

The Britannia Hut

It began as a "thank-you" gift from British climbers to the Swiss over 100 years ago.

It is now a place of refuge and welcome to all who stay there. Situated at 3030m, the Britannia Hut is a mountain hut owned by the Geneva section of the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) and is located in the commune of Saas-Almagell near Visp in the Canton of Haut Valais (Oberwallis). This hut is one of the most popular SAC mountain huts in the Alps, and is on the *Haute Route* from Zermatt to Chamonix.

Last year the hut celebrated its centenary, and in honour of this celebration a fascinating little book was produced to recognise the milestone.

Written in French, German and English, the book tells the story of the history of the hut, beginning with the formation of the "Association of British Members of the Swiss Alpine Club" and how their inaugural meeting was held in a restaurant in London in 1909. Almost 120 guests were present at this meeting, including the famous Edward Whymper*. The main objectives of the association were to encourage British Alpinists to support the Swiss Alpine Club by becoming members, and to collect funds to present a hut to them as a token of gratitude for the hospitality that they had themselves received in Swiss huts.

Melting ice for water, chopping wood for the fire

The story of the hut, the wardens who have looked after it over the years, the



improvements made to it, the amount of overnight bed stays since its construction (approximately half a million) are all here in this book, but the fascinating part of this little publication is its accompanying DVD. Beginning in the 1960s, it includes cine footage of staff and climbers (complete with 60s climbing gear) chopping wood for the fire and cutting away ice from their surroundings to be melted in pans in the hut's kitchen. We see some very young climbers playing in the snow above the hut, and a plane dropping in food supplies. The film then moves on to the 75-year celebrations of the hut along with plenty of yodelling, music and wine high up in the mountains. It ends with some lovely airborne footage from 2012 of the hut and the spectacular surrounding mountains.

The book itself concludes with a summary of the hut's last 100 years, how climbing conditions have changed and how many glaciers have decreased in volume and retreated. Commenting on

access from the Eggnerjoch, it says, "once so straightforward has become complicated, even in winter". It goes on to say that "even Alpinists have changed; whereas in the past, only an elite few spent several weeks at a time mountaineering, now with the rise in standards of living and improved transport systems large numbers spend their spare time in the mountains, often just for a short period of time". Despite these changes the hut is a testimony to the close links still existing between British and Swiss mountaineers.

If you fancy climbing up to and staying in the hut this summer, see links below. The hut opens on 1 March this year.

The book can be purchased via Pamela Harris
ps.harris@bluewin.ch

The Britannia Hut
www.britannia.ch

The Association of British members of the Swiss Alpine Club
www.abmsac.org.uk

The Swiss Alpine Club – Geneva Section
www.cas-geneve.ch

* Edward Whymper – English climber and explorer, best known for the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865.



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