

## STAGE 8

### Grächen to Zermatt – the Europaweg

<b>Start</b>	Grächen
<b>Access to start</b>	Grächen is reached by bus from the Mattertal from St Niklaus.
<b>Altitude at start</b>	1619m
<b>Finish</b>	Zermatt
<b>Access to finish</b>	Train from Visp; bus and road access to Täsch, then train to Zermatt.
<b>Altitude at finish</b>	1600m
<b>Altitude gain</b>	about 1400m
<b>Altitude loss</b>	1300m
<b>Distance</b>	31 km
<b>Time</b>	10–11 hrs
<b>Highpoint</b>	2663m: on Europaweg near the Grosse Grabe after the long ascent from Grächen.
<b>Facilities</b>	Grächen has all facilities and Zermatt has everything you could ever need and more. In between you can buy chocolate at the Europahütte and, if you ask the evening before, they will do a picnic. There is a café at Ottovan.
<b>Maps</b>	1:50,000 Carte Nationale de la Suisse 5006 Matterhorn Mischabel; 1:25,000 Carte Nationale de la Suisse 1328 Randa, 1308 St Niklaus
<b>Transport options</b>	Sunnegga lift down to Zermatt
<b>Accommodation</b>	Zermatt: lots of hotels; Täsch, Randa: hotels; Täschalp Europaweghütte; Europahütte; Grächen: several hotels.
<b>Extras</b>	If there has been a lot of rain recently it's worth checking that the Europaweg is practicable as it is prone to landslides and rockfall. For more details about the Europaweg check out <a href="http://www.europaweg.ch">www.europaweg.ch</a> .
<b>Variant</b>	If you do not want to do the Europaweg for whatever reason then descend to St Niklaus and take the valley route. This takes back-roads up through Herbruggen, Randa and Täsch from where there is a delightful footpath through the woods to Zermatt. The train is also an option from St Niklaus to Zermatt.
<b>Escape route</b>	There are several paths down to the valley from the Europaweg to reach Herbruggen, Randa or Täsch, from where the train can be taken to Zermatt or the bus to Grächen or the Saas Valley.

On 6 July 1997 the Grächen–Zermatt Europaweg was officially opened as a two-day hike. It is without doubt one of the most magnificent high-terrain routes of the Alps and, along with the Saas Fee Höhenweg, is regarded as the showpiece of the Swiss Tour of Monte Rosa.

After climbing up from Grächen to reach a statue of St Bernard on the Zum Grat Ridge at around 2300m the trail stays high above the Mattertal Valley for the next 25km or so. Views of the glaciated peaks such as the Weisshorn, the Zinal Rothorn, the Obergabelhorn and, as Zermatt is reached, the Matterhorn, are unsurpassed. The Europahütte situated about halfway along the route provides a superb place to spend the night and savour these unique vistas.

However, the Europaweg is not the perfect hike it would seem. The Zermatt and Grächen authorities have created a monster that requires constant attention and nurturing. The trail traverses across steep slopes which in winter are prone to avalanches and hence denuded of trees. The high altitude of the trail in any case ensures it is above the treeline – great for views but inevitably on unstable ground. In heavy rain landslides are frequent and it is not uncommon for the Europaweg to be closed due to risk of stonefall. This problem is being dealt with by very careful trail maintenance and the construction of metal tunnels on the worst affected slopes, which allow the walker to safely cross gullies raked by stonefall. Nevertheless, in 2003 the trail was closed for some time and in 2005 many new paths had formed as people found sections of trail had fallen away or become too narrow and slippery to use. In the last couple of years a section of trail after the Europahütte has had to be re-routed 100m below where it used to be, again because of rock fall and in the summer of 2009 there were again closures.

As long as the route is maintained it will remain a gem but it does not look as if this path will stabilise as well as its neighbour, the Grächen Höhenweg.

Do not be too surprised by the arduous nature of the Europaweg. A traverse it is, but it can best be described as ‘undulating’ and as usual those small ascents of 100m or so often feel a lot harder (being interspersed with downs and level sections) than a regular ascent of 1000m. There tends to be a certain lack of rhythm. But for all this there is no doubt that the two days spent on the Europaweg will be some of the best and most memorable walking on the Tour.

## **Route**

A sign indicates the way out from **Grächen** town centre, giving 6hrs 30mins to the Europahütte and 13hrs to Zermatt. It usually takes a little less time than this and the tourist office gives a total time of 10 or 11hrs. However long it takes this is a two-day stage, not one to go for in a long day. A small road leads past flower-bedecked chalets into forest and here a track is followed to the hamlet of **Gasenried**. Once out of this village the Europaweg is signposted along rising forest paths, past a turn-off to the Bordierhütte. The way is steep as most of the altitude is gained in the first couple of hours, so take it gently. From time to time clearings in the forest tempt you stop for a breather to enjoy glimpses of the far-off Bietschorn in the Bernese Oberland. Early on, a sign on a rock identifies a

source where you can fill up your water bottles. In dry conditions this is the only water fill-up point on this part of the trail.

Coming out of the forest views open up and soon a grassy shoulder is reached, where a statue of St Bernard has been erected to encourage hikers on their way. Patron saint of mountaineers, St Bernard was active in the 11th century when he gave up a life of leisure to help the poor and needy. He saw it as his mission to help those who were obliged to travel in the mountains – for trade, immigration, pilgrimage, to find grazing and so on. He set up two hospices on mountain passes, with the aim of giving shelter and food to travellers and providing safe passage.

From here on the character of the trail changes totally and for the next few hours your world will be dominated by rock and scree rather than grass and trees. The trail continues to climb, but more gently now, becoming more and more barren as it begins its long snaking traverse around the hillside. Rocky buttresses give way to steep gullies, narrow ledges and boulder fields. The occasional cable aids passage but you still need to keep a wary eye on the trail. Views are best enjoyed from a stationary stance.

The **Grosse Grabe** (2663m) is the highpoint of the trail, but being a zone of boulders it is not a place to stop: this area is one that is threatened by rockfall and signs encourage you not to linger.

Beyond this section the trail becomes easier, except for the odd exposed part. There are many places to sit and enjoy the views of the Mattertal. Up above are glaciers and peaks that can only be guessed at from the trail below.

A wobbly suspension bridge crosses the torrent gushing down from the Hochberggletscher and a sign advises no more than five people should be on the bridge at once. The void below suggests that this is probably good advice.

Another hour's walk and the **Europahütte** (2237m) is a welcome sight. This wooden building was newly constructed for the opening of the Europaweg and has a wonderful terrace facing over the Mattertal to the Weisshorn. This is the place to get out the binoculars and become intimately acquainted with the exquisitely sculpted North Face of this peak. At 4506m, the second highest peak entirely in Switzerland, there is no easy route to its summit.

The onward section of the trail seems to be more equipped with tunnels and cables than the earlier part. Soon after the hut there is a path signed to the Domhütte. From here the path has been re-routed at a lower level than previously. The old trail can still be seen going across but you must take the new path which zigzags down some way. You will pass a couple of paths down to Randa but keep on the main trail. This will then climb back up to rejoin the original route where there is a signpost left to Gruen Garten. The Europaweg is signed to the right.

A short descent leads to a tunnel cut into the rock. It helps if you find the light switch at the entrance, which, in typical Swiss fashion, is solar powered. A bridge crosses another deep ravine before an improbable hillside traverse, protected by rope railings.

As the path descends you pass another descent to Randa. There are good views of the Randa landslide from here. In April and May 1991 there were several landslides on the westerly hillside above Randa. The biggest one blocked the railway line, the road and the river and the military were brought in to build a temporary floating road to evacuate people stranded in the upper Mattertal. Miraculously no-one was hurt.

We are nearing the end of the exposed slopes of the Europaweg but a final section must be crossed – a sign warns of rockfall and the path is protected by platforms and at least four tunnels. At a river crossing you can see the signs of older trails each one progressively lower as the route has to be re-made regularly due to erosion and landslides. After this there are sections of trail protected by ropes and cables before the terrain becomes a lot more gentle. The Weisshorn now cedes its dominant position and the Matterhorn takes over. This provides a welcome distraction from the ups and downs and before you know it you'll be coming into the delightful hamlet of **Täschalp/Ottovan** (2187m) which can also be reached by road from the valley.

Views from here are superb, with a background of the Täschhorn. There is a church and a café, the **Europaweghütte**. This is a lovely place to enjoy lunch and if you have decided to take three days over this stage then this is the place to stay.

Täschalp/Ottovan marks the end of the 'Alpine' nature of the Tour of Monte Rosa and the final part of the trek follows pastoral tracks through delightful forest of larch and Arolla pines and hamlets of wooden chalets. Monte Rosa itself stays hidden although a look at the map shows it is not far away. The other Zermatt peaks take centre stage from here as you stroll onwards around the hillside heading for **Tufteren** (2215m).

A café here begs a last stop before deciding which way to reach Zermatt. Most people will want to arrive on foot, so take a wide track which goes past the cable car at **Patrullarve** (or take the signed footpath which avoids the track) and down through Tiefenmatten, arriving in town just over the river from the church. Alternatively the **Sunnegga lift** can be reached by following a wide and well-signed track around the hillside.