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GREEN THRILLS

OF TRAVELS, TOURS AND ADVENTURES



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Thrills of Hiking in the Montafon Valley

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Prelude:

One of the three postdocs offers in abroad that I took after my Ph.D., the one that is very close to my heart was at the University of Konstanz in the southern part of Germany on the majestic state of Baden-Württemberg. When I travel back in time with closed eyes and a calm mind to hear the *sound of music* in the serenity of lush green meadows, beautiful chalets, the ringing bell of a small church amidst the Alpine serenity, playing marmots and fighting ibexes up on the edge of the ridges with snow-capped peaks shining all around – its Konstanz. This pleasing University town, also a very popular tourist destination, is demographically situated in a lucrative position between three nations – France, Switzerland and Austria. A charismatic tungsten blue lake, namely the Bodensee or Lake Konstanz, with seven small islands – Mainau and Reichenau being the most pristine one – and the infamous Schwarzwald, or the Black Forest, used to encompass the city from one side. The other side of Bodensee contained all the mid-range of Swiss- and Austrian-Alps. On a clear day, especially in summer and winter, the shine of the Alps with the fresh air breezing from the Bodensee and, the sunset charisma of



Fig.1: Dusk at *Stein-am-Rhein*, Sunset enjoying Seagulls, Floral Downtown of Konstanz.

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the lake was something that every localite, as well as the Tourists coming from all over Europe, used to crave for (see Fig.1,3). Konstanz does have a significant role in Indian history while Netaji Subhas Bose led army legion tried to enter Switzerland along the shores of Lake Konstanz [1].

Bengali bookworms too can connect to the place via the story of Satyajit Ray – “Aschorjyo Prani” of Professor Shanku, which was framed in the city of St. Gallen in Switzerland which is the nearest town to Konstanz [2]. And not the least to mention the delicacy “Schwarzwälderkirschtorte”, a variant of which we all crave in any bakery outlet – The “Black Forest Cake”, comes from the Schwarzwald region which is also the gateway to Konstanz from Germany. Schwarzwald is also enriched with the *WeltGrößte Kuchkuchs Uhr*, or World’s Biggest Cuckoo Clock, which has a Guinness Book of World Records entry – consisting of a huge wooden house (chalet), below which a river named *Gutach* flows and from the above, a large Cuckoo comes every hour and its note reverberates from all around (see Fig.2) [3].



Fig.2: WeltGrößte Kuchkuchs Uhr, Eble Uhren Park, Schönachbach, Schwarzwald.



Fig.3: Sunset panorama of Bodensee containing Austrian Alpine range around Konstanz.

Till the day I had my eyes on the faraway peaks, I secretly wished for a day when I would be hiking up in there. The Department of Physics at the University of Konstanz

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used to organize a yearly conference on Alpine serenity either in Switzerland or in Austria. I could see my wish to be granted, while I was happy to find in the schedule a day, that is left out for “*other planned activity*”. I could decipher that my peers might be wishing for a party, but that might not be a gala day-night long party, right? Later on, the chair-Professor disclosed that the daredevils (including him) wished to use this opportunity for a group hike up the mountain. I guess I had not heard such sweet words for a long time, and from that very moment started to look forward to this event. At that point, I had no experience using poles, snowshoes, snow spikes, ice cleats, gaiters and so on. The lessons I learned from this hike shaped my accessories for the next summer and winter hikes in Europe and the USA in later stages of life.



Fig.4: (Left to Right) Austrian Village Gaschurn, scattered Maisäß, *drei Türme* peak in Rätikon range and the baroque monument of Pfarrkirche.

Konstanz to Bartholomäberg: Then in one fine morning, we headed from our University towards Bartholomäberg in the Montafon valley of the Vorarlberg state of Austria, which is adjacent to the lake Konstanz [4]. It is one of Austria's largest ski areas during winter. It's a small village situated up in the mountain that encompasses the ranges of Rätikon, Silvretta & Verwall, with spectacular views of the majestic “Mt. Zimba” and “*drei Türme*” (meaning three sisters), as well as the next city of Gaschurn lying way down in the valley. We stayed in an Austrian “*Maisäß*” (or the mountain hut, that we usually called a Chalet) for a few nights and enjoyed the landscape with, of course, an extensive conference session. Maisäß were used for

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livestock farming leading to a three-step agricultural practice around this region, while some of them made their way of living by providing holiday rentals to families throughout the year for tourism (see Fig.4). In between the conference intervals, small up and down troll around our maisäß gave us a flavour of the place in terms of its ancient and rich heritage.

A small parish pilgrimage church of the 14th century with a baroque monument, named *Pfarrkirche*, with a small yet aesthetically appealing prayer room, and an hourly ring of the church bell amidst the mountains made the soothing ambience a completely satisfying one. The time we went, all the Apple/Cherry trees were flourished with red Apples/Cherries, as well as a few local vegetation were visible (Fresh Pumpkins, Cranberries, Grapevines etc)(see Fig.5). Then on the “other planned activity” day, six of us headed towards a challenging trek lead by two Professors (my PI and co-PI), while the rest of the student’s group decided to go-around the uphill for a small merry-go-round. It’s no wonder why Ernest Hemingway came around this region to complete writing his book - “*The Sun Also Rises*”[5].



Fig.5: (Left to Right) Mt. Zimba, Me at Bartholomäberg, fresh Pumpkins (though Halloween wasn't nearby), hanging Cranberries, mountain flowers, beautiful day of Bartholomäberg, Apple Trees, Vineayrd with grapes, some distant rocky peaks.

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Bartholomäberg to Vermunt-Stausee.



Fig.6: Way to *Saarbrücker Hütte* with the board (containing a Map) displaying $2\frac{3}{4}$ Std means *stunde* or hours).

We happily started our hiking trip by driving straight towards the Silvretta Alps. A dam, named Vermunt-Stausee is constructed up above in the mountain at 1743 metres, on the banks of which we parked our cars and initiated the hike after a short stretching exercise. On the way, we had fueled up the water, brunches and candies for the hike from the city of Gaschurn. The first impression according to the plan was to hike up to the “*Saarbrücker Hütte*” (Hütte is the German for hut) lying at the highest peak of Montafon Valley, but later on, we discovered that the hut was closed due to extreme weather conditions for the last few days, that wasn’t advertised over the web.

Fearing that we might starve with a shortage of water after having a strenuous hike up there, we discarded our initial plan and chose another section of the hike to Mt. Hochmaderer at 2823 metres which was just beside our route, where we assumed also that the hut lying above, namely the “*Tübiner Hütte*”, will be open. In those days, we didn’t have any smartphones and ready access to Google Maps with the internet – manual maps with compass were the only saviour (see Fig.6). So after we hiked up, we found that the hut was on the other side of the valley in another ridge lying way below. Our assumption was not completely wrong, while we distantly observed a few hikers from the opposite ridge reach and enjoy drinks and beverages.

Vermunt-Stausee to Hochmadererjoch.



Fig.7: Way to *Tübiner Hütte*, while crossing a stream en-route, bird’s eye view of the beautiful Silvretta Valley during the day.

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We crossed a small fountain and stream in the initial ascend with a brisk walk and eyes wide open on the landscape, that evolved rapidly. The Vermunt-Stausee started to display its shape more profoundly, finally making a complete disappearance after we landed in the first mountain valley, the Gantschettatal Valley, up above around a few hundred meters from the Vermunt-Stausee. The slopes weren't too steep then, but parts of the soil were muddy, where I slipped once due to my carelessness and diversion of mind towards enjoyment in taking pictures during ascend. To avoid any mishap, I had to rectify this mistake. So I packed my DSLR back into the backpack that I took out only after reaching the summit, and with extreme caution watched my steps toward the summit, where the terrain was extremely steep and rugged. A group of European hikers we saw at the initial stage of the hiking, equipped with proper equipment like poles, ropes, clamps etc also took a break in the Gantschettatal valley near a fountain. The ice though were melted and the lush green grass reigned the dynasty, up above, there were still some leftover structures of ice.

After being recharged, we re-initiated the last and the most difficult part of the hike - climbing the Hochmadererjoch saddle which consisted of a good amount of steep



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ascend and the landscape was rocky. The last part was too challenging, on one side there was a rocky wall and on the other side, there were a few hundred metres deep ditches – the path was not only narrow but was way too inclined upwards, where even a good North Face boot wasn't good enough to get a grip, but slip. I never wanted to quit, when the destination was only a few steps away.



Fig.8: First View of Hochmadererjoch, Sitting atop the ridge, View towards Switzerland from *Hochmadererjoch*, stream flowing at *Gantschettatali* valley lying in between *Hochmadererjoch* and *Vermunt-Stausee*.

So I dared myself to take a calculative risk, by making the hiking process very slow and one step at a time. Thanks to my destiny that day, I could make it to the top without any mishap, which was named *Hochmadererjoch*, and the reward was truly spectacular. “*Hoch*” in the name meant high, and “*Joch*” denoted a V-shape or a ridge with a ditch on both sides with a narrow piece of soil to stand or rest.



Fig.9: Light and Shades of *Vermunt-Stausee* in later part of the day.

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Up Above the World so High, I could distantly stare at both the valleys in Austria and Switzerland, the distant Silvretta-Stausee dam, the east Swiss-mountain range of the St. Moritz side, and the crazy play of the clouds and their reflection over the Silvretta-Montafon Valley. While ascending, I saw a few Marmots and Ibexes (mountain goats with horns, that the Germans call Steinböcke), which made every ounce of sweat worthy. We rested for an hour on the ridge, had our short brunch there, took some memorable group photos, celebrated our victory amidst the fresh mountain breeze and finally decided to descend. Now the point of descent was challenging not to slip through the narrow edge, which I completed. Gosh!, they could've fitted a rope to avoid any mishap, that I experienced a year before during a *fünf-seen-weg* solo hike in the Valais Alps of Southern Switzerland.

While descending, we rested a little bit near the fountain in the *Gantschettatali* valley which was so beautiful, that we rested for quite a good amount of time to have fun. Finally, as we bid *sayonara* to the valley, the Hochmadererjoch saddle disappeared, and the Vermunt-Stausee lake lying down in the valley was visible. The broken clouds and their shadows, reflection over the lake made the descent an unforgettable one.



Hochmadererjoch to Silvretta-Stausee.

During the last section of the descent, we changed course, and hiked a little more up towards the Silvretta-Stausee dam that we viewed from the Hochmadererjoch. We were all geared up after losing sweat and didn't want to end the hiking day without having a short session of beverages. We passed en route a few more fountains and mountain streams, and finally had a late lunch at the Madlener Haus adjacent to the Silvretta-Stausee Dam. The Austrian delicacy offered to us was the famous "Kaiserschmarn mit Apfelmuss" - it's a sweet cheese preparation with Appel and Cherry sauce^[6]. While we were hungry enough, we all craved the sweet dish and cannot remember whether it was excellent, or just okay as a food. Having spent a grand day in the



Fig.10: Marmots, Leeches & Kaiserschmarn mit Apfelmuss.



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Alpine meadow, we came back with a satisfied feeling to the Vermunt-stausee lake by catching a bus to the banks, where we had our parked cars. Finally, we bid au-revoir to Silvretta Alps and came back to Bartholomäberg for the next day's conference. The trip in the Austrian summer of 2012 has a permanent history in my memory, and, only good memories. Ho-Na-Ro!

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