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Vitus walking in the Jura

The last time I was in Switzerland, some of my brothers and I decided we would like to do a multi-day walk somewhere so the decision was made to walk in the Jura, an area we did not know well. Bernhard, Richard and I were going to walk together but then Beni felt he could not do it and at best would slow us down.



Vitus, Richard & Bernhard

So Richard and I set off on 4 July from Kuettigen (by Aarau). Beni kept us company over the Wasserfluh, a steep climb but with good views from the top. The weather was fine and warm but hazy as we walked through forest and over farms to Salhöechi. Beni then took the bus back to Kuettigen to get his car in order to pick us up at Hauenstein. The two of us stayed on the trail until 3pm when Beni picked us up and we spent the first night at his house.

During the night we had rain, thunder and lightning but by morning it had cleared. Beni dropped us off at Hauenstein and we commenced our walk in a south-westerly direction. From now on we carried our backpacks of about 13-14 kilos. We hiked through colourful grain fields, mixed farms and forests. Had some light rain as we walked up a road that was cut out of the side of a very steep hillside during the world wars by soldiers and volunteers for defense purposes.

Should have had good views from Belchenfluh of the Alps from Santis to Mont Blanc but the weather was against us. Passed some old castle ruins on the way then it was down a very steep drop from the high cliffs to Balsthal for the night. Light rain fell as we passed the old Falkenstein Castle, now a museum. Yesterday's downhill now becomes today's uphill as we climbed to Schwaengimat. The rain fell more persistently and at 1000m it became much cooler.

A detour pointed us downhill for some distance but we had a gut feeling we would have to go uphill again and sure enough after a while up it went and the rain poured down. The normal track was closed because of a rock fall. We were supposed to meet Walter and Anita Zuber in Balmberg but because of the adverse weather, we decided to carry on to Hinterweissenstein.

We woke next day to a beautiful morning with mist hanging over the cliffs and rock outcrops with Hassenmatt at 1450m., the highest point for the day. Friendly cattle were grazing the high plateau amongst snow covered fences. A long walk through lovely forests and pastures brings us to Frinvillier, a very small town enclosed by mountains and narrow gorges. It was an important town during the Roman times.

Continuing on, the track led up and down steep cliff tops until we reached the Jura House, a SAC hut where members were having an aperitif before a risotto meal. Being a Sunday, there were many mountain bikers and walkers on the trails. To our left we could see the three lakes, Biel, Murten and Neuchatel and a kaleidoscope of patchwork fields. To our right were rolling forest-clad hills with France in the distance. We walked on to the top of Chasseral, the highest point of the whole walk at 1607m.

To our surprise, the Chasseral hotel was closed on Sundays and Mondays so we took a bus to the lovely old town of St. Imier and spent the night there. We followed the top of the range and then dropped down towards Neuchatel. As we descended, we walked through golden grain fields and small settlements. A music festival was being held at the town so we could not get lodgings so a kind receptionist gave us a bus ticket and booked us a room at nearby Montezillon with the hotel surrounded by vineyards above Lake Neuchatel.

We walked through Rochefort which is surrounded by pleasant rolling farmland. Soon after we enter the Val de Travers, a narrow forested valley with only a river and railway running through it. Our track is about 75m above the railway which is protected from falling rocks by steel nets. The track has been cut into the sheer rock face with chains and rails protecting the walkers. Further on a very deep narrow gorge is crossed by an ancient Roman bridge.



A 700m, 2hour climb brings us to Solidat, a plateau of 1400m and a very popular place with crowds of people, bikers and walkers visiting the area. Solidat is located above the very impressive Creux du Van, a massive natural curved amphitheatre, its near vertical rock face rising 160m above the valley below.

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The memorial to the soldiers and volunteers who cut the track out of the rock face.



The impressive Creux du Van

Vitus walking in the Jura

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Nerve-wracking stunts at the very edge of the 160m drop

To our amazement a young woman performed single and double handed handstands on the very edge of the cliff while pictures were being taken of her. This was the most interesting day of the whole trip.

Then the two brothers became lost. All of a sudden we ended up on a track that no-one had used for a long time. We kept on going until we came to a tank barrier from the 2nd World War. There was no mention of a tank stop in the guide book and when a car came along, asked the driver how to get to Ste-Croix. With a wry smile he pointed up the mountain. So we climbed up for an hour and tried to get more information from a mountain restaurant but had a language problem in this French speaking area. Someone with a mobile phone and a bit of tech know how would have been handy.

The decision was made to carry on in the direction we thought we had to go and walked for hours through fields and forests and finally came to a sign which said "Ste-Croix" – what a relief. But it was still 3 hours walking away so stayed at a B & B at Les Cluds – that was a long day of 9 hours of solid walking.

It was great to be on the right route again; the area is well-known for cross-country skiing. As usual the track led up and down, at times quite steep. The area is very close to the French border so it is quite isolated with just the odd alpine hut with a restaurant. There were many reminders of the two world wars with tank stops and bunkers on the hillsides.

From Le Suchet there were views over Lake Geneva and the outline of Mont Blanc was just visible in the haze.

From here on it was all downhill through the countryside and it was another long

day due to yesterday's stuff up. We spent the last night of our trek at the picturesque town of Vallorbe. It is also the centre of exclusive watch-making and we were told that some of the most expensive watches were made in surrounding farmhouses.



Our final day was in brilliant weather, tackling the last but very steep hill to look down on the picturesque Lac de Joux and the town of Le Pont, our final destination. And so we came to the end of our 10 day walk of approximately 230km.



Vitus & Richard at Le Pont at the end of their walk.

Impressions: I was amazed at the size of the area and the beauty of the Jura. There were many large farms with well-maintained buildings; most notable were lots of nurse cows with their calves of every breed. The high rocky cliffs and forested hills were impressive, especially the curved rock walls of the massive Creux du Van.

Dear Reader

If you have undertaken some great and interesting walks in Switzerland then please send your report and photos to our editor. We would love to hear from you.

The Spiez laboratory

4 March 2018 – A man and woman are found unconscious in Salisbury, England. After a while it becomes clear who they are: Sergei Viktorovich Skripal and his daughter Yulia. Why is this significant? Because Skripal was a colonel in the Soviet and then Russian military intelligence, the GRU, who defected and became an informant for the British secret service MI6. Soon enough, it transpires that both father and daughter are the victims of an attempted poisoning. The world's press gets its hands on a story worthy of James Bond. And the Spiez lab gets a job... But what is this laboratory exactly?

What led the Swiss government to create this institute in the first place – an institute that doesn't just analyse substances any more, and no longer works exclusively for Switzerland but on behalf of the entire world?

Lessons from the First World War – how the Spiez lab was born

After poison gas had been used to devastating effect in the First World War (1914–18), the Swiss government felt obliged to act. In 1923 it approved a new section for gas protection at the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH), which was relocated in 1925 to the Eidgenössische Pulverfabrik (now known as Nitrochemie) in Wimmis in the canton of Bern. This laid the foundation for the Spiez laboratory – Switzerland's institute specialising in protection from atomic, biological and chemical hazards and threats. The lab's initial focus was on developing gas masks. It also experimented with masks for cavalry horses after 1928. Military carrier pigeons were also to be protected, and the lab developed a model of a ventilated vehicle for carrier pigeons.



The Second World War

With the horrors of the First World War just behind them and those of the Second World War looming ahead, the Swiss government decided in 1937 at the request of the General Staff to make provisions for chemical warfare in the