

ISU excursion to Switzerland, Summer 2013



At first going on a botanical field trip to Switzerland did seem a bit like the odd visit to your local Botanical Garden and more so since previous tours went to destinations as illustrious as the North of Norway and Sikkim/ India. A closer look at the map and recollections of various visits to the part of Switzerland in question put that straight almost immediately.

So a group of 16 enthusiasts from Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, the UK, South Tyrol and even two from the US set off on Sunday, 14th of July 2013.

Already anticipation was high and fuelled further with curiosity as we travelled to our destined accommodation, a hotel situated loftily above the valley. The hotel welcomed us with old-fashioned charme - a traditional house, carefully restored and done up through the years and sensibly run well off the beaten track of fast and mainstream hotel management. A fitting 'base camp' for our stay in Switzerland and a choice as masterfully planned and executed as the whole expedition by Andres Altwegg. He welcomed us on arrival with a short itinerary of the things to come.

Monday morning started off with a lecture by Walter Dietl, a vegetation ecologist, who introduced us to the habitat of alpine pastures and hay meadows. The staggering biodiversity of these sumptuous flowering expanses was diligently explained, its flowers and grasses classified in taxonomical detail. Even when it came down to discerning features as minute as the ligule (a row of delicate hairs at the leaf sheath) - all was described studiously while staying on the right side of entertaining. *Bromus erectus* was named the most dominant and common species of grass, together with *Centaurea rhaetica* and *C. nigra* and the occasional, more elusive variety of *Gymnadenia conopsea* and *Orobanche*. Cutting the grass very late in the year (not before the 15th of July) is essential to accomplish such biodiversity, which is why the Swiss government makes funding available to those who harvest accordingly.

The day continued with taking the steep route to Alp Curtignatsch by minivan, i.e. negotiating hefty climbs and hair-pin bends to an altitude of 2400m. There an alpine flora greeted us in all its splendour as early *Soldanella pusilla* and *Primula integrifolia* put on flowering displays right next to white expanses of snow. According to the exposure to sunlight *Ranunculus montanus*, *Polygonum viviparum*, *Cerastium* and of course *Gentiana* varieties further festooned the slopes. Out came the identification guides or in case of the smartphone aficionados the *Flora Helvetica* app, thanks to a good satellite reception.

On returning to our hotel after that exciting if challenging tour it took but a small breather to restore everybody sufficiently to enjoy an excellent dinner by the end of the day.

Day Two began with an introduction into the habitat of the Ibex (Capricorn in Romansh language) and their history on Swiss territory. Hunted to extinction by the 17th century they were re-established artificially in the 20th century. Nowadays the Capricorn population has recovered to levels that warrant control through hunting. The impressive creature is aptly so the heraldic beast of Graubünden and notably of the Beverin Natural Park.

Needless to say we endeavoured to see them in their natural environment, again setting out from Alp Curtignatsch. The local game keeper took us on a magnificent circular tour past fields of snow and glacial lakes and up to an altitude of 2650m. Soon he realised that botanists and gardeners operate on a somewhat different concept of time. However, the astute botanical expertise which came into the bargain mostly made up for the fact.

Again the mountainous terrain teemed with the familiar sights of plant species such as *Arabis alpina* and *Hutchinsia alpina*, along with *Gnaphalium norvegicum*, *Dianthus sylvestris* and *Crepis alpestris*. While getting our fill of beautiful alpine flora we failed to spot our quarry - the capricious Capricorns, who had by all accounts a good laugh at us from their vantage points.

But we were reconciled as a chamois paid a brief encounter, marmots frolicked in the meadows and a couple of eagles soared into the sky on our return journey. And after all our guide had cautioned us in advance: the essential part of hunting is stalking the prey and even with plenty of luck that can be a tricky fixture at times.

At the evening talk we were given a good summary on the founding of the Beverin Natural Park. It stretches across an area of approximately 370ha and includes a number of participating communities, home to some 2500 people. The widespread commitment of the locals has attracted further support by the canton and federal funding thus enabling a soft approach to tourism in favour of conservation and sustainability.

Wednesday was set aside for a hike through the Rhine valley near Flims. There a massive land slide dumped an enormous amount of rock, earth and rubble into the valley about 10,000 years ago. Over time the river dug its way through, into a new bed, and so created the spectacular scenery of rock faces seen there today. The Rhaetian Railway running along the banks of the Rhine dwindles to the proportions of a toy train in comparison. Though challenging a hike that had us soaked in sweat at times, it paid rich rewards for its fascinating geology and plant life. There was *Actaea spicata*, flowering and fruit bearing simultaneously, *Epipactis purpurea*, catching the eye with its spark of dazzling colour amazing in such a small flower and *Anthericum ramosum*, somewhat an 'old acquaintance' by now.

Thursday had a more cultural and historical focus, namely the upper section of the river Rhine as it passes through a particularly steep gorge. Our expert tour guide enlightened us on a number of interesting details: An age-old trade route passed through these mountains since antiquity, stretching from Lake Como via Splügen mountain pass down to the Lake of Constance. It largely follows the run of the Upper Rhine by snaking through deep ravines and finding a footing along its banks. A passage used early on by Roman forces as they negotiated their way into Germania it became a means of advance not only in terms of conquest but of impressive cultural influx. Its detailed description would certainly burst the scale of this report, so here is one good advice in short: go see! Of course having the advantage of a tour guide as proficient as ours made both history and significance of the route more tangible for us. There are sights to appraise in abundance, be it architectural gems or natural beauty. Our pick was St. Martin, the delightful Romanesque church at Zillis. Once on the Splügen mountain pass, plenty of travellers felt the need for spiritual sustenance and prayers as weather, terrain and the latent danger of robbery or worse made for a treacherous passage. Many a prayer for a safe journey issued from that little church founded back in ancient times. Inside, perfectly preserved paintings adorn the wooden panelled ceiling in a manner unparalleled in the world.

Then a small hike took us to Andeer. Again path and pastures teemed with a multitude of species, some familiar from the nursery such as *Aconitum lycoctonum* in full bloom, some more obscure such as *Vincetoxicum*. It was the umbels of *Laserpitium siler*, *Daucus carota*, *Heracleum sphondylium* and *Carum carvi* that had even the seasoned gardener at a loss occasionally.

Another unique site awaited us later on in the afternoon: the Rofla Gorge. As the story goes, a Swiss man, who had emigrated to the US, eventually went to visit the Niagara Falls and was astonished to discover caves behind the cataracts. Once homesickness set in he remembered the family home at the Rofla Gorge and thought the place oddly reminiscent of the Niagara Falls. After returning to his native country he commenced to create a marvel of a scenery in years of dedicated and bone-breaking labour. It features staggering rock faces, cascading water and mists that sometimes obscure the view, *Saxifraga cotyledon* clinging to cracks in the stone and ferns galore due to ideal conditions.

Friday: We travelled by bus to Juf, at 2612m above sea level the most elevated settlement in Europe inhabited all year round. Tight, twisting roads lead the way up through a narrow gorge to the high plateau where lush pastures greeted us with a wide array of species. As the first harvest had just gone underway there were yet plenty of flowers in full bloom for us to behold. The variety of plants made for a rich floral display and a radiance of colour quite breathtaking, starting with species common to the meadows such as *Leucanthemum*, *Centaurea* and *Dactylorhiza*, while *Viola* was hiding between boulders and the early flowers of *Helianthemum nummularium* dazzled from the rocks.

Bistorta almost dominated the wet pastures and the banks of small burns. Campions bloomed exuberantly and *Veratrum viride* showed its finely structured blossoms. For a gardener in pursuit of some new varieties of, lets say *Geranium sylvaticum*, there would have been quite a few prospective candidates to take home yet.

Next item was by contrast the gigantic dam at Valle di Lei. What seems like a plain concrete barrier on the outside reveals a most intricate machinery inside - plenty of technology and careful monitoring to alert to malfunctions immediately. Though an impressive feat of engineering it was, we exited the building with a feeling of relief as we returned to plant life, meadows and culinary delights - indulging in a full course rustic Italian dinner at the end of the day.

Saturday was set aside for a trip to a Walser settlement. Driven by proud independence the Walser people gained the privilege to settle as free mountain farmers at altitudes of 1500 - 2000m. Outside the cities the Walser remained free from bondage tax and other serf's duties and were not bound to land or its lord. From the Southern Alps they brought with them a distinctive style of architecture which they maintained for centuries in much the same manner as their idiosyncratic lifestyle and their management of agriculture. On site a small authentic museum is well stocked with exhibits telling the history and showcasing many of the customs and traditions so central to the Walser population's way of life.

The day continued with a hike through a small valley and more botanizing of what embellished the side of paths and the meadows. Then the group split up in two. One group remained in the valley and eventually returned by bus, the other went up another taxing 850m to the Carnusa mountain pass and down the other side in a long descent leading directly back to the hotel. With the emphasis on taking a long mountain walk, the pace was leisurely enough to enjoy the sight of *Gentiana lutea* still budding at pass level in close proximity to fields of snow whereas down in the valley it had almost finished flowering.

And at last and a nice touch at that after our arduous climb - there they were, hailing from a distance: the Capricorns.

The last evening at our nice, comfortable hotel we spent as pleasantly as our stay on the whole, thanks to Barbara Gaetzi and her team which catered lovingly to our every need. We are also indebted to Andres Altwegg, who organised and meticulously prepared for the trip - even doing the various tours beforehand just to make sure. Here's our Thanks to you and a wish: hopefully there will be another trip soon!

Jakob Hokema



Veratrum viride

Text and Images by Jakob Hokema