

A Secret Alpine Valley

Jerry R. Hobbs

Years ago when I was hiking through the Alps in Switzerland, I reached the top of the high pass called Bonderkrinde, just before the town of Kandersteg. Triumphant and exhausted, I looked at the view. There it was, hidden from almost everyone but me—the most beautiful valley I had ever seen.

The valley of the Kander River, like all Alpine valleys, rises steadily between mountains, through villages of tall square brown wooden houses with overhanging eaves and red flowers in window boxes. It ends in a sharp rise through pine forests and then scree reaching up to the jagged snow-covered ridge of the Alps. But just before it ends, Kandersteg's valley does something unusual. There are high cliffs cut through by a narrow gorge, and behind them, at right angles to the main valley and 1100 feet above, there is another, smaller, secret valley—the Gasterntal. Flat green fields in a steep-walled canyon and a tiny village at the end. On my map it was labeled "Selden".

As I sat and gazed, I wondered about it. Who lived there? What were they like? Why had people ever moved up there, and what contact did they have in their isolated valley with the outside world?

I couldn't go there then. It was the wrong direction, and when you are on foot with a 40-pound pack, you try not to go the wrong direction. But I had always longed to return to Kandersteg to explore that secret valley.

Recently business took me to Zurich, so I went a weekend early and drove down to Kandersteg. It was in November, a particularly beautiful time of year in Switzerland. The summer season is over and skiing has not yet begun, so you have the country to yourself. The reds, browns, and yellows of autumn trees cover the lower slopes of the mountains. Midway up they become flecked with the white of snow, and finally at the top the snow takes over completely. It's like seeing the change of seasons in a single glance.

The village of Selden can be reached by a two and a half hour hike up the gorge from Kandersteg, but there is also a one-lane, unpaved toll road,

chipped out of the sheer cliff face. (The toll is ten francs—eight dollars—payable at a grocery store in Kandersteg.) I took the road, since I knew it would be its own unique experience.

The road was so narrow at some points that I could only inhale and proceed on faith. It crosses a narrow stone bridge with the Kander River raging azure and turbulent below. It passes through two small rough-hewn tunnels. And then you are in the high valley, passing through white fir, red fir, and spruce forest, and then, a little higher, the scrubbier larch forests. Four miles later you reach the town.

It was quite a surprise. The town was not just isolated; it was uninhabited. The town consisted of only four guesthouses, now abandoned for winter, and some barns and cabins in the fields. I parked my car as far as I thought I could drive on the snow-covered road and began to hike farther up the valley.

Another reason to visit Switzerland in November—the snow was not too deep to walk in, but everywhere I looked was a winter wonderland. Pine trees covered with snow, the high reaches of the Kander River gurgling among snow capped rocks, and the tall snowy mountains pressing the valley in so tightly the sun could barely reach the valley floor.

Ten minutes out, I met three Swiss people who had hiked up from Kandersteg and were just turning back. Beyond that it was only me, breaking new snow. The only other tracks were of a deer that had run down the hill across the road to the creek for a drink and then back up the hill again. Suddenly an hour out I saw another man, approaching from the other direction, cross-country skis sticking out of his backpack and surrounded by three huge Husky dogs, each with its own little backpack. We greeted each other, and beyond that I was alone again, following his footsteps up toward the high pass at the end of the valley. When the sun began to dip below the mountains, I turned back.

But the valley was still a mystery to me. What was its history? I speculated that it had been an isolated and inbred little village, with few contacts with the outside world, until the age of television came along, and the bright lights of Kandersteg and bigger cities downstream proved irresistible.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

I was told that the expert on Gasterntal history was Ulrich Junger, the minister of Kandersteg's Evangelical church. This was Saturday night. I figured he'd be busy Sunday morning, but at least I knew where to find him. The next morning in church, Junger was so dynamic, warm and good-humored, it didn't matter that I didn't understand a word of the Swiss

German service. I cornered him afterwards and asked if he could spare a few minutes.

The village of Selden, he told me, had been anything but isolated. Its history goes all the way back to Neolithic times, as early as 1500 BC. The Alps used to be crossed at its lowest passes by mule tracks, and the one up through the Gasterntal and over Lötschen Pass south into the Valais is one of the oldest in the region. It was only natural for travellers to want to stay the night in the valley before trekking over the pass, and it is believed that this is how the settlement of Selden began. According to one theory, the name “Gasterntal” comes from a word meaning “bed” or “a place to sleep”, related to our word “guest”. Far from being a forever isolated valley, it was the closest thing the ancients had to a truck stop. Gasterntal meant something like “Motel Row”.

It was a busy trade center in the Middle Ages, with lots of commercial links to the towns south of the pass. There was one sort of communication to the north as well. They paid their taxes to a monastery in Interlaken.

Strange thing though—a document from the fourteenth century decrees that the taxes were to be paid in peppercorns. Now there’s no way peppercorns could grow in that high valley, so where did they get them in such quantity? Historians speculate that they were used as money by the traders who passed through.

The village’s population was never more than sixty. They had a school, but no church. A pastor from Kandersteg would travel up there twice a year to make sure the school was teaching the right things.

Then around 1740 disaster struck Selden. It was bypassed. A new trail was cut into the rocks one pass to the west, providing traders with an easier route. The traffic through Gasterntal fell off drastically.

Selden hung on through the rest of the century, farming in the summer—wheat, vegetables, cows, and sheep. In the winters they practiced wood-carving—buckets and other utensils—to sell in the Valais, and for a while they made wooden match boxes for a match factory farther down the Kander valley. But by 1820 the last of the year-round residents left.

People still live there in the summer, tending cattle and growing hay. They also operate the guesthouses, providing dormitories and rooms without baths for the tourists. It’s the original Selden families that run these guesthouses, families with names like Künzi and Rauber. But when winter approaches, in October, they move down to Kandersteg, or farther down the valley to Kandergrund. By December the valley is nearly inaccessible.

But when I was there in November, it was accessible and empty, a secret

and beautiful valley that belonged only to me, for a few hours one day.