

Travels with a rucksack

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TRAVELS WITH A RUCKSACK.

By EDWIN MULLER.

The Victorians had their formula for the perfect vacation. Looking back to the golden haze of that placid era it's hard to see why they ever felt the urge to Get Away from it All. But from time to time they did, and, when they felt that way, they knew exactly what to do. To-day in spite of planes and cruises de luxe and all sorts of stream-lined travel, the Victorian idea of a vacation remains, to my mind the best one.

They went on walking tours in the Alps.

I know of no other way in which the tourist can, at the same time, take a health cure, live in remote scenes of beauty, enjoy all the mobility and freedom of a roving vagabond and do it in comfort and security. To have all that you need in the rucksack on your back, to be complete as you stand — there's a thrill in that that can't be described.

And you don't need to be a hardy athlete. You don't need, for example, to measure up to the standard of one stout Victorian walker the reverend Charles Hudson. He once proposed diffidently to some of his cronies that they take with them on their next tour a pupil whom he was tutoring. The young man had drawbacks he was careful to explain:

"He is of a delicate constitution. We could not, perhaps, count on him for more than fifty miles a day."

Don't worry — you can have a very good time in the Alps even if you can't count on yourself for more than five miles a day. Does even that seem excessive? It won't when you're in the Alps. There's an extraordinary difference between what you can do at home and what you can do under the stimulus of mountain air. I have known people whose idea of a walk was going around the block, but who climbed all the way up to the Gornergrat, ascending a good thousand feet an hour.

Where to go? There's a bewildering variety of tours to choose from. You could go walking in Switzerland every season for the next fifty years and there would still be little valleys into which you had never looked and ranges of which you had never seen the other side.

My own favourite region is the Valais, especially the parts that lie along the left bank of the Rhone. The Rhone valley, flat as a table and only a mile or two wide, is one of the principal highways of Europe. The Orient Express goes tearing along it to disappear into the hole of the Simplon tunnel. The road is full of motor-cars going to and fro between the lake of Geneva and the plains of Italy. There is all the hurry and bustle of modern life.

But leave the main valley, swing your rucksack on your back and march away to the south. On a little way and you are enfolded by the peace of the high hills. The world is as it was a hundred years ago.

The abrupt green wall that borders the Rhone on the south is pierced in half a dozen places by narrow gorges that send their streams tumbling down into the river. Follow any one of these. Presently it broadens into a little valley from which pine forests slope up until they merge into the stony wastes above. You walk along a path between meadows where peasants are swinging their scythes and carrying great bundles of hay to the winter storehouses.

Further up the valley you begin to catch glimpses ahead of broad fields of snow that rise into jagged peaks silhouetted against the sky. That is the great chain of the Penine Alps, the giants of central Europe. Your path leads straight into their inner sanctuaries.

You are in country that is unknown to the tourists who have to be transported by rail or motor-car. You spend the night in a little inn where there are, perhaps, only four or five other guests. It is not only as clean as all Swiss inns proverbially are but its proprietor is, in his way, as much of an artist as Oscar of the Waldorf. Probably his grandfather served Leslie Stephen and the other mountaineers of the 1860's and 70's who came pioneering into these valleys.

All of these villages appear in the climbing annals of those days. — Gruben, St. Luc, Zinal, Evolena and the rest. They are the climbing centres for the big snow and rock expeditions and the stopping places for the walking tours by which the climbers trained for the big peaks.

The best way to make a walking tour of the Valais is to cross from valley to valley, a day's walk to each crossing. The best direction to take is from west to east so that the climax may come in the Nikolai valley where, at Zermatt in the shadow of the Matterhorn, you are in the seventh heaven of the mountaineer. Each day you start from an inn in the valley, cross a path and, in the afternoon, descend to an inn in the next valley.

There's always a thrill in crossing a pass. Take, for example, the last day's walk into the Nikolaital. You have spent the night at Gruben, a neat little village



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near the head of the Turtmanntal. In the morning you start up the meadow slopes back of the inn, climb up through the higher pastures where the cow bells are tinkling all around you and at last follow the path up a steep slant of rock débris toward a notch it is as if a curtain were suddenly rolled up. A whole new world of peaks and valleys is spread out before you, range after range stretching off to the east. Far below at your feet is the winding green ribbon of the Nikolaital. Your afternoon's descent is an adventure into the unknown.

And the end of the adventure is a worthy climax. The last lap of your journey is by railroad, the electric narrow gauge line that climbs up to Zermatt at the head of the valley. At first you feel shut in — the valley is narrow and its walls tower thousands of feet on either side. You see nothing of the great peaks that you know to be ahead. Then at last the train turns a corner and the grandest sight in the Alps is there before you. The Matterhorn is unique even when you see it far away among a crowd of other mountains. Here, so close at hand that your head jerks back to see the slender spear-point of the summit, it is overpowering.

Next day you have earned a rest and you can spend it lying in the meadows, watching the play of cloud and sunshine on the hills. Or, better still, you can take the rack-and-pinion railroad up to the Gornergrat — see the valley sink down to your feet while, one after another, the snow peaks rise and take their places in the great circle.

I have only space to mention one or two of the walking tours in the Swiss Alps:

The bernese Oberland is one of the best regions of all. Come down on the night train from Paris and get off at Brigue with your rucksack ready packed. After a breakfast of rolls and honey at the little inn by the station start up the path to Belalp. Your next day's walk takes you across the great ice stream of the Aletsch, the largest glacier in the Alps. And the day after that you'll want to climb the Eggishorn. It's a little mountain — anybody can climb it — but the panorama is finer than that from Mont Blanc.

Another way into the Oberland leads up from Leuk over the Gemmi Pass. When you look up at the Gemmi your heart may fail you. It's a sheer cliff,

more than 2,000 feet high, apparently a job for expert mountaineers only. But you'll find a path, broad enough for anybody, winding straight up the face. Thence you go on to Kandersteg and down for a swim in the blue lake of Thun.

Another classical route is up from Interlaken to Lauterbrunnen and past Wengernalp where you can watch the avalanches thunder down the side of the Jungfrau. Then over the little Scheidegg to Grindelwald. But stop a day at the Scheidegg to make the trip by rail up to the Jungfrauoch. There's another reason for doing it beside the fact that you see a magnificent view. Day after day you've been looking up at the high snows from the valleys and lower passes. If you take this opportunity to see what those snows are like close at hand the distant view will mean twice as much to you in the future. On the Jungfrauoch, at an altitude of 11,340 feet a/c., skiing and dog sleigh rides are in season throughout the year, and from this point it takes only 3-4 hours to climb the regal Jungfrau herself. Next you can continue to Meiringen. And on that day's walk, if you know your Sherlock Holmes, you must stop for a minute and gaze down at the falls of the Reichenbach where Holmes had his never-to-be-forgotten encounter with the villainous Moriarty. You can continue the tour to the Grimsel and the Furka and see the Rhone make its start in life from under the snout of a huge glacier.

A word in conclusion about equipment. Don't carry more weight than you have to. It's worth while thinking out all the little ways in which you can cut down. For example, don't carry the whole guide book. Baedeker and most of the others are made so that you can take them apart in sections and carry only what you need. And why take along a full tube of tooth paste or a big cake of soap? All of these little things add up to a light rucksack and comfort.

Even if your tour is to be for several weeks there's no need to carry more than you require for three or four days. The Swiss post is very dependable and you can always mail a suitcase ahead to where you'll be.

Women, if they don't carry too many little jars and bottles of cosmetics, seem able to get along on walking tours with a pound or two less weight than men.

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