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JOCH PASS—WORLD'S EASIEST MOUNTAIN WALK

By Weldon F. Heald

I could be wrong about this. Somewhere in Switzerland there may be a more carefree Alpine ramble than from Engelberg to the Melchthal by way of Joch Pass. But, if so, I've never heard of it. Where else can you be so effortlessly wafted mechanically 4,000 feet up to the mountaintops, wander three or four hours along a boulevard of paths, then be gently lowered into another valley at the far end? Meanwhile on the way, you are treated to some of the finest panoramas, fairest meadows, bluest lakes, and freshest air the Alps have to offer. Even if you don't walk a block to post a letter at home, the Joch Pass is a zestful pedestrian experience you can relish to the full whether you are male, female, seven or seventy.

The venture starts with a level ten-minute walk from the centre of Engelberg to the Gerschnialp funicular station. But, of course, you can save this initial effort by taking a taxi. In five minutes or so the slanting cable car lifts you 900 feet up the west slope of the valley. At the top are restaurant, hotel, and a magnificent outlook over Engelberg below and the grand semicircle of soaring peaks surrounding it. Your second walk is a few steps to the adjoining aerial tramway for a spectacular bit of levitation over woods, pastures and cliffs to the Trübsee, 5,870 feet elevation. Again awaiting you with efficient Swiss hospitality is the inevitable hotel with tempting terrace restaurant.

Up here, 2,600 feet above Engelberg, the views are more extended, and the combination of green valley and rocky, glacier-hung summits are of the breathtaking variety. The Trübsee itself is a little lake, a half mile long, in a grassy Alpine basin under the impressive snowy dome of famed Titlis. With an altitude of 10,627 feet, this distinctive mountain is the king of the Engelberg Alps and one of the easiest major climbs in Switzerland. If you are ambitious and want to bag at least one Swiss peak, Titlis is for you. A licensed guide will take you from Trübsee to the top in 4½ hours. There is a chapel by the lake where you can ask the blessing of Saint Bernard, patron of mountaineers.

The next leg of your journey is another level, ten-minute walk around the south shore of the Trübsee to the lower end of the Joch Pass chair lift. For sixty years Engelberg has been a leading European winter sports centre and these high open slopes near tree line and above make prime skiing country when the snows are deep. The chair lift was installed principally for the wintertime *ski heil* fraternity, but serves in summer as a welcome boost for hikers and climbers. In twelve minutes it swings you airily to the rocky gap between the ice-patched Reissend Nollen and the plunging cliffs of the Schafberg. This is the top, 7,265 feet above sea level. The painless ascent has taken some forty-five minutes compared to more than four hours had you laboured on foot up the winding way from the valley.

The Joch Pass is a gateway into another world. Facing west, you start down the gently inclined path into a wide, breezy Alpine basin carpeted with lush grass and spangled with multicoloured wildflowers. Here and there, singly and in groups, are picturesque wind-blown cembra pines. As a

dramatic backdrop against the sky, fifteen to twenty miles distant, are the serrated crests of the Bernese Oberland, glistening in snowy robes and swathed with wrinkled glaciers. On the south a precipitous snow-frosted ridge rises abruptly 3,500 feet. Centred in the grassy basin are the blue waters of Engstelnsee, looking as if a piece of the sky had fallen to earth.

A short traverse of this exhilarating Alpine upland brings you to Engstelnalp. If exhausted after your down-grade forty-five minute walk from the pass, you can revive yourself with a mug of beer, cup of tea or coffee, or a full meal to mitigate your mountain appetite. Potato soup, Emmenthaler cheese, French bread and a big salad bowl go well here.

You can spend the night, too, at the Kurhaus Hotel if you'd like to explore the delectable surroundings. But Engstelnalp is popular, especially on week-ends, and it is wise to phone or write for reservations beforehand. In fact, you'll never be lonely on this trip, and can pass the time of day and unlimber your French and German with people from all parts of Europe. Roundabout are pleasant strolls to take, mountains to climb, good trout fishing in the lake, boating and even swimming—if you are rugged enough to splash in water around 60 degrees temperature. From here you can also take a highly scenic path crossing the ridge south to Gadmen on the Susten Pass Road or a long, downhill trek to Meiringen and the Brünig Pass Railway.

Beyond Engstelnalp, the route to Melchsee-Frutt passes a fine waterfall, then makes the only ascent on the entire walk, winding 600 feet up to a small notch on the north rim of the basin. Here you are 6,500 feet elevation and can look back over the lake and high Alpine pastures in their wild mountain setting. Passing a sparkling tarn in the gap, you enter a shallow meadowed upland a mile wide and stretching for six miles west between moderate rims to the Melchsee. This is an interesting example of what geologists call a *Karrenfeld*—a bare and fissured plateau of limestone rock. There are several sinkhole ponds without inlets or outlets, and streams suddenly disappear into subterranean crevices.

After wandering for a couple of hours through this open highland country, you come to Melchsee-Frutt. Here several hotels cater to a crowd of visitors who enjoy the stimulation of the elevated environment when green and flower-spread or buried deep in glistening winter snow. Again you have the choice of tarrying awhile to sample the delights of this mountain retreat or returning to the valleys. But in any event, it is time for another refreshment break on an open-air terrace above the little lake, with an unimpeded view of the Titlis range beyond.

The descent is accomplished by a 13-minute aerial tramway ride to the Stockalp, 2,240 feet below. From there you catch an Alpine Postal Motorcoach which takes you down the charming, pastoral Melchthal in an hour to Sarnen on the Brünig Pass Railway line. As you await the train to Lucerne or Interlaken, it's doubtful that you are even tired. For, as I said, I don't know of an easier mountain walk—or one more rewarding.

But just one or two suggestions before you go: be sure to take along a jacket or windbreaker, and carry a stout spike-shod Swiss cane—it's as helpful as an auxiliary leg. And if you plan an overnight stop or two in the high places, a small knapsack will accommodate everything you may need along the way.

Good walking—or, as the Swiss might say, *Glückliche Fusstour!*

(S.N.T.O.)