



A walk amongst alpine flowers

A walk in late June through the Lauterbrunnen valley, set in the heart of the Swiss Bernese Oberland, offers a spectacular journey through a deep glacial valley with towering ice-capped summits above. With richly carpeted alpine meadows, awash with fresh snowmelt and awakening flowers, the scene was set for an overwhelming hut-to-hut excursion.

I chose to go to the Lauterbrunnen after chatting with a friend and listening to stories of intrepid mountaineering and wonderful natural history.... it sounded like the perfect place for outdoor adventures where I could indulge myself in nature and immerse myself in a world free from the shackles of work.

There are several mountain huts and bivouacs in the area. Pouring over maps I found an interesting hut-to-hut walk. With late snows having just cleared, the huts were finally opened for the season and were peaceful and quiet.

The Lauterbrunnen valley, situated in the Pennine Alps in the Swiss canton of Bern, is easily reached by road and rail yet you can very quickly feel like it's a long way from civilisation. Paths lead up through the coniferous forests of Norway Spruce and Silver Fir which fringe the valley floor.

The sense of being surrounded by nature is immediate and the noise of town and road are left behind. Columbine, Aconite-leaved Buttercup and Yellow Wood Violet are among the many plants which cover the dark and damp woodland floor, as they are specialists in living in poor light conditions. Bird's-nest Orchid are dotted around and you may be fortunate enough to happen across them. These Orchids are wholly reliant upon fungi in the soil for their food and nutrition. They are well adapted here and their faint, musty smell attracts delicate flies to aid pollination.

It's not long until we reach the upper limit where trees lose their vigor and allow the smaller alpine vegetation to take over. The well-established treeline signifies a change of climate. The trees' ability to grow and reproduce no longer outweighs their ability to repair and survive in the harsher environment. Thin skeletal soils offer a meagre nutrition and house the sprawling roots of the low-lying vegetation.

Despite this the beguiling diversity of grasses and flowers begin to come into their own. Free from the shade of the tall canopy trees many flowers possess an ability to track the sun's path as it traverses the sky; others have flower shapes that help to concentrate and harness this energy into developing their seeds. Whatever the mechanisms they have adapted to survive, these hardy plants seem to thrive in the extreme yet fleeting alpine summer.

Coming down from the higher reaches of the valley, in the shadow of the impressive north face of the Breithorn, we head north towards Stechelberg leaving the meadows of Spring Pasque-flowers, Stemless Gentians and Mountain Avens and travel through small, active farm dwellings whose occupants are busying themselves with the chores of the day. Finally, we come through the improved pastures of tall herb grasslands with the nodding heads of Clustered Bellflower, Yellow Rattle and Forget-me-not. Shortly beyond this we cross the now much larger river and follow a gravel road towards habitation where, with Swiss precision, the bus arrives to take us to our final destination.



Clockwise from top left: Alpine Rock-jasmine, Dwarf Snowbell, Rock Speedwell, Purple Colt's-foot, Stemless Gentian, Trailing Azalea, Spring Pasqueflower, Lady's Slipper Orchid, Broad-leaved Primrose. Upper centre: Horned Rampion, lower centre: Spring Gentian