



**Where? Switzerland**  
**What? Walking the Eiger Trail**

A glimpse of the north face of  
the Eiger from the Eiger Trail.  
You can get even closer than this...



# THE EIGER FOR EVERYONE

It may be the most infamous rock face in the world, but you don't have to be a climber to get up close and personal with the Eiger. **Trail** goes for a short walk in a long shadow.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS **SIMON INGRAM**





Meltwater cascades off the face near the Alpigen end of the Eiger Trail.

**T**he rock on the north face of the Eiger feels sharp, hard and damp – like the edge of an industrial brick that’s been broken in two with a hammer. Collectively, when seen from below, it forms a wall that is concave and brittle, fractured into broken spurs and cavities that lean over you like an torso of crushed ribs. Looking up at it, you get all the terror of height, but backwards. It’s both exhilarating, and deeply unsettling.

Now how could someone like me – a *walker* – know something like that? Well, I’ll tell you. And moreover I’ll tell you not only how you too can get your fists around the most notorious mountain wall in the world, but also how you can get on it, inside it, beneath it and under its skin in the most literal sense without ever putting on a rope. And I promise you’ll enjoy it, and not have to worry constantly about dying. Don’t say we never give you anything.

One thing you will need is ibuprofen. Arrive in Grindelwald, and it won’t be long until your neck starts to ache. Wander its main street and you’ll find yourself walking off kerbs into the path of traffic and colliding with Japanese tourists because your eyes are constantly fixed on the mountaintops, which

peer down on the town like nightmare monsters around a child’s bed.

“There. *There*. Look at it. Look at the way that shadow falls. That patch of white there, you know what that is? That’s the bit I was telling you about, you know, the bit with the man and the thing and the rope? Look at that rock, there. No, the other rock. Wow. Wow.”

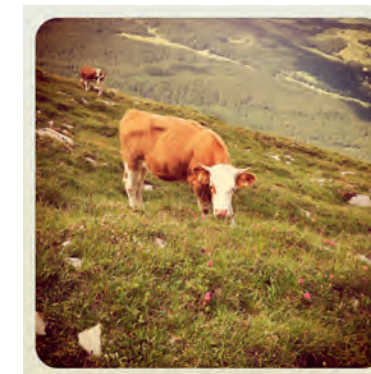
Standing in the main street of Grindelwald, I had just had my first oblique view of the Eiger, peeping its head above pillows of cloud. Having obsessed over this mountain for a decade, this finger-jabbing moment was quite a life event for me – though to passers by I must have looked like a man having a row with God.

Spend enough time amid anything to do with the mountains, and sooner or later the Eiger’s going to get you. It’s a disease: the cold that bubbles away in the background for ages, then collapses into double pneumonia. All of a sudden you find yourself devouring books, films and YouTube clips, all the while feeling yourself melting into the mountain’s alluring shadow. My wife – who I’d lured out to Switzerland with the promise of healthful walking in Heidi-land – was now exposed to a shadowy condition rampant among mountain-loving folk of a certain immersion: Eiger fever.

Why this pull, and why the Eiger? Not even Everest or the Matterhorn have their claws into Planet Normal so deeply. It’s not the highest peak in Switzerland; it’s not even the highest peak in its massif, dwarfed by not one but two vertical festivals of ice right next to it.

Its lure is down to what you could call Man o’ War Syndrome (which is the first syndrome I’ve ever come up with, so be kind.) A man o’ war is a pretty jellyfish of startling toxicity, which often bobs within a few feet of the shore, and elicits a mixture of horror and fascination from everyone nearby – from divers to seaside icecream-lickers. There are bigger, scarier things you could go looking for out in the ocean, but rarely – unless Joan Rivers happens to be on the beach – will you find something quite so frightening quite so nearby. It’s this juxtaposition of cruelty, a striking aesthetic and accessibility that makes the Eiger such a specifically dangerous beast.

Because the Eiger’s arena of combat is right there, guts out, above such pastoral Swiss butteryness, it draws people to it like a powerful hypnotic. You can’t get so close to the meat of another really important mountain in the world with such civilised ease. You’ll see tourists sat on the terrace of



RACHEL ANDREWS-INGRAM

Left: the start of the Eiger Trail, near Eigergletscher. You’ll want more than 2 hours to enjoy this.

the Hotel Bellevue des Alpes in Kleine Scheidegg in a kind of stupor, eyes fixed on the mountain, stirring sugar into their beer with one hand and glassily signing away their children’s inheritance on the bill with the other.

There’s a dark side to this. Between the 1930s and the 1970s, this mountain killed a lot of people – all of whom were attempting to put their own bruise on the Eiger’s shins. This wasn’t about getting to the *top* of the mountain, lord no. That, improbably, had been knocked off in 1858 by a tweedy Irishman who barely knew his way around an ice axe (surely the mountaineering equivalent of The Krankies patching the ozone layer).

No, this was about finding new and more audacious ways to tackle the Eiger’s infamous north face – a vertical, 6,000ft labyrinth of obstacles tattooed with a bloody history of death and awe. This north wall – which from its German *nordwand*, requires a mere one-letter tweak to transform it into *mordwand*, or ‘death wall’ – sees little or meagre sun, which makes it dark and cold (and evil).

Every last battle, triumph and disaster prickled under the cruelly voyeuristic glare of the world. Perhaps the even meaner flipside was that climbers would cling to life through

frostbitten fingertips in the most appalling conditions, while the twinkles of comfort and fireside warmth lay agonisingly, teasingly below.

There are two reasons why now is a good time to go Switzerland to treat Eiger fever. A budget airline has just started operating between London and Berne, a town right in the thick of the interesting bit of Switzerland (that is, the bit that boasts eye-spraining scenery, rather than the bit with the watches and all the cash). And they use proper planes, the noisy kind with propellers, which makes you feel like you’re en route to a landing strip where someone with paddles will guide you in between meringue-hung peaks. It’s all very swashbuckling. And the best part is it’s okay to enjoy it, because you know it’s all done by Swiss people and everyone knows the Swiss Do Things Properly, and would never put you in a plane that would crash, make you late for your Lots of Money meeting or even wrinkle your trousers slightly. The second reason is that a new walk has just opened up, deviously called The Eiger Walk. This short amble in itself would be worth a look, featuring a free little museum, relics and memorials that look back on the Eiger’s history within clear gawp of the thing itself. But the kicker here is that when it



The Wetterhorn, from the Eiger Trail.

is combined with a slightly more involving trail called – yes! – the Eiger Trail, it closes a circle between Kleine Scheidegg and Alpigen in an intimate traverse right beneath the Eiger’s north wall. Close enough to touch? That’s not even the half of it.

It’s this we were here to do. That, and catch a very special train.

The Swiss like trains. They run on time all the time to an ingenious schedule which means you’re never more than a few minutes away from a connection. They’re annoyingly good at everything. Well, the important things: chocolate, timekeeping, cheese, scenery – even the damn cutlery is made by Victorinox. They’re not big on boats, consistency of language or rulebreaking, but with scenery like this, big deal.

The chapel housing the mini Eiger museum, near Lake Fallboden.







# THE EIGER

**'THIS NORTH WALL, THIS MORDWAND, OR 'DEATH WALL' SEES LITTLE OR MEAGRE SUN. IT MAKES IT DARK AND COLD.'**

The masked face of the Eiger. Clear weather doesn't give you this vibe.

## GO!

The best time for this trip is between June and October. In other seasons winter conditions will be encountered.

Trail flew to Switzerland with SkyWork, which now operates between London and Berne. For the latest fares check out [www.flyskywork.com](http://www.flyskywork.com)

For accommodation ideas check out [jungfrauregion.ch](http://jungfrauregion.ch)

The Jungfrau railway is a quirk for the ultra-practical Swiss. It goes nowhere. Nowhere but through the core of the Eiger en route to the highest station in Europe, where it stops and comes back. If this sounds like it belittles the mountain, it doesn't: what it gives you is the unique opportunity to stare out from a third of the way up the Eiger's north wall.

I was fidgeting to see the Stollenloch, a small maintenance door that has been the scene of many attempted rescues and which today offers an illicit way out onto the north face. There it went, a flash of daylight in the long tunnel. And then, like some scene from Bond, we slid onto the steely fluorescent-lit platform of the 2688m Eigerwand station.

These days the viewing platform is no longer open to the elements, which I found disappointing. I'd conjured an image of snow billowing in on a whistly wind, and the availability of a guardrail to hang rakishly out over, throwing the occasional salute to climbers spidering past and perhaps even exchanging a square of chocolate or two. Alas, it's a window now, riveted to the wall. But it's still fascinating, not least because it affords the ability to see the innards of the mountain right against its immediate epidermis, and to touch the sharp rock of the mountain itself. Outside the window was pure soup, but a little of the distinctive, frosty corduroy of the rock was visible immediately below, and in an instant, a place that could have been anywhere was suddenly The Eiger.

These days many people climb the north face, but it's still bloody dangerous, mostly due to weather and rockfalls. One description on an instructional website I found contained an amusing bullet point – slid in between rope measurements and hydration tips – which simply read: 'falling isn't allowed.'

Thwarted by the weather – and, trust me, you want a day with at least the possibility of a break in the clouds for this short but unmissable outing – we fled to Grindelwald for fondue ▶



## EIGER REFLECTIONS



"The sheer physical presence of the Eiger is astonishing. It's a dark anvil of rock that rises out of a meadow. It's just the most dominating mountain architecture I've ever seen, and impinges on the mind like no other. Most walkers cannot get that close to the face of a big mountain, but step off the path and you're on it. What's more disconcerting is that you can hear walkers chatting and sound of cowbells while you're 2,000ft up it. And when you can't it's total silence, which is even stranger."  
Joe Simpson, author and climber



"No-one could suggest any usefulness to mankind in such a climb. Nor could any material advantages be worth the risks, the indescribable labours and the difficulties which demand the uttermost physical, spiritual and mental resistance merely to win fame at the expense of that horrific wall."  
Heinrich Harrer, from *The White Spider*



"The Eiger had loomed in my thought since I started climbing. Those notorious, spots on the face: Swallow's Nest, Death Bivouac, Traverse of the Gods... I even bivvied on a ledge at my local crag when I was at school and imagined I was on that north face! When I climbed it there was no fear. I enjoyed every moment, even the falling rocks. If one had hit me it would have killed me like a bullet. It's a spooky noise – a cross between the whine of a high-velocity round and a jet. On the climb one of my crampons broke – but I relished the thought of a harder time. I climbed on across the Traverse of the Gods and White Spider with one-and-a-half crampons. It made me very happy."  
Alan Hinkes, mountaineer





# THE EIGER



The Eiger Trail, from Kleine Scheidegg, is mostly descent. Which is nice.

and Toblerone, then the next morning caught the train back up to Kleine Scheidegg and – spotting the wooden markers signifying the beginning of the Eiger Walk – set off.

The Eiger Walk is more of a stroll; a paddling pool to whet your senses before the main event. It isn't taxing: a never-dull wander with plenty of diversions. Along the way there are nifty photo stops, relics tied to a rock, and – touchingly – a memorial to climbers lost on the face, their names etched into the rock encircling the small Lake Fallboden.

The Eiger was still behind a mass of swirling cloud when Rachel and I arrived at the lake. A clapboard chapel stands atmospherically next to it, and inside a mini-museum offers a model of the north face complete with LED tracers showing its many hard-won routes.

We left the church and once again headed towards the Eiger. The crowds of Kleine Scheidegg were gone; instead we were climbing into meadow and murk, with the occasional view of a wicker-

textured glacier and brown towers of cloud-draped rock as we walked.

At Eigerletscher station we crossed the railway and – at the insistence of a large sign – began the Eiger Trail.

Well, it was great. The trail's ribbon of a path cuts high across the huge fan of scree that stands at the foot of the face; there's a bit of up and down, but it's mostly a lingering descent into Alpigen. From this position you can comprehensively appreciate how tiny you are and how menacingly huge the face is above you. We felt this despite being unable to see it in full due to the peculiarly localised cloud. But even if you can't see it, you can still feel something heavy and nasty to your right, and have to resist the urge to quicken your pace through fear of it waking up.

Half-familiar landmarks peer transiently out of the gloom: the Rote Fluh, a huge pitch of brown rock, and next to it the famous Hinterstoisser Traverse; the First Pillar, the point at which most climbers leave the path and things get serious; the bottom sections of the west ridge – the hood that throws the face into shadow; a brief snatch of the shadowy couloir where two climbers froze, earning its nickname of Death Bivouac; and the occasional glimpse of the ever-dynamic, torrent-coursed, cloud-masked visage of the face itself, those distinctive horizontal striations glinting in the sun. The Eiger felt lethal and alive. A clear blue sky just wouldn't have delivered the same atmosphere.

"Hang on."

"Why?"

"Something I need to do. Won't be a minute. Nothing to worry about."

Abruptly, I left the path and, after

some scree paddling, found a rib of rock. A few moves, a cocked head to listen for the hollow *pock* of rockfall or the shriek of a falling climber, then a few moves more.

I looked down at Rachel, stupidly happy, and shaking a bit.

"How are you going to get down from there? Have you thought of that?"

"Never mind. Take a picture. Please?" Pathetic? A bit. But I didn't care. I was scrambling on the Eiger's north face.

I could have stayed up there, at least for a bit. It's a creepy treat, a novelty that a mere walker really has no right to abuse.

The trail continued, an ever-so-slight simmer of frustration brewing as the mountains around us dropped their cloaks – the Wetterhorn, the Schreckhorn – all except the Eiger, which stayed shy. Then it happened.

It must have only been 15 seconds. But beginning with a peep of sun-caught snow from impossibly high above, the cloud unzipped and the mountain gave us a very brief, maddeningly coy, flash. I could have cried. It was unreal, hung with late-season snow and standing far higher above us than I had imagined. And while dramatic and gothically cut, it wasn't horrible; it was gorgeous.

With this memory, we turned our back on the Eiger and carried on towards Alpigen, where the railway snakes its way back down to Grindelwald.

If the Eiger is your illness, this specific Swiss air is guaranteed to help and as your doctor I would advise you to go, and go now. Me, I'm cured for the time being. But I'm thankful I'm not a climber. Otherwise I'd really be in trouble. **■**

# YOUR EIGER TICK-LIST

## THE STOLLENLOCH

Visible to most as a flash of light outside the left window of the train as you approach the Eigerwand station. Some companies offer hang-out-of-the-window via ferrata experiences, but they're expensive.

## EIGERWAND STATION

Gallery station where you can leave the train and peer out of the mountain from 2688m.



## EIGER WALK (2km)

Easy, waymarked preamble between Kleine Scheidegg and Eigerletscher stations, which takes in various information posts, nifty photo stops and a museum.



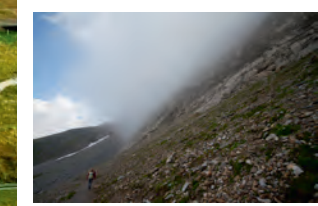
## KLEINE SCHEIDEGG

Jumping-off point for the Eiger Walk, and a fairly unattractive jumble of hotels and rail lines. The terrace of the Hotel Bellevue des Alpes is the place to order a beer and stare.



## EIGER TRAIL (6km)

A ceaselessly enjoyable but technically easy traverse directly beneath the north face of the Eiger. Provided you're prudent and aware of rockfall danger, you can get your hands on the awesome foot of this face.



## JUNGFRAU RAILWAY

It's 100 this year, and it's essential for two reasons: one, it takes you through the mountain; and two, the Eigerwand station has a viewing gallery that looks directly out onto the north face.



## THE EIGER A SHORT HISTORY

**1858** The Eiger is first climbed by Irishman Charles Barrington and guides Peter Bohren and Christian Almer, from the west. Barrington claimed he'd wanted to climb the Matterhorn, but couldn't afford to get there.

**1912** The Jungfrau railway is completed, its infrastructure including the Stollenloch window and the gallery Eigerwand station.

**1935** Karl Mehringer and Max Sedlmeyer die in hellish weather, frozen to a ledge that would become a well-known overnight stop called Death Bivouac.

**1936** Crossing the traverse that now bears his name, Andreas Hinterstoisser neglects to leave a rope attached and – with his team unable to retreat in a storm – perishes. Toni Kurz is last to die, hanging near to the Stollenloch and agonisingly close to rescue.

**1938** The north face is finally climbed by Heckmair, Harrer, Vörg and Kasperek. The route would become the '1938 Route', and Harrer would write his seminal account *The White Spider*, named for a distinctive icefield.

**1961** Don Whillans and Chris Bonington abort the first British ascent of the north wall in order to rescue Brian Nally, after Barry Brewster falls to his death.

**1962** First British ascent of the north face, by Chris Bonington and Ian Clough.

**1966** The American John Harlin falls to his death when his rope breaks, while attempting the first *dirrettissima* (direct) ascent of the face. His partner, Scotsman Dougal Haston, joins a competing team and completes the route, named in Harlin's honour.

**1970** Welshman Eric Jones free-solos the face, while filming a documentary with Leo Dickinson.

**1974** Clint Eastwood films *The Eiger Sanction* on the north face. After rigger and body double Dave Knowles is killed in a rockfall, filming is relocated to a nearby glacier for safety reasons.

**1974** Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler climb the face in a record 10 hours in fast, lightweight style. By evening they are in the bar.

**1988** Brit Alison Hargreaves makes an ascent of the north face while six months pregnant. She died on K2 in 1995, but her son Tom Ballard has since become an accomplished climber on the Eiger with several routes to his credit.

**1992** French rock-climber Catherine Destivelle solos the face in 17 hours.

**2007** Ueli Steck free-solos the north face entirely without artificial aid in 3 hours 54 minutes. A year later the Swiss smashes his own record by climbing it in 2 hours 47 minutes.