


# 1 Rooms with a view

*Amid the rude elements of nature, rock, snow and ice,  
the hut is a life-giving oasis.*

*(Herbert Maeder, The Mountains of Switzerland)*

All morning the trail had gained and lost so much height that I seemed to be getting nowhere in a hurry, when at the foot of yet another steep descent the way divided, offering an escape route into the valley. Having been on the go for 5 hours and with at least another 2½ hours ahead of me (if the guardian at last night's hut at the head of Val de Bagnes was to be believed), I was almost tempted to take it – especially as close

study of the map showed there were several kilometres still to cover, and more than 700m to climb in order to gain the pass whose crossing was to be the crux of the route. I felt unaccountably old and out of touch. My knees hurt and I was running short of puff. Yet 10 minutes' rest, an over-ripe banana and half a bar of chocolate put a bit of fuel in my engine, and I set off again with optimism and energy restored.



*The spectacle of alpenglow on the Combin massif is one of the rewards for a night spent at the Panossière hut*

Two hours later I kicked my way up a snowfield, crossed two false tops and emerged at last on the sun-dazzling crest of the Col des Otanés. The view directly ahead revealed a wonderland of ice and snow, with Combin de Corbassière rising above its glaciers, the great dome of the Grand Combin to the south, and the Dents du Midi, around which I'd trekked only a few days before, juggling wispy clouds to the north. It was a view that would have taken my breath away, if I'd had any to spare, and it made all the effort to get there worthwhile.

In no hurry now, I sat on my rucksack in the snow to savour the moment, squinting in the sunlight and soaking in the view before descending at snail's pace, content with the knowledge that before long I'd be able to relax with a cold beer in hand, the promise of a refreshing shower, a bed for the night, a three-course meal, and maybe a carafe of red wine to celebrate – not in some fancy resort hotel, but in a mountain hut set beside a glacier.

A couple of hundred metres below the col, the hut was even better than I'd hoped. Sturdy, spacious and welcoming, Cabane de Panossière stands on the right-hand lateral moraine of the Corbassière glacier in a world of its own. It has no neighbours, other than the rock, snow and ice of the mountains that drew me and the other visitors to it, and in the warmth of that bright summer's day it had everything I could possibly want or need.

Given a mattress in a room overlooking the glacier, and after satisfying a long

day's mountain thirst with more overpriced cans of beer than were good for me, at 7pm that evening, along with 20 or so other climbers and walkers, I was working my way through a large plate of tender meat and spaghetti when suddenly all conversation ceased. In its place came the clatter of cutlery on china as everyone grabbed their cameras and rushed outside.

There at the head of a vast glacial highway, the Grand Combin was turning scarlet before our very eyes, its summit snows reflecting the dying sun in a riot of alpenglow, while a 1200m cascade of ice disappeared into a rising cauldron of shadow. It was one of those sights that none of us who saw it will ever forget, yet it was just one of many that the hut provided at no extra cost.

**'the Grand Combin  
was turning scarlet  
before our very eyes'**

Night fell not long after, leaving each one of us marooned in a world of our own – a world centred on a solitary building astride a wall of moraine among alpine giants. Peace settled; there were no alien sounds, just the occasional clunk and slither of a rock falling onto ice. It was no more threatening than the pulse beat of mountains at rest.

At 2am I slid off my bunk, tiptoed to the window and counted the stars,

some of which settled on creamy summits more than 1500m above me. In the darkness, the great peaks watched over Cabane de Panossière and its guests, all of whom – except for me – were sleeping, unaware of the beauty of the scene beyond the window.

As for me, there was nowhere else I'd rather be, for my simple dormitory was the ultimate room with a view.

### Huts for all

Like thousands of others scattered across the alpine chain, the Panossière Hut ([www.cabane-fxb-panossiere.ch/en](http://www.cabane-fxb-panossiere.ch/en)) provides overnight accommodation for walkers, trekkers, climbers and ski

mountaineers, and, in common with the vast majority, is located amid magnificent scenery. This one, at 2645m in the Pennine Alps of canton Valais in Switzerland, belongs to the Bourgeoisie de Bagnes, while its predecessor, destroyed by avalanche in 1988, was owned by the Swiss Alpine Club (Schweizer Alpen-Club, SAC). It can sleep 100 in its dormitories, and is manned by a guardian (or warden) during the spring ski-touring season and for about three months in the summer, when meals, drinks and snacks are available.

That, in a nutshell, sums up a modern mountain hut. It's a bit like a youth hostel, offering simple, reasonably priced



*Trekking group on the trail leading to the Schesaplana Hut*



accommodation and meals in a magical setting for visitors taking part in mountain activities. A 'hut' in the conventional sense it is not. There is no resemblance to a garden shed, as the word might suggest, although one of its predecessors, a simple wooden cabin built nearby in 1893, may well have been, for there were very few luxuries available in those far-off days.

A few of those early mountain refuges that gave little more than rudimentary shelter still exist today, but the majority have evolved, thank goodness, into much more comfortable buildings (the most recent claiming eco-friendly credentials, with solar generators and innovative means of water purification) that provide overnight lodging with all, or most, mod cons, three- or four-course meals and an experience to remember. Every year, thousands of mountain enthusiasts from all over the world have reason to be thankful for their existence, for they're much more than a simple home-from-home in what can sometimes be a wild and uncompromising environment. Up there, you can make contact with others who share your interests, build friendships, exchange stories and gather valuable up-to-date information about route conditions and weather forecasts from the guardians, a number of whom are also experienced mountain guides. Up there, you're in another world, divorced from everyday concerns. Up there, mountain huts become a means of escape from one reality to another, a

halfway house in which to relax during adventures 'out there'.

OK, maybe I'm nudging towards a romantic view, for it must be admitted there are those who think less favourably of the hutting experience than I. In his introduction to *100 Hikes in the Alps*, American author Harvey Edwards sets out his objections. 'They are wonderful protection in a storm,' he says, 'but I've yet to catch up on all the nights' sleep I've lost. Someone is always snoring, sneezing, singing, smoking, or getting up at 1:00am to start a climb. In season, the huts are overcrowded and often unbearable. Still, a trip to the Alps isn't worth a schnitzel if you haven't tried a hut at least once.' He then goes on to recommend using a tent.

Now I like wild camping too, and bivvying alone in remote places lost above the clouds. But there's something very special about huts, their welcome shelter and the camaraderie they inspire – especially in the *Stube* (common room/dining room) after a hard day in the hills, or (as Harvey Edwards implies) when a storm explodes outside. Any old port in a storm, you might think. Well, yes, but that's only a part of it. Having had a role to play in the history of mountaineering, they've since become an important, you might say an essential, part of the whole alpine experience – and when I say alpine, I don't just mean the European Alps (although that's the focus of this book), but any high mountain region where simple lodgings have been



*After a hard day on the hill, the Stube invokes a warm sense of camaraderie as strangers who share a common enthusiasm become new-found friends*

provided for those of us who are active in the great 'out there' and who, like me, look forward to spending a few nights of a holiday resting somewhere up there between heaven and earth. It's true that your sleep might be disturbed for a spell by someone snoring, but I reckon that's a small price to pay for all the rewards on offer. And you can always use ear-plugs.

I'm with Chris Bonington when he says (in *Mountaineer*): 'There is an anticipatory excitement in a crowded hut, in its babel of different languages, chance encounters with old acquaintances swilling wine and coffee, the packed communal bunks and the intensity of the early morning start.'

So where are these huts? Well, they can be found in just about every district of the 1200km alpine chain, stretching from the Maritime Alps above Nice, through France, Italy, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Germany and Austria, to the lovely Julian and Karavanke mountains of Slovenia, and there are now so many of them that, given sufficient time, energy and ready cash, it would be possible to trek from one end of the range to the other and stay in a different hut each night. Some are grouped just an hour or so apart (there are in excess of two dozen in the Mont Blanc massif alone, a dozen on the flanks of Triglav in the



Julian Alps, and at least eight on or around the base of the Sassolungo massif in the Dolomites), while others may be spaced 5 or 6 hours – or almost a day's hike – from one another, so you can remain at high altitude for a week or more without the need to descend to a valley to find a bed for the night.

Each one will be unique – not unique in the type of sleeping accommodation on offer, since they all have some form of communal, mixed-sex dormitory, while

gourmet meals with beer or wine will be served as if in a valley hotel.

There are huts clinging to summits, huts wedged among the clefts of narrow mountain passes, huts projecting from rocky spurs secured with cables. There are huts built on moraine walls, huts in gentle meadows. Long ago there was one in the Maritime Alps that looked like a railway carriage that had been airlifted into the mountains, and there's at least one (the Rinder Hut high above

**‘There are huts clinging to summits, huts wedged among the clefts of narrow mountain passes, huts projecting from rocky spurs’**

many also have smaller two- and four-bedded rooms for greater privacy, but unique in respect of location, architectural style and ambience. Since no two huts are the same, a multi-day journey across the mountains could result in one night being spent in a converted dairy farm with 20 mattresses laid out in what used to be the milking parlour, and the next in a tiny unmanned metal cabin of a bivouac shelter anchored to a shelf of rock at 3000m with just four bunk beds, a first-aid box and a million-dollar view, while another day's hike might bring you to something better described as an almost luxurious mountain inn with room for 200 guests, decent bathroom facilities, and a cosy dining room in which

Leukerbad in Switzerland) that occupies the basement of a cable car station. When I stayed there I had the dormitory and washroom to myself, but at mealtimes was generously looked after by the Portuguese couple who'd signed up to run the cableway restaurant for the summer. They fed me as though I'd not eaten for a month, and sat me in what seemed like a great glass-domed conservatory that became a first-class observatory when darkness fell. Then they left me to enjoy the night sky and a view of snow-topped mountains stretching into the distance.

I love that diversity, the sheer variety of hut buildings and the surprise you get when you first catch sight of one



*Refuge du Plan Sec is a welcome stop on the Tour of the Vanoise (Photo: Jonathan Williams)*





## The hut at the end of the rainbow

Cabane du Mont-Fort is one of my favourite huts. Perched high in the mountains at the western end of Switzerland's Pennine Alps, it commands one of the great alpine views, with Mont Blanc hovering far off to mastermind some of the finest sunsets you could wish to gaze on, while Daniel, the guardian who's run the place since 1983, is a cheerful host who treats all-comers as friends. It's always good to be there, and each of my visits has been memorable; only once was it memorable for the wrong reason...

It had been a long and demanding climb of more than 1600m out of the valley, and in the late afternoon I was growing weary when at last the path eased round the steeply sloping hillside to reveal the hut above me. But the relief that I'd always experienced when I caught sight of the familiar building with its red-striped shutters turned this time to despair.

Not more than 10 minutes' walk away, the hut looked as welcoming as ever, but the grassy slope up which my path climbed towards it was now being sprayed with liquid manure. I could smell it long before I actually saw it - the discharge from a long anaconda-like pipe that snaked across the slope and disappeared round another corner. September sunlight picked out rainbows in the pungent spray of khaki liquid that flicked in a casual arc from left to right, right to left, and back again, like some great metro-nome, ticking all the while as it washed across the hillside and covered the path - my path, and the only route to the hut.

I peered in horror at the trail ahead that was now stained with the yellow-brown liquid, and searched in vain for a way to avoid it. There was nothing obvious, so in desperation I looked for the farmer. He was nowhere to be seen, so I scanned the hillside for a dry, spray-free route to the hut, but the only one was too steep for me to contemplate and I had no appetite for that. It had taken almost 7 hours to get this far, and I was worn out.

What to do? I paced back and forth, trying to think of an alternative. How long, I wondered, would it take to get across the danger zone? Nervously I timed the arcing spray's journey from one side to the other, and doubted my ability to sprint that distance wearing a rucksack and big boots. But unless I waited until the source of the spray dried up, there was only

one thing to do. I'd just have to gamble on having enough energy to spare, take a deep breath and go for it.

Counting the number of spray-free seconds available, I waited for the wash to pass over, then dashed up the soggy path at an Olympic pace. It was longer and steeper than I'd feared. I was slower than I'd hoped, and much too soon a shadow crossed my path and I sensed the spray's return. Relief was not more than a pace or two away, when what I'd feared came true. I slipped...

Fortunately, Cabane du Mont-Fort has decent showers, although most people take their clothes off first when using them.

you've never been to before but which is to be your home for the night. It may be a distant sighting, the flash of sunlight on a window catching your attention; or a flag on a pole beckoning from the far side of a ridge, making a useful guide in a bewildering landscape. Anticipation spurs you on. Then you top a rise, turn a corner – or the mist lifts for a moment – and there it is, journey's end at last! Arrival at the hut invariably comes with a sense of relief, for it's a guarantee of shelter, somewhere to relax, freshen up, slake your thirst and settle the nagging hunger that comes from a long day's effort.

### **Huts for trekkers**

Manned all year round, Cabane du Mont-Fort ([www.cabanemontfort.ch](http://www.cabanemontfort.ch)) is immensely popular in summer with day visitors and trekkers, while skiers flock there in winter, for access is made easy with the aid of one or more *téléphéri-*

*ques* (cable cars). Few trekkers' huts have such means of access, but most are approached by decent, well-marked trails and are no more than a few hours' walk apart. Facilities are usually pretty good too, enabling you to make a tour of a week or two with a backpack containing little more than a change of clothing, a sheet sleeping bag, head torch and travel towel, leaving you to enjoy the trek without being weighed down by non-essentials.

A steadily expanding network of refuges across the alpine range has enabled numerous exciting day walks and multi-day treks to be tackled by walkers of varying abilities and levels of fitness. Practically every district now claims a hut-to-hut tour that explores some of its finest scenery, encouraging newcomers to discover the mountains in all their rich variety. There are classic routes with worldwide fame, like the 10–12-day Tour