcoal (which was all over the trail) given a famous pre-nursing student of mine who insisted that eating charcoal removed foodborne bacterial toxins from the body. Although Ellen posed well with said folk-remedy, she didn't take that suggestion to heart either. In the end, there were no ill-effects. I suspect that ASLOM just opened one of those apple juice boxes that don't require refrigeration; it was clear that the father-boy lived lower down the valley (we had seen them tractoring around earlier in the day) and likely supplied the cabin regularly... not to diminish or modernize the antiquated nostalgia of our Rick Steves Moment. From Truttlisberg, it should be noted that the official Via Alpina proceeds in a different direction all the way to richy-rich-rich Gstaad. Although Sherpa presented this very long option, they recommended ending in the small town of Launen – visible in the immediate valley below (vs. Gstaad, another full ridge/valley away). Taking Sherpa's recommendations, we continued over the other side of the pass, the trail rough and poorly marked to the point we had to actively search for markers at times. The upper sections were all in steep short-grass meadows. After half an hour, we arrived back on a gravel road – coinciding with the appearance of simple farm structures. But then we started cutting straight through tall-grass fields that shortcut along the curving road, following Sherpa's advice despite hardly any trail markers. Eventually, we hit car-pavement – zigzagging by well-kept farms and houses.



Left to Right: mid-valley views en route to Launen, sucking hay, final footpath to Launen, entering Launen... pretty house/garden

Indeed, the more we descended, the more affluent the farms seemed – based on a lot of very high-end equipment. Most farmers were actively cutting the fields or loading hay into barns using vacuum hoses. Although Wildstruble was no longer visible, there were some new mildly impressive mountains with glaciers and waterfalls at the head of the valley. At times, the route left the road and took some odd footpath jogs along shady creeks or through forested draws – a welcome relief from the sun, heat, and asphalt. Indeed, the final mile was all along such a route, emerging between two nondescript buildings along the main street through town. It would have been totally anticlimactic had I not been with always-theatrical Ellen – albeit ten minutes behind me. In what remains the first of many awkward segments at the end of this trip, we strolled over to the recommended bus stop – only to find all the times quite different from Sherpa's notations, causing us to question whether this was the stop. Given that it seemed as though our target bus was at least 45 minutes from arriving, we stopped at the first open café – dropping \$20 on a couple drinks and a one-balled ice cream bowls... and

equally so Ellen could make a LONG bathroom pit-stop. In the end, we could have saved a BUNDLE because there were free restrooms and a cheap grocery with ice cream bars RIGHT at the small central bus station. Although there was some confusion about which bus to get on (mostly because the drivers could not communicate well and what they insinuated was different from what the bus placards stated), we eventually boarded an acceptable bus that drove us 20 minutes down the valley to richy-rich-rich Gstaad. There, we had another 45 minute wait for what was to be an 8-minute train to Saanen – where our booked hotel was (begging the obvious question: Why didn't Sherpa just book us in Launen or Gstaad?). Gstaad was as posh and chock-full of beautiful people as Grindelwald – although that did not stop us from parking our grubby asses and gear in the window-seat of this fancy-schmancy bakery/chocolate shop... notably eating puff-pasty wrapped hot dogs RIGHT in the middle of boutique-ville. Of course, someone must have vexed us good because what was about to happen in Saanen was NOT the pleasant end we were hoping for (especially given Sherpa's RAVING commentary about how good the hotel and food were there!).



Left to Right: waiting for the train in Gstaad, Saanen hotel room and WHY it was LOUD, a surprisingly NICE fondue meal in Zurich!

Saanen COULD have been a nice Lauterbrunnen-esque town (albeit - without big cliffs or glaciated peaks) – but, alas, we arrived in the middle of some kind of nutty TV production event. Imagine Good Morning America meets New Year's Rockin' Eve in Switzerland... complete with three co-hosts: a goofy DJ, a round celebrity chef, and the obligatory female eye-candy. Making matters worse, most of the production crew was staying at our hotel – with MAJOR sound and video equipment actively blocking, illuminating, and sometimes deafening the street outside. Hotel staff were also completely usurped by this project to the point we received poor service at every turn. Talk about a clusterfuck! Although they put us on the top/sixth floor, our room faced the CF street below... and no amount of window treatment or earplugs completely cut out the incessant noise. After cleaning up and spending some time packing in preparation for tomorrow's haul back to Zurich, we headed down to the hotel restaurant – hoping for “some of the best food on the tour” (again - a direct quote from Sherpa). Well – that is total bullshit. We received a small salad, boring goulash-style beef chunks (notably tough) over white rice, followed by some kind of plum tart. Seated street-side during the sound-check phase of the production, we were subjected OVER and OVER and OVER again (like at least TWENTY TIMES) to live choruses partially singing “Ain't No Mountain High Enough” – the song CHOSEN by Saanen to represent their town in this apparent Swiss series. Hmmmm... so I have to choose between this and some kind of Trump-machine gun bacon hybrid? Yikes. We're all going to hell. Being that it was closing in on 8 p.m. (the live start of the show), we decided to mosey down to the main stage – half a block away in the town square. For all the set-up and noise, we were embarrassed when we arrived to MANY empty seats... and so we decided to slightly embrace the spirit by at least watching the start. There were no miracles, though... we didn't stay more than 30 minutes, nor did we wind up as American guest-stars on Swiss television. BUT the pistachio gelato being sold by a square-side vendor WAS delicious! Back at the hotel by 10, I fared better than Ellen in my quest for sleep - largely because I tolerate shoved-in earplugs better... but the DJ portion of the show lasted until midnight – followed by LOUD public drinking and bar-noise. Like I said: NOT a pleasant way to end this otherwise delightful journey.

Thankfully, we could enjoy sleeping in the next day... which we did until 9. Although the hotel dinner was nothing to write home about, their breakfast was one of the better buffets on this trip. We caught the 11-ish train from the block-away station, changing trains twice before arriving back in Zurich around 2:30. As with our ride in, the smaller/mountain village trains were empty and pleasant, but the final train to Zurich was hot and crowded (although not as crowded as the one we first rode in to Lucerne). After checking into the airport hotel (my home for the night) and dropping our bags in the room, we headed back to old town Zurich because Ellen needed to make sure I ate some fondue before she jumped on her evening flight back to the Netherlands. Indeed, although I had mentioned wanting to eat melted cheese fondue or raclette repeatedly throughout this trip, I wasn't sure I wanted it now... particularly given that it was 95°C in Zurich. But we had internet-scoped out a nice-looking place with shady outdoor seating and – shockingly – the meal was a memorably good end to this trip. After basic dinner salads, we shared something called “lady fondue” (a lighter cheese with pears and bread for dipping) and a side-plate with more dipping vegetables (steamed carrots, broccoli, and zucchini). The only bad thing about the meal was that the two sweet old ladies frying bacon and melting raclette for themselves right next to us promptly lit up cigarettes to round out their fatty-fat-fat meal. Oh Switzerland - why must you so regularly remind me about your bad health habits!

Closing Thoughts:

I must retrospectively confess that I had many reservations going into this trip: I didn't think this very demanding hike could live up to our amazing but less-demanding hiking experiences in Italy from last summer. During the Tour du Mont Blanc circuit back in 2005, Switzerland struck me as chilly, too stuck on schedules and appearances, and not gastronomically inviting, healthy, or interesting. Given previous Alps experiences, I was also terrified that we were going to suffer through two very hard weeks in horrible weather and dangerous lightening. I was a little concerned that Ellen and I have a colorful history of traveling together, enjoying different philosophies about things like money and guided travel; in Italy, we were diluted by Allison/Marshall – but how would we behave together/alone on this much harder trip? I also was concerned my aging, creaky knees were not going to survive this trip – although testing them out was one of my reasons for choosing this particular itinerary. I suppose it is a miracle I elected to take this on. In the “pro” column, though, were several things: Switzerland was easily our dad's favorite European destination. Although he would have loved what we accomplished, he would not have been able to physically do it when he most traveled Switzerland (i.e. in his 50-60's). Ellen enjoyed two amazing hiking trips to Switzerland in her 20-30's – offering up the potential for good weather! Despite Ellen and my

varied history, she and I accomplished a few hikes in Italy that approached the challenge level on this trip (e.g. my favorite Fiscalina loop) BECAUSE Ellen was more competent than me, and she was willing to be patient and see me through hard terrain.

Ultimately, this trip was FABULOUS but it was as hard as I expected and trained for. Some of my friends FINALLY grasped why I had been training so hard when Ellen and I started sending daily-feed emails/pictures from Switzerland: Yes - THAT IS hard! Indeed, I would rank this section of the Via Alpina among the hardest trips I've ever done - the Wonderland Trail and John Muir/Whitney being the others. It is impossible to say which was THE hardest because each was challenging for very different reasons. What made the Via Alpina hard was the extreme grade (steepness, loose rock, exposure) of the trails; by comparison, the grade of the Wonderland and John Muir are cake... but on those, you are camping, carrying your shit, and/or are at sustained high altitude. Knowing I was going to sleep in a bed every night and eat hot dinners and buffet breakfasts, I consciously willed myself through what were – for me – major challenges. Ellen and I give Sherpa high overall ratings for laying out a great itinerary, choosing decent and varying hotels, and providing excellent value and service for the price. Looking back, I would have gotten THAT much more out of a \$7K guided version of this (other than fancier hotels). It is worth noting that I don't think I would have enjoyed this trip when I was younger. Back in those days, I had a much lower tolerance for road- or village-hiking... and there is a LOT of that on this trip. Having done Mont Blanc and the Dolomites, I came into this experience with a better expectation about what Alps-hiking is like... plus, it is easy to appreciate gravel roads more because they are good breaks from the insane pass grades! Ellen and I are also now old enough where I think we are more settled, quiet, and capable of getting along; this trip was the perfect compromise because it was more than she would usually pay for but it was less than I would usually pay for. Although Ellen is stronger than me (and had to be more patient) on Alps-grade trails, she will concede that I was the trip driver/motivator and she would have not come up with this idea on her own. In the end, she – despite having seen Switzerland before – loved it for the always-impressive scenery and because of the thru-hike nature of this trip: being able to look at the distance between Engleberg and Launen and say "I walked almost all of this..." whether via crazy pass trail or sleepy village road. Of course, much as I loved this trip, I wrote to Allison in the middle of the ginormous-pass bonanza and said: "Don't get your hopes up for me joining you on this in the future... I don't think I can ever hike this again." Indeed, I was very conscious of this reality while hiking it – more conscious than on any other hard hiking trip. But I would readily do Switzerland again – stitching together easier base-camp day-hikes that were a lower-commitment. Of course, I'm not going to rule out ONE daytrip over Hohturli... just not the whole traverse!

Lastly, a longstanding mystery was finally solved by our doing this trip. The adjacent picture (cut from a magazine and framed) has hung in all our childhood homes. All the sisters know the shot well and consider it a fond reminder of our dad – even though we never knew exactly where it was taken/which mountain it is. While sorting my pictures, I finally figured out that it is the Jungfrau taken from near Kleine Scheidegg – a place Ellen and I enjoyed a lot on this trip... thankfully, an easy one where we can definitely return!

