

Now that the days are getting longer and the terraces of restaurants have re-opened, many of us, like Chaucer's pilgrims, are turning our thoughts to travel. With so much beauty and variety in our own country we are spoilt for choice, but if you enjoy walking in the mountains, I would recommend the Val d'Anniviers, where my partner and I headed after the lockdown lifted in early summer last year.

Easily accessible from Nyon, the Val d'Anniviers is one of the loveliest of the valleys in the Pennine Alps, with the Matterhorn, Ober Gabelhorn and Weisshorn at its head, and a wide selection of trails. The valley divides into three branches at Vissoie, due south leading to Zinal; south-west leading to Grimentz and Moiry; and south-east leading to St Luc and Chandolin. In July 2019 the Friday Walkers had spent their three-day walk at Grimentz, but we chose St Luc as our base.



*View from the hotel of Besso, Ober Gabelhorn and Matterhorn*

We planned a walk from each of the centres, starting at Zinal along a flat path from the end of the village through pastures where black cows contentedly grazed. The view in front was dominated by the twin peaks of Besso, the first big mountain I had climbed when I first arrived in Switzerland more than 50 years ago; the date we set foot on its summit was unforgettable, as it was the same day that Neil Armstrong had set foot on the moon. But we had no intention of going so far last year, and the path even to the Cabane du Petit Mountet seemed to have got steeper over the years, with the rockier parts protected by chains to bypass small streams and waterfalls. As we gained height we came out into an open valley, with alpenrose at the side of the path and views of the Weisshorn to our left, and finally the hut came into view at the top of the moraine above us, with a terrace of brightly coloured umbrellas. Here the glacier was rubble-strewn and dirty, but there was a glorious view of the glistening white peaks above it. On past occasions I had continued on to the much higher Cabane du Grand Mountet, one of the most beautifully situated huts in the Swiss Alps, directly opposite the north face of the Ober Gabelhorn. But this path up the western side of the glacier can no longer be used as crumbling moraine and glacial recession has made it too dangerous, and



*Walking towards Besso*

now the safer route to take is on the opposite bank along the flanks of Besso, on a path constructed some years ago by the Swiss army.

The following day we woke to glorious sunshine and took the early funicular to Tignousa, an easy way to gain 500m height. Our objective was the *Sentier des Lacs*, the Lakes Trail, a 14km circuit below the 3000m Bella Tola. We set out along the Planets Trail, a scale model of the solar system with sculptures of each of the planets, quickly passing the six closest together: Sun, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars and Jupiter – on a much grander scale than the one we had recently walked along at the Lac de Divonne with the Wednesday Walkers. The path led towards the large square building of the Victorian Hotel Weisshorn on the ridge high above us, on the route taken by the annual Sierre-Zinal mountain race, a gruelling 31km run, with 2200m height gain and 1100m loss, sadly cancelled last year. After passing the models of Saturn and Uranus further along, we turned off the main track to take a narrow path to the left which led uphill through slopes of tiny black vanilla orchids, bright blue trumpet gentians and delicate yellow pulsatilla anemones, with pink moss campion clinging to the rocks higher up. We soon reached the first lake at Plan Torgnon and then continued steeply uphill to the beautiful Lac de l'Armina, a peaceful spot for our picnic lunch. Facing us in the distance were the peaks of the Val d'Hérens above Arolla, another lovely valley. After lunch the path became an undulating, rocky scramble to reach our final lake, the Lac de Bella Tola, 500m below the summit of the mountain. Although the views were still glorious, the slopes were now scarred by ski-lifts and avalanche barriers, and we hurried downhill to the Cabane de Bella Tola for a quick drink before returning on the funicular for a delicious Swiss fondue back in our hotel.



On our third day we drove up to Chandolin, the highest village in the valley and once home of the intrepid Swiss explorer Ella Maillart, where a small museum is a testament to her action-packed life. One of her most famous exploits was in 1935, accompanying the British explorer Peter Fleming on an overland journey on the Silk Route from Peking to the Taklamakan Desert in Sinkiang and across the Karakorum Pass into what was then British India – a journey that I had made in 1979 in the reverse direction, and had made the topic of one of my Armchair Adventures talks.

After taking the chairlift to Tsapé, we started on a circular trail which undulated past small lakes between the Schwarzhorn and the Illhorn. The path was flat as far as the Lac Noir, but then became a steep and rocky scramble down towards the Illsee 200m below. We were soon overtaken by a group of youngsters racing downhill, carrying what looked like fishing nets. We assumed these were for use in the lake, but when they stopped above it, we discovered they were a group of French botanists – and we never did find out what the nets were for! It was indeed a wonderful spot for botanising, the ground covered with a spectacular display of alpine flowers: gentians, alpenrose, pulsatilla anemones, white Paradise lilies and several different kinds of orchids in addition to the ubiquitous black vanilla. After the lake the path climbed steeply uphill to reach the only patch of snow we crossed on any of our walks, just below the Pas de l'Illsee.



*Illsee with the peaks of the Bernese Oberland*

And it was here too that we met the only foreign tourists we encountered, a group of Belgians who commented that for them Switzerland was not far away, a mere 800km drive! We were now at the northern end of the Val d'Anniviers, and the view from here looked across the Rhône Valley to the peaks of the Bernese Oberland. The signpost at the col stated that the summit of the Illhorn was just 30 minutes higher, but we were not tempted, preferring a gentle stroll downhill for a drink at the Cabane Illhorn before returning to our car at Chandolin.



*Relaxing at the Cabane Illhorn*

moraine of the glacier, but our route this year was on the opposite side of the dam, towards the Alpage de Torrent. The track led gently uphill, past slopes of large yellow bell-flowers and tiny green frog orchids, both rare but growing in profusion here, and continued up to the Lac des Autannes. It was a lovely spot, with the snow-covered peaks of the Dent Blanche, Grand Cornier and Ober Gabelhorn rising above the Moiry glacier at the end of the valley. We could just make out walkers on the top of the col above us which led down to the Val d'Hérens, but we turned back down to Moiry for our drive home, after an idyllic few days free of Covid restrictions. With so many more trails to explore, we are already planning our next visit.

For our last walk we drove down through Vissoie to the lovely village of Grimentz, the chalets with window-boxes of colourful geraniums, and then up a long winding road to the high dam at Moiry and the lake beyond. On past occasions I had walked from here up to the Cabane de Moiry, spectacularly sited on the



*Socially isolating at the Lac des Autannes*

*Article and photos by Pamela Harris*