

U3A STONNINGTON INC

WALKING IN AUSTRIA AND SWITZERLAND

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BACKGROUND NOTES

We will walk in two areas of Austria, the Wachau Valley then in the Salzkammergut region and in the Bernese Oberland in Switzerland, from two locations - Meiringen and Grindelwald. In between will call in on Berchtesgaden in Germany.

AUSTRIA

Wachau Valley

The Wachau Valley, of the Danube River, lies in North East Austria about an hour by train from Vienna. It is a particularly scenic area, bookended by the towns of Krems to the north and Melk to the south.

The area is UNESCO heritage listed due to natural landscape, agriculture (grapes and apricots) and architecture - particularly monasteries and castles. Standout Monasteries are Melk and Gottweig, whilst prominent castles are Durnstein (ruins) and Aggstein (partially ruined). It is an area of delightful small towns and villages. A notable feature is the extensive terraced vineyards, specialising in the white grape variety, Gruner Vetliner (makes very drinkable crisp wine!)

The Danube River is Europe's second longest (after the Volga) at 2,850 km. It rises in the Black Forest in Germany, passes through 10 countries and 4 capital cities before entering the Black Sea via a delta in Romania (and to a much lesser extent Ukraine)

By river, or bicycle, it is about 30km from Krems to Melk, but walking over 5 or 6 days it is about 50 km with some daily elevation gains of up to 525 metres! Easier coming downhill!

The walk begins in **Krems**, a town of approx 24,000 and one of the oldest in the region with written records as far back as 995CE. It is noted for its many traditional burgher houses, and the medieval gate - Steiner Tor.

Just down the Danube and an up and down walk is the delightful small town of **Durnstein**. It is easily recognisable by its beautiful abbey with the unmistakeable blue tower. The town's main claim to fame are the ruins of Durnstein Castle, sitting high above the town. These ruins are historically significant as they were once the castle where Richard the Lionheart was held captive for several months in 1192, as he was returning from the Third Crusade. He had had a tiff with Leopold of Austria at Acre and this was a form of revenge.

Weissenkirchen, is an attractive river town, dominated by an enormous parish church, with extensive vineyards behind the town - again specialising in the Gruner Vetliner grape. **Spitz** is a small market town dating from the year 800, also dominated by a large parish church

Between Spitz and **Melk** is the **Castle Ruins of Aggstein** or Ruine Aggstein. The castle dates from the 12th Century, and was owned by one family for several centuries. By the 15th Century it came into the possession of robber barons who would raid ships passing along the Danube. It had a cycle of neglect and rebuilding until partial restoration occurred in the early years of the 2000's.

At the far end of the Wachau Valley is **Melk**. A small and reasonably attractive town of 5,000 it owes its fame to **Melk Stift** or Melk Abbey - an impressive and colossal building. It began as a castle but was handed to the Benedictine monks in 1089. Between 1702 and 1736 it received a huge facelift in the Baroque style. Most impressive are the courtyard, library and the church. There

are also attractive terraces and gardens, high on a hill overlooking the Danube. A boat ride from Melk to Krems is a relaxing way to spend two or three hours. (At the other end of the valley and just over the river from Krems is the huge Gottweig Abbey)

Salzkammergut

The Salzkammergut region, to the east of Salzburg, is a dramatic region of alpine and sub alpine lakes, rolling hills, steep mountain ranges (some peaks over 3,000 metres) dominated by the mighty Dachstein, and attractive villages. The name reflects the age old significance of the salt industry. Tourism, which dates from the early 19th Century, is now the dominant industry. Of the many lakes the best known are Traunsee, Wolfgangsee, Mondsee and Attersee.

Bad Ischl is a spa town which rose to prominence in the early 19th Century when the Austrian imperial family and Viennese aristocracy started to “take” the saline waters here. The Emperor Franz Josef (reigned 1848 - 1916) spent every summer here after he became engaged to the enigmatic Sisi (Empress Elisabeth - married at 15, a grandmother at 36 and assassinated in France by an Anarchist). Franz Josef described the town as heaven on earth. Within an English style park is the Kaiservilla, or summer palace of the Emperor. Also situated here is the Leharvilla, summer residence of Franz Lehar - he of numerous frothy operettas, including The Merry Widow.

Halstatt a stunningly beautiful tiny town sits by the edge of deep and dark green waters of Halistatter See, amongst precipitous slopes of mountains to the west. A particular joy is to cross the lake by ferry from the railway station on the opposite side of the lake. The village is picturesque in the extreme, and overwhelmed by tourists (almost all Chinese) early in the day. Thankfully by midday the hordes have moved on to the next must see spot. The village has a history dating back over 5000 years, with a flourishing culture arising from the extensive salt mines situated above the town.

Gmunden is a cute town at the northern end of Traunsee, noted for its delicate ceramics, a tiny island with its own castle (Schloss Orth) and attractive lake front promenades. Famous regular visitors in the past included Kaiser Wilhelm 2, Franz Schubert and Johannes Brahms.

Ebensee is an unremarkable market town at the southern end of Traunsee. Parts of the 1968 film “Where Eagles Dare” were shot here, and the cable car to the Feuerkogel mountain (1650 metres) is a spectacular experience. Ebensee was also the site of a Nazi concentration camp.

Wolfgangsee located between Salzburg and Bad Ischl is a popular lake with warm water in summer, attracting many visitors. There are many picture postcard towns and villages, one of which is St Wolfgang, site of the “Weisses Ross” or ‘White Horse Inn’ of comic opera fame. As a piece of useless trivia, close by is the small Fuschisee and the village of Fuschl am See, home of “Red Bull”

An Interlude - BERCHTESGADEN

Close to Salzburg, a tiny part of Germany protrudes into Austria. Here can be found the delightful small town of Berchtesgaden, clinging to a series of hills. The area came under Bavarian rule in 1810 and the town and surrounds became instantly popular with the Bavarian royal family - the House of Wittelsbach. (of mad king Ludwig fame). The area offered magnificent mountain scenery, the tranquility of Königssee, and hunting in the forests.

Unfortunately the area has sinister connotations for it was here in the 1920's that Adolf Hitler began vacationing. He purchased a home in the Obersalzberg above the town, and in due course Nazis such as Speer, Himmler, Goring and Goebbels began to frequent the area. Hitler's home was called the Berghof and featured a large terrace with magnificent views. Many locals were forced to give up their properties to the Nazis and some who objected were sent to Dachau.

Above the Berghof and up a terrifying one way road is the Kehlsteinhaus or “Eagles Nest” - sitting atop the 1,834 metre Kehlstein. The building was a 50th birthday gift to Hitler and was erected in 13 months and paid for by the Nazi Party. 12 workers died during construction. It is reached by an entry tunnel and a grandiose lift. Hitler was terrified of heights and visited on only a dozen occasions. Eva Braun was a regular visitor.

A visit to the area generally consists of a tour of the Obersalzburg area where few Nazi buildings remain, a visit to the excellent but challenging Documentation Centre, a tour of an extensive bunker system and then a shuttle bus to the Eagles Nest. The Documentation Centre is designed primarily for Germans to learn and understand recent history. A visit is thought provoking, as are visits to the Topography of Terror in Berlin and the Documentation Centre in Nuremberg.

Berchtesgaden is overlooked by the Wartzmann massif, rising to 2,700 metres, and surrounded by National Park, a feature of which is Konigsee, a lake noted for its pure clear water. Only electric boats are permitted. A highlight is the pilgrimage church of St Bartholoma.

Also in the area is Mount Jenner which can be ascended by funicular and then a short steep aerobic climb. The views are magnificent

SWITZERLAND

Cheese, chocolate, super efficient trains, watches, and Swiss Army knives, secretive bankers, rosti, cow bells, snow, William Tell and his Overture, white wine and wurst. What more could you want - walking in the Bernese Oberland of course! (Let's forget fondue!)

The Bernese Oberland.

Lying to the south of Bern (Switzerland's capital) and Luzern lies the grand alpine heart of Switzerland. Spectacular high peaks, sheer valleys and lakes, a mecca for snow sports and walking. At the very heart of the Oberland is the Jungfrau region with nearly 40 peaks over 3,600 metres. The three great peaks - Monch (Monk) Eiger (Ogre) and Jungfrau (Young Maiden) are the iconic symbols of the Oberland.

For walkers it is paradise. Served by a comprehensive range of mountain railways, chair lifts, gondolas, cable cars and funiculars, and buses much of the area is easily accessible. There are thousands of kilometres of excellent footpaths, through valleys and high plains. The walks are waymarked with frightening Swiss efficiency, making it virtually impossible to get lost, particularly as there is a great range of maps available. Mountain Inns or taverns abound so there is always an opportunity to refresh with a beer and wurst or indeed a fondue.

Small towns such as Grindelwald, Wengen, Murren, Lauterbrunnen and Meiringen offer great appeal.

Haslital

This area sits to the east end of the Oberland with Meiringen as its centre. Close to Briensee, Interlaken and the Grimsel Pass it offers many walking and skiing opportunities.

Meiringen is the main tourist centre of the valley and is served by train from Luzern and Interlaken as well as a cute train to Innertkirchen. Post buses serve a number of locations. The town's main claim to fame is the nearby Reichenbach Falls, the “fearful place” where Sherlock Holmes met his end at the hands of Professor Moriarty (until The Return of Sherlock Holmes) The town has an excellent Sherlock Holmes museum.

Lauterbrunnen Valley an utterly spectacular and stunning U-shaped cleft (the world's largest) with bluffs on either side rising 1000 metres sheer, and doused by 72 waterfalls. The small town of Lauterbrunnen lies on the valley floor and a great starting point to explore the area. The nearby

towns of Murren and Wengen are car free, perched on narrow shelves of pasture. From Murren a series of spectacular cable car rides take you to The Schilthorn for spectacular views.

Grindelwald

Terminus of two rack railways, and numerous Post buses, this resort town lies close to Jungfrau, and at the head of a picturesque bowl of pastureland dotted with chalets and rimmed with evergreen forests. It has been a mountaineering base for 150 years. There is a choice of cable cars to use to get to the start of more walks than can be enumerated.

Happy walking and memories!