

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: 6 (2000-2002)
Heft: 1

Artikel: Ospizio Bernina to Alp Grüm : a high level walk in the Alps
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-854843>

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OSPIZIO BERNINA TO ALP GRÜM

A high level walk in the Alps

Coming by train from the North you reach the highest point at Bhf Ospizio Bernina; you are about 7500 feet high. On your right is Lago Bianco, the White Lake, so called because of the milky coloured brooks coming down from the Cambrena Glacier. High above is Piz Cambrena, 12000 feet high.

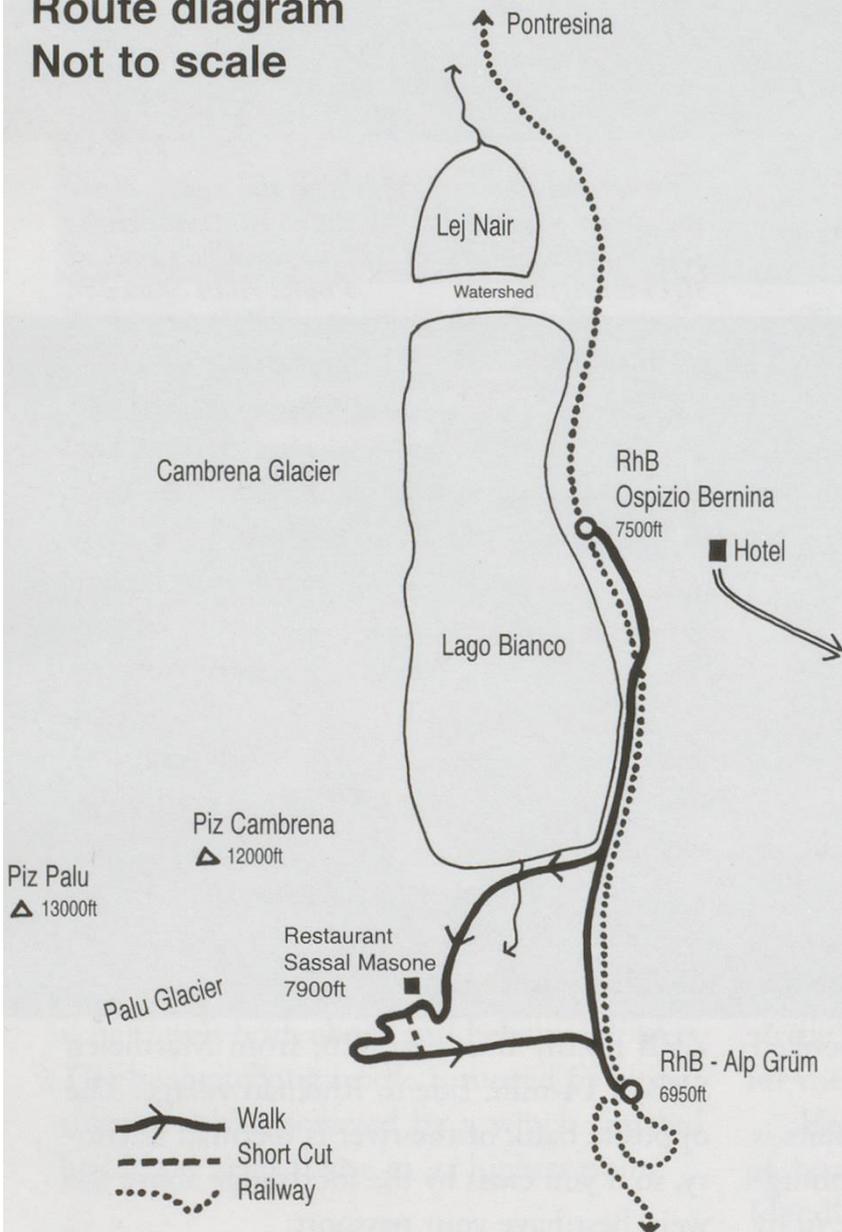
Just before reaching this lake you may have seen another, smaller lake, Lej Nair (the Black Lake) and on the narrow strip of land in

between, a large board telling you that this is one of Europe's main watersheds. Incidentally it is also a 'language' shed as you cross from Romansh speaking to Italian speaking Switzerland (Lej-Lago). From this smaller lake the water flows down to the River Inn at Samedan and from there through Switzerland, Austria and Germany to the Danube at Passau and finally through the Balkans to the Black Sea. The water from Lago Bianco, after helping to make electricity at Brusio, makes its way down to the Adda, at Tirano, and through Lake Como to the Po and the Adriatic.

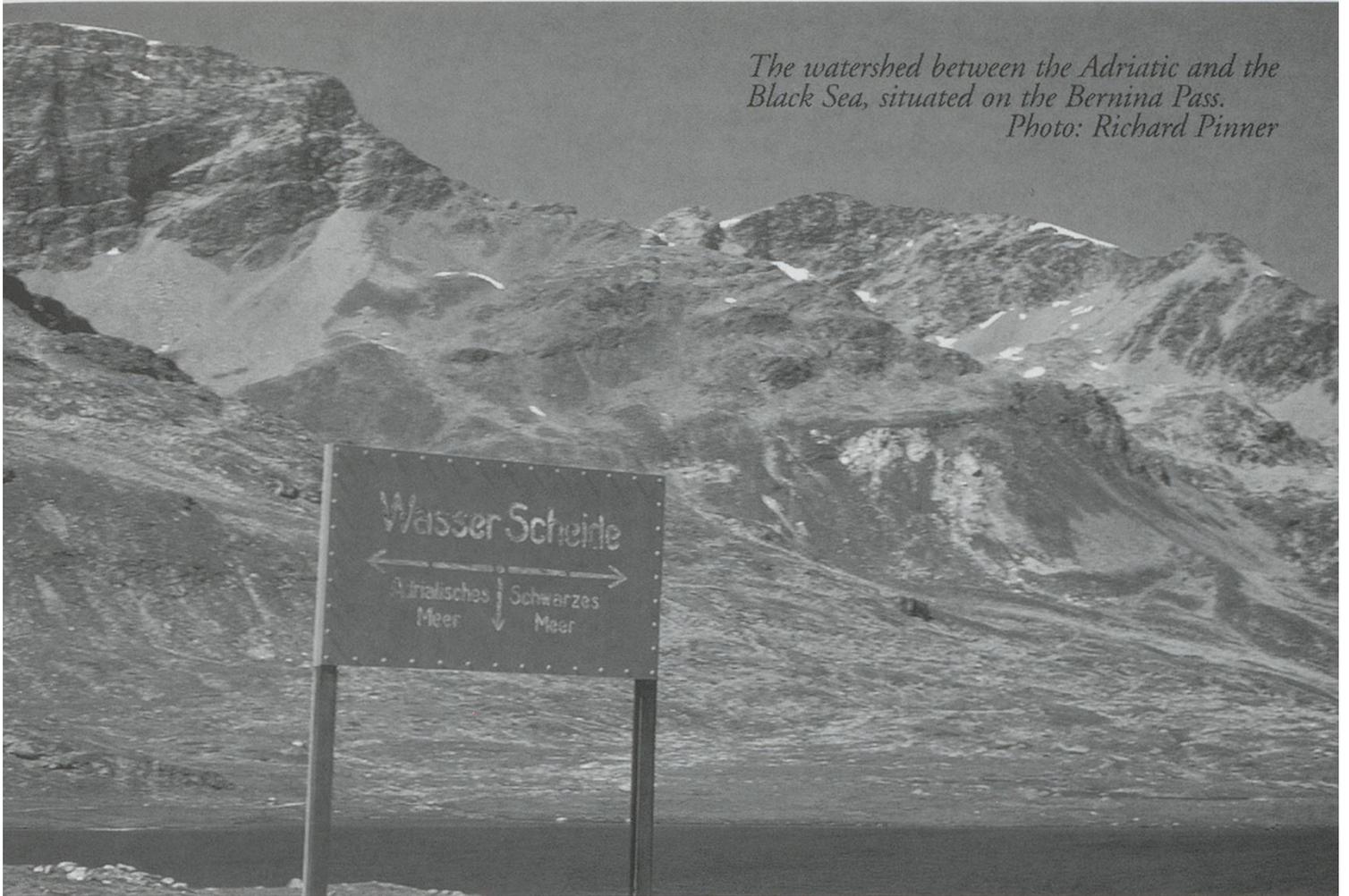
The train travels along Lago Bianco, descends to Alp Grüm and then, literally, plunges down 6000 feet to Tirano. To get a better view of this high section I would like to suggest a walk of about 2^{1/2} to 3 hours from Ospizio to Alp Grüm. The first part is easy; level at first and then a rise, on a good path, of about 400 feet. The way down to Alp Grüm is more demanding; you come down almost 1000 feet on a very steep and narrow path. This needs some experience in mountain walking and a good pair of boots are strongly recommended. However it would be worthwhile just to walk up to the Restaurant Sassal Masone and return to Ospizio. To get the maximum benefit choose a clear day, the walk is not recommended in cloudy or misty conditions.

From the station you can actually see the Hotel, the 'Ospizio'. It is up the slope behind the station. If you have time you may find it worth walking up

Route diagram Not to scale



*The watershed between the Adriatic and the Black Sea, situated on the Bernina Pass.
Photo: Richard Pinner*



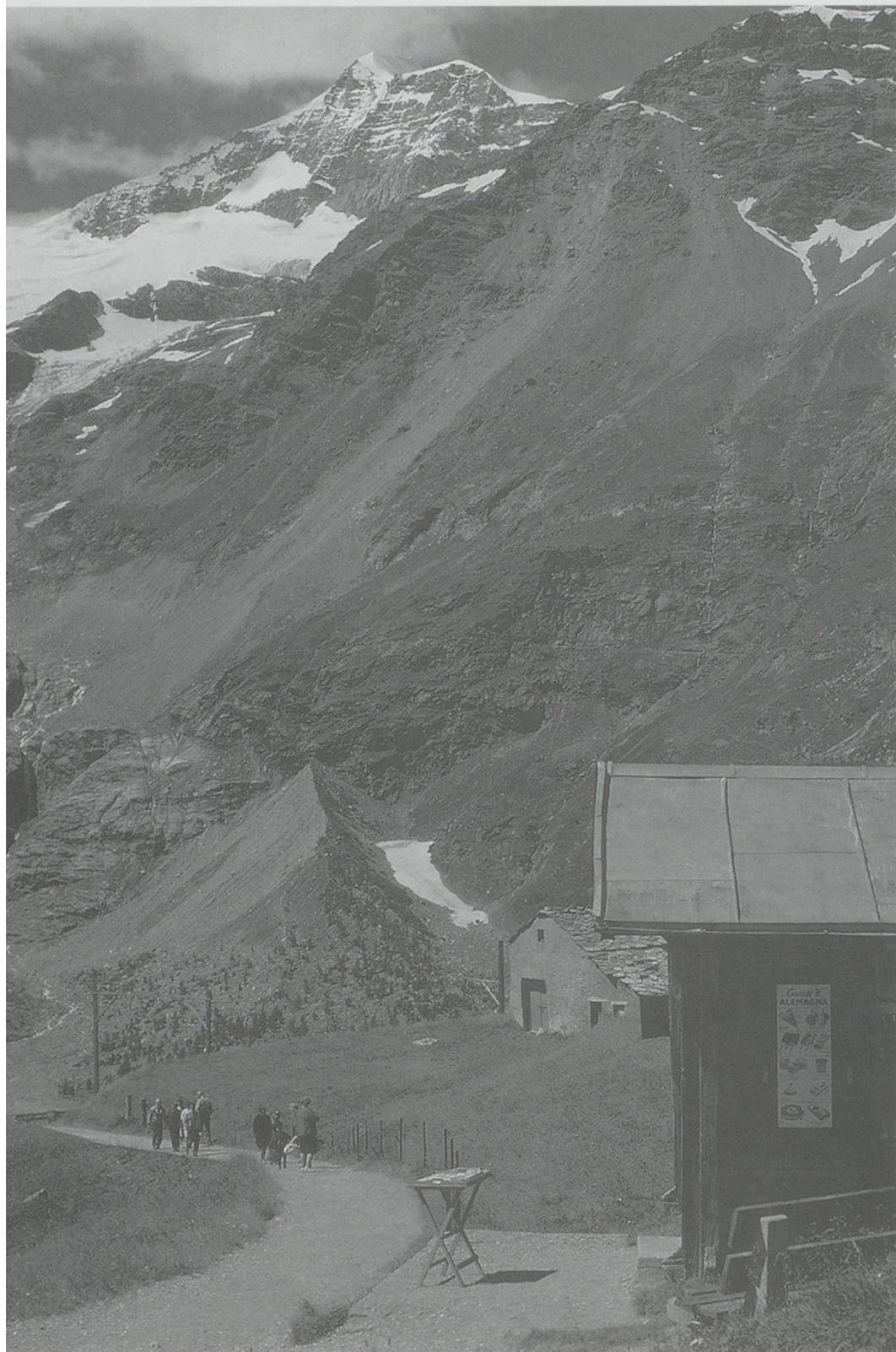
and along the main road for a few minutes. It descends from the Bernina Pass by a quite different route from the railway and from where the descent starts you have a surprising and interesting view down, completely different from the views along the railway.

Incidentally in 1897, before the railway arrived, a room at the hotel cost SFr2 per night. Hiring a coach with one horse to Pontresina cost SFr13 and to Poschiavo SFr15. In considering the walk then a guide cost SFr4, a mule was SFr7 or you could be carried by two porters in a 'chaise a porteur' for SFr25. Lucky porters.

For today's walk either, go back to the lake or start along the footpath from the station. Walk to the end of the lake. You will enjoy the clear and keen mountain air. So much better than even the air-conditioned coaches of the RhB. At a fork you could keep left and follow that path to Alp Grüm but the interesting way is the one to the right, round the lake and then up the slope (signposted Sassal Masone).

After a climb of about 400 feet you suddenly turn a corner and come to the Restaurant Sassal Masone. You are now 7900 feet high. If the air is clear you will want to stay for a while to take in the view from the terrace. Back, to the North, you can see the whole lake and follow the route by which the train comes up. Below you can watch trains travel between Ospizio and Alp Grüm; just like a model railway. Down, to the South, you can see the station at Alp Grüm, the two restaurants and several loops of the line down to Cavaglia. You can just make out the little plateau on which that station stands. In the distance, 4700 feet below you, you can see the lake at Le Prese and, beyond, the gap at Miralago, through which the railway plunges down another 1800 feet to the Valtellina at Tirano. In the far distance is the Adamello range of the Bergameske Alps.

Quite different, on the other hand, is the view up to your right; you are near to the large Palu Glacier and, above it, one of the peaks of Piz Palu. This mountain, one of the highest in the Bernina group is best known for its beauti-



The path from Alp Grüm Station towards the restaurant Sassal Masone at the top. If you follow the guide you will walk down this slope. Easier than walking up.
Photo: Richard Pinner

ful face with its three pillars as seen from Pontresina. Here you see its southern side.

The restaurant, incidentally, may not be open for business if you come up too early in the season, so take some refreshments with you just in case. The large stone structures are interesting as they were used to store the wine and also acted as a kitchen.

From here you have a choice. You can see Alp Grüm and the start of the path down. If you do not feel like tackling the steep slope in front of you walk back to Ospizio. Otherwise start along the path towards the glacier. You can follow this on the slope in front or, take the short cut which starts almost immediately on your left. If you feel confident then take this. The path zig-zags down the steep slope. At the bottom simply walk towards the railway line. When you come to it, after crossing a meadow, walk along the line until you find yourself on the platform at Alp Grüm. A large restaurant is just across the railway about two minutes or of course one could stop at the refreshment room on the platform. Your rest will be well earned.

If you walk a little beyond the station, through the Alpine Garden, you come to a spot from where you not only have a good view down to the Val Poschiavo (the actual town is hidden from view) and you are just above one of the loops of the railway line.

Here is an interesting exercise when travelling the Bernina. From Sassal Masone, as well as from Alp Grüm you can see the lake at Le Prese and the position of Miralago at its southern end. The next time you stop at Miralago, perhaps after having made the lovely walk from La Prese to Miralago along the eastern side of the lake without either road or railway, look up from Miralago and try to find the place, near the skyline, where Sassal Masone and Alp Grüm are. Not easy I promise you. When, on such a journey, I pointed it out to a friend he replied that “it wasn't April 1st!”. He changed his mind as we climbed up.

The view looking from Sassal Masone over Alp Grüm and onto Miralago. The opposite of the view below.

Photo: Richard Pinner



View from Miralago towards the Bernina and Alp Grüm. Where are they? See text.

Photo: Richard Pinner