

Alone in the Alps: Hiking a high altitude trail that connects eight countries

—James Lasdun, *The New Yorker*, April 11, 2016

The Via Alpina network of trails, established in 2002, extends for more than three thousand miles.



The Dreiländereck is a popular lookout point in the Alps where the borders of Austria, Italy, and Slovenia were set after the First World War, and from which you can see all three countries. I was there in August, hiking a stretch of the vast trail system known as the Via Alpina. The Austrian sky was a clear pale blue. A few puffy clouds hung above Italy's Friulian Mountains, to the south. Slovenia, to the southeast, where I was heading, was grayer, with the great wall of the Mangart Massif disappearing into dark mists.

It was drizzling when I crossed the Slovenian border, and by the time I reached Triglav National Park—Triglav is Slovenia's tallest mountain—it was pouring. In some parts of the Alps, a few seconds of light rain will set in motion dozens of waterfalls on every slope, but these are porous limestone mountains, and the water soaks in. They loomed over the lodge where I was staying, vast and austere in the dusk.

That night, I heard a sound like artillery from high on one of the slopes: a rockfall. There had been more rain than usual the past few weeks, and I'd been told that rockfalls were a hazard. I was already nervous about the ambitious solitary hike that I'd planned for the next day. It had a much stiffer elevation than anything I'd attempted so far on the trail—a climb of forty-five

hundred feet—and there were no fountains or springs along the way, which meant lugging large amounts of water. I once had an ignominious collapse on an Ecuadoran volcano, from which I had to be rescued by an elderly woman with a mule, and I was worried that I might have set myself up for a similar humiliation. I didn't want to be thinking about rockfalls, too.

I've been hiking the Via Alpina on and off for a decade, often without realizing that I was on it. Five interlocked trails crisscross all eight countries of the Alps: Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia, and Switzerland. More than three hundred mountain huts are spaced at day-hike intervals. (It's generally not permitted to camp along the trails.) Though the Via is more than three thousand miles in length, there is something oddly elusive about it, as if it didn't quite want you to know that it exists. It was set up in 2002 under an intergovernmental treaty and is still partly funded by the European Union, which gives it a quasi-official standing. But aside from having a densely informative Web site, in five languages, the Via does little to promote itself. There's not even an official guidebook. Surprisingly few people know about this monumental endeavor to create an endlessly rewarding and recombinable series of hikes through the most spectacular passages of Europe's mountainous heart.

The weather was better in the morning: overcast but dry and cool. A dirt track led from the trailhead alongside a glassy stream, passing plank-roofed cabins, pear orchards, and gardens full of blue cabbages. Pyramidal mountains rose on either side of the stream, their gray cliffs edged with blackish green. A magnificent waterfall gushed straight out of the rock and disappeared back into it. A Soviet-era tractor, spindly and goggle-eyed, gleamed within the shadows of a stone barn.

I hadn't been to Slovenia before, and knew only a few things about the country. It split off from the former Yugoslavia in the early nineties, after a ten-day war, and joined the E.U. a decade ago. It was the birthplace of the philosopher Slavoj Žižek. There was a dormouse-hunting season when dormouse delicacies appeared on menus. And all Slovenians were supposed to climb Mt. Triglav at least once. That was about it. But my ignorance made the Slovenian countryside only more alluring. I liked the feeling of entering terra incognita. It's one of the distinctive pleasures of Alpine hiking. "The glamorous vast multiplicity, all made up of differences, mediaeval, romantic differences," D. H. Lawrence wrote, in "Mr. Noon," his semi-fictional account of crossing the Alps with Frieda Weekley after their elopement.

That sense of multiplicity is still strong. The Rockies may offer wilder wildernesses, but you don't experience the pleasure of sharp cultural variegation as you move from place to place. In the Alps, it's still present in the shifting styles of church towers, village fountains, sheepcotes, hay barns. It's there in the odd bits of language that filter through even if you're an incurable monoglot like me. (How nice it is to learn that the German word for the noise cowbells make is *Gebimmel*, and that the Swiss-Romanche word for "boulder" is *crap*.) It's there in the restaurant menus: *daubes* giving way to dumplings, *raclette* to *robiola*; and in the freshly incomprehensible road signs, which in Slovenia are clotted with impenetrable consonant clusters, as if vowels were an indulgence. Somewhere between *Strmec* and *Cmi Vrh*, I ate a *pršut* (prosciutto) sandwich.

The path left the stream, passing through woods and coming out at a dry riverbed on a dilapidated bridge, where it began climbing steeply. Two of the Via Alpina trails—the Red and the Purple—go through the park, and my plan was to switch from one to the other at a junction

above the Soča Valley, then circle under the summit of Triglav to the mountain hut of Koča na Doliču.

After zigzagging upward for a couple of hours—in Slovenian, a switchback is called a serpentina—I stopped to rest. Two women came along the trail: Germans, recently retired on state pensions, spending their third summer exploring the Alps. They, too, were heading for Koča na Doliču. They'd phoned the hut that morning and, by luck, had reserved the last two beds. I'd made my reservation weeks earlier, knowing that the huts can fill up in August. "But have you confirmed?" they asked. I hadn't, and asked if they thought that there would be a problem. They glanced at each other. "Probably not." An hour later, I passed them eating their lunch on a rock and joked—a little nervously—that I'd see them at the hut, "if I'm allowed in!"

The landscape became increasingly gaunt. Above the valley floor, the limestone doesn't support much in the way of grazing or agriculture, and there were few of the human traces you see elsewhere at this altitude: no perched villages, none of the crooked-timbered hay barns that dot the high-summer pastures in Switzerland, or the ornate drystone shepherds' shelters that you pass in the French Alpes-Maritimes. This was pure, unadorned, elemental mountain: cliffs, gullies, glacial moraine, meadows of scrub and rubble. No sound of bleating or gebimmel-ing, just the wind and the occasional jabbing whistle of a marmot.

The main object of interest was the path itself. Along this particular stretch of the Via, it was a rocky, two-foot-wide trail with sparse trees on either side and the odd dab of color from some thin-stalked wildflowers bobbing over the dust. I'd begun to find these footpaths strangely moving. The fact that they continued to exist—spiderwebbing the region so delicately and yet on such an epic scale, and purely for the benefit of people who liked to walk—seemed faintly miraculous. So did the care with which the paths were maintained: mudslides cleared; fallen sections shored up by massive tree trunks; stone slabs set in the steepest parts to form rough stairways. Many stretches of the Via Alpina follow paths that have been trodden for centuries or more: pilgrim roads, trading routes. Others are seasonal grazing paths that were first used by Bronze Age pastoralists. Earlier in the summer, in the South Tyrol, I'd taken the Via Alpina's Yellow trail up into the Ötztal Range where, in 1991, a five-thousand-year-old mummified body was discovered in melting ice. From the possessions found alongside the corpse of Ötzi the Iceman—as he was inevitably dubbed—it's thought that he must have ascended from Lake Garda, south of the Italian Alps, on one of the routes that are still used for bringing sheep over the Niederjoch Pass into the Ötztal pastures. That linkage across time—the sense of being led by the tracks of others who were there before you—is reassuring, especially in the more remote places.

I reached the junction where the Red and the Purple trails divide, and took the fork toward Doliču. This was at about a mile above sea level, where you start to feel that you're entering the realm of the high peaks. I wanted to stop again and enjoy the view, which was tremendous, but the wind was blowing strong, bringing in colder, damper air, and I had sixteen hundred more feet to climb. Elevation is everything in this tilted landscape. Your destination can be less than a mile away, but if it's a quarter of a mile above you it can take three or four hours to get there—more if you're tired. I was tired. I was also concerned about my reservation at the hut, and thought I should arrive as early as possible.

Hiking alone is a sure way to get acquainted with your neuroses. In my case, these take the form of a steadily ramifying doubt that extends to every aspect of the journey. Half an hour past

the junction, I started to wonder if I'd taken the right turn. The Via Alpina rarely posts its winglike insignia on the trail, directing you to follow local marks instead. Some trails are extravagantly well marked, the blazes ushering you around turns like a parade of unctuous footmen anticipating every tremor of uncertainty, but this one was marked only where strictly necessary. The signs at the junction had been clear, but since then long stretches had gone by without any of the superfluous reassurance that I'd grown used to and now seemed to require. Had I zoned out and missed another junction? There weren't any on the map, but I knew from past experience that hiking maps were sometimes wildly inaccurate. (Once, in Italy, I lost my wife and daughter for half a day after going down a separate path around what appeared on the map to be a tiny copse but turned out to be a forest.) Reaching a spur with a long downward view, I looked to see if the German women were coming my way. There was no sign of them.

I had a compass as well as my map, but the path had begun twisting sharply along the increasingly sheer cliff walls, and it was impossible to get my bearings. I had a G.P.S. device, too, which I'd bought in an effort to raise my very rudimentary tech game. G.P.S. has long been touted as the future of orientation in hiking. No more map-reading in the rain or interpreting badly written directions; just download the satellite coordinates of your walk (which I'd done from the Via Alpina Web site) and make sure that the cursor keeps following the line on the screen. I'd tried the device out in Brooklyn, where it worked like a dream, tracking me from the wine store to the cheese store with a bread-crumbs trail of pixels. I'd wondered how well it would work in the more vertical plane of the Alps. This probably wasn't the best moment to be experimenting—I was cold, anxious, and drenched in sweat, with the numerous minor ailments that beleaguer my middle-aged body (neuroma, neuralgia, dodgy hip) all starting to act up. But the answer was unambiguous: the G.P.S. didn't work at all. I zoomed in and out, trying to find a readable scale, but the path wheeled frantically on the screen as the device succumbed to a kind of trigonometric panic. As I made the hairpin turn of the next serpentina, the digital bread-crumbs trail showed me stepping off into the void and floating somewhere between the summits of Triglav and Mt. Mišelj. I shoved the thing back into my pack and pushed on, half-convinced that I was going to be spending the night under a crap.

The final stages of the ascent, where the mountains attenuate into their crests and peaks, are always the hardest. You think the sheer wall of rock ahead of you is your final trial, but, as the path snakes its way up, another wall appears beyond, then another, each one steeper and more forbidding. The wind was making a disconcerting whine through the yellowish-gray masses of bare limestone. Rain clouds appeared and the temperature dropped. No cause for alarm, I told myself. I had waterproof clothing, a hat, and gloves. Something—age, probably—had made me more interested in the business of equipment on this trip than I'd been in the past. I'd bought clothes made of magical fabrics that breathed, weighed almost nothing, and were indestructible. I had a bamboo shirt that dried with uncanny speed after being washed, and a microfibre towel that packed into a pouch the size of a walnut. In recent years, I'd started paying attention to the incidental descriptions of clothing in old accounts of Alpine expeditions: Victorians lumbering around on glaciers in crinoline and tweed; Wordsworth with his "little knapsack of necessaries." The hikers in "Mr. Noon," Gilbert and Johanna, suffer the fate of those born before neoprene and Gore-Tex: "In the grey, disconsolate, Alpine downpour they trudged on, Johanna in her burberry, he in his shower coat. The cherry ribbon began to run streaks into Johanna's Panama, whose brim drooped into her neck. Drops of water trickled down her back. Gilbert's trouser-bottoms flapped his wet ankles." Most fascinating, to me, was the Iceman, Ötzi, whose Bronze Age travel gear included a woven-grass cape and a stylish black-and-brown-striped goatskin coat, which had been recovered beside his body.

I thought of him as I stopped in the shelter of a narrow gully to take out my nylon-and-polyester anorak. At ninety-eight hundred feet, the spot where Ötzi's body was found, on the Austrian-Italian border, is the highest point on the Via Alpina. I'd gone there the previous week, making a stunning hike up through the Tisental, with sparkling green meadows full of red cows and yellow asters which give way to the snow-streaked rock citadels of the Niederjoch Pass. There's an Ötzi industry in that part of the Alps—Ötzi pizza, "Bow Hunting with Ötzi" excursions—and I had some resistance to the subject. But it was unexpectedly moving to see the forlorn landscape that he'd been crossing with his longbow and copper axe the day he died. Sleet had started falling when I reached the hut where I planned to spend the night, and, instead of pushing on another hour to visit the actual discovery spot, I'd spent the rest of the day drinking hot chocolate in the dining room and chatting with other hikers.

Later, I'd picked up a book about Ötzi, and found myself drawn in by the heroic pathos of this ur-Alpinist, whose preserved body and effects individuated him with eerie clarity through the vast tract of time since he died. It's known that he had brown eyes, that he was afflicted with fleas, that the last thing he ate was ibex. Whatever language he spoke must have had words for pouch, belt, tinder, awl, and tattoo. (The many tattoos on his body are thought to have been a form of acupuncture treatment.) The cause of his death remained a mystery until ten years after his body was found, when X-rays revealed a flint arrowhead deep in his left shoulder. He'd been shot, from some distance, and had bled to death. No motive has been firmly established for his murder. If it was robbery, why was his valuable axe not stolen? If it was some kind of ritual sacrifice, why was he shot from afar, and why did he have a dagger clutched in his hand? Perhaps he'd been forced into exile—the poor state of some of his equipment supports this theory—and ran into inhospitable strangers along the trail.

I moved on. By now I was at the limit of my strength; my muscles were protesting, my hands were going numb in my too-thin gloves, and I had trouble catching my breath. (I tend to develop mild altitude sickness at about six thousand feet.) I thought of a conversation that I'd had the day before with Marko Pretner, who runs one of the information centers at the Triglav park. He'd made some criticisms of the Via Alpina. The stages in the park were too long for most hikers, he felt, and at times went too high into the mountains. He'd contrasted the Via Alpina walks to the newer, more popular Alpe Adria trail, which runs from Austria through Slovenia down to the Italian Adriatic, and sticks to less demanding valley routes. The Alpe Adria had a guidebook and a slick Web site offering organized packages with a guaranteed "magic place" on every stage, and was marketed at what it called the "pleasure hiker," a term I'd felt duty-bound to despise. But what was I, if not a pleasure hiker? A pain hiker? What was the point of that?

Since 2014, the Via Alpina has been the responsibility of the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, an N.G.O., based in Liechtenstein, that is dedicated to sustainability and biodiversity. The commission is a great generator of newsletters and position papers, and it advises, lobbies, and facilitates various worthy projects. But, as its director, Claire Simon, said, "it can be a little abstract at times." The ultimate goal is to enshrine the Via as an embodiment of the idea of sustainable tourism, and in the past two years a few showcase projects have been set up: an artisanal operation for distilling the herbal liqueur genepi; the conversion of a French military barracks into a mountain hut. Much will depend on the fate of a funding application that is currently under consideration by the E.U. But to Simon the urgency is plain. With a hundred and twenty million visitors each year, the Alps are under immense ecological pressure. The ski industry is a particularly relentless driver of development, disfiguring landscapes on a massive

scale, causing traffic, and emitting prodigious amounts of carbon. If nothing else, Simon would like the Via Alpina to reestablish the idea of the Alps as something other than a constellation of chic resorts. As she put it, “I would like it to diversify the unlimited ski-tourism industry with respectful, low-impact alternatives.”

Artisanal-liqueur operations may or may not be your thing, but the grand scale of the Via, and the breadth of the curatorial vision behind it, insure that there will always be plenty of reasons for hiking it. Nathalie Morelle, a Frenchwoman, oversaw its creation, and still works as its international coordinator. She described the criteria that she’d had in mind at the Via’s inception. No new paths were to be created, though existing ones could be refurbished. The trails had to feature all the major massifs, regions, geologies, and sightseeing highlights, while also steering hikers to lesser-known attractions. The Via would connect the valleys and the high passes, but without any need for rock-climbing skills. Stretches of tarmac should be minimized, and cities avoided (though Innsbruck, Bolzano, and Trieste were allowed in). Each of the three hundred and forty-two daylong hikes would end in a place to eat and sleep.

During my Slovenian ascent, the sky cleared in the middle of the afternoon. I saw a small wind turbine on a ridge in the distance. For a long time, it came and went on the horizon as the trail climbed crabwise toward it, but eventually the corner of a roof appeared below it, and at around four o’clock I dragged myself over the final parapet and staggered toward Koča na Doliču. It was a metal-roofed building on the edge of a wind-buffed plateau of chalky scree. A few Nordic poles leaned against the wooden walls outside. The insignia of the Via Alpina—the first one I’d seen all day—hung next to the front door. The Via has a slightly exasperating way of showing up like this, presenting itself in all its official pomp just at the point you feel that it has abandoned you forever. I limped into the hut, shattered and panting, hung up my pack, changed my boots for a pair of slippers from a box in the entranceway, and went down a flight of narrow stairs to a low-ceilinged dining room. Two teen-age boys, eagerly hospitable, greeted my anxious questions with loudly incredulous hilarity. Yes, of course I could have a bed! No, there’d been no need to confirm my reservation! Yes, I could get something to eat right away! I sat at a table, reeling as much from relief as from exhaustion. A plate of steaming goulash and polenta was brought over. I devoured it and, still at the table, I lay down on my bench (these places are very informal) and fell into a long, semi-comatose stupor.

By the time I was rested enough to get up, a curious shift had taken place in my feelings about the day. I seemed to have become aware, for the first time, of the grandeur of the landscape I’d just climbed through. It was all the more powerful for its starkness. Stretches of the trail came back to me on a current of mysterious pleasure. It was as if a second hike, joyous and invigorating, had begun to superimpose itself on the one I thought I’d taken. I’d experienced this alchemy before—the day’s accumulated fretfulness and discomfort turning into pure exhilaration, though seldom this intensely.

The rooms were being cleaned, so I wandered outside, over the cratered plateau. Battered onto its knoll, with the wind turbine humming beside it and the pale rubble scattering shadows all around, the hut looked like an outpost on another planet. A landing pad for a supply helicopter was marked out in stones. Tall summits, golden in the level light, rose like islands over the lake of dark air below. I was taking a photograph of the wind turbine when one of the teen-age boys walked by. He shook his finger—“Not allowed to take photographs!”—then broke into a huge grin: “Just joking!” I heard variations on the same joke several times in Slovenia. It was still a

delight, apparently, to reenact the lifting of strictures from oppressive times. Somehow this, too, became part of the strange exuberance gripping me.

The rooms were opened, and I was assigned a bed in an eight-person dorm. A young Swiss couple were already in there, rubbing pungent eucalyptus oil into their calves. One was a political scientist, the other a conservationist. They knew about the Via Alpina, although, like many people, they thought it was just a single trail, running from Slovenia to Monaco. While I unpacked, we had a lofty conversation about the natural community of interest formed by the Alpine nations, versus the artificial alliance of the E.U. (“What, really, can Helsinki have to do with Athens?”) You never know what the arrangements are going to be in these huts. I’ve had twenty-person dorms entirely to myself, and I’ve shared sleeping platforms with half a dozen others on the same wide mattress, but I’ve never been uncomfortable. The huts are clean and well run, and a code of scrupulous civility prevails.

Downstairs, the place had started filling up. There were families with young children and hardcore climbers draped in ropes. A raucous group from Ljubljana had completed an ascent of Triglav, and its members were toasting every new arrival from their party with steins of foaming lager. A Frenchwoman in her thirties, tall and regal, came through the door and checked in. The boys asked her if she was hiking alone. She told them that she was, and they were impolitic enough to ask why. “Because I like to,” she replied, imperiously. The German retirees came in—they’d been walking at a sensible pace, unlike me—and greeted me like a long-lost companion.

It’s very friendly, this high-altitude world. I could happily wander from hut to hut all year: the accommodation is inexpensive, the food’s not bad, and there’s the natural sociability of people who’ve been out walking all day and want to relax. The absence of Wi-Fi and phone service makes for a reminder of how human beings used to interact at moments of leisure: card games, board games, shared meals, conversations among strangers. I’d been thinking that, if the Via Alpina was having some trouble catching on, it was partly because the Alps themselves needed reframing in people’s imaginations. The idea of the Sublime had mobilized Alpine tourism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but images of icy peaks and yawning abysses had lost their thrill long ago, in a sea of jigsaw puzzles and chocolate boxes. Meanwhile, the region had been eclipsed by the Himalayas as a destination for adventure-seekers and plutocrats looking for a braggable challenge. In my still somewhat delirious condition, I felt that what was needed was someone to celebrate the Via Alpina’s vision of the good life—to sing the goulash and polenta, the bunk beds and the benches, the inextricable joys and pains of the trail, the Hobbitish congeniality of it all—as eloquently as Shelley had sung the desolation of the glaciers or Rousseau the uplifting terror of the torrents and the precipices. The Via Alpina was waiting for a prophet to acclaim it.

One slight drawback about this particular hut was that, owing to the stark geological conditions, it lacked water. Bottled water was available, and a single tap in the entranceway gave a thin trickle, but there were no showers or washbasins, and no toilets—just two hole-in-the-ground latrines outside, with some disconcerting twig brooms propped next to them. All of the hut’s seventy-nine beds were expected to be filled, and, with some serious drinking already going on in the dining room, this was beginning to strike me as problematic. Night was going to be a challenge; morning gruesome.

I decided that the only way to handle it was to get myself to sleep immediately, and to clear out first thing in the morning. I had a sleeping pill in my glasses case, where I’d also stowed my

contact-lens container. A minor mishap gave the day a final farcical twist. Some of the lens solution had leaked, half-dissolving my precious narcotic. There was no alternative but to lick the residue out. I was doing this, my tongue buried deep in the case's plush interior, when the door opened and the Swiss couple came in. An awkward pause followed, in which I decided it would be hopeless to try to explain. They stared for a moment, evidently reappraising their high-minded roommate as some kind of cokehead or very specialized deviant, before beating a retreat. I passed out, mercifully quickly, to the dim roar of Slovenian drinking songs, and left before daybreak the next morning.

Just beyond the hut, I saw something moving in the gray light below me: a shaggy animal with big horns. It was an ibex, though in profile it looked like a slightly disreputable unicorn. I took out my phone and filmed it as it ambled across the lunar scree. When I look at the footage now, it seems the perfect emblem of that place: wild and dreamlike and marvellous.

Hiking the entire Via Alpina would take years, so after leaving Triglav National Park I got into a car and drove to other sections of the trail. Moving southwest, I crossed into Italy, where I began a walk on the Karst Plateau, a rocky landscape pockmarked with caves and sinkholes, and ended up at Duino Castle. It was here, walking along the cliff-top path above the Adriatic, that Rilke claimed to have heard a voice speak the opening line of what became the Duino Elegies: "Who, if I cried, would hear me from among the Angels' orders?" The Sentiero Rilke, as the Italians call it, is surely one of the great approaches to any cultural pilgrimage site, the castle appearing across the Gulf of Trieste in a series of visual throbs like the unabashedly orgasmic build of Rilke's poems. In 1912, he wrote to a friend, "We are in the karst, and the hardened mountains forgo the effeminacy of any vegetation." There's actually quite a lot of vegetation around the castle (and only Rilke could have imagined the gentle slopes nearby to be mountains), but the path itself is pure karst: fantastical water-eroded stone, fissured into what geologists call clints and grykes—blocks and cracks—and fluted like cake icing or pinched into rigid waves like an arrested ocean.

I then headed north into Austria, and resumed following the Purple trail. One stretch of it passes near the Altaussee salt mine, where the Nazis hid some of their stolen art. I dropped down from pristine meadows—still emerald green in August—and looked at the old railbeds, with salt crystals glittering along the tunnels and a subterranean chapel dedicated to St. Barbara, the patron saint of miners. Years-old swags of fir hung on the walls, smelling as if they'd just been cut, the salt air keeping them unnaturally fresh.

That evening, I stayed at Blaa-Alm, an inn along the trail. The owners, who'd told me they were going to be gone for the night, left my room key in the entrance. It was an old wooden building in the Tyrolian style, deep in the middle of silent countryside, with flower-hung balconies looking out on a meadow full of small farm buildings, and I seemed to have it entirely to myself. A wooden staircase led up to a large bedroom in which the walls, ceiling, and every other surface, including the light-switch cover, had been intricately panelled in the same butter-colored wood. It was very comfortable, even luxurious, if a touch sarcophagal. I sat out on the balcony, watching night fall and feeling as though I'd landed in a folktale about a traveller arriving in a household under some powerful enchantment.

There was nothing sinister, exactly, though the tall fir trees around the meadow were forbidding in the dusk, and I got a shock when I saw the back of a woman, dressed in a dirndl and high-

crowned hat, exiting from what I'd thought was the empty downstairs, and disappearing into the woods. Later, online, I discovered that Eichmann and his S.S. guards had stayed at the inn while fleeing U.S. troops at the end of the war. Gold coins that they buried under the huts in the meadow had been dug up occasionally over the years.

If I had to choose a favorite stretch from my sampling of the Via, it would be the part of the Blue trail that passes through the Walser villages of the Piedmont. The landscape was thickly forested, with Chinese-looking crags and knolls scarved in fog. The villages were miraculous specimens of an ingenious, low-impact culture. There were miniature funiculars for bringing in supplies (the streets are too steep and narrow for cars), Richard Scarry-like vehicles on caterpillar treads for the garbage and heavy lifting, stone houses caged in wooden balconies, scythes lying on the stone-covered roofs, chimneys shingled like tiny houses. The schist-rich local rock made everything glitter madly in the sunshine. The Walsers were German-speaking refugees and migrants who spread south through the Alps during the Middle Ages, improvising a life style on the high terrain where nobody else farmed or lived. It was a frugal life style, constrained by the demands of basic survival, but there were enough grace notes to make you feel that the inhabitants enjoyed their existence. In a little museum in Alagna, I admired a teaspoon carved with a hand holding a rose.

It's the looping continuum of the trail that makes the Via Alpina what it is. It doesn't take long to lose yourself in the rhythms of mountain travel: the morning climb and long afternoon descent, the dependably undependable weather, the never quite knowing what you're going to see over the crest of the next high pass or who's going to emerge from the mist along the trail—though, unlike Ötzi, you can be fairly sure the stranger isn't going to kill you. He might even want to be your friend. We've come that far since the Bronze Age.