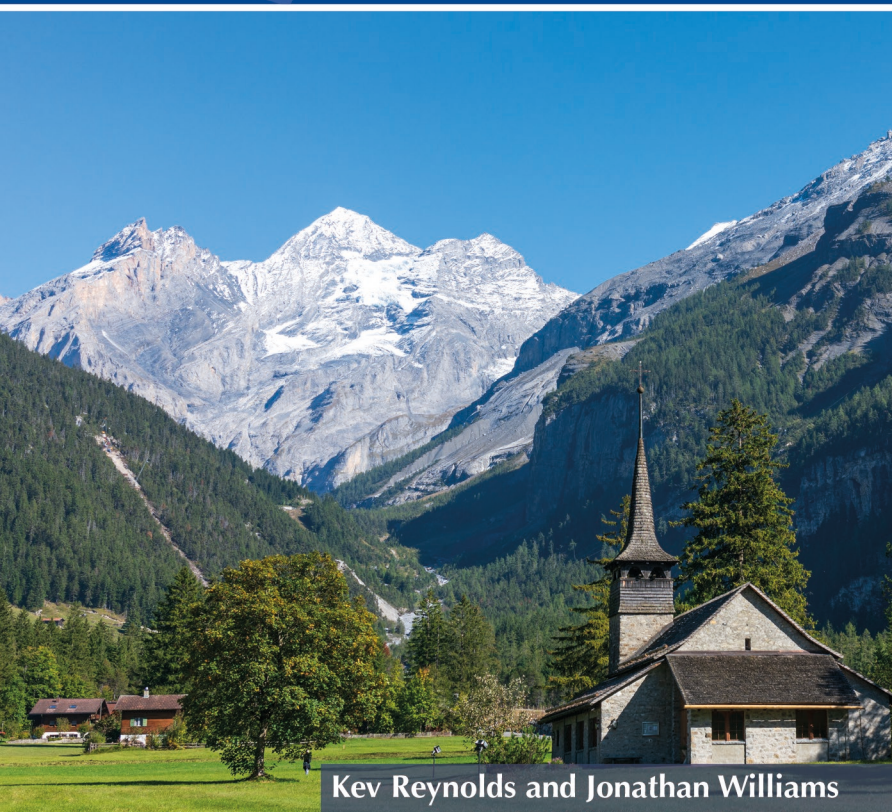


CICERONE

TREKKING THE SWISS VIA ALPINA

East to West across Switzerland –
the Alpine Pass Route



Kev Reynolds and Jonathan Williams

TREKKING THE SWISS VIA ALPINA

**EAST TO WEST ACROSS SWITZERLAND –
THE ALPINE PASS ROUTE**

by Kev Reynolds and Jonathan Williams

CICERONE

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While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1160/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: Looking up to the Blümlisalp range from Kandersteg (Stage 12)

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Symbols used on profiles

	hotel		train station		refreshments
	mountain hut/inn		bus service		shop
	campsite		cable car		information

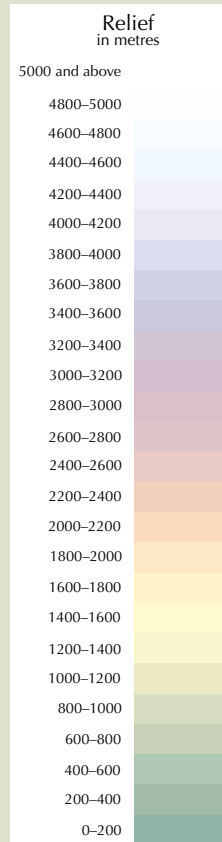
Symbols used on route maps

	route
	alternative route
	start point
	finish point
	alternative start point
	alternative finish point
	glacier
	woodland
	urban areas
	international border
	station/railway
	peak
	pass
	mountain hut/inn
	hotel
	refreshments
	campsite

SCALE: 1:100,000

0 kilometres 1 2
0 miles 1

Contour lines are drawn
at 50m intervals and
highlighted at 200m
intervals.



GPX files

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded for free at www.cicerone.co.uk/1160.

ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Finish	High Point		Distance (km)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	Time	Page
Prologue	Gaflei	Sargans	Gaflei		27	400	1400	7hr	40
1	Sargans	Weisstannen	Vermol		13.5	770	250	4hr	46
2	Weisstannen	Elm	Foopass		23	1400	1420	7hr 30min	52
3	Elm	Linthal	Richetlipass		24.5	1550	1880	8hr 45min	59
4	Linthal	Urnerboden	Fatschbach (nr Nussbüel)		17.5	1030	300	5hr 30min	65
5	Urnerboden	Altdorf	Klausenpass		28	1000	1920	8hr 30min	70
6	Altdorf	Engelberg	Surenenpass		29.5	2040	1500	10hr 30min	78
7	Engelberg	Engstlenalp	Jochpass		12	1280	450	5hr	86
8	Engstlenalp	Meiringen	Balmeregghorn		22.5	730	1960	7hr	91
9	Meiringen	Grindelwald	Grosse Scheidegg		23	1500	1060	8hr	98
10	Grindelwald	Lauterbrunnen	Kleine Scheidegg		19.5	1150	1390	6hr 30min	108
11	Lauterbrunnen	Griesalp	Sefinafurrga		22.5	1910	1300	9hr 15min	117
12	Griesalp	Kandersteg	Hohtürli		18	1460	1700	7hr 30min	126
13	Kandersteg	Adelboden	Bunderchrinde		17.5	1480	1300	7hr	135
14	Adelboden	Lenk	Hahnenmoospass		14.0	680	970	4hr 30min	142
15	Lenk	Gstaad	Trütlibergpass		22.5	1150	1160	7hr	149
16	Gstaad	L'Etivaz	Col de Jable		16.5	1170	1080	6hr 30min	156
17	L'Etivaz	Rossinière	L'Etivaz		14.5	300	520	4hr	162
18	Rossinière	Rochers de Naye	Rochers de Naye		19.0	1900	850	8hr	167
19	Rochers de Naye	Montreux	Rochers de Naye		14.0	50	1650	4hr	172
Total (main route)	Sargans	Montreux			371.5	22,550	22,660	129hr	
Total (inc Prologue)	Gaflei	Montreux			398.5	22,950	24,070	136hr	
15A	Lenk	Gsteig	Trütlibergpass		22.5	1500	1380	8hr	179
16A	Gsteig	Col des Mosses	Col des Andérets		25	1470	1210	8hr	179
Total (alt finish)	Gaflei	Montreux			396	22,970	24,080	135hr	

Mountain safety

Every mountain walk has its dangers, and those described in this guidebook are no exception. All who walk or climb in the mountains should recognise this and take responsibility for themselves and their companions along the way. The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure that the information contained in this guide was correct when it went to press, but, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, they cannot accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person using this book.

International distress signal *(emergency only)*

Six blasts on a whistle (and flashes with a torch after dark) spaced evenly for one minute, followed by a minute's pause. Repeat until an answer is received. The response is three signals per minute followed by a minute's pause.

Helicopter rescue

The following signals are used to communicate with a helicopter:

Help needed:
raise both arms
above head to
form a 'Y'



Help not needed:
raise one arm
above head, extend
other arm downward



Emergency telephone numbers

Switzerland: OCVS (Organisation Cantonale Valaisanne de Secours): tel 144

Weather reports

Switzerland: tel 162 (in French, German or Italian), www.meteoschweiz.ch/en

Mountain rescue can be very expensive – be adequately insured.

12 DAYS ON THE TRAIL – A TWO-WEEK TREK

Day	Stage	Time	Distance km	Ascent metres	Descent metres	Transport options
1	Altdorf/Brüsti to Engelberg	6hr 45min	25.9	930	1460	Cable car to Brüsti
2	Engelberg to Engstlenalp	5hr	12.0	1280	450	Cable cars along the route
3	Engstlenalp to Meiringen	7hr	22.5	730	1960	Buses from Engstlenalp, cable car from Planplatten
4	Meiringen to Grindelwald	8hr	23.0	1500	1060	Buses along the route
5	Grindelwald to Wengen	5hr 30min	16.5	1150	920	Cable cars along the route
6	Wengen to Mürren/Rotstock Hut	5hr 45min	15.3	1320	550	Trains to Lauterbrunnen and Mürren
7	Rotstock Hut to Griesalp	4hr 30min	10.2	590	1220	None
8	Griesalp to Blümlisalp	4hr	6.8	1430	10	None
9	Blümlisalp to Kandersteg	3hr 30min	11.2	30	1690	Cable car from Oeschinensee to Kandersteg
10	Kandersteg to Adelboden	7hr 30min	17.5	1480	1300	None
11	Adelboden to Lenk	4hr 30min	14.0	680	970	Cable cars to Hahnenmoospass
12	Lenk to Gstaad	7hr	22.5	1150	1160	Cable car to Leiterli
Totals		69hr	197.4	12,270	12,750	

For a one-week trek, the section of the route from Meiringen to Kandersteg would give the trekker the high section through the Bernese Oberland, sometimes termed the *Bärentrek* (German for Bear Trek) in Switzerland.



PREFACE

The Via Alpina (VA) has now supplanted the Alpine Pass Route (APR) as a journey across Switzerland, giving a fully waymarked Swiss National Trail. This guide reflects this evolution which has been completed in recent years, while seeking to keep the exploratory journey that the original APR provided.

Many major changes were included in the previous (third) edition. These were the start in Liechtenstein, the Planplatten Traverse after Engstlenalp, and the slightly awkward (to plan) stages after Lenk, where the route now heads to Gstaad. This fourth edition now includes the full 'official' finish by way of Lenk–Gstaad–L'Etivaz–Rossinière–Rochers de Naye.

However, after considerable soul-searching we have retained the original finish of Lenk–Lauenen–Gsteig–Col des Mosses–Rochers de Naye as a harder, quicker, more mountainous route for trekkers looking for sterner stuff. There are fewer facilities (likely part of the reasoning behind the official routing) but more of the spirit of a mountain journey. The APR was a route of options, and while we have pruned these back somewhat, we have retained them where they improve the overall experience.

Another change has been in the details of how the route is referenced throughout the guide and we have decided to refer to it as the Via Alpina (VA) rather than the Alpine Pass Route (APR).

One of the results of the codification of the route is that the numbers of Swiss trekkers keen to traverse and explore their country has grown. In time it may come to fulfil the same status as the Coast-to-Coast route in England. Transport in Switzerland is outstanding so taking in a stage or two is easy for many. It is possible to wait for good weather before setting out. Swiss trekkers tend to head in each direction, to the east or the west, and while many would start or finish in Vaduz few seemed interested in walking up or down the Gaflei hill. So, the trail is busier with Swiss walkers as well as international visitors.

However, we have retained the one-way route description from east to west. Montreux with its restaurants, music and transport seems a suitable end point for the international visitor. A small town (or hill) in Liechtenstein does not.

While now a Swiss National Trail, the route remains an outstanding journey across the Alps. It tends to naturally stage from valley to valley, ensuring plentiful accommodation. This limits or restricts to some extent the need and ability to sleep high in refuges and mountain inns; some will appreciate this, others less so. The route is still supported by numerous cable cars, postbuses (distinguished by their yellow paintwork) and regular buses, and mountain trains for those looking to move faster or sustain sore legs.



A question many trekkers have as they consider the route is whether it is a two- or three-week trek? The VA is an exploration of Switzerland's mountains and valleys, and if possible, it should be approached in an open and relaxed manner with ample time allowed. If you want to walk every step of the way it's best to allow closer to three weeks, and the 19 stages plus prologue in Liechtenstein reflect this, giving just under three weeks of walking and allowing for some rest days and bad weather disruptions.

In practice many people will only have time for a two-week trek, and for these the guide suggests ways in which lifts, buses and trains can be

used to hold the journey to a comfortable fortnight without detracting from the experience. Postbuses, funiculars, small mountain trains and cable cars are quintessentially part of the Swiss mountain experience, so only the purest of purists would object to their use on this route.

Another option is either tackling the central Oberland *Bärentrek* section – between say Engelberg and Kandersteg (6–7 days) – or splitting into two trips with a break say at Grindelwald or Lauterbrunnen. Other options are considered in the Introduction.

It has been a pleasure to revisit regions we already knew well and to



It's a hard job but someone has to do it – the updating team in action with the Blümlisalp glacier behind (Stage 12)

explore new ones; so what were the highlights? Any long mountain journey has its own routine. Like many such treks in the Alps, the VA has a pass or col almost every day, so the daily routine of early start, climb and descent set the rhythm. Another highlight was the insight gained into the challenges of mountain farming, for Swiss farmers and their cows and sheep manage the landscapes in a way that is both picturesque and accessible. No less interesting were the valleys, villages, resorts and occasional towns along the way.

The 'Oberland giants' took centre stage on the sections between Grindelwald and Mürren, but these in no way diminished the impact of mountains to the east (Tödi, Titlis) and the west (Blümlisalp, Wildstrubel, Les Diablerets). Mountain lakes added to

the beauty of the landscapes, while the wildlife – chamois, ibex, marmots – and meadow flowers all contributed to the trekking experience.

On the first day of September we were woken just before seven by the sound of bells – a great many of them, enormous, and ringing at a steady tempo. Viewed through the window of our mountain inn, we were treated to a Swiss ritual as cows descended from their high pasture to the middle levels before their final descent to the lowlands in October. With heads held high, the animals knew it was a special day for them, and they walked past the window at a brisk pace, intent on pastures new. These were their alps, and they knew it. We were merely guests passing through.

Jonathan Williams



INTRODUCTION



Sunset over Lac Léman (Stage 19)

There's immense satisfaction to be gained in undertaking a long journey on foot; especially when that journey takes you among mountains. There's the daily challenge, of course, and rewards when, on reaching the summit of a pass that has occupied most of a morning's effort, you are greeted by a panorama of exquisite beauty, with peaks and ridges far off to lure you on in the days to come. And when at last you gain those distant ridges, you exchange them for yet more new horizons, with new challenges to be met and overcome along the way.

When that journey makes a traverse of the Swiss Alps, with mountains as dramatic as Titlis, Wetterhorn, Eiger, Mönch, Jungfrau, Gspaltenhorn, Blümlisalp and Les Diablerets, it's

bound to be a tremendous source of pleasure, bringing a sense of achievement for all who complete it. Such a journey awaits walkers along the Swiss Via Alpina.

THE SWISS VIA ALPINA

For many years the Alpine Pass Route had no official status. However, over recent years it has evolved into the Swiss National Walking Route 1, or the Via Alpina, starting not in Switzerland, but at Gaflei in the Principality of Liechtenstein. From there it passes into Switzerland and through the ancient town of Sargans, the traditional start point, and eventually finds its way to Montreux on the shores of Lac Léman. From Gaflei to Montreux the route

THE LIECHTENSTEIN START

PROLOGUE

Gaflei to Sargans

Start	Gaflei 1483m
Finish	Sargans 483m
Distance	27km
Total ascent	400m
Total descent	1400m
Time	7hr
High point(s)	Gaflei 1483m
Maps	LS 237T Walenstadt and 238T Montafon; K&F 30 Sarganserland
Transport	Bus (Gaflei–Vaduz, Vaduz–Sargans). Regular buses from Vaduz to Gaflei take 30min.
Accommodation	Sücka (off route), Vaduz, Sevelen, Azmoos, Sargans (see Sargans below)

Starting an almost three-week traverse of Switzerland's passes with a long downhill in another country does have a slightly counter-intuitive feel, but the descent through the woods is interesting, while the countryside after the covered wooden Rhine bridge is decidedly bucolic. Vaduz feels like a small Swiss town except its buses are a different shade of yellow, and with few signs of the busy tax accountants for which Liechtenstein is renowned.

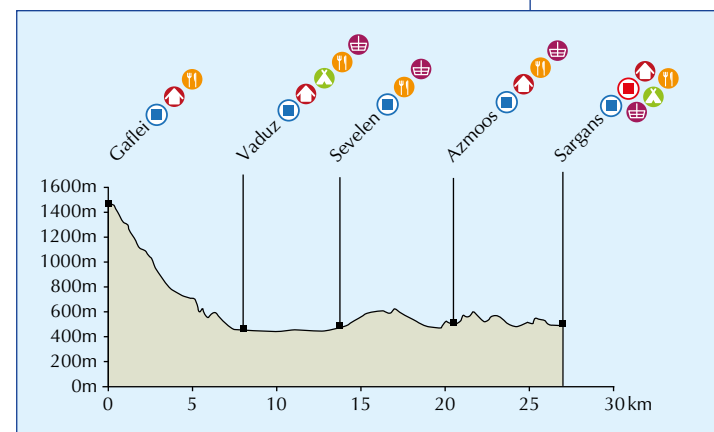
It would be possible to stay in Sargans for two nights, taking the bus to Vaduz or Gaflei. Walking from Vaduz to Weisstannen in a single day would be a 9hr walk, perhaps too much for a first stage.

THE VIA ALPINA IN LIECHTENSTEIN

The official Swiss Via Alpina starts at Gaflei, a spa hamlet and car park in Liechtenstein, dropping down through Vaduz, the capital of the Principality, crossing the Rhine and then on to Sargans where the APR has traditionally started.

Slightly confusingly the European Via Alpina red route also passes close by Gaflei, and can be joined with the VA either by a short descent to Gaflei, or a 1hr 30min walk from Sücka where stage 57 of the red route ends. Sücka can be reached from Vaduz by bus, getting off at Steg and walking 10min to Sücka, where there is accommodation at Berggasthaus Sücka.

The red Via Alpina route takes a different route through Switzerland and joins the Swiss Via Alpina for a stage before diverging again at the Trütlisbergpass above Lenk (Stage 15), from where it makes its way southwards to the Mediterranean at Monaco.



From the entrance to the car park at **Gaflei** take the signed track downhill, watching for a left turn after 250 metres. It starts unpromisingly through pasture, but is signed with a marker post in the field. Pass below a viewing platform (reached by passing the left turn). From here the route drops steeply to the left. ▶

In places during the first half hour the route can be steep, narrow, muddy and potentially slippery, living up to its Bergweg sign.



After 30min cross another trail, and after 60min and 600m of descent come to a clearing and the entrance to the **Wildschloss**. This is the ruined Schalun Castle which started falling down as early as 1200AD. Follow the forest track, which is signed at the start but has limited signage until you reach the outskirts of Vaduz after many zigzags and 1000m of downhill.

Turn left at the first houses (Letzi) then pass **Vaduz Castle**, turn right along the road and at the second bend take the waymarked path dropping steeply into the town. The path is decorated with boards explaining the history of the Principality, and it drops you at a plaza in the centre of **Vaduz** (457m, **2hr 15min**, **restaurants, accommodation, bars, cafés, shops, banks**). Cross the plaza and at the roundabout turn right and then left (although straight across and then right works just as well).

Vaduz Castle occupies a prominent position 120m above the town to which it gave its name. Thought to have been built as a fortress in the 12th century, the castle became properly habitable as early as 1287, and was acquired by the Princely Family in 1712.

Vaduz Castle in Liechtenstein



Following a long period of decline, it was restored by Prince Franz Joseph in 1939 and adopted as the official residence of the Liechtenstein Royal Family, which it remains to this day (see www.tourismus.li).

From the town centre the official route takes a 2–3km detour through the attractive meadowland of Haberfeld to the north before turning south parallel to the Rhine and passing Vaduz football stadium, a smart modern affair. It is straightforward to cut this loop, and from the town centre you head straight towards the river, joining the trail just before the Rhine bridges.

Cross the elegant, covered cyclepath and footbridge, completely made from wood, and pass into Switzerland (3hr). Turn left then right at the road bridge, then left after a road junction along an irrigation channel then right and into **Sevelen** (471m, 3hr 50min). ◀

In the centre of the village turn left along a road with a bar on the corner heading south-west. The signs suggest around 4hr to Sargans, but in fact it's nearer three. The track climbs steadily and after 20min and 100m of ascent turn left on a path signed to Azmoos. Passing through woods and pastures, with better and better views as you climb, pass the ruined castle near Wartau and reach the

The land is pancake flat, and although Sevelen is industrial (home to Schoeller, makers of fabrics widely used in outdoor and work clothing), the upper part is a much more traditional Swiss village with a fine church.

Castle on the route between Sevelen and Sargans



village of **Gretschins**. Turn left along the road and then right at the bus stop. Descending, the path makes a sharp left turn by an attractive cottage and drops alongside a small stream that has gouged an impressively deep gorge. At the hamlet of **Fontnas** cross a bridge and turn left along a road which enters the straggling village of **Azmoos**; 1hr 30min from Sevelen ([gasthaus](#), [accommodation](#), [food](#)).

At the large hexagonal water fountain turn right and walk uphill through attractive older houses on a narrow street. The road turns into a track through pastures, and crosses beneath a small hill (the Maxiferchopf) looking down over the Rhine, motorway and flat valley bottom with views to the Rätikon Alps and beyond.

Descending to the road at Vild, the route appears to be entering Sargans, but it is merely teasing and the route (perhaps disappointingly if this is late in the day) heads back uphill past a restaurant built into an old mine gallery, signed to Sargans 45min. The road turns into a track, and then a smaller and smaller grassy path heading in the direction of Sargans Castle, seen ahead. Turn right up the short stretch of road immediately before the castle and then descend left through the grounds, pass a chapel and quite suddenly you come out on the main road in the middle of **Sargans** (483m, 7hr). Having done it, you may well think that the longer route into town was worth the extra effort. Details on transport and accommodation for Sargans are given in Stage 1.

The Rätikon Alps form a fine backdrop to the descent into Sargans

THE MAIN ROUTE

STAGE 1

Sargans to Weisstannen

Start	Sargans 483m
Finish	Weisstannen 1004m
Distance	13.5km
Total ascent	770m
Total descent	250m
Time	4hr
High point(s)	Vermol 1030m
Maps	LS 237T Walenstadt; K&F 30 Sarganserland
Transport	Postbus (Sargans–Schwendli–Weisstannen)
Accommodation	Sargans – hotels, gasthofs; Mels (30min) – hotels; Weisstannen – hotels

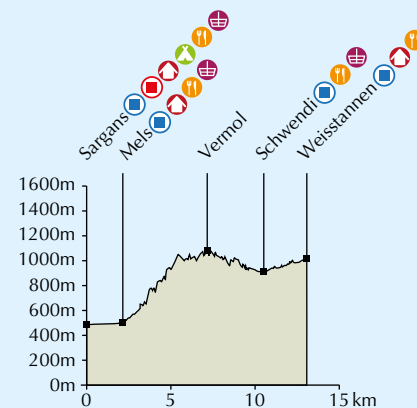
This first stage is both short and undemanding, giving an opportunity to ease gently into the long walk to come. Breaking away from the low, flat valley of the Seeztal, it climbs into the wooded Weisstannental to the south-west, and makes an ideal introduction, putting walkers in a good position to tackle the first pass of the route the following day. If you overnighted in Sargans it makes a pleasant short day, and could be extended to Alp Vorsiez, shortening Stage 2 by an hour.

The Weisstannental is distinctly pastoral, with woods clothing the lower hillsides that occasionally spill across the valley floor. At its entrance, behind Mels, the valley is squeezed into a tight defile, forcing the route along its western flank. The walk then goes through woodland and across open pastures to gain its highest point near the little alp hamlet of Vermol. It then eases slowly down to river level at Schwendi, where it crosses to the east side of the river and meanders gently uphill to Weisstannen. Alternatively take a higher path on the west bank at Schwendi (signed Windegg) among more trees and meadows.

SARGANS (483M)

Sargans is a small ancient town at the confluence of the Seeztal and the Rhine's valley where the latter breaks northward alongside Liechtenstein. Just outside the town to the north, the site of a Roman city was discovered in 1967. Of more recent origin, the old castle (*Schloss*) that commands the town was built for the Counts of Toggenburg between the 13th and 15th centuries. There is a museum of local life and history in the castle. Rising above the town is the steep little peak of Gonzen (1830m), whose ascent is made by footpath from Sargans in around 4hr, and whose summit gives a splendid panoramic view which includes the Walensee and the Rhine Valley from Landquart to the Lake of Constance – but of special interest to VA walkers is the view south-westward into the Weisstannental. Local tourist information promotes Sargans as the centre of 'Heidiland', and indeed the countryside is beautiful.

Tourist information (www.sargans-tourismus.ch). Hotels, gasthofs, restaurants, shops, PTT, railway station (Zürich–Chur). If needed, the bus to Weisstannen leaves from the railway station. Accommodation includes: Mariandl's Bed & Breakfast located on Zürcherstrasse (tel 081 723 42 20, www.mariandlsbnb.ch). Also in Zürcherstrasse there's Hotel & Restaurant Garni Franz Anton (tel 081 723 30 35, www.hotelfranzanton.ch), while the Bahnhofstrasse is where you'll find Hotel Post (tel 081 720 47 47, www.hotelpost-sargans.ch), Hotel Déjà & Pub (tel 076 461 97 93) and Hotel zum Ritterhof (tel 081 710 68 30, www.hotel-ritterhof.ch).





400km hut-to-hut trek in 19 stages, with optional Liechtenstein prologue • crosses 16 high alpine passes
• Titlis, Bernese Oberland, Kandersteg, Les Diablerets



- a demanding route for alpine trekkers with some experience
- walking the entire route normally takes up to three weeks
- by using selected cable cars and public transport the best of the route can be walked in two weeks
- includes route variants, facilities information and accommodation listings for planning your own schedule

The Swiss Via Alpina trail crosses the country's finest mountain passes between Sargans in the east and Montreux in the west, with an optional start in Liechtenstein. It covers nearly 400km of mountain and valley terrain and features 16 passes, with a cumulative height gain of nearly 23,000 metres. Each pass is different, from grassy crests to the challenges of the Hohtürli – the high point of the route, at 2778m – and Bunderchrinde, every pass revealing new and far-reaching mountain vistas.

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