

## KANDERSTEG IS GREAT FOR A TREK!

The area around Kandersteg is a walker's paradise with many possibilities for all levels. Some time ago, I spent three days hiking in the area with a friend and we explored a few of the more famous trails.



The town itself is a throwback to the eighties and is quite old-fashioned in a quaint kind of way. The main street is the beating heart where it all happens -which is not much at any time. A few sport shops, two bakers and a smattering of restaurants are strung along the main street as well as a local small supermarket and a bank. The restaurants mainly serve

local mountain fare with cheese, rösti and/or sausages. One night we ate at one named "The Alpenblick Röschteria" which could easily have served as a film set in the sixties and had about ten different kinds of rösti, including a vegetarian one with bits of salad on the side. On the way to the railway station are a few souvenirs shops and an excellent cheeseshop which I had an eye on for my picnic lunch. However when I got there at just after 12 o'clock the shop was closed as were all the other shops until 2pm. However, the town has a fine little historical museum with a focus on local mountain passes as well as the construction of the 15 km Lötschberg railway tunnel that opened in 1913 and connects the Bernese Oberland to the Valais.

When I was there, at the end of August, an Alphorn festival was in full swing which meant that every evening for a week at 6pm, the local alphorn club gave a 30-minute concert in a different venue around town. After the concert, the alphorns were zipped up in their bags, everyone went on their way and that was the end of the festivities for that day. Nevertheless, the alphorns have a melancholy quality and sound beautiful in the mountains.



Kandersteg is home to one of three world international scout centres. Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the scout movement, often vacationed in the region and took the initiative to build a permanent centre. Every year more than 10.000

scouts from 40 countries meet here and during our stay the town was indeed full of young scouts from many different countries. They were all very well behaved, closely supervised by their leaders and seemed to have a fine time.

The first hike we took was eastwards to the Oeschinensee which is a pristine mountain lake fed by glacial waters from the high mountains that surround it. Situated 1,578 meters above sea level, it is one of the larger alpine lakes and can be reached from Kandersteg by cablecar and a 30-minute walk. It is a popular destination for swimmers, bikers and tourists. From here many treks start for serious hikers who are equipped to tackle the high mountain passes.



The next day we headed north and walked up to the Gemmi Pass. This historical track leads from the Bernese Oberland to the Valais and was the only way to get across before the railway was built. It is a classic hike in summer as well as winter. Mid-way on the hike we had lunch at the Schwarenbach hotel, a former toll-station which is now a restaurant and hotel with delicious food. The hike takes you through pleasant alpine meadows as well as bleak and rugged mountains. Finally it passes the Daubensee and ends at the Gemmi pass from where a cable car descends to Leukerbad. On the way we passed a farm where we chatted with the farmer's wife who sold us some delicious cheese that was freshly made there. She showed us the cheese-making plant which was really minuscule and to me it is clear that farmers really do need their subsidies to continue to exist on small holdings that are so much part of the Swiss alps.



On the last day, we went west and climbed up to the Alme alp – a strenuous three hour hike that left us gasping. Luckily up the top was a nice alpine snack bar with cold drinks and great sausages as well as several varieties of rösti. We came down by cable car and passed a solid sheer rock wall where people do scary climbs with ropes and helmets. Interesting to watch but not my cup of tea.

The journey to Kandersteg can easily be done by train either via Bern or via Brig (through the Lötschberg tunnel). We stayed in the Victoria – Belle Epoch hotel which is in the middle of town and very pleasant with friendly people.