

# Saastal

When deciding which resort to visit in the Valais, most of us invariably choose Zermatt, with its iconic views of the Matterhorn. As a result, the neighbouring Saastal is often overlooked, but this has equally spectacular mountain scenery, with some of the highest peaks in the Swiss Alps. The valley is easily accessible from Nyon by train or car, the advantage for car-drivers being that you do not have to leave your car at Täsch and pile all your belongings into the train for the final leg of the journey, as you do for Zermatt. An added bonus is that with overnight accommodation in a hotel, self-catering apartment or even a campsite, the Saastal Guest Card gives summer visitors free rides on all the post-buses and lift facilities in the valley. It was the Saastal that the Friday Walkers chose for their three-day trip at the end of June this year and those who participated will recognise some of the walks described here.

There are four villages in the Saastal, the most well-known being Saas-Fee. Situated on a sunny shelf at 1800 metres above the main valley, this has grown exponentially since the road was paved in the early 1950s and skiing became increasingly popular. It is now a Mecca for winter sports enthusiasts, with plenty of accommodation available. However, I find it much more pleasurable in summer when the walking trails open up and the mountainsides are green and flower bedecked. This summer was even more enjoyable than most, for the pandemic had restricted foreign tourists and everywhere was much less busy.

With several cable cars starting in the village, you can be wafted up to 3000 metres in just a few minutes. These lifts are used mainly by mountaineers and hikers, but at the top of each there is a restaurant with a view and a terrace for a leisurely lunch, basking in the high-altitude sun whilst gazing at the numerous 4000 metre peaks. There is even a revolving restaurant at the top of the high Mittelallalin lift, an ideal lunch stop for those who do not want to walk.



*Walking from Hannig*

We found that the lower trails were more enjoyable, so chose the lift to Hannig for our first walk. It was a gloriously sunny day at the beginning of August as we set out on a contouring trail high above the village. It was difficult to choose whether to look in front or below, for before us was a panorama of snow-covered peaks and at our feet a myriad of alpine flowers. The trail crossed streams and waterfalls to reach the other side of the valley at Gletschersee, the Glacier Lake, a wide expanse of milky water. We entered the woods to reach grassy meadows above the village, where cows grazed peacefully and the marmots had been fed by so many tourists that they were almost tame.

Saas-Grund lies at the foot of the road leading to Saas-Fee, and from here a cable car takes you up to 3200 metres at Hohsaas. The view from here is one of the best in the valley for eighteen of the surrounding 4000 metre peaks can be seen. A panorama trail leads across the snowy rocks, past information boards naming each peak, the date it was first climbed, and by whom. Most were climbed in the “Golden Age” of mountaineering, mainly by Victorian alpinists from Britain, accompanied by Swiss guides. Straight ahead across the valley is the Mischabel range, though its highest peak, the Dom, was shrouded in cloud when we were there.

From Hohsaas we took the cable car down to Kreuzboden for what has become one of my favourite walks in the Valais, the “*Blumenweg*” or Flower Walk. From the lift a trail led eastwards across grassy slopes to join a section of large boulders and an avalanche slope, giving spectacular views. At our feet were numerous alpine flowers, with small boards along the trail naming each, and although we were too late for the trumpet gentians, we found some alpenrose still in flower, and a few edelweiss hiding in the long grass. It was a colourful walk, with bright pink dianthus, lilac-coloured field gentians, black vanilla orchids and bright blue perforated bellflowers, *campanula excisa*, which I have only seen growing in this valley. But the most exciting find for me was the rare King of the Alps, *Eritrichium nanum*, its tiny bright blue flowers clinging to the rocks.



*Panorama trail  
at Hoh-Saas*



*Eritrichium manum  
(King of the Alps)*

A popular walk from Saas-Grund is the historic “Kappellenweg”, the Path of the Chapels, leading to Saas-Fee past fourteen small wayside shrines, each depicting a different episode in the life of Christ and his mother Mary. The shrines were built in 1709 and contain over a hundred wooden carved and painted figures, culminating in an elaborately decorated chapel to Mary, scene of an annual pilgrimage each September. From here a gently descending path leads to the village of Saas-Almagell, past the attractive restaurant at Bodmen where we enjoyed a typical Valaisian lunch of *rösti mit spegelei* on a sunny terrace.

Saas-Almagell is the southernmost of the villages, with two chairlifts leading to the north. From Furggstalden at the top of the lower lift there is an exciting “adventure trail” across the steep rocky slopes of the Almagellerhorn, traversing metal ladders, along rungs bolted to the cliff face, and over high suspension bridges. Needless to say, this is not a trail for the faint-hearted! However, there are easier walks from the top of these lifts which lead into the wild, secluded Fürggtälli. This is an unspoilt valley where you will meet few others as the only restaurants are at the top of the lifts and there are none higher up. At the head of the valley is the Antrona Pass, a medieval trade route into Italy, an eight hour walk from the top of the lift.

The road continues above Saas-Almagell to Mattmark and the high dam and its lake. This was the scene of one of Switzerland’s worst disasters, for while the dam was being built in 1965, a huge landslide of ice and debris engulfed the construction site, killing almost a hundred of the workers. Now there is a monument at the foot of the dam listing the names of those killed, most of whom were Italian, for this is very near to Italy. From the lake a trail leads

southwards to the border at the Monte Moro pass high above, another medieval trade route which crosses to Macugnaga. On the rocks at the top of the pass is a large statue of the Golden Madonna, which on a good day can be seen for miles.



*Campanula excisa* (Perforated Bellflower)

The Saastal is one of my favourite valleys, and I have made several visits here since first arriving in Switzerland more than fifty years ago. Undoubtedly the most exciting of these were in my early years when I was a mountaineer, climbing up to the Britannia Hut high above to embark on my first 4000 metre peak. But that is another story, and the Britannia Hut merits a special article of its own!

*Article and photos by Pamela Harris*