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St Jakobsweg – the 1st week

by Heidi Wehrle

You are going to do WHAT? was the reaction of our friends and family when they were told that we planned to walk across Switzerland. Indeed, some of us did question our sanity at even contemplating such an undertaking in our retirement years (the average age was 67).

Walking over 400kms across Switzerland seemed like an impossible dream when the idea was first discussed by three Achermann brothers, Vitus, Beni and Richard four years ago. The plan was to follow the St Jakobsweg pilgrim route across Switzerland from the eastern town of Rorschach to the western city of Geneva. But it was 2011 before the idea became reality. The itinerary was meticulously planned by Markus Achermann. All accommodation was pre-booked in youth hostels, hotels, massenlager and B & Bs. We were instructed to carry as little as possible yet plan for wet weather, hot weather, cold weather... what does a woman leave behind? Men are no problem - pair of undies and a toothbrush! Backpacks weighed from 7 - 12kgs! No food needed to be carried as we will eat in the lovely restaurants, inns and cafes on the way.

On 13th June 2011, our group of 9 finally gathered in Rorschach. Markus, Benni, Richard and wife Maele, all residing in Switzerland were joined by us Waikato Kiwis: Rae and Vitus Achermann, Richard and Heidi Wehrle and John Rennie, a long time tramping buddy of Vitus and Rae's. Our pilgrim passes were handed out and pilgrim stamps were collected at each place of stay, at small wayside chapels, cathedrals or monasteries along the route to verify that one had truly been on the Jakobsweg.

Due to an accident Beni was advised not to walk all of the way, so he came with his car and walked as much of the track as he could in the morning and drove on to the day's destination point and then walked to meet us from there. He and his car would prove to be a godsend.

On the morning of 14th June at 8.00am we commenced a journey that would cover an average of 23kms per day for the next 19 days and would test most of us in patience, endurance, adaptability and mental as well as physical strength.

DAY 1: Rorschach – St Gallen – Herisau: The walk officially commenced at the Fountain of St Jacob in Ror-



Group at Rorschach:

Back, l to r: Vitus Achermann, Maele Achermann, Markus Achermann, Richard Achermann, John Rennie, Rae Achermann.

Kneeling on front l to r: Beni Achermann, Richard & Heidi Wehrle.

schach and then it was on to St Gallen's old town with its beautiful frescoed cathedral where, with much excitement, our first Pilgrim stamp was collected. We were glad to leave the sun beaten concrete and asphalt of the city behind and walk across open green fields towards Herisau - our first night's stop. We thankfully removed our backpacks, entertained Swiss friends including Hans and Vreni Vetsch who had come to see how we all fared after our first day on the pilgrim track, but some of us just had to go to bed early - we were stuffed. Only 18 days to go!

DAY 2: Herisau – Chaseren – Wattwil: Jacob & Margrit Frischknecht, local friends of the Wehrle's, joined us for the hot day's walk through the beautiful Appenzell region. John the Kiwi was fascinated by the Swiss cow stalls, the small size of the herds (as his family farm milks over 700 cows) and was blown away by the scenery as were we all. Through the forest and hamlet of Risi, then we slowly climbed to 1084m and Restaurant Sitz, the highest point of the day. Chaseren was our lunch stop then down steeply to the Necker Valley and the beautiful baroque churches and painted houses of St Peterzell. Reitenberg hills seemed steep and never ending to a few of us and Heidi (one of the youngest amongst us) swallowed her pride and accepted Jacob's offer to carry her backpack; and she felt that on a pilgrimage, all help needed to be accepted! Churfirten was a welcome drink stop before traipsing past Toggenburg farmhouses and tackling the



The Hemberg climb between Herisau & Wattwil.

final steep descent to Wattwil. That night some attended to blisters and Heidi accepted that God had a hand in providing us with Beni and his car. Her backpack went into the boot and she moved her goalpost from "walking all the way with backpack" to "walking all the way." After the 2nd day, some of us found the combination of the long, hot days with blistered feet, carrying a heavy pack very difficult, so, following Heidi's example, all but 3 packs went into the car - anything to make walking easier. Only the 3 Achermann brothers (Vitus, Richard and Markus) continued with full backpacks and would do so for the next 17 days. They were the group's true pilgrims!



DAY 3: Wattwil - Neuhaus - Tuggen: At 7.30am we started our steep uphill climb to Iberg Castle and continued on to Schmerikon in the midday heat. Here we cooled our feet in Lake Zurich while our minds contemplated what lay ahead - why were we doing this? We followed the Linth Canal, rested at Schloss Grynau restaurant and once again plodded for what seemed like hours towards Tuggen, our evening's resting place. While some attended to blisters and others enjoyed a cool beer, the heavens opened and we had to take shelter from the Swiss *Gewitter*. That night we slept above a stable of restless horses - another new, and for some, a sleepless experience.

As we daily followed the scallop shell logos that marked the St Jacobsweg, it became clear to us that the final 6kms of each day would become a major challenge, even to those with no backpacks as the heat and blistered feet took their toll.

DAY 4: Tuggen - Lachen - Einsiedeln: The weather continued to be hot. Rae's blisters prevented her from wearing walking shoes so she opted to spend the day with Beni walking the easy track around Wägitalersee. The rest of the group settled into a walking rhythm through the lush green rolling countryside dotted with small villages and towns like Lachen - just like the chocolate box pictures. We arrived at St Meinrad chapel and restaurant

we went back to the monastery to hear the monks sing Te Deum and to collect our pilgrim stamps.

DAY 5: Einsiedeln - Haggeneegg - Schwyz: This was to be a day with a difference. At 7.30am we left Einsiedeln and headed for Schwyz in light rain. Beni and Rae kept us company for 2 ½ hours up the Alpthal valley then drove on to Beckenried. As the group climbed, the cloud-



Vitus with chocolate box views.



Outside our 200 year old B & B, Einsiedeln

(950m) in time for lunch. This is the area where St Meinrad built himself a hermitage and where he lived and prayed for over 26 years. We continued first along the Etzelstrasse down to "Tüfelsbrugg" (built 1699). Once again we found ourselves walking on hot gravel and asphalt, this time towards the impressive Einsiedeln Monastery and town - once again it seemed that it was taking forever to get to our accommodation - a 200 yr old B&B. No matter how tired or sore most of us felt, in the evening

covered Mythens signalled what was to be the wettest day. We watched the clouds close in and the rain pelted down, at times one could hardly see 4 metres ahead. In no time some of us were wet through. Our indomitable quest was not to be beaten by the elements or the very steep terrain and we reached the Berggasthaus Haggeneegg at 1414m, earlier than planned. We dried out, drank coffee schnapps, played a few rounds of cards and with the rain still relentlessly falling, headed down the never-ending steep wet forest clad gravel path. A few found it easier to just jog down rather than let the knees bear the brunt. When we all arrived in the beautiful fresco-painted town of Schwyz, we gathered for 2 hours in a warm pizzeria to dry out, warm up and eat while we waited for the hostel to open at 5.00pm.

DAY 6: Schwyz - Treib - Buochs: An overcast drizzly day greeted us on our 6.30am start to catch the boat from Brunnen to Treib-Seelisberg. Things went a bit pear shaped as our planned breakfast stop restaurant at the mediaeval Treib House was not yet open but an hour further up hill an obliging restauranteur opened just for us. Then refreshed, we headed to Beckenried. The rolling scenery was hidden behind mist as we negotiated a steep wet muddy track below the cliffs of Emmetten. Whenever Heidi looked back, she would see Richard A. looking like the true pilgrim - body and huge pack covered by wet raingear with sticks in hand - onwards and upwards was his motto. The weather began to improve as we reached the spectacular Choltal waterfalls and cascades and the clearing weather provided us with beautiful views of Lake Lucerne and the Rigi mountains. We finally descended to walk along the lake shore towards Beckenried. After a lunch stop we headed towards Buochs along a narrow road dotted with chapels. We arrived at our farmstay accommodation relatively early and had time to rest, recoup and reflect on the achievements of our first six days walking the pilgrim trail.