

LOOSE SCREE

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MONT COLLON

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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CROSSING THE HISTORIC PANIXER PASS

Ian Elliott follows the route of the Russian Army in Switzerland

I first came across the story of Suvorov's Swiss campaign in Baedeker's "Switzerland" over forty years ago, and was intrigued by the route he took with the Russian Army in 1799 – what on earth were they doing there? His retreat – as it was to turn out – culminated in a crossing of the wild Panixer Pass under deep snow with over 15,000 men.

I had visited some more accessible spots on Suvorov's route, and before I declined from "spry" to merely "looking well" – still breathing that is – I had better tackle the Panixer Pass. When we arrived in Elm at the foot of the pass the weather was too filthy even to leave the village. A visit to the absorbing Suvorov Museum with its enthusiastic curator in near-by Schwanden strengthened our desire to return, and in August 2008 we were back in perfect conditions – but a little history first.

The so-called Second Coalition of the Austrian and Russian Empires – Britain was also an ally – was in action against the armies of revolutionary France on both sides of the Alps. Suvorov carried all before him in Italy – disconcerting even his allies – and north of the Alps another Russian army corps was joining the Austrians in Switzerland.

Alexander Suvorov was Russia's most successful and daring general, summoned out of retirement by the Tsar at the age of 69 to lead the joint campaign in Italy. The Austrians now wanted their own forces to remain in Italy and persuaded the Russians to reinforce the allies by concentrating in Switzerland.

The 22,000 Russians had to fight their way over the St Gotthard Pass and across the Devil's Bridge spanning the Reuss below Andermatt – the local train from Andermatt to Goeschinen now pauses in a gallery there. Pressing on to Altdorf they found there was no road along the Bay of Uri on Lake Lucerne and the French were on the offensive and in control of the lake itself. Suvorov had to use the Chinzig-Chulm – over 1600m of ascent with an army – where there is now a memorial tablet marking the pass, a nice hike from Altdorf helped by a lift! Reaching Muotathal, the Russians fought the French again and crossed the Pragel Pass towards Glarus, hoping to break out of the high Alps northwards down the Linth valley.

The Russians and French fought each other to a standstill near Glarus and Suvorov resolved to escape to the upper Rhine over the Panixer Pass. The hardy Rus-

sian army had stumbled along primitive roads and narrow paths in unfamiliar conditions, fighting, hungry and shedding equipment. It was October as they reached Elm, and a three day storm had covered the upper slopes in heavy snow, to add to the difficulty of a 1400m ascent.

Coming to August 2008 it's very convenient to stay in Elm and we noticed the house sign where Suvorov passed the night of 5/6 October 1799.

You can reach the Panixer Pass in a long day-hike from Elm, or from Panix on the other side – Pigniu in Romansch on modern maps. It is more satisfying to take the historic route from north to south, and a very useful option for the ageing trekker is to stay the night in the unattended Panixerpass Hütte refuge on the summit of the pass at 2407m.

We saved a couple of miles' road walking by taking one of the morning buses up the Sernf valley from Elm. Extensive steep meadows testify to the hundreds of years' labour to wrest a living from this rugged landscape. The driver dropped us on our own for the Panixer Pass, where the crowded bus turned up to Obererbs.

We were already at 1261m near the end of the road and first of all were impressed by the narrow winding defile leading to the Panixer Pass between huge cliffs. After all they had endured, what an obstacle this must have appeared for the Russian army. Entering the defile, we were entranced by the unspoiled nature of the route and the inviting way ahead.

The path is perfectly straightforward and leads to the scenic Jetz Alp, with tremendous tiered cliffs and waterfalls on the left. Passing the Ober Stafel cow-sheds (no refreshments!) the path climbs right to avoid more cliffs ahead and soon we were ready for a picnic, a good spot to contemplate the rougher stretch ahead and appreciate the height gained.

The summit of the pass was still hidden as we contoured nicely along the side of the rocky defile, then it narrowed and we climbed a snow couloir where a pole was handy. The route then opens up into a wild rocky corrie and the summit comes into sight at last. The floor of the corrie is a tumble of multi-coloured rocks, a geologist's dream – or nightmare. We read how some Russian soldiers even burned their muskets for warmth at this very spot.

Reaching the 2407m summit of the pass we made ourselves at home in the unlocked Panixerpass Hütte refuge. We had it to ourselves in mid-week apart from a mouse, but remember the Swiss make the most of their refuges at week-ends and this one cannot be reserved – it sleeps 14, but 6 would be a crowd!

The refuge is maintained by Glarus and the canton is responsible for keeping it supplied with wood.

We soon had the efficient wood-stove going for a brew and it warmed up the small kitchen. The spacious rocky saddle felt remote and atmospheric in the calm evening and it was a treat to be in residence. It was a pleasant little exercise navigating 300m to the water supply. We noticed only one British entry in the log-book, by two enterprising trekkers from Leeds, travelling from Lake Constance to Lake Como. Finally we cooked our meal and lingered in the snug kitchen before grabbing plenty of blankets in the cold dormitory.

Over breakfast we could gaze at the grand Haus Stock through the window. Descending southwards on a good track, the way down looks more open and the view extends across the upper Rhine to the Rheinwaldhorn. A little care is needed across some downhill-sloping slates, but this was a treacherous spot for the Russians and their horses over wind-blown snow. We then hiked pleasantly through high sheep-pastures, but history told us it was not all over. Unbroken precipices bar the way down, and the track ascends left across the hillside towards more limestone cliffs, looking tricky but threading a way through along a ledge.

Finding a way down in the conditions of October 1799 was a terrible final ordeal for the Russians and many lost their way in the dark and slid over the precipices. 15,000 of the original 22,000 from Italy straggled into Ilanz on the upper Rhine.

“Thus terminated a march of 18 days’ duration” wrote Coolidge in Murray’s Handbook (18th edition 1891) “perhaps the most extraordinary ever made by an army, incessantly engaged, fighting a battle almost every day, and obliged to traverse a country unknown, and completely destitute of resources. This remarkable retreat was accomplished with the loss of all the artillery, the greater part of the beasts of burden, and one-third of the men”. At least the army had survived.

When we emerged from the cliffs, the way ahead was straightforward, even tedious on a forestry road to the village of Panix/Pigniu. We found where Suvorov stayed, near the upper end of the village street, but our sense of history did not embrace the hike to Ilanz and we took the post-bus down. Ilanz is a picturesque small town, and the lively old city of Chur is perhaps the place for that celebratory vodka.

In November 1799 the Russian forces began their march home, and Napoleon came to power in Paris after returning from Egypt. Suvorov was elevated to Generalissimo and died within a year. It must have been devastating at the time, but every Swiss village on the route of his epic march is proud to commemorate his name, adding to the interest of this region for the trekker.

LOOSE SCREE

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