Dürrenhorn-Nadelgrat Traverse

21-22 July 2013
Guides: Thomi Zumtaugwald and Danilo Kalbermatten
Our tour will be along the ridge of 4000 meter peaks pictured below, some of which we have already explored from the south (left) in previous summers. This time, we will come at the ridge from the north, starting at the Bordier Hut – which is out of the picture to the right. Either way, the tour has no lifts to help with the hut approach, and the area feels very remote - for the Swiss alps!

The Dürrenhorn is the high peak on the far right.
This is a view of Dürrenhorn (Dirruhorn in dialect), taken in a dry summer. Our route will lead up the Sella Couloir on the right, shown in green. From the summit, we will continue to the left.
We have a relaxed start, driving to the tiny village of Gasenried, above Grächen, and parking our car around 1100/11AM.

Here is J posing in Gasenried, behind him the massive, crevassed Ried glacier and a portion of the Nadelgrat ridge. This line of peaks is where we hope to be tomorrow! From left to right, they are Nadelhorn, Stecknadelhorn, Hohberghorn and Dürrenhorn.
The warm sun pokes through larches and pines as we head up along the stream that empties the Ried glacier. There are countless, teetering Steinmännchen (markers) people have built along the route (left picture).
At 2100 m, we enter a long meadow called Alpija, enclosed by the mountainside on one side and a high glacial moraine on the other. There are thousands of Alprosen growing here, and we tip our hats at the sheep and the group of locals here for a Sunday BBQ.
Here’s our Alpenrose trail at the upper end of the Alpija meadow, the last bit of green before we enter the world of the glacier and its rocky moraines. Note the flank of an ibex fleeing us, at lower right.
It’s cloudy and about 10 C on the lower reaches of the Ried glacier. The tilted, rock-strewn and summer-blackened surface rises from 2650 to about 2750 m. From this point, we know it’s just 30-40 minutes to the Bordier Hut, at 2890 m. M, left, picks through a rocky patch, while J, right, gives a sense of the scale. The glacier behind him is only half the expanse we have to cross before the final ascent over rock to the hut.
On the glacier, one of our guides, Danilo Kalbermatten, passes us in gym shorts, carrying a nearly empty pack and going twice our pace! This will be our first tour with him, so at this point we don’t recognize that it’s our guide. The photo right shows him later in the tour, with full gear.
Rain showers upon arrival at the hut (2890 m). The warden’s wife Heidi, with her brown braids and big smile in that broad, tanned face, remembers us from last year!

Yummy Rosti and Tagessuppe are the reward for climbing up 1230 m in just 3 hours and 55 minutes, with heavy packs. We have to share a room with 7 people – some of them already snoozing. The beds are too short for J, as usual.
We enjoy the antics and posing of the hut cat, who is not allowed inside. Here is J in the evening sun, showing the hut’s view of the peaks we hope to scale tomorrow.
And here is M sending a text to her friend Coral in Vancouver from the hut flagpole – which is the only place with phone reception!

A jolly time at dinner, and special Spinattaschen for our vegetarian. Thomi’s story about the overcrowded Mischabel Hut the night before, and the shirtless, smelly Frenchman next to him in the bed...

Evening thunderstorms with a lightning strike too close to the hut for comfort!

Neither of us can sleep well, which is a surprise given our by now good acclimatization.
The next morning, Thomi, Dani, M and J are the first to leave the hut, at 0250. J ropes up with Thomi and M with Dani. Negotiating the loose rock and boulders of the trail is difficult with Stirnlampen only. We ford a stream and realize we are now officially on the glacier. First, an hour’s trek without Steigeisen on only slightly soft snow. The surface holds us well, as we avoid the uneven, rutted track made by climbers yesterday. Glacial crevasses in a steep stretch keep us alert, and big steps up keep us warm.

This picture, taken in the earliest light at 0430, shows Biggerhorn and Balfrin, on the opposite side of the glacier. It gives a sense of the enormous expanse of this glacial bowl, about 3 km across in both directions.
Several climbing duos are underway, their lamps dotting the landscape. Four choose the “standard” route, to the left of the Dirru summit. We four strike out alone, to climb up the Sella Couloir, which at 300 meters’ height is the longest and steepest of this range. Here are M and J taking a quick break for a drink before we start up the Couloir, at 0510.
Numerous falling rocks and the daily melt and freeze have created vertical chutes. We have to cross over (and back) these washboard ridges in a zig-zag ascent, instead of going straight up the fall line. Thomi volunteers to do the hard work of leading. He hacks away, making many steps in the hard snow, and especially in the ice near the top of the couloir.
Here’s Thomi’s snapshot of us all, looking down from a place about 2/3 of the way up the couloir. Steep, eh?!
... and here’s the sunrise we see, once we tear our gaze away from the ice and snow in front of our noses and look across the glacial bowl. The peak with the cloud on top is Fletschhorn.
Our first summit shot. It took us just 55 minutes to climb the entire Sella Couloir! Another hour of rock climbing, and we are at the top of the summit block of Dirruhorn (4035m) at 0715. What on earth has happened to J’s hair?!
As we break for food and drink at the summit cross, other parties approach up the ridge from the Hohberg side.
Thomi continues to take great photos, and we marvel at the views of Dom, in the bright sun at 0715, and of the Nadelgrat peaks. Weisshorn (pictured here) looks as majestic as ever.
Here’s the ridge from Dirru down and back up to Hohberghorn (4219 m). In the back right is the bulk of Dom (4545 m), and back left is the continuation of “our” ridge to Stecknadelhorn (4241 m) and Nadelhorn (4327 m), about 1.3 km away. We will traverse it all!
Then the fateful moment. M sets down her Steigeisen/crampons, carefully wrapped in their straps for stowing away. But the place she has chosen is on unstable rock ... Before anyone can react, the Steigeisen start to roll and tumble and fly a hundred meters down toward the Dom glacier. No way even a guide can climb down and retrieve them. 30 minutes of thinking about solutions out of this dilemma. A phone call to Pius - Is the north ridge a plausible exit route? No! We reject the helicopter rescue option, at least for now, and decide to proceed along the ridge line as originally planned, one segment at a time – but missing a crucial piece of equipment!

The next section is possible to climb without Steigeisen, which is enjoyable. There are just enough hard moves to make you pant in the thin air, plus some cornices that take away your breath for reasons other than exertion! The first exit option to try is to rappel down a couloir between Dirru and Hohberg (the red line in slide 3 above) – no one has been either up or down this chute. Thomi secures and Danilo ropes up and disappears backward, out of our view. We hear loud cracks and then thuds of a rock fall Dani has set off! Luckily, he is ok. Yikes, that was a bit close for comfort.

Our next option is to try to traverse all the peaks on the ridge with each guide wearing only one crampon, and M in a borrowed pair. The snow is ok, and there are no extensive icy sections, so we are able to continue both to Hohberghorn and to Stecknadelhorn. The ascent to Hohberg has a well-deserved reputation for loose rock, but we clamber over blocks and up ledges just fine. Pay attention and just don’t grab anything before testing whether it will hold solid! Thomi remains chatty and upbeat, although he did enforce a 30-minute ‘thinking period’ right after the Steigeisen fell, so as not to make any rash decisions.
We reach the Hohberghorn summit (4219 m) at 0910. M has no memory of this summit – surely it felt like an achievement at the time. Hmm, probably distracted with problem-solving. Danilo and Thomi ask other guides about the snow and ice conditions on the ridge to Nadelhorn, and they hear it should be doable with just one Steigeisen – for them, of course, not for us. Here we are, packing up after rearranging our gear.
As we pass another possible exit point provided by the Hohberg west face (the wall we climbed in 2001 with Marc Derivaz), J and M peer down the long slope and recall the effort.

At 1000, we take a longer break on the wide flat “Sattel” – pictured here - between Hohberg and Stecknadel (4241 m). We can see the Nadelgrat ridge line from the west side, and follow it all the way over to Lenzspitze (far right in this photo).
We enjoy watching the many climbers on Dom, reduced to the size of insects making tracks up the enormous glacier.
J and Thomi go first on the very steep rock ascent to Stecknadelhorn. The approach up 100 meters of steep snow is easy, but then, when we hit the rock, J is frustrated because he is not climbing well in Steigeisen. In one spot, you have to lower yourself by the arms (the reverse of a pull-up) to get around one of the big blocks. It feels so scary to have only air beneath the soles of your boots. M chats with Dani about her earlier sports, partly to boost confidence in the strength of her hands!
After many twists and turns and steep sections with ledges above the huge drop down to the Domgletscher, we are finally at the Stecknadelhorn summit (4241 m) at 1055. The cross at this summit is special, with its Bergführer motif.
Dani checks the Gipfelbuch, while we grin for the camera. Behind M in this photo is a section of the ridge we have just completed. Hohberghorn, with its 300-meter East Face, is the most prominent feature.
Finally, the light bulb goes on! “Shuttling” across this last traverse (snow track to the right and a little above Thomi’s head) will allow us to complete the tour as planned, short one set of Steigeisen.

Here’s how it works: Thomi takes back M’s borrowed Steigeisen and he and J traverse together. Then J removes his Steigeisen and sits - securely! - on a big boulder to wait for us. (You can see it at the end of the snow track.) Thomi runs back along the track with the free set of Steigeisen at top speed, flaunting his fitness (see photo). Once more, M gets her spikes back, and the three then traverse to Jeff – who in the meantime has fallen asleep at 4200 m in the warm sun. ☺
This ridge of Nadelhorn is infamous for its mixed snow and ice, which inexperienced climbers often underestimate. We all recall various tales of gruesome falls, and thus take great care downclimbing with Steigeisen (red descent line on left), especially after nearly 10 hours of exertion – captured in the entire red line!
Once we are off the rock, there is deep snow, slushy in places, as we approach the Windjoch in burning midday sun. J and Thomi race ahead; M’s thigh muscles can’t handle any big strides, up or down. M and D catch up at the Ulrichhorn summit (3925 m), after the final steep snow climb, which is the last real ascent of the tour. The fabled park bench at the summit is occupied by other climbers, so we make bucket seats in the snow bank out of the wind. It feels good to eat and drink and relax. We rib our guides for smoking a cigarette – something we rarely see Thomi do. Maybe he, too, is relieved to have the improvised part of the tour (with one Steigeisen) over.

By the time we start down the broad snow flank of Ulrich to the Ried glacier, just before 1300, a high cloud cover has moved in and wet snow starts to fall. This turns to sleet during our long trek across the glacier. At least it’s all downhill and there is no wind. We are also grateful that much of the glacier surface is still hard enough to bear our weight. We do the whole distance to the far lip of the glacier with no Steigeisen – ample chance to practice “skiing” on your boot soles!
It is a wonderful feeling to look up over our left shoulders to the three peaks we have just climbed and traversed, and to study the couloir we ascended so many hours ago.

The last challenge of the Hochtour is the very steep, broken rim of the glacial bowl. This section’s crevasses, crossed easily in the cold morning, are wide open at this time of day. Several require a real jump to get across, and this has to be done from rotten snow. Both guides give us strict instructions to concentrate on what we are doing, as they know we are getting tired. Beneath the crevasse area, we walk over the last bit of snow and then through about a km of debris, which passes in a blur. Our goal is to complete the round trip from the hut in 11 hours and 30 minutes – which we do! Arriving at exactly 1420.

Pius greets us on the return. We festoon the stone wall outside the hut with our wet socks, gloves and other items, and retreat from the outdoor glare to enjoy giant Rösti and liters of drink inside the hut.

Dani and Thomi are very pleased with the tour, and – good guides as they are – point out how much we learned solving our “problem”. We say good-bye until next year, and hand over the well-deserved guiding fee.

At 1600, we start the descent to Gasenried, watching Thomi and Dani put hundreds of meters between us as they run down unburdened by clients. We step gingerly on tired legs and sore toes, and, as the hut retreats to the horizon above us, we say our farewells to the high alpine landscape for this summer. It’s gotten cloudy and windy, and just after we complete the crossing of the lower Ried glacier, we hear the first rumbles of thunder.

The next two hours are a challenge for our nerves, as the lightning flashes again and again over the Rhone Valley and a fitful rain splatters down. Should we seek shelter and sit this out, or keep going, to get as low as possible? The path traces the crest of the lateral moraine, a terrible place to be if the storm gets close. A half-hour above Alpija, we decide it’s safer to crouch for a while in the lee of a boulder. 15 minutes’ rest and a snack do us good, and the thunder appears to be lessening. The trail is completely deserted (except for sheep) as we pass the alp and stumble down through wet grass and then muddy woods on the steepest – and shortest – route back.
Finally, the playground and hayfields and cottages of Gasenried come into view, and we can rinse our hiking sticks in the Suonen. It’s 1915. That’s a rather long day, considering that we had left the hut at 0250!!

Now for the usual “zombie” drive back to Almagell, where our cozy apartment and hot showers await!
Stats:
The tour was 11.5 hours roundtrip (hut to hut), and 11.7 km in total distance. Adding in the 7.5 km return from the hut to our car, we covered 19.2 km in one day, with 1581 meters of vertical climb and 2811 meters of descent.