

# Illhorn (HB/VS-216) and Bella Tola (HB/VS-175)

August 2-3, 2016

Paul HB9DST

**Summary: When it comes to SOTAs, the two words "spectacular" and "easy" almost never apply to the same summit. Even so, I believe I have found two such summits -- and even better, they're relatively close to each other. If you could find the time to get to this distant corner of Switzerland, this is an overnight trip that you would enjoy and any visiting SOTA activator would go crazy over!**

Some people refer to Bella Tola as "among the very easiest 3000ers in Switzerland" (Peter Deuble, *Leichte 3000er in der Schweiz*). Now that's very enticing! However, because Bella Tola is located in the Val d'Anniviers region south of Sierre and almost in France, it's impossible to do as a day trip from Zurich. Thus, I decided to stay overnight in St-Luc where there is a funicular that would be the starting point to a trip to Bella Tola. In checking around, however, I found another very interesting summit, Illhorn, which is very close by. So what a perfect overnight trip: Illhorn upon my arrival and Bella Tola the next day. And with an overnight stay, both are easy to reach with public transportation -- but the buses run only sporadically so keep an eye on the schedules.

As for buses, the ride from Sierre to St-Luc was likely the scariest part of the entire trip! The bus goes along narrow roads that on the other side of the guard rail drop of hundreds of meters. I'm not normally bothered by heights, but even I was getting a bit queasy in the stomach on this bus ride. So if you also get queasy, for the trip up take a seat on the driver's side.





*The narrow cliffside road where the bus trip was a true adventure.*

I got off the bus stop directly at the chair lift station at Chandolin. Ride the chair lift up to the summit station at Tsape, where there is also a restaurant if you need refreshments. Because of all the travel, I arrived at 12:30 and so wanted to get started with the hike right away -- the return bus from Chandolin to St-Luc (my hotel) departs at 15:42 -- or else you have to wait until 17:42 or have another hour to hike.



*The bus stop/chair lift station at Chandolin is in the red circle.*

The trail is very obvious and well marked and T2 with no dangerous spots at all. It took me just under an hour to go 1.6 km and climb the 289 meters -- it is indeed an easy summit. The scenery was very lovely but nothing you can't see anywhere else in Switzerland -- until the very top. The summit itself is an outcropping where it drops off straight down on three sides. It's not really dangerous, but it certainly does look impressive! And this is why I call Illhorn "spectacular" but "easy".



*The trail up to the summit of Illhorn (seen here) is not the least bit dangerous.*



*The summit itself is quite impressive!*

The activation area is moderately large. There is a hiking signpost and a summit cross to which you can lash a mast. There are also two wooden benches that can also serve as a mast support and a convenient place to sit when you are operating. I chose one of these.

I did make it back down to Chandolin in plenty of time for the bus and the ride down to St-Luc. It's a charming village with a real French flavor. In fact, my German did me very little good and I had to rely on

my English to get around. My hotel, the Hôtel Le Cervin, looks like at one time it was a posh place, but this Grand Dame has meanwhile seen better days. My room was very spartan but clean, as were the shared toilets and showers. I had dinner at a local restaurant and then retired early because I knew I had a big day ahead of me.



*My hotel, which in earlier days must have been quite posh.*



*A scene from St-Luc.*



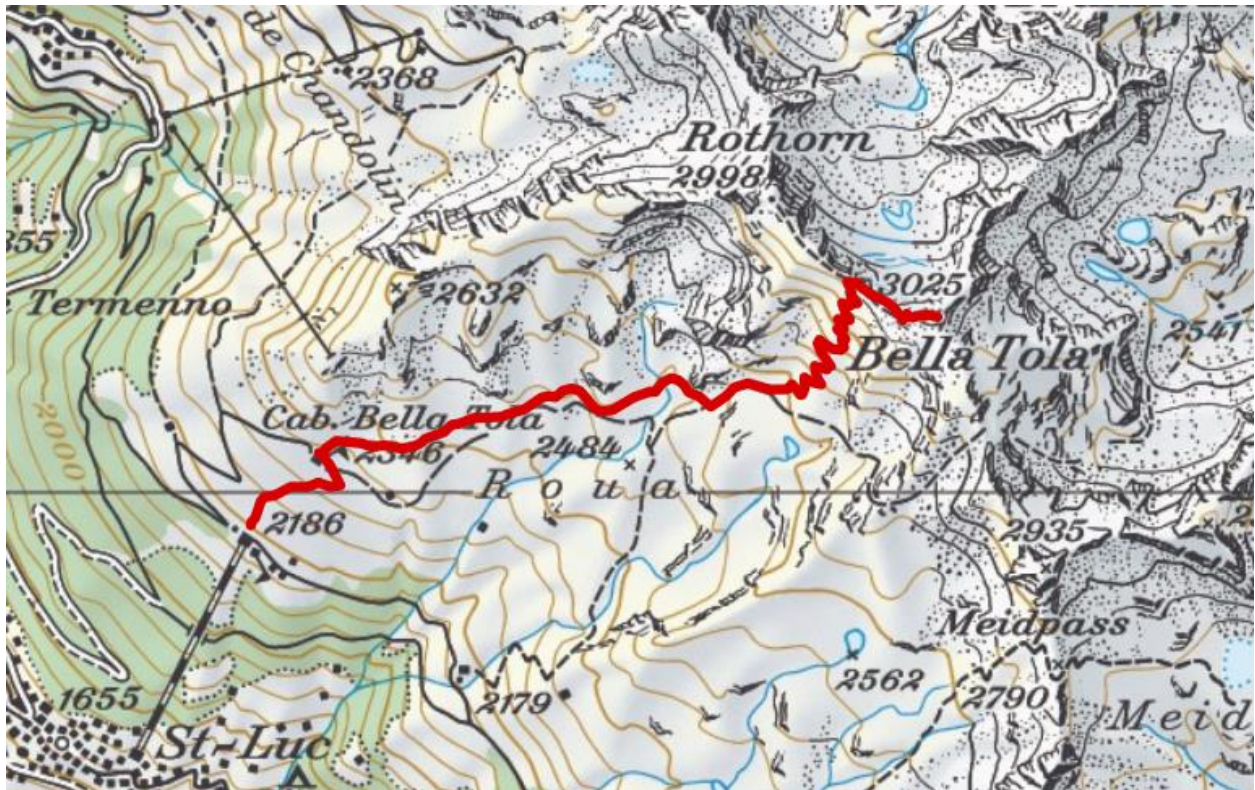
*The village baker presenting her goods for sale.*

Note: it's also possible to stay overnight at the Cabana Bella Tola alpine hut, which is located above St-Luc. Doing so would also cut half an hour off the hike the next day. However, I chose not to because for just a few CHF more down in the village I had a single room, a hot shower in the morning, and could choose my evening meal from a menu -- which was worth it to me. In any case, when I was on Illhorn, I spoke to a pair of hikers who were staying at the hut. Instead of going down to Chandolin, across to St-Luc and then back up again, they planned on hiking to the hut -- really not a bad idea at all.

On the next day, I wanted to take the first funicular from St-Luc to Tignousa which ran at 8 a.m. The breakfast buffet at the hotel didn't start until 8, so I skipped it (not a big sacrifice for me). Tuesday had been somewhat overcast with some sprinkles late in the evening, but Wednesday morning turned out to be a perfect day for hiking. The overall hike goes 5.3 km (one way) with an ascent of 829 meters. It took me about 2 hours 45 minutes. It's not trivial, but it's well within the abilities of a seasoned SOTA activator and hence me calling this one "easy" as well.



*In peak season, the funicular from St-Luc to Tignousa runs every half hour.*



The first section of the route (half an hour) takes you to the Cabana Bella Tola alpine hut, where I could have stayed. On the return trip, it's a nice place to stop for a beer.



Just above the Cabana Bella Tola is a slight crest where you get your first view of today's destination. There is a ridge with a summit on either end: to the left is Rothorn (which has a small gazebo on top, is not a SOTA and at 2998 meters is not quite a 3000er), and on the right is Bella Tola.



*The ridge in the background: the left peak is Rothorn, the right is Bella Tola.*



Next you follow the trail to the base of the summit. Note that the hiking trail runs parallel to the dirt road, but you want to take the trail -- it's actually somewhat shorter and more pleasant than the road. The trail leaves the road near Point 2484. It's not marked with a hiking signpost, so you have to look closely for the white-red-white markings. I saw that numerous people missed this trail and ended up continuing along the road.



*Here is where the hiking trail (continue to the middle of the photo) leaves the dirt road; if you look very closely on the lower left you can see a painted stone marking the trail.*

This trail meets up with the road again, and after several hundred meters you are at the base of the summit. Now you follow a zig-zag hiking trail up to a col between the two peaks that define the ridge. This hike is not technically difficult -- again with wide paths and always a T2 -- but at this altitude, an ascent of 829 meters is not trivial and you can tell the air is a bit thinner.



*A section of the easy zig-zag going up the mountainside leading to the col.*

An aside: because of its special nature (an easy 3000er), this summit is very popular, not only for people staying in St-Luc and the surrounding villages, but also for day-trippers from the Lake Geneva area. Also interesting, I saw a number of families with small children. It seems their parents want to get them to their first 3000er at an early age. It was also clear that not all the kids were nearly as enthusiastic as their parents. In fact, at one point coming back down the zig-zag route, I saw a boy of about 6 with a frown on his face and his arms across his chest as if to say "No more, I'm done!" I told his mother to tell the little boy (who spoke only French) that "if the fat guy [me] can make it to the top, so can you!"

From the col, you follow the ridge southeast until you get to the actual summit, where there's another 100 meters of zig-zagging to get to the top. At that point you are above 3000 meters -- and the views are amazing in every direction. The activation area is reasonably large. There is a hiking signpost (which I used to lash my mast) and about 15 meters away is also a metal summit cross (where I tied off the other end of my end-fed antenna). As noted earlier, there were lots of people on the summit, another reason for me wanting to get an early start and try to beat the rush.



Again, the bus connections from St-Luc back to Thalwil (home) were very limited, and I definitely wanted to catch the 15:50 bus rather than wait for the next/last one at 17:50. I broke off radio operations and left the summit in plenty of time. In fact, I had half an hour to spare and treated myself to a cold beer at the café right next to the bus stop to celebrate a wonderful two days of activations.