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RAMBLES ROUND PONTRESINA

by Weldon F. Heald

WHERE THE PEDESTRIAN IS STILL KING

Voltaire called walking the chief of insipid pleasures. But the great French satirist was better known for using his head than his feet, and he presumably never visited Pontresina. For, there walking has been raised to a fine art, an exact science, and a stimulating and rewarding way of life. In fact at this famed Swiss resort village the pedestrian is king, and he rules an enchanting, far-flung realm of breathtaking grandeur.

Pontresina is located at an altitude of 5,915 feet in the Upper Engadine, 3 miles east of St. Moritz. It is a pleasant place nestling in a delectable green mountain-rimmed valley at the foot of the giant glaciers which sweep down from the snowy peaks of the Bernina Group. Summer and winter, almost every kind of outdoor recreation is available, and more than a score of hotels and *pensions* take care of Pontresina enthusiasts, many of whom return year after year.

A PARADISE FOR EVERYBODY WHO LIKES TO USE HIS FEET

But from June to October no place on earth can excel the area as a walking centre. Round about Pontresina are 125 miles of well-maintained paths, ranging from nearly level black-top promenades provided with benches, to exhilarating tracks up among the ice-hung heights. Nine comfortable mountain huts can easily be reached on foot in a couple of hours or so, and there are many one- to three-day walking tours and loops that may be taken by the average healthy individual. A folder containing a sketch map with 47 signed and numbered paths marked in red is obtainable gratis at the Enquiry Office on the main street. It shows and describes trips suitable for everybody with two legs, whether they be aged seven or seventy. And whichever path you choose you will meet dozens of zealous pedestrians, not one of whom would agree with the Patriarch of Ferney that there is anything insipid about walking.

But what makes Pontresina "tops" as a rambler's paradise is the mountain wall which encloses the valley to the east. This is a gigantic sidehill, 6 miles long by 2 miles wide, rising to a crest of rocky summits of over 10,000 feet elevation. Obligingly slanted towards the warm afternoon sun, the slopes are criss-crossed with a network of paths. They gently lead you up through shady woods of pine, fir and spruce; cross cascading streams from the lingering snowbanks above; traverse high-perched airy alplands, bright with wild flowers; and even lead up to the highest peaks and ridges. The views everywhere are superb, and particularly impressive are the gleaming white summits of the Bernina Group soaring high above the valley to the west.

No rough stony tracks are these Pontresina paths, but wide, graded super foot-highways, with flights of steps in the steepest places. At especially spectacular outlooks along the way are a half-dozen little mountain restaurants having terraces for out-of-door refreshment. A couple of these provide overnight accommodation where you can experience the silent wonder of sunset, moonlight and sunrise on the upper heights.

A VARIETY OF DELIGHTFUL WALKS — WHEREVER YOU GO

The main artery is the "Höhenweg", or High-level Path. It contours the length of the mountain slope, about 2,000 feet above the valley floor, and connects Muottas Muragl, to the north, with Alp Languard, at the south end. For its whole length this delightful walk does not vary in altitude more than a few hundred feet, and it may be made in a leisurely two and a half hour in either direction. The Höhenweg is reached by several paths from Pontresina in an hour or so, and other routes diverge from it upwards. Among the finest of the latter is that to Munt della Bescha, 8,967 feet, which commands a tremendous sweeping panorama of mountain and valley. From there you can follow a steep path to the top of the west peak of Las Sours, 9,784 feet, locally called "The fat sister". This feat of safe, guideless mountaineering requires about an hour. Another scenic walk is from Alp Languard to Little Languard Lake, cradled in a barren, snow-spotted cirque beneath the hanging Languard Glacier. From there another path zigzags to the hut and restaurant atop the dizzy Schela de Paradies, or "Ladder of Paradise". Round the lofty shoulders of Piz Albris, to the south-east, is a nature preserve, and often bands of agile ibex can be seen on the cliffs above.

THE CROWNING ADVENTURE — THE ASCENT OF PIZ LANGUARD

However, the crowning adventure for the more ambitious walker is the ascent of Piz Languard, 10,722 feet. This rocky pyramid is the culminating point of the crest, and the wonderful 360-degree panorama from the top is one of the finest in the entire Alps. The view extends from the Ortler to Monte Rose, and the close-up of the snows and glaciers of the Bernina is particularly grand. An excellent well-marked path goes clear to the summit and takes from 3½ to 4½ hours from Pontresina. With ordinary precautions a guide is not necessary, and just below the final pull is the Georgy Hut with a welcome cafe.

HOW TO ENJOY THE DELIGHTS OF THE "HÖHENWEG" WITHOUT TAKING A STEP

But you need do no strenuous up-hill walking to enjoy the delights of the Höhenweg. In fact, you can reach both ends without taking a step. A cable railway ascends from the valley to Muottas Muragl, 8,060 feet, in 15 minutes, while Alp Languard, 7,175 feet, is served by a chair-lift direct from Pontresina. At the former point is a sizeable hotel with a popular terrace restaurant overlooking St. Moritz and the long alpine corridor of the Upper Engadine — a charming combination of green meadows and woods, sparkling blue lakes, and snow-streaked guardian peaks. Unhurried strollers, picture-takers and nature-lovers generally should follow the Höhenweg from north to south because the path inclines gently downward in that direction.

All in all, rambling round Pontresina provides an enjoyable and relaxing antidote to the watch-spring tensions of modern Space-Age living. As yet, no wonder drug or tranquilizer has been discovered that is half as good.

(S.N.T.O.)

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