

The Urner Haute Route (March 2019)

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THE URNER HAUTE ROUTE (MARCH 2019)

The Urner Haute Route from Realp to Engelberg is a classic Swiss multi-day ski-tour, akin to the famous Chamonix-Zermatt Haute Route and the Bündner Haute Route between Flüelapass and Julierpass. The standard route typically takes four to five days, with overnights at Albert-Heim-Hütte, Chelenalphütte, Tierberglühütte, and Sustlihütte. Robert Buessow and I only had a three-day weekend available, but we decided to make it work anyway, with long days and a small shortcut. The idea proved appealing: within two days our group had swelled to five, including Hansi Wäsle, Martin Hood, and Alex Fuchs.

We planned to ski to Göschenalp on the first day, then over Sustenhorn on the second day. While the others would ski out to Gadmen, Robert and I would overnight at Steingletscher and ski to Engelberg on the third day: in total, about 60 km with 5,900 vertical meters over three days. Our route, south to north, would allow us to climb south-facing slopes in the morning and descend north-facing slopes in the afternoon, providing better skiing and safer avalanche conditions. We prepared for glacier skiing: two 40 m ropes, crevasse rescue equipment, ice axes, crampons, and ski crampons.

Saturday 30th March 2019 was cloudless in the Urseren. Having taken the train from Zürich, we started climbing from Realp just before 10am. Snow conditions were good despite the warm weather, and we made brisk if sweaty progress. Our lunch spot, lake 2432, offered superb views of the Gotthard

Massif. The heat ended abruptly as we emerged on windswept Winterlücke. In front of us rose Dammastock with its impressive glacier. A 200 m bootpack brought us to the top of Lochberg (3074 m). The actual summit block is somewhat exposed, and only Hansi and Alex climbed the final meters.

Save for a difficult crusty section near the bottom, the 1500 m descent to Göschenalp fulfilled the Tourenatlas' promise of "Hänge vom Feinsten" and afforded plenty of photo opportunities. At the bottom, on the far side of the Göschenalpsee dam, the road was snow-covered and skiable, an easy glide down to Berggasthaus Göschenalp. Climbing to Chelenalphütte rather than descending to Göschenalp would have shortened the following day, but it was a non-starter on south-facing slopes in the mid-afternoon. Moreover, the lady who runs the Göschenalp hotel welcomed us warmly: she opened just for us and another group. We highly recommend this place if you choose to do a similar tour.

The next morning began with the ascent to Bergseehütte (closed), and then a long traverse to the Sustenlimi saddle (3077 m), alternately skiing and walking across small rock fields. Hard snow and steep drop-offs to Chelenalptal 700 m below made us thankful for our ski crampons. This area felt like real wilderness, with magnificent views towards Dammastock and Lochberg and no visible human infrastructure. From Sustenlimi it is an easy climb to the summit of Sustenhorn (3502 m), the highest point

On the summit of Sustenhorn - Martin Hood, Alex Fuchs, Robert Buessow, Hansi Wäsle (photo Massimiliano Poletto)



Sunset on Sustenhorn (photo Massimiliano Poletto)



of our tour. Clear skies afforded views as far away as the Matterhorn, and, closer by, Tödi, Finsteraarhorn, and Brienzensee. Six hours of climbing now rewarded us with a fantastic descent of the Steingletscher, interrupted only to admire the landscape and take photos. We also noticed that someone had left ski tracks on the steep north face of Gwächtenhorn! We reached the Steingletscher Hotel shortly after 3pm. Alex, Hansi, and Martin, who had to work the next day, continued skiing towards public transport in Gadmern – an adventure that, I understand, involved a fair amount of walking because the road was already largely clear of snow. Robert and I, on the other hand, spent a lazy afternoon relaxing and reading.

We were on our skis by 6:30 the next morning. The first part of the ascent from Steingletscher was steep and icy, ideal conditions for my ski crampon to fail during a kickturn. I changed into boot crampons and hiked quickly to rejoin Robert, who was waiting a couple hundred meters ahead. We jury-rigged my ski crampon with zip ties and continued the 1000 m climb to Fünffingerstöck. The zip ties failed about half way up Obertalgletscher, slowing my pace, but Robert was patient and eventually we were admiring Titlis from the summit of Fünffingerstöck (2993 m).

Some old topo maps show a ski route west from Obertaljoch – the saddle below Fünffingerstöck – and around the west side of Wendenhorn to Wendengletscher, but climate change has reduced glacial

cover and made that route impassable. So Robert and I skied counterclockwise around Wendenhorn. We had hoped to visit Sustlihütte for lunch, but when it came into view we realized we might run out of daylight if we did so. Instead, we climbed back along the northwest side of Wendenhorn to Lücke 2789, and skied almost perfect powder in the north-facing couloir down to Wendengletscher, where we found a lunch spot with panoramic views of Wetterhorn and Jungfrau. Avoiding Sustlihütte was our main shortcut on the Haute Route.

After lunch, it was only a 500 m climb to the summit of Grassen (2945 m). Looking south, we could admire the highlights of the last two days, from Fünffingerstöck to Sustenhorn. The drop to the Engelberg valley at Herrenrüti, 1800 vertical meters, provided a fitting finale to our tour. Several large avalanches rumbled down the sheer east face of Titlis before dissipating in the air. Firm, dry snow on the upper slopes gradually gave way to softer conditions, and finally, to breakable crust littered with vegetation. Near the valley floor we took a wrong turn and had to negotiate an icy chute next to a waterfall. I (stupidly) skied it, while Robert more prudently down-climbed it with crampons and axe. That turned out to be the last excitement. A creek crossing, a few more meters of snow, and finally the road to Engelberg. A short walk brought us to our bus stop and the Restaurant Wasserfall. We sat outside and looked back at the mountains. The beer tasted very good.

Massimiliano Poletto