

The Churfirsten:

HB/SG-049 / 020 / 018 / 052 / 053 / 017

by Paul HB9DST/AA1MI

This amazing series of peaks along a ridge is one of the most striking mountain formations anywhere in Switzerland. It is also a SOTA activator's dream because almost every one of the Churfirsten is a valid 8-point summit. This article first describes the region in general and then examines each of the Churfirsten in detail as regards it being a SOTA summit. No matter which one, the views from the top are spectacular!

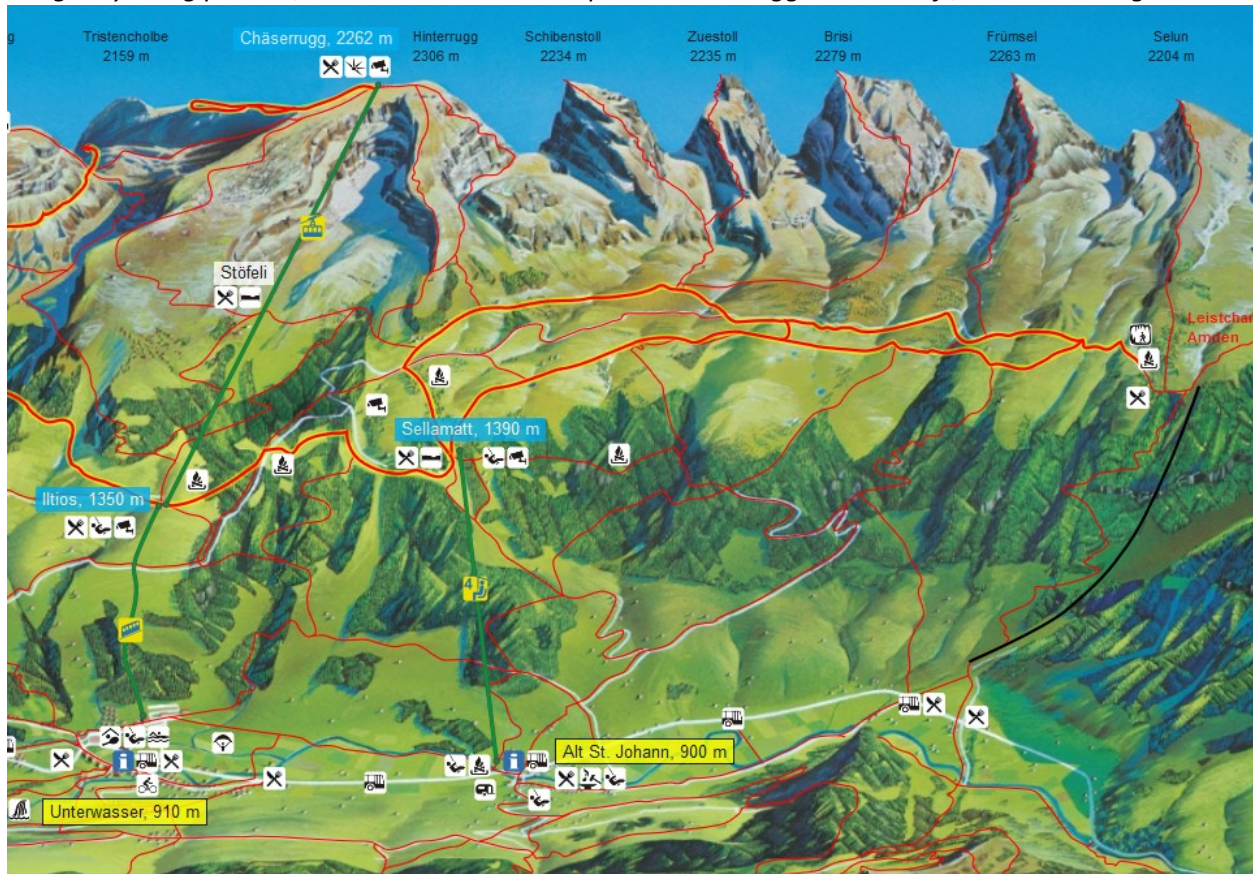
When you drive on the motorway from Zurich to Chur, not long after passing Lake Zurich you then drive along the south shore of the Walensee (Lake Walen). Across the lake to the north you see a most striking scene: a vertical wall of rock, topped by a number of peaks that almost look like dragon's teeth. These are the Churfirsten, a mountain range in the Toggenburg region and famous throughout Switzerland. From this side they are inaccessible to casual hikers, but on the back side the situation is completely different as the following photos and diagrams indicate.



The Churfirsten seen from the Walensee, looking north.



The Churfirsten seen from the other side (looking south east). A road runs through the valley, then there is a gently rising plateau, and then the individual peaks. Hinterrugg is on the left, Selun to the right.



The name "Churfirsten" is plural, and it derives from the fact that the peaks form the historical boundary of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Chur. The name has historically also been folk-etymologized as Kurfürsten, referring to the prince-electors of the Holy Roman Empire who in the later medieval period numbered seven, which in turn encouraged the count of seven main peaks.

The standard seven peaks of the Churfirten are (from west to east to match the above diagram going left to right):

- Chäserrugg (2262 m) *not a SOTA summit*
- Hinterrugg (2306 m), HB/SG-017
- Schibenstoll (2234 m), HB/SG-053
- Zuestoll (2235 m), HB/SG-052
- Brisi (2279 m), HB/SG-018
- Frümse (2263 m), HB/SG-020
- Selun (2205 m), HB/SG-049

The count of exactly seven peaks is contrived -- sometimes Chäserrugg is not included and is instead counted as part of Hinterrugg because of its topographical prominence of just 14 meters. That is also the reason why it is not a SOTA summit. Also note also that to the west of Selun there is another nearby peak, Schären, which is also a SOTA (HB/SG-054) but it is not considered one of the Churfirten.

To save time during an activation, you do not need to hike the entire way from the valley with the main road. Instead, there are three cable cars of various types going from the valley to the plateau. Your choice of which to take depends on which summit you wish to activate and which means less hiking time. Note: in the summer and fall hiking seasons, these facilities are in operation only until mid-October or early November at the latest.

As you enter the valley from Wattwil and Neu St. Johann, going from west to east (right to left on the above diagram map), the first cable car is in the village of Starkenbach/Säss. That village itself is not marked on the diagram above, but the route of its cable car is the heavy black curved line on the right of the diagram, and it runs up to Alp Selun. This is actually a private cable car operated by the farmers who need to bring milk down to the valley every day when the cows are grazing on the plateau. It has a sporadic schedule (sometimes only every two hours for commercial passengers, more frequently on weekends), so you are well advised to call in advance (+41 (0)79 537 77 20), especially if the weather is poor (but you do *not* want to hike to these summits in the rain because of the dangerous footing). In the summer months there is continuous operation for hikers on Saturdays and Sundays. Even so, it carries only 5 adults at a time, and if the weather is good, expect a long line and waiting time at both the valley and summit stations. The fee in 2019 was CHF 18.00 round trip.



The Starkenbach "dairy farmer" cable car. The locals also refer to an "Ikea-bahn", a build-it-yourself cable car.

The second cable car runs from Alt St. Johan to Alp Sellamat, and this is a commercial facility built primarily to service skiers. It has both open-air chairs and enclosed 4-person gondolas. It runs continuously throughout the day, although the daily starting and ending times vary depending on the month. In 2019, a round trip costs CHF 24.00 (half-rate discount cards are accepted).



The commercial cable car at Alt St. Johann.

The third option starts in Unterwasser, where you take a funicular railway to Itios. Then there is a large gondola that runs from Itios to Chäserrugg (the non-SOTA Churfirsten immediately adjacent to Hinterrugg), where there is a newly renovated fancy restaurant. In 2019, a round trip was CHF 58.00 (half-rate discount cards accepted).



The funicular railway from Unterwasser to Itios where you pick up a gondola to Chäserrugg.

When you arrive at one of these locations, you will encounter simply striking scenery such as this with the plateau and the individual peaks all inviting you to climb them:



Each activation follows a similar pattern: You cross the plateau to approach your target summit, hike across a very rocky, uneven karstic base area, and the final approach is up a very steep grassy slope. Losing your footing on this slope can be a disaster, and some of the rocky approaches to the top slopes are very exposed. As a result, *never* attempt to activate one of these summits if there has recently been rain in the past few days (the slopes are north facing and don't get a ton of direct sunlight to dry things off) or if there is rain or fog or the threat of either (except perhaps Selun, see below). It's also a good idea to take a GPS and record your tracks because in some cases the trail can be difficult to find and follow, even without any rain or fog.

Now I will discuss each of the individual SOTA summits. Note that Hinterrugg (2306 m) HB/SG-017 is almost trivial (very short hike) once you take the gondola up to Chäserrugg, and it and Selun are also the only Churfurstens you can activate in winter with snowshoes unless you are an expert.

Note also that if you plan on doing several Churfursten activations in several days in a row, a pleasant thing to do is to stay at a hotel either in the valley or on the plateau. One popular choice is a modern hotel on Alp Sellamatt, located at the top of the Alt St. Johann cable car summit station. On the plateau you can find numerous facilities with large multi-bed rooms and rather basic accommodations such as the Ochsenhütte near the Selun cable car, and they are an interesting experience to say the least.

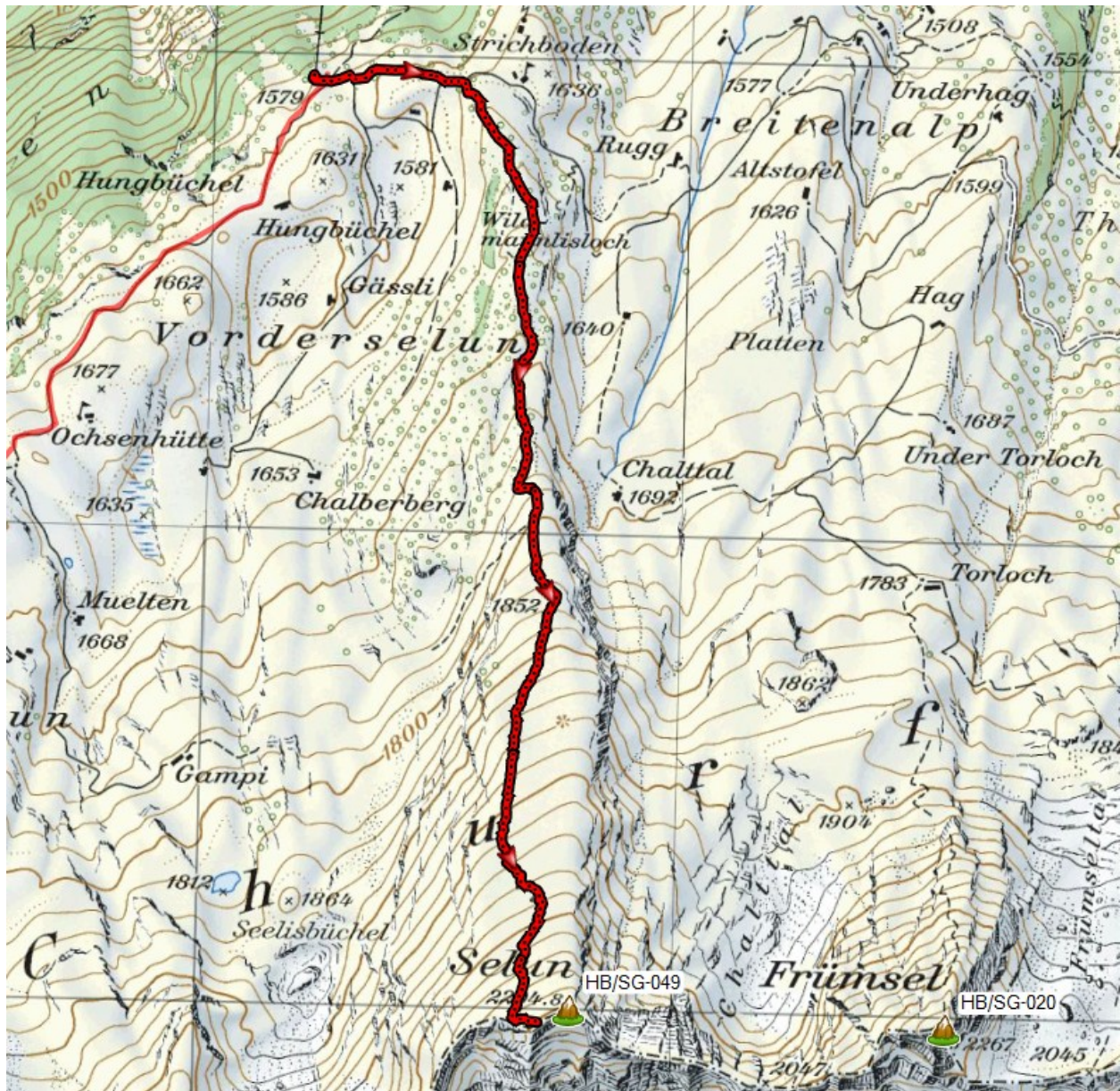
While not officially recognized with an award or certificate, activating all the Churfursten SOTAs is a true badge of honor, something not everybody has the skill or endurance to do. Here it's worth mentioning that a buddy, Manual HB9DQM, not only summited all six Churfursten in a single day, he did a SOTA activation on each and every one of them!!!

For me, though, it was a big enough challenge to simply tackle every Churfursten summit on its own. When I arrived in Switzerland about 20 years ago, I had zero experience with mountain hiking. I remember looking at a map of the Churfursten and reading reports about the summits, thinking to myself, "never in my lifetime". Well, over the years I gained experience and built up confidence in my abilities, and it has now actually happened, and there are few hiking experiences of which I am more proud.

Selun HB/SG-049 -- hiking grade T2

Activation date: September 27, 2015

Except for Hinterrugg (cable car summit with a short hike), this is the easiest of the Churfirten and a good place for someone new to this region to become acquainted with it. It's also not dangerous at all with absolutely no exposed sections during the ascent. The Starkenbach/Alp Selun cable car is the closest one and is the best place to depart from.



I wanted to get this summit checked off the list before the end of the season. There was a weather forecast for low clouds and fog, but I was hoping the summit would be above the fog line. No such luck.

In fact, there were plenty of patches of snow above 2000 meters or so. That meant the rocks were wet and slippery, and the hiking path was muddy and even more slippery. This hiking path is normally no problem at all with no danger. Today the only real danger was slipping and getting your clothes all muddy -- a fate I suffered more than once. The only thing that got hurt was my pride.

For specifications: the hike is 2.7 km with an ascent of 631 meters, and the hike up the summit took me 1 hour 53 minutes (and that was under these difficult conditions where you have to be extremely careful with each and every step). The last 45 minutes involves going up a grade of about 20+ degrees, and the final 75 vertical meters or so has a grade of almost 30 degrees. Even so, this is less than the critical value for an avalanche, so this should be possible with snowshoes (and several people on hikr.org give it a snowshoe rating of WT2).



The "farmer cable car" summit station. It is not manned, but they do have a camera so they know when someone is waiting to go down. When the bell rings, make sure you're in the car with the door closed!

The route shown above also goes by the Wildmannlisloch (Wild Man's Cave). It is presumed to have been the home of prehistoric people. It has a measured length of 192 meters with a difference in height of 2.4 meters. The first few meters of the cave are dry and you can walk inside, but the further you go in, the more water you will find on the ground.



A photo from inside the Wildmannisloch (photo placed on the web by Petra Eisele).



A view of the summit for the day (the closest one in the right-center). All I could see during my activation was fog, so this photo comes courtesy of Peter HB9TVK during his activation of Selun.



One of the few moments the summit peeked out of the fog with about half an hour left in the hike to the summit. It's hard to see, but there is considerable snow on the final approach to the top. You can also see there are no exposed sections of the hiking path.



Summit cross and the relatively small activation area (and hence my decision to bring my loop antenna).

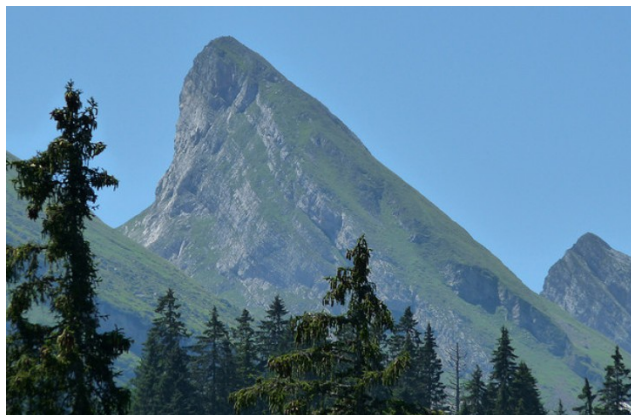
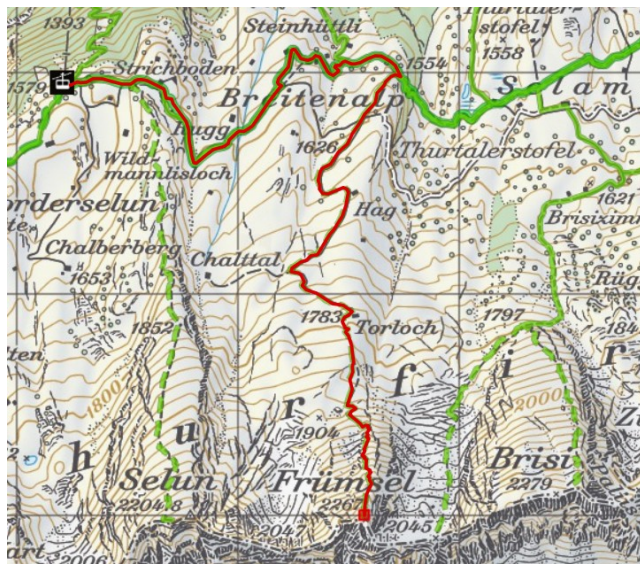
Frümsel HB/SG-020 -- hiking grade T3+

Activation date: September 29, 2019

One of the two most difficult of the Churfürsten, the other being Zustoll SG-052.

Like Selun, this one is best approached from the Starkenbach/Alp Selun cable car. The reports on hiker.org don't mention any significant obstacles other than the very steep grassy slope common to all the Churfürsten. However, there is one 10m section with a wire rope that is almost mandatory to use. Some people I spoke with on the summit claim that this one is even tougher than Zustoll, which is normally recognized as the most difficult of the Churfürsten.

According to wanderland.ch: hike distance one-way is 5.1 km, ascent of 779 meters, hike duration 2h38 (I took a bit longer). It had rained two days before, had since been very sunny, but even so the trail was still slippery in spots and required great care, especially during the descent. It took me 90 minutes to carefully hike up the steep grassy slope section leading to the actual summit.



In this photo of Främser you get a better idea of how steep the grassy slope really is



This section includes some wire rope for support, and it is extremely useful to have.



The small activation zone on SG-020 includes a summit cross to which you can lash a mast – if the crowds allow it.

Brisi HB/SG-018 -- hiking grade T2

Activation date: September 25, 2012

Unfortunately, I didn't take any photos of this activation or make a GPS track. I do remember that it was not at all difficult except for the steep grassy and rocky slope. After Selun, this is probably the easiest of the Churfirστεn to hike up.

For this activation, you can use the cable car at either Starkenbach or Alt St. Johann. I recommend the latter because it runs on a regular basis and there will inevitably be a shorter wait for your ride.



According to wanderland.ch: hike distance 5.3 km, ascent of 903 meters, hike duration 2h59 (although I generally take a bit longer).



As you can see, there are no massively exposed sections on the ascent of Brisi, making it one of the easier of the Churfirten.



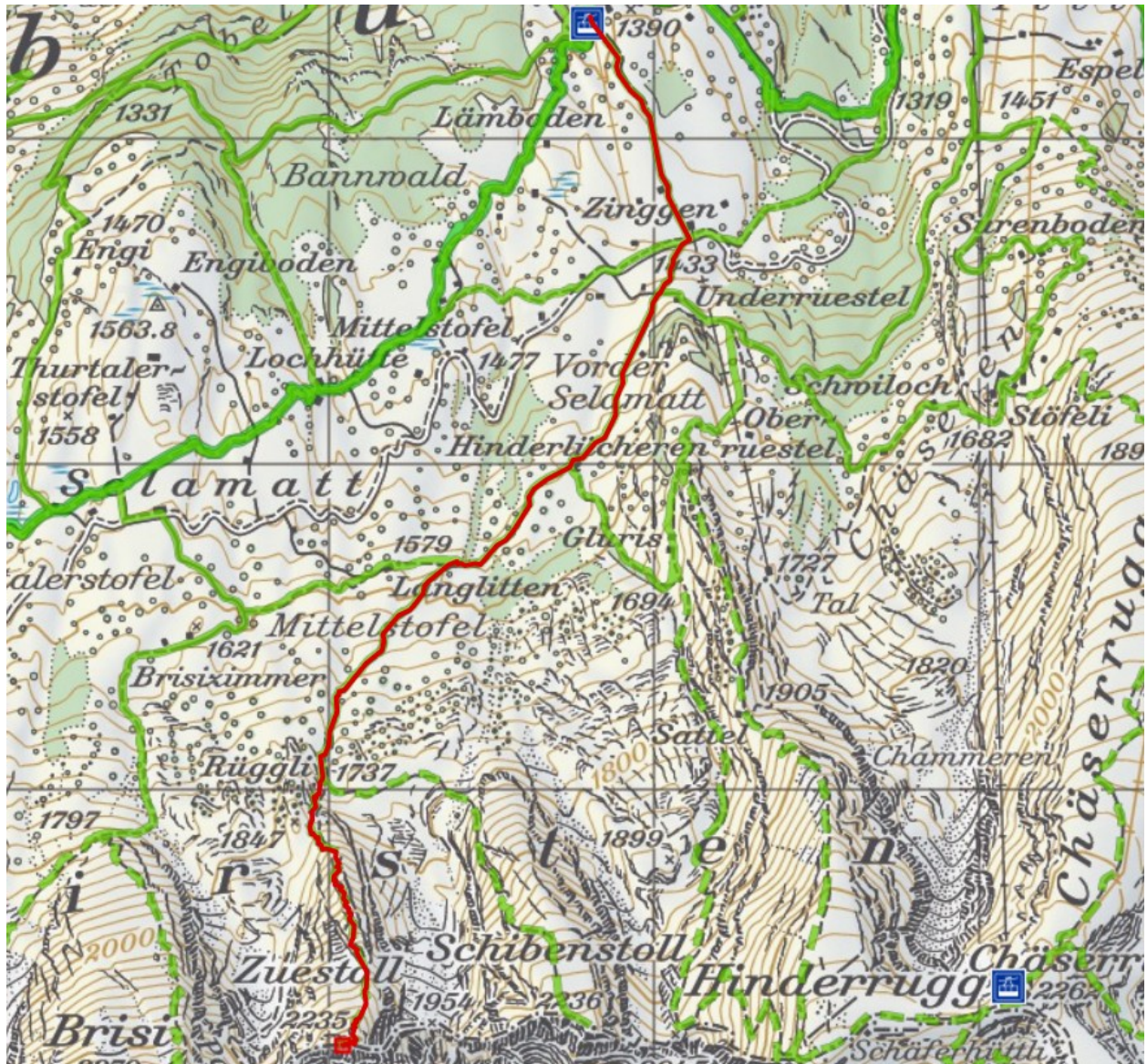
By moving down the slope 25 meters you have a relatively large activation zone. You will, however, have trouble finding a mast support except for the summit cross.

Zuestoll HB/SG-052 -- hiking grade T4

Activation date: September 4, 2020. One of the most challenging of all the Churfirsten.

According to wanderland.ch: hike distance 4.1 km, ascent of 853 meters, hike duration 2h35 (although I generally take a bit longer). Departure point is the Alt St. Johann/Alp Sellamatt cable car.

While on another of the Churfirsten, I had a chat with some locals who know these summits well. They explained the hiking path for Zuestoll goes along the top of the ridge where you come upon a spot where you must use cables to go down a saddle prior to going up the final summit.





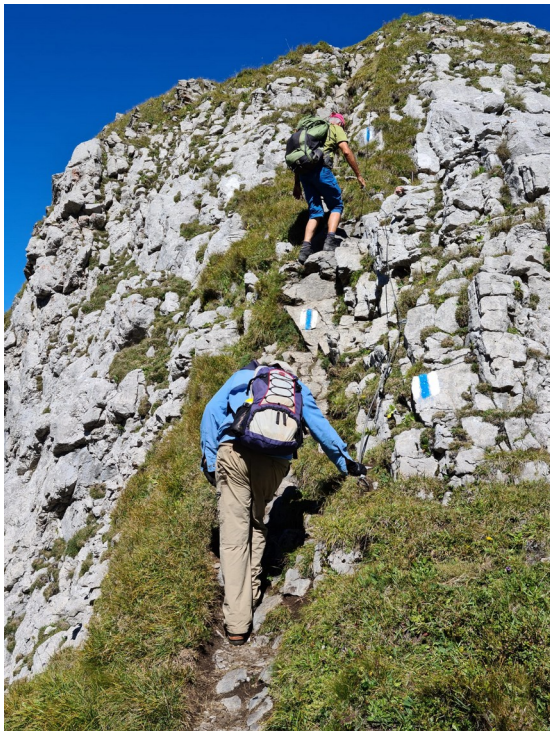
Zuestoll seen from Schibenstoll. You hike up the top slope on the right side until you reach the “step”, which you must go down before proceeding to the main summit.



On the left side, looking up towards the top of the “step”, with 300m of ascent remaining to the actual summit.



Climbing up to the top of the “step” with the help of wire ropes.



Coming down the other side of the “step” on the way to the summit. Here, the wire ropes were absolutely necessary for me! Later, during the descent, you must then climb up to get to the top of the “step”.



The summit / activation zone is relatively large and surprisingly flat. There is a summit cross where you can lash a mast, but I opted to bring an hf whip antenna so I had less weight to carry along.



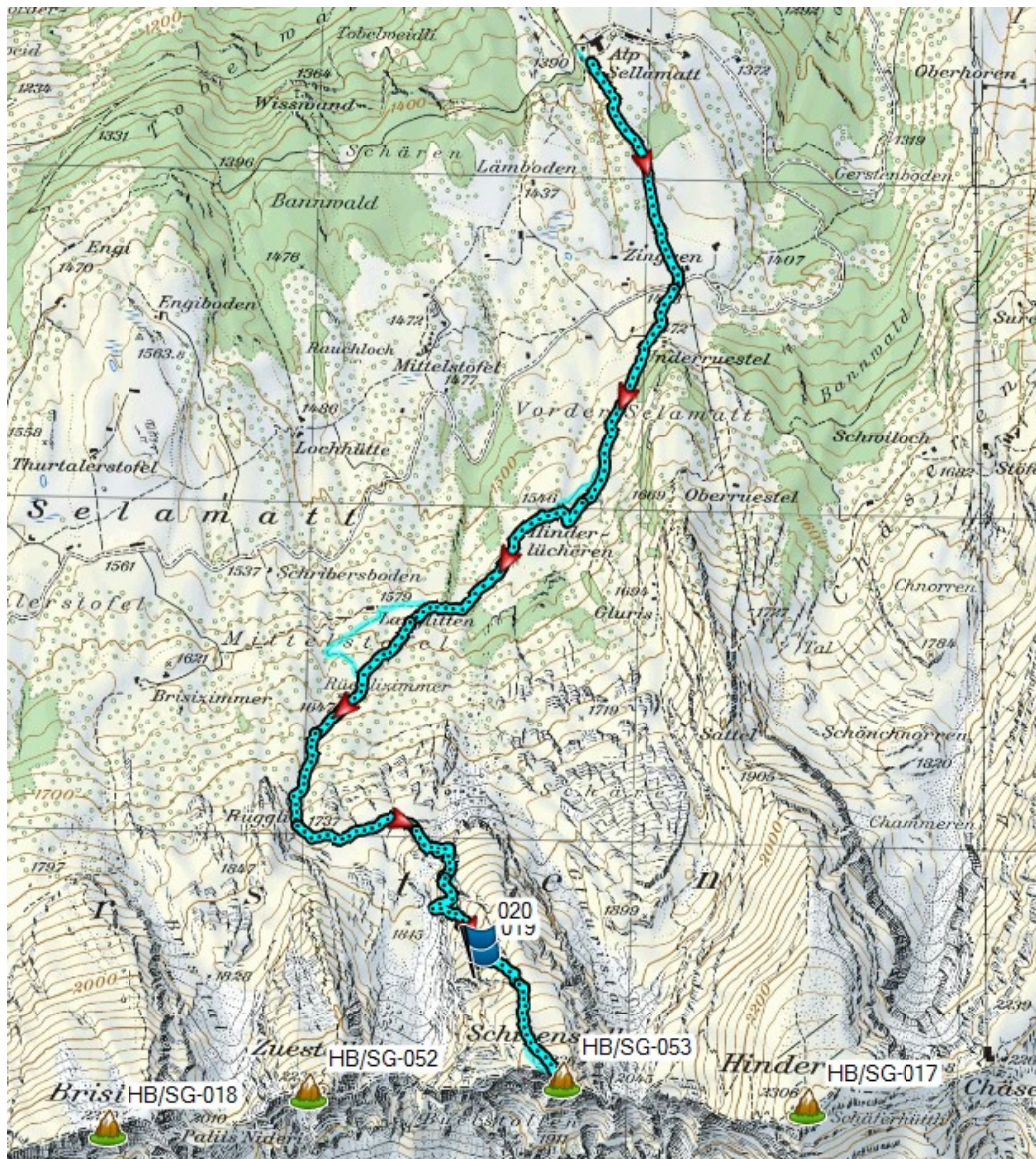
View from the summit of Zuestoll, but it is typical of what you will find at the top of any of the Churfirsten.

Schibenstoll HB/SG-053 -- hiking grade T3+

Activation date: September 21, 2015

A hike that put me to the limits of my comfort zone. One spot, in particular, had me quite concerned.

This was a joint activation with Juerg HB9BIN . We took the very first cable car up from Alt St. Johann to Alp Sella matt at 0830, and we caught one of the last runs down the mountain at 1645 (it stops running at 1700). Hike distance 5.3 km, ascent of 947 meters, hike duration 3h22 (with a 20+ minute breakfast break in the middle of the ascent).



Waypoint 20 is the location of the most critical spot on the hike; Waypoint 19 is the spot where you first get a good look at the slope you climb up after getting past the rock wall face.

The hiking path up to Rüggli (1737 meters) is straightforward and relatively easy. Here you have a fork in the path: turn right for Zuestoll, turn left for Schibenstoll. From Rüggli and going to the rock face you go across a karstic landscape with uneven rocks and sinkholes for tough, slow going. You then follow up along the base of a rock wall. This section is quite exposed. Now, I don't mind an exposed section or two, but this lasted an hour or so and I was quite pleased when it came to an end.



The path we followed along the rock face. From this view it doesn't look tricky...



...but this is what many sections involved (here, Juerg on the trail).

The transition from the rock wall to the grassy slope involves the most difficult section of the hike. In this spot we had to climb with our hands for roughly 10 vertical meters and in one spot in particular there was just one foothold, and a not very big one -- but one slip and say "good-bye". I will admit, though, that going up was far trickier than coming down, when I could sit on my rear end and slide slowly down to the next good foothold. Even so, this was one of the scarier sections I've run into. It would be much easier if they put up a steel cable as an assist, but we saw no good place where they could anchor such a cable.



The most difficult section of the hike at Waypoint 20 as seen looking up (left) and looking down (right). One slip and there's nothing to stop you for quite a distance. Going up is far trickier than going down.



Once you get past that tricky spot, which is the transition from the rock face to the grassy slope, this is what awaits you for another half hour up to the summit cross.

On the peak there is a summit cross, which I let Juerg use. But the activation zone is relatively large because the slope is not so terribly steep near the top and rounds off. I brought along a small light tripod to support a lightweight mast. I had counted on there being stones on this summit to weigh down the tripod, but amazingly enough there were absolutely no loose stones around! I secured my tripod with my backpack and with Juerg's backpack enough to hold up the mast.



I set up my station on the grassy slope, which at the top of the summit isn't nearly as steep as on the way up.

Hinterrugg HB/SG-017 -- hiking grade T2

Activation date: June 29, 2012

After riding up the gondola to Chäserrugg, this is a very easy walk, making this the simplest of all the Churfirsten to activate.

This is a hike of less than 1 km, with a total ascent of 57 meters and taking 15 minutes.



The view to the gondola summit station at Chäserrugg as seen from Hinterrugg. Note that to cross over to Hinterrugg you drop down some 20 meters to a small ridge and then climb back up. Even in late June the ridge was covered with snow (the footpath is clearly visible). By mid-day the snow was getting soft and slippery, so I had to be very careful with footing, and it sure helps to have hiking poles!



My operating position at a cairn with my AlexLoop. It was very windy that day and I had to use cord to stabilize my antenna. You seldom see an activation zone so large at this altitude. You can use the posts on the snow fence for a mast support, but even in late June this would involve getting your feet wet.