

HB/VS-078 Üssers Barrhorn

Paul HB9DST, August 23, 2015

Summary: This was a HB9SOTA club project, an activation of the highest summit in Europe you can hike up without ropes or other equipment. The headline for this activation might be "February in August." At an altitude of 3610 meters (almost 11,000 feet) you never know what to expect. I brought my winter gear (winter jacket, long underwear, gloves, etc.) and used all of it!

Jürg HB9BIN set up this club activity earlier this year, and I was anxious to go along, it is one of the summits I would never attempt alone by myself. It involved a 2-day trip: staying overnight in an Alpine hut and leaving early the next morning for the summit.

On Saturday I rode the train with Bruno HB9CBR to the town of Turtmann, where we were picked up by Robert F5HTR. The trains were quite full because this was also the weekend of the Gampel Openair music festival. We left Turtmann at about 1:30 pm and drove through Gruben to a parking area at Vorder Sänntum. We were surprised by the number of cars there, but it was a beautiful day for hiking. In addition, anyone staying overnight at the Turtmannhütte would also be parking there.



The parking area with the many cars.



Hiking route to the hut.



The first section of the hike to the hut is a dirt road leading to a dam (barely visible in this photo). The hut is marked with a red circle. (photo courtesy of Bruno HB9CBR)

We started our hike at 2:18 pm. The route to the hut is not technically difficult at all. It took us 2-1/2 hours with an ascent of 759 meters, covering 6.4 km. About 2/3 of it is on an unpaved road leading to a dam and then there is a steeper path up to the hut. Along the way, Bruno spotted some Edelweiss -- it was the first time I had ever seen any in person.

During our approach we saw that the summit was covered in snow, which gave rise to some concerns. In addition, at the hut we heard from another group that they saw the conditions near the top, aborted their ascent and instead turned around and came back. This was again food for thought.

At the hut we had a pleasant surprise -- although Jürg HB9BIN was not able to join us on this trip for health reasons, we found that his spot was being taken by Norbert DK9ES. He was spending some time in Switzerland doing a number of activations, and when he found out that Jürg's spot was open, he

immediately took it. We got our room assignments; it was an 8-person room, and the four of us were on the top bunk. Dinner was at 6 pm, and we were in bed just after 9 pm.



Arriving at the Turtmannhütte. It has a capacity of 50 beds, and on nice weekends you can expect all of them to be occupied.



The HB/VS-078 team the night before the activation. Left to right: Paul HB9DST, Norbert DK9ES, Bruno HB9CBR and Robert F5HTR.

Normally for a SOTA there's no rush or deadline, you just take your time and enjoy the scenery. Getting there is half the fun. But in this case, the weather report was calling for showers to start at about

noontime, so we wanted to get to the summit and do our activation before the rain started. It seemed that everyone else in the hut had the same idea. Everyone showed up punctually at 6 am for breakfast. At that time the hut was enshrouded in fog with a slight drizzle and there were discussions about aborting the activation if conditions did not improve. But by the time we finished eating, the clouds were breaking up, and by 6:30 various teams were making their way up the trail. We departed at 6:40 and needed 3-1/2 hours for the 1160 meter ascent across a distance of 5.3 km. The other three members of the group are extremely fit, and I'm only in moderate shape, so I was always at the back of the pack and often they had to wait for me to catch up. Thank you for your patience with me, guys!!



The first obstacle is at Güssi, where you climb along and up an almost vertical wall. There are wire ropes to hang on to, and they are essential. If you take your time and make sure you have a good foothold every step, it is not so very difficult. It looks worse than it is.



Wire ropes are virtually essential for normal hikers to go up and down Güssi, the most challenging part of the hike up the summit. (photo courtesy of Bruno, HB9CBR)

After that our next challenge came at an altitude of 3280 meters where we ran into our first patch of snow and the uncovered ground was frozen, so we had to watch our step. As we got higher, there was quite a bit of snow, more than I expected. There had been some precipitation the previous weekend, but the weather for most of the week was sunny and warm, so I expected most of the snow to be gone. But I was wrong! At roughly Schoellijoch where we made a turn to the north, from then on we had a constant layer of snow. We had to be very careful to get good footing at every step as we went across a steep flank; if you started to slide, you would ride down the snow for quite a distance at a fast speed, likely getting injured. Fortunately the morning snow was still hard, so it was relatively easy to stamp down your boot and get good footing.



The slope we crossed was covered with snow, which made it necessary to have absolutely sure footing. In the upper center you can see another group making the final ascent to the summit.

Just before the final ascent, Norbert spotted a fog bank coming up the other side of the summit and he was concerned. We spent a minute considering the fog and the approaching rain from another direction, but we decided to continue up to the summit and keep an eye on developments. These last 150 vertical meters are relatively steep. However, all the hikers from this day and previous days used the same trail, so there were essentially steps formed in the snow that we could follow. I have never hiked at this altitude, especially the more than the 1160 meters of ascent that this required, so I was a bit short of breath and somewhat queasy in the stomach -- but nothing I was not able to ignore.

At this point I want to talk briefly about the temperatures. Jürg had advised us to take warm clothing, and I'm glad I did! With the wind and no sun, it did get quite chilly. It was very nice to have my long underwear and extra jacket layer and warm gloves. I felt that here in late August that I was dressed the way I usually am for a February activation at 1500 meters.

When we reached the summit there were a number of other hikers already there. We quickly set up two stations (no need for all four people to carry one). Norbert and Robert used an FT-817 (Norbert on SSB, Robert on CW) while Bruno and I used my ATS-4. For some unknown reason, though, the audio on my receiver was way, way down, almost like a 30 dB attenuator. Luckily a few chasers had such strong signals that we both got the necessary contacts for the qualification. Again keeping an eye on the oncoming rain clouds, we quickly packed up and started on our way down.



Bruno and Paul at the summit cross operating one station; Norbert used his ice pick as a mount for his mast. From our clothing, you can get an idea of the August temperatures we enjoyed. (photo courtesy of Robert, F5HTR)

Just before noon, about the middle of the way down, it started to rain lightly, so we were very careful when we stepped on rocks. Even trickier, though, was going down steep areas where the path was made of loose dirt and gravel, where it was tricky to get a good foothold. Robert remarked (and I agree) that it was probably easier to deal with the snowpack than loose dirt and gravel, especially the final 150 vertical meters where it is very steep.

We got back to the hut safely and picked up the things we had left behind (there was no need to carry our overnight materials up to the summit and back). We had a cold drink and some of the hut's homemade Schwarzwaldtorte. By this time, the sun was again starting to peek out of the clouds, and we had a non-eventful trip back to the car. I must admit, though, that at the end of the day my legs were very tired! Luckily I had no trouble with my feet -- but knowing the distances and condition of the trail, I had put on some Compeed as a prevention against blisters, and that magic stuff did the job.

As I noted, this is an activation I would never, ever attempt on my own, and it was a pleasure to do it with this group of excellent outdoorsmen. I hope that HB9SOTA continues to organize such events!