

Bietschhorn – Nordgrat/ North Ridge 3934 m

July 25-26, 2016

Guides: Rüttschi Pollinger and Fernando Jörger

We top off this summer's mountain vacation with an amazing Hochtour that is just as challenging as a 4000-meter peak.

Bietschhorn (3934 meter) has been tempting us for years. It stands alone on the border between Wallis and the Berner Oberland, an imposing sight from the south (the Saastal). Here's an evening view from Saas Fee.

The summit can be climbed from the northeast (Baltschiederklause Hut), reached via a long hike from the Rhone valley, or from the west (Bietschhorn Hut), reached via a shorter hike from the Lötschental.





We choose the Baltschiederklause variant, which means the hut climb itself is 11-12 km each way and over 1500 m height gain, through fascinating, changing climate zones and landscapes.

We park at the Ausserberg/Niwärch tunnel entrance, shoulder our heavy packs and – are in for our first surprise. This pedestrian tunnel-cum aqueduct is 1.6 km long! Tapping along in the cold, damp dark with a malfunctioning headlamp ... then, on the other end, abrupt sun and humidity. On the path high above the Baltschiederbach, we see two people at a little farm, but otherwise there is not a soul around for the first hour.

About 90 minutes into the hike, we catch up with our guide Rüttschi, who is waiting for us among some summer cabins after stashing his bike (this is for his quick getaway tomorrow, after the tour). The water trough provides welcome relief as we splash our heads until our hair is soaking wet.

The next stretch involves winding our way through nettles on either side of the path, looking up to the left to locate the Wiwanni Klettersteig, and wondering when we will catch a glimpse of the Bietschhorn itself. Here's M at the very beginning, still looking fresh but wishing she could ditch her thermal pants for shorts!



The middle part of the hike is a steep meadow with never-ending switchbacks. Now there are alpine flowers along the path instead of nettles, and piles of old snow lie against the valley flanks.





Lunch at a lush spot in the grass, next to a giant boulder, close to the roaring stream. M complains of the heat and thirst. Rüttschi: “Marta, was ist mit dir? Nur ein 3-stündiger Spaziergang.”

We start to overtake groups of hikers: parents and an athletic daughter, carrying all the cargo; 2 macho-men sweating bullets; 8-10 “seniors” with double hiking poles.... Rüttschi points out Stockhorn (the rock climbers’ mountain) 200 m above us on the left, with its weird geodesic bivouac.

After we pass a tiny chapel built by the locals in 1922, the glacial moonscape begins. As the valley curves, we turn the corner and can finally see Bietschhorn – strangely foreshortened, of course. In the giant moraine trough, there are multiple braided streams and numerous bridges. We take a second break, among the boulders, with about an hour left to go to the hut. Here's J pointing up at tomorrow's goal.





Now there is the final grind up to the hut; early on is a plastic barrel with a sign “letzte Tankstelle” – full of cans of drink, for thirsty hikers. The blazes on the rocks have smiley faces or encouraging words.



Here are two views of Baltschiederklause Hut (2780 m), from the approach below and from the 'front yard'. The warden and hut crew are all women. After a Begrüßungstee on the terrace, J & M check out our assigned bunkroom – not fully occupied, just 6-8 other climbers, thankfully. The pillows are rock-hard but the bedding otherwise ok. Back in the Stube, a bowl of Tagessuppe hits the spot.

We will do the climb with Rütschi and a guide-in-training, Fernando Jörger, from Randa. He is a bit shy at first, but warms up to us. At supper (for J, a pretty lame veggie meal), Fernando is both puzzled and entertained by the Jeff & Rütschi show. After the meal, the hut's resident Steinbock poses obligingly – as does Jeff, with tomorrow's route (the right-hand ridge) as a backdrop.



We are up at 0215 for a 0255 departure. Rock-hopping, then crevasse-hopping, all in the dark. Fernando was on the mountain 10 days earlier, so he leads – at first, on the glacier, walking far too slowly for us. Rütschi: “Schneller, sonst fangen die an zu träumen.” – (Go faster, otherwise they will start to daydream). A fully justified warning - M breaks through a snow bridge and finds herself up to her hips in a crevasse. Ugh. (Scrambling out, she pulls a groin muscle, but it’s not serious.)

We take a break at around 0500, at the first signs of dawn (see right). We are underneath a towering slope with the most dangerous rock fall of the whole route. We leave our poles behind, jammed into the snow, and start moving upwards gingerly. Everything is unstable: the bigger boulders, the smaller fill and the mud underneath.



After this nerve-wracking section is done, we have reached the base of the North ridge, a long line of alternating snow/Firn and rock ridge.

At 0645 or 0700, we are on the North Ridge proper. The views open up.



The rock terrain is slow going, as we are still wearing Steigeisen (crampons). In contrast, we chug up the steep snow flanks very well, even in the places where the track is worn to a deep groove or is very narrow. Here is what the final bit of steep snow looks like from below (photo taken later in the day). The highest peak on the right is the Bietschhorn summit.



We stow the Steigeisen.
Hooray, we will be able to
do the rest of the summit
climb, mostly rock, in our
“bare” boots.

Here is J during the break,
surveying some of the
peaks in the Berner
Oberland while chewing
on his second chox bar of
the day.





And here is Fernando, getting ready to set off up the last bit of snow before the summit ridge becomes only rock. He is getting used to guiding Martha, who must be older than his mother. He praises her when she does things right but seems to hesitate with any corrections or criticisms. (This in contrast to Rüttschi, who shouts and mocks and jokes with Jeff the whole time.)

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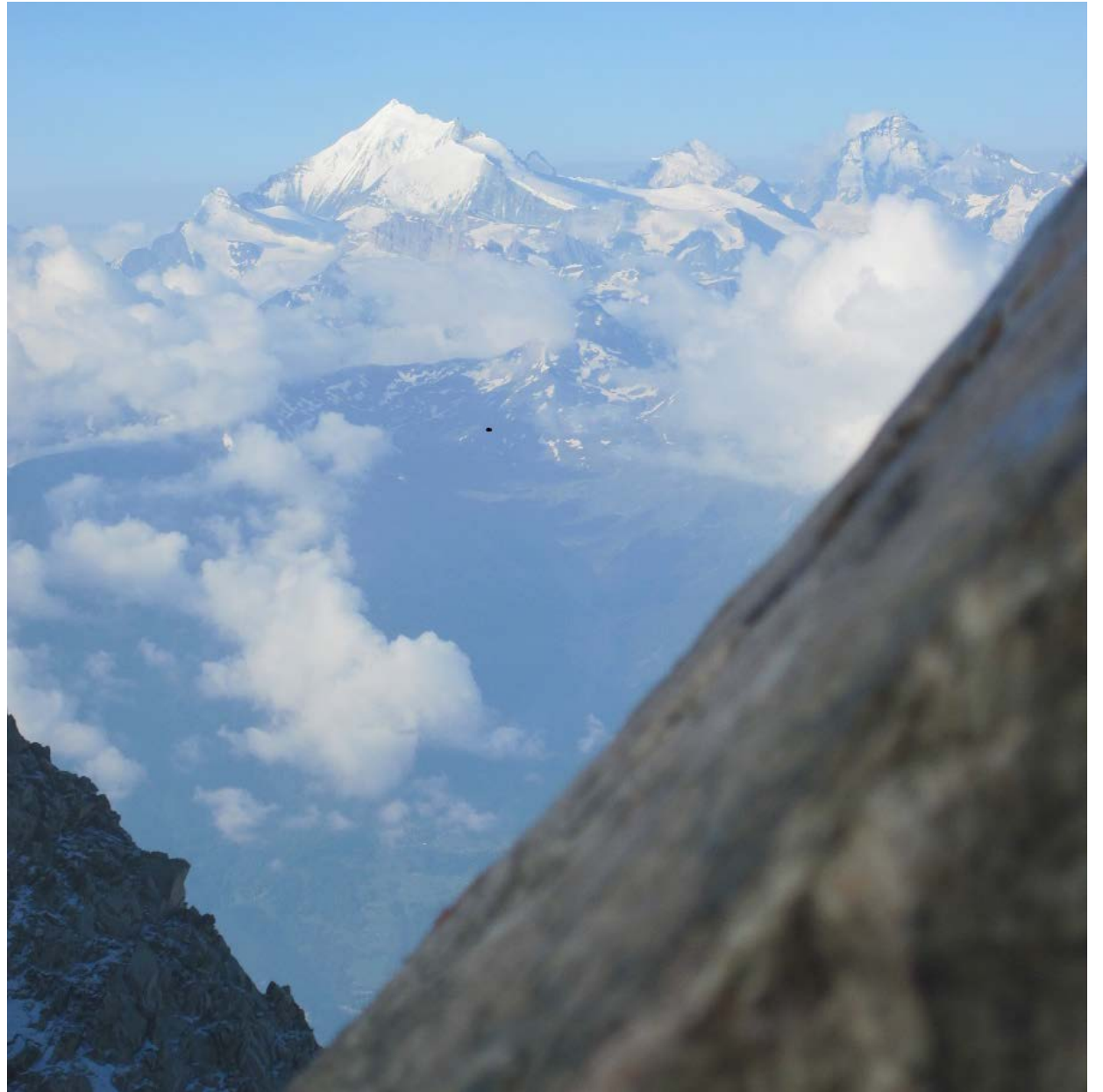
There is some tricky ice on the shadow (right) side of the ridge. The solid rock alternates with loose rubble, and it is all too easy to grab something that simply gives way.

J does really well with the climbing, including on the two crux passages – pictured here – that are rated IV, which come about a third of the way up the rocky part.

Jeff and Rüttschi reach the summit first, at 0820. Jeff snaps these shots of Fernando and Martha arriving a few minutes later (hey, what's the tilt?) and another shot back down the ridge we have just climbed. Until this point on the climb, "our" familiar 4000 meter peaks in the southern Valais have been obscured by the mountain. Now we have fabulous views of a brilliant snowy Weisshorn, the whole row of peaks to the north, and down below, the Lötschental valley floor with its hamlets, which look like toys.



And here they are (from left to right), Weissshorn, Dent d'Hérens and Dent Blanche. Beautiful!!!



Here are two happy campers at the summit – 3934 meters, 0820, 26 July 2016! (J clearly needs some coaching – How to get up at 2AM, climb for 6 hours and, um, not look like a total dork!) And note that M's coat is ... open. The T is a pleasantly mild 0 C.





The wooden summit cross has a plaque at its base.

Just 10 minutes into our Gipfelrast, Thomi Zumtaugwald (our guide from many other tours) and his client Anna join us at the summit. They have climbed the East Ridge (Ostsporn), which is harder than our ridge, and are very enthusiastic about the conditions.

After we turn around to head back down the ridge, time flies. M snaps this photo of Rüttschi after he has secured for an Abseil from the top of the crux pitch gendarme. We finish the rock climbing section of the ridge before we know it.

Then, after we put on the Steigeisen at 1000 in anticipation of an easy descent down the snow slopes, the trouble begins. Our own path up, from just a few hours ago, is impassable.





The snow has melted, leaving a layer of slush on top of hard blue ice. The guides pull out their ice screws, and we spend at least an hour painstakingly Abseiling. Doing this on a very steep, icy slope is not easy. The remainders of the rotten snow sometimes slide away under our feet, like giant surfboards.



We search for patches of rough, pocked ice to get a better grip. Jeff and Martha do a lot of waiting, balancing on slick toe holds, while Fernando and Rüttschi have to do some hard work hauling the ropes up and down, clipping and unclipping, and lowering themselves without a belay above (not safe!) – just using their Steigeisen and a pick.

J took this shot of M during one of the waits, where she has moved off the main snow slope for a safer standing place. She is displaying her soaking wet gloves.

It is a huge relief to reach the rock terrace at about 1130 and to be able to remove our crampons. But we have to focus again to get through the rock fall zone, this time with tired thigh muscles and wet hands. The conditions are truly terrible and, frankly, scary. Each step is followed by an uncontrolled slide of maybe a meter, with loose rock cascading everywhere. And there is no place to secure the rope. Yikes. I sense Rüttschi's nervousness – not a good sign. Move fast and concentrate!

Beneath us, Thomi and Anna are taking a break on the glacier, and we have to be so careful not to knock any rocks on them – or on each other, for that matter.

We find out later that today was the last day this summer when it was possible to climb the Bietschhorn north ridge; the loss of snow cover, and the melt in the rock fall areas made conditions too dangerous.

The final segment, after we retrieve our poles, is a long march over softening snow on the glacier. At times it's flat and at times there is quite a slope. We clench our jaws (and our butts) and manage not to lose our footing and fall. We are moving at our speed limit. The sun gets hotter and hotter; we know this experience of being in the glacial "wok" or "sun mirror" on the way back from a summit.

We enjoy a very happy – but short – break on a rock platform just 20 minutes from the hut. Rüttschi distributes the gummi bears he has been carrying the whole way, as rewards for good behaviour. Better not to relax too much, as our muscles will stiffen up. Approaching the hut, we see what a steep and dangerous drop off it is from the path where we rock-hopped in the dark this morning.



Here is the view down
toward the hut, its
roof glinting in the
sun.



...and the view back up to the rock-fall zone (rocky section on the far right) and the foot of the ridge, from our rest stop.

We arrive at the hut at 1305. Wow! The guides call it 10 hours. As we wait for our lunch of soup and Rösti, we drink liters of mineral water and juice, slowly becoming animated again after our zonked state of low fluids and zero fuel.





Nice to share lunch with Thomi and Anna before they dash away down the trail. Rüttschi and Fernando leave next, and we are finally re-packed and ready to leave the hut at 1505. It always feels unreal to watch the hut recede from view so fast. After just 15 minutes of steep descent on the rough switchbacks, we know this is going to be a Leidensweg.

J keeps up the discipline and tells M we can only stop a few times. The first is near the chapel, when we have left the glacial/moon landscape behind. We thoroughly enjoy day-old sandwiches and “Cola-mischung” and crunchies, sitting in the soft grass in a light rain. There is one loud thunder clap way above us – but luckily no more of that type of danger.

Here is J pointing up to the Stockhorn bivouac. We then cross the roaring stream where we had lunch yesterday. M whines, curses and lags behind, but J keeps on stoically. He does not recall that the way back to the Alpenblick summer cottages is so long and keeps expecting them around the next outcropping.

One short break and another – finally! – at Alpenblick with its water trough. We have descended about 2400 meters since we were on the summit, and have only 300 more to go.



The humidity rises, the peach-colored evening light is special during the last hour's walk before the entrance to the tunnel. This last photo was taken at the little farm; these cows are not at all moved by our heroism...

The march through the cool dark tunnel is total zombiesville; the rushing water in the aqueduct and the echo of drips from the ceiling and of our boots in the wet gravel are mesmerizing. M keeps asking J if he is still awake and still following her.

Hurray, we reach the car at 1940!

Jeff is a champ to drive all the way down the winding narrow roads from Ausserberg to Visp and then back up the Saastal. Rüttschi has sent us an SMS to make sure we made it down.

We shop for an emergency supper at the Migrolino beneath Stalden, and then Martha drives the last stretch back home to Almagell.



Stats:

Parking Place, Niwärch Tunnel (Stollen): 1260 m

Baltschiederklause Hut: 2780 m

Bietschhorn Summit: 3934 m

Hut ascent distance: 11-13 km

Roundtrip distance from hut to summit cross: 13 km

We took 5 hr 20 min to reach the hut from the parking place

We took 5 hr 20 min from the hut to the summit, starting at 0255

After the complications of the descent, we were back at the hut at 1305

The Hochtour itself took 10 hr 10 min (hut to hut)

We left the hut at 1505 and took 4 hr 35 min to descend to the parking place, arriving at 1940

*Total distance from start to finish: 37 km!

*Total descent from the summit to the car: 2670 meters!

