

GUTEN TAG AUSTRIA 1988

Friday 22nd July

What can I say about today, except eek! We managed to pack everything in time, which was a feat in itself with me sewing two special badges on Daniel's Scout uniform at the last minute, but then all we had to do was wait for the minibus to collect us at 11:30 and transport us into Plymouth to join our coach. We had decided to take advantage of an offer to join the 2nd Saltash Scouts Essa Troop on a trip to the Austrian Tirol region, as it would be relatively cheap and it would be a good experience for 12-year-old Daniel and 7-year-old Rachel. Also, Austria is somewhere Alan and I had always wanted to visit.

At 11:20 the minibus drew up outside our house, but Len the Scout leader leapt out to tell us that it was full to the brim and would it be possible for us to have a lift or take a taxi? Alan replied that it was rather short notice, so Len said the minibus would come back for us. However, about 15 minutes later, someone connected with the Scouts arrived and gave us a lift into Plymouth. Of course, we were the last to arrive and the only seats left on the coach were downstairs in the 'lounge', which was just a few cramped seats and a place where a table had been. Daniel was OK, as he went upstairs and sat next to his friend Richard.

Our long journey began. There were two other parents and a Scout leader sitting in the so-called lounge area with us, but I felt a little odd because they knew each other and we hardly knew anyone. We stopped at Exeter in quite high spirits, though, with a further stop at around 16:30. We had made good time and were intending to stop at Dover service station, but a car and our coach bumped into each other as the coach was manoeuvring into a space. The Irish driver of the car was very irate, as well as his passengers. Our coach driver wasn't exactly pleased and was going to call the police, but in the end he drove us away with the Irishman jumping around making rude signs at us.

A courier joined the coach at about 20:00 and the next move was to drive onto the ferry, except it had been delayed and hadn't yet arrived. We were allowed to get off the coach to stretch our legs by walking around a nearby shopping complex until the ferry arrived. We finally drove on board at 22:00, by which time Rachel was so tired that we just found some spare seats in which to literally sit out the short Channel crossing. Daniel was with us for most of the time, but later on went off with a Scout friend. Rachel finally went to sleep – we must have left Dover at 23:00, which made it midnight according to French time.

Saturday 23rd July

We arrived in Calais at 01:30, but Rachel was deeply asleep and we had to wake her. It was quite scary getting back on the coach with people hemming us in all the way down the stairs to the hold. We made it just in time – three people were late and had to walk off the ferry to join the coach where it waited for them.

Back in the lounge, we all tried to settle to sleep but it was immensely difficult. Rachel seemed anxious and about 20 minutes later, said she thought she had a tummy upset and not long after, she threw up in the coach's chemical toilet. After that, she lay across Alan and me and fell fast asleep, but she became so heavy that our legs felt dreadful. I tried to doze, but failed. I remember us going through the Belgian border and then the sky became lighter.

The six of us downstairs 'woke' at about 05:45 and talked about the disastrous night, although I didn't talk because I was in too much of a daze. Rachel woke and half an hour later was sick again. I gave her one of the travel sickness pills we'd brought with us just in case, although none of us had particularly suffered from travel sickness before. I was slipping into the depths of despair by then, feeling worried and exhausted. We passed through the German border, but I was aware that all my security had gone down the proverbial pan (or down the chemical toilet when Rachel was sick, to be precise).

At 08:00 we stopped at a German service station, where I was neurotically afraid that Rachel would be sick all over the floor. The place was absolutely crowded, with two coach-loads of people and other travellers. Rachel was fortunately OK and managed to drink a few sips of Coke. After this my spirits began to lift as she gradually became better and better, until she was actually eating and back to normal. The relief was immense and it also felt better when Rachel and I washed our faces in the Ladies (I mean Damen), although I was still too inhibited to clean my teeth like some others in our party were doing.

We drove all morning through Germany, past great expanses of beautiful forested areas that helped to ease the weariness somewhat. I read a bit and played Hangman with Rachel, who'd made friends with everyone down in the lounge. I knew this because she was feeling their ears, which is a favourite pastime of hers (she seems a much friendlier soul than her mother). Apart from my personal social discomfort, the lounge was rapidly becoming like a sauna.

We thankfully stopped for lunch around midday at another German service station. To use the Damen cost 2 pfennigs (pfennige to be pedantic) but nobody had any German change, so we had to rely on people leaving the doors open for us – awkward. It was much nicer outside, though, where we all sat on the grass in the shade and ate pasties, crisps and apples that Len the Scout leader and his wife Sylvia had packed for us. It was swelteringly hot and therefore we were delighted when a beautifully cold Cornetto was bought for everyone.

Back on the coach, Len seemed anxious that we should sit upstairs where it was cooler with more ventilation, so we changed places with some Scouts. It was still hot, but far more bearable and I even dozed off a couple of times, as did Alan and Rachel. It was tedious as the journey dragged on, but Len sent around a drink for everyone twice, which felt like a lifesaver.

The mountains started to appear as we entered the Tirol region. We were still in Germany as we drove through one very pretty village, but then we finally made it into Austria. Well not quite, as our driver became lost twice, but I didn't care much because the mountains looked so lovely. We had to go back to the lounge to pack our hand luggage and then we *really* began to sweat. Poor Rachel's face was dripping, I felt so sorry for her, although she didn't complain.

We then realised the driver had gone the wrong way up a mountain road, because he had to turn the coach around in a narrow space with the back end of the coach hanging over the wall at the side of the road with an enormous sheer drop below. I tried hard not to panic, but it was quite terrifying and I was aware that sweat was running down my back, which has never happened to me before. I felt exhausted and dirty.

Finally at just gone 18:00, we arrived at our hostel in Stanzach, nestling prettily in a valley beneath the mountains. Alan, Rachel and I were assigned to a room that had two bunk beds and a sink. The toilets and showers were on the floor above, which I wasn't at all enamoured with, but one has to make the best of everything. At least we had arrived and were still alive!



Cloudy mountains behind the hostel grounds

It had become cloudy, but after washing and unpacking, we all assembled in the communal dining room at 19:30 for vegetable soup, spaghetti bolognese, a chocolate wafer biscuit and glass upon glass of water, as we felt dehydrated.

Alan, Rachel and I then went for a stroll around the village of Stanzach, while Daniel stayed with his Scout friends. Alan and I were so tired that we had a minor argument, but Rachel made us make up! What cheered and uplifted me most of all was the sight of the mountains, so majestic and beautiful. We took a couple of photos before the light faded and then walked back to the hostel.



Evening walk in Stanzach

There was a short meeting at 21:30 to discuss arrangements and to have a welcome cup of tea, but Rachel and I excused ourselves at 22:00. I've been feeling two main things over the last two days, namely that I don't 'belong' here with this group of Scouts and that I'm never going to do this sort of thing again because it's not a holiday, it's an ordeal! However, I shall enjoy the mountains.

Sunday 24th July

Our room is opposite the kitchen and due to a late coach arrival, dishes were being bashed and clashed around until nearly 23:00. Thankfully, Rachel was asleep and Alan and I managed to sleep quite well after the kitchen cacophony. I'm glad to say there were no night-time trips up the stairs to the toilet, either!

Apart from puffy eyes, I felt OK for breakfast at 08:15, consisting of cornflakes, bread and jam, a cup of tea and a bar of chocolate (saved for later). Afterwards, the three of us went for a short walk along some paths by the hostel. It was like walking along a forest path in England, except for the mountains and the flies – we had to make a quick dash back to our room for the insect repellent.

Later, we sat in the sun with other adults in the group. Sylvia was unfortunately stung on her back by a wasp, which was quite unpleasant for her. I was glad we'd already made ourselves repellent to insects, but my eyes seemed ultra-sensitive and were giving me trouble, so I had to sit with my back to the sun.

After a cup of coffee, there was a meeting to hear and discuss the arrangements for the week. We decided to join the Scouts on a mountain walk in the afternoon, as we were assured Rachel would be able to manage it fairly well. The following day was to be a chairlift excursion and a German castle another day. It sounded promising and my spirits surged upwards for a while.

Lunchtime was at 12:30, when Alan and I were unfortunately the last to arrive and had to walk around looking for spaces at tables, which I absolutely hated. Rachel had earlier gone off with Karen and Maddy (aged 14 and 13) and was happily sitting with them. Alan and I were forced to split up, whereupon in my desperation I managed to squeeze in beside Daniel. I felt I'd never been so pleased to see him in my life before! The food was strange, like a floppy omelette smelling of kippers. I couldn't face it and just had a slice of bread and jam, followed by a peach. Daniel had two helpings of the floppy kipper omelette.

Needless to say, my spirits had plunged during lunchtime, but I was looking forward to a close encounter with a mountain. We assembled outside and set off in two separate groups. Our group was led by Dot, a feisty athletic lady probably in her forties. Rachel had a funny turn because she wanted to go with Karen and Maddy in the other group, but Alan and I wanted her with us to make sure she didn't fall off the mountain. She finally stopped sniffing and pouting after we'd walked through the village and on to the mountain path.

It was lovely at first, walking along through the trees and gazing at those superb mountains, lots of them with their tops hidden in cloud. In fact, there were clouds all around us and we soon began to hear several claps of thunder reverberating up aloft. I only saw one flash of lightning, though, with an extra loud thunderclap a few seconds afterwards that made Rachel jump. There was some rain, but it was fresh and cooling.

As we progressed, we caught up with the earlier group and the climbing began in earnest. Dot, who must have been at least ten years older than me, was climbing nimbly up in front while I began to struggle mightily. The last five minutes nearly killed me, but what with Dot in front and a group of energetic Venture Scouts behind me, I felt trapped! By sheer willpower, I managed to reach the top without dying, but my face felt puce and my heart was thumping.



Rachel looks unfazed and I look hot

We'd made it safely to the top of the mountain called Baichelstein and there was a beautiful view of a neighbouring mountain, so after I'd stopped gasping, panting and gulping water, I took out my camera.



Daniel looks cool

We rested for 15 minutes and then started to descend. It was a bit slippery on the many exposed tree roots, but my trainers thankfully gripped quite well. After the worst bit, Rachel was walking along jauntily by herself, really enjoying the experience. The older Scouts were singing, they seem to be a nice group of lads.

My legs were feeling a bit trembly by the time we reached the bottom, but it was much easier walking along the flat valley road. The aim was to walk to the swimming pool to cool down in the water, but when we arrived there, it was closed. I wasn't desperately disappointed, but most people in the group seem very keen on swimming, so I suspect we shall return.



Walking along the valley roads

We walked back to the hostel along roads, through paths and fields and up one steep slope. It started to rain and as we walked through the village of Stanzach, it poured. We thus returned, tired and dripping, at around 17:15. I hadn't realised this holiday was going to be so strenuous!

The thunder was still rumbling in the distance as we changed into drier clothes and amused ourselves until dinner at 18:30. This time, we made sure we were early and sat together for some green soup (constituents unknown), followed by a sort of mashed potato mixed with something green (possibly kale) and a jumbo-sized sausage, rounded off by a dessert that looked like blancmange but tasted like mousse. The realisation that no tea or coffee is on offer after the evening meal occurred to me with a certain amount of disappointment.

After dinner, we stayed in our room and read our books, since it was still pouring with rain. Rachel was tired and went to bed at 20:45, after we all drank hot chocolate (we'd located a kettle complete with some instant hot drinks). It was so noisy, though, that I was surprised she managed to sleep at all. Our room is close to a sort of common room, where boys were shouting and girls were shrieking – it began to drive me around the bend. Alan and I prepared for bed, but there was no way I could settle to sleep until people had stopped playing table tennis. I began to wonder when we were going to leave this hell hole...

Monday 25th July

We slept quite well, although Alan had set his alarm for 06:30 instead of 07:30 (but fortunately it didn't wake Rachel). Breakfast was the same as yesterday, without chocolate. Each table was then given food to make up a packed lunch for everyone. Alan kindly took over that task, making sandwiches with meat or cheese spread, plus an orange. Len came around distributing apples and crisps.

At 09:30, Alan and I took the opportunity to nip out to the bank in the village of Stanzach to change some travellers' cheques. The sun had come out and was shining very warmly and pleasantly. Alan somehow went into the post office by mistake, but the man there told him quite politely that the bank was next door.

At 10:15 we all set off in the coach, destination the Jochelspitze mountain via a chairlift. Some of the adults were nervous, although I was looking upon it as a new mountainous encounter. Firstly, we drove through some insanely narrow roads, scraping through houses on each side – the pretty houses so typical of Austria, with flowers and shutters at the windows. The coach drivers (we have two) must be competent to negotiate difficult manoeuvres with a long coach.

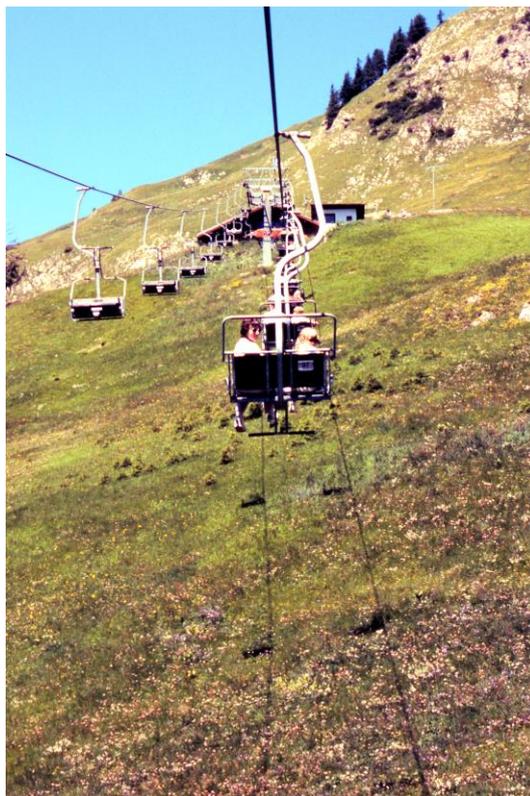
We all had to trust in their competence on approaching the chairlift station, as the S-bends up the mountain road began in earnest, with terrifying sheer drops either side. As we arrived at the chairlift station, the horror began to dawn on me that we would have to go in pairs and it was logical for me to take Rachel, as Alan was lumbered with an enormous rucksack and a camera bag. The horror deepened as I realised the 'chairs' didn't actually stop, we just had to jump onto them as they gaily swung along on a kind of conveyor belt system.



Daniel prepares to be chairlifted

I tried not to panic as our turn approached, hoping Rachel could manage it – and she did, beautifully. There was an attendant standing alongside who may have helped her. To be honest, I didn't see much because I was too busy jumping on myself and then pulling the safety bar down into place, feeling inordinately proud that I managed it all by myself. Then we were off! I found I was enjoying it, swinging along up the mountainside with breathtaking views all around.

It was a clear, sunny day and the air was fresh, which added a real feel-good factor to the experience. I heard a couple of delicate screams now and then as one of our female adults tried to deal with her fear of heights. Rachel was a bit nervous when we stopped a few times and clunked and clicked somewhat alarmingly, but I managed to talk and joke her through it. We soon reached the top station and jumped off while the chairlift was still moving, although an attendant was once again at Rachel's side to help her.



Rachel and I swing along

It was absolutely beautiful where we stopped, in a flowering alpine meadow with superb views, just like *The Sound of Music*. Nobody burst into song about the hills being alive or otherwise, though, we just sat on the grass like a good Scout group and ate our packed lunch, very glad of the apple and crisps from Len.

We saw Daniel, who said he'd been a bit nervous on the chairlift because he's not exactly keen on heights, but he seemed fine wandering around taking some photos and eating his lunch with two friends, Richard and Anthony. There was a sort of café and shop at the top and we were able to buy the first postcards of the holiday. There were no stamps to go with them, but maybe tomorrow...



Richard, Daniel and Anthony



Rachel's there somewhere!

The group split up then, with the Venture Scouts going on up to the top of the mountain and the other Scouts going a little way further up. It appeared that we had a choice whether to come down by the chairlift, or walk down.

Daniel walked a bit further up with the Scouts and then chose to walk down, while Alan, Rachel and I opted to walk down slowly by ourselves in solitary freedom. It was hot, picturesque and surprisingly tiring, taking us one and three-quarter hours altogether to reach the valley. We loved looking at the flowers and butterflies, though, stopping now and again to drink water.

We had to wait a while for everyone to meet up. Those who had been to the top said it was freezing cold there with snow in places, which was hard to imagine as we sweltered at the bottom, waiting in the shade to avoid the glare of the sun.

Once back in the coach, we continued along the road for a short while until we came to a swimming pool (we'd been advised previously to bring swimsuits). I was so overwhelmingly hot that I was actually very glad to have a swim. Rachel loved it and Daniel proudly showed me that he could swim a few strokes of crawl. It was great to see him swimming without armbands.

We returned to the hostel just in time for dinner, which was the same sort of soup as last night, followed by rice and some stewed meaty stuff. I couldn't face the meaty stuff, so made do with the rice, even though I was very hungry. Dessert was pineapple and peach chunks in juice.

Alan, Rachel and I went out for another evening walk in Stanzach, enjoying the scenery and fresh air and taking more photos. After we got back and had some supper and a shower, Rachel went to bed at 21:00. It was insanely noisy again.

Some of the adults went out to celebrate the birthday of one of the Scout leaders this evening and Alan was asked to help look out for the boys. He had a drink with Len afterwards, as Len too had stayed behind. Len and Sylvia are always very friendly, as are some of the others, but there's an 'in group' to which Alan and I don't belong and it makes us feel a little odd at times.

Tuesday 26th July

We had to get up for an early breakfast this morning, although I could hardly wake up in time for 07:30. Everyone was ready to board the coach at 08:45 and we set off for Hohenschwangau in Germany, to visit a famous castle there. We only had one driver, as the other one had somehow hit himself in the chest coming down the water chute at the swimming pool the day before and had sensibly gone to a local hospital for a check-up.

Our single driver seemed to be having a certain amount of difficulty on his own, as he took ages going up and down roads, turning around in narrow spaces and parking, but on reflection, it was better to be slower and safer. We therefore arrived safely at Hohenschwangau, disembarked and climbed up a hill to lots of other steps that took us to the castle entrance.

Karen (the sister of Daniel's friend Richard) was feeling very sick, which her mother thought was probably from the heat, a sore throat, yesterday's suntan and climbing up all those steps. She had to rush outside, but luckily returned by the time we had all queued and waited for an English guide.



Rachel at Hohenschwangau

It was good to have a tour, but we were ushered along too quickly for my liking, which made it impossible to look at everything the guide pointed out. She kept saying, "Follow me, please, into the so-and-so room." She was very pleasant and polite, but almost certainly on a time schedule, as such a significant castle was understandably a very popular destination. The room that seemed to stick in my memory most of all was the music room, where Richard Wagner used to play the piano and where he also composed some music.

After the speedy tour, we were informed we could go our separate ways from 11:30 until 14:30. We asked Daniel if he would like to walk around with us, but he preferred to go with his Scout friends – I could understand his desire for independence. It was probably better in the long run, because Alan had an accident and almost frightened the life out of me.

We'd gone up some steps into a small sort of turret to look at another castle in the distance and both happily took a photo of the picturesque view. However, on the way down Alan slipped on the stone steps that had been worn very smooth over time and landed with an absolute thump on his bottom.

He seemed very dazed and I was afraid he'd hurt his back. Other people had seen/heard him go down with a clunk and came along to check if he was OK. He obviously wasn't, as he proceeded to pass out – he was moaning and deathly white, it was awful. It was his rucksack that had made the clunking sound and the bottle of water we'd brought along for the day had smashed and was leaking all over the steps, as if he'd had another sort of accident!

Several people were asking if he was all right in German as he began to come around. One young blonde girl in a trendy black skirt took his pulse while looking at another man's watch. I presumed she was a nurse, because she seemed to know what she was doing. I heard her say, "zu schnell" – too fast. She said other things to me and asked me if I understood. All my O' Level German had evaporated in panic and I answered pathetically, "Nein."

Fortunately, another girl there understood some English and she did her best to translate. The 'nurse' was saying he needed to stay in the shade and it would help to have cold water sponged on his wrists, face and the back of his neck. There was a fountain close by and someone ran to it with a hankie, doused it in cold water and put it on the back of Alan's neck. The 'nurse' said it would help if he had something sugary. Someone else produced a sweet and gave it to Alan, although he said he didn't want it.

Sometime during all this, when he'd come around but was still groggy, he'd said, "I don't know where I am." I was so afraid he'd banged his head, but can remember replying to him as clearly and calmly as I could, "You're at the castle and you've fallen down the steps. Have you hurt anything?" He said his elbow was hurting. Poor Rachel was just standing there watching all the time this was going on, I felt concerned about her, too.

Alan gradually became a little better and the people began to filter away, saying "Bye bye" and smiling kindly. After a few minutes, Alan got up and we walked very slowly to a shaded spot under a tree by a fountain, where we didn't look quite as conspicuous. Alan and Rachel shared Rachel's small flask of Coke and ate some sandwiches, but I couldn't eat anything because I was still in shock. I'd been imagining an ambulance and Alan in a German hospital with a broken arm and other injuries. He does worry me so!

We stayed by the fountain for 20 minutes or so while Alan recuperated. I'll never forget the sight of that fountain (especially since we took photos of it). I was glad when he said he was happy to leave the castle and walk slowly down from there to a road where we'd previously noticed there were some souvenir shops.



The unforgettable fountain...

As we walked along, Alan said he felt much better as long as he didn't move his elbow. Fortunately, he could move his fingers and thus knew he hadn't broken it. We bought a few things and realised how expensive Germany is. To be honest, it didn't help that we were paying in Austrian schillings, but I refused to let money bother me after our recent close scrape with disaster.

It was incredibly hot and we had to buy a drink in order to survive – I finally felt well enough to eat my sandwiches at about 13:30. There were coach loads of people everywhere, including French, Italian, Japanese and American. Among this mêlée, we wandered back to the coach at around 14:00 and saw Daniel, who was pleased with his purchases, especially a key ring. I thought how well he had done to walk around a foreign town with two other boys and buy himself something with foreign money and be completely confident about it.

The coach drove us away at 14:30 and we returned to Austria. I can't deny I felt pleased about that, although the German people at the castle had been nothing but kind and helpful to us, for which I was extremely thankful. We stopped at another swimming pool in a market town called Reutte by the Lech river, but Alan, Rachel and I wandered around the shops there rather than endanger ourselves again at a swimming pool.

It was absolutely sweltering, so we went into the nearest shop that sold ice cream. A delightfully cold interlude followed and then we carried on walking slowly until we came across a most interesting shop that was displaying a fascinating array of rocks and minerals. There was a lovely piece of rock from the Tirol that caught our eye and after the day we'd had, we went ahead and bought it. Alan's hip had begun to hurt, as well as his elbow, but he said that buying the piece of Tirol rock was compensation.

We met the others at 16:30, but there was a slight contretemps because Daniel and another boy had somehow got their clothes locked in a locker and they didn't have a key. One of the Scout leaders thankfully sorted it out and we drove back to the hostel, which I only found out then seems to be called Baichelstein, like the mountain we walked up on our first afternoon.

Dinner at 18:30 was peculiar, as it was a sort of pasta soup with suspicious bits floating around in it. I couldn't bring myself to have any, but brave Rachel did. After that, there was potato, green beans with onion and some dodgy looking meat that looked like chicken, but which turned out to be veal (I was glad I hadn't taken any of the meat). Dessert was rice pudding, apparently left over from yesterday, but I had some because I was hungry.

At 19:00, we found out we were supposed to be on the coach at 19:15 to go to a 'Tirol Evening', which was rather a surprise. We'd already been booked to go (Rachel as well) so we didn't have much choice. It would have been so helpful and thoughtful if we'd been informed about this beforehand. It seems that organisation and communication are lacking at times.

The coach took us to a place that had a large room with three rows of long tables, a bar and a stage. At least Daniel got to sit by us, so that was good. Everyone bought drinks and at about 20:15, the entertainment began. There were three musicians, as well as four male and four female singers and dancers, all dressed in Tirolean costume. The dancing involved lots of knee and thigh slapping and everyone was clapping along, linking arms and swaying together to the music. Rachel was enjoying herself immensely. At one stage she was even clapping hands with one of the Scout leaders and loving every minute of it.

Daniel was also having great fun with his friends, especially when he was allowed to have a shandy to drink. Alan was unfortunately in pain from his hip (and bottom) but he said he was enjoying the atmosphere. A couple of dances involved members of the audience and five people from our group were picked upon, but I'm happy to say I wasn't one of them.

We finally left at 22:30 and drove back to the hostel. Rachel was asleep as soon as her head touched the pillow and Alan fell asleep quickly too, after his ordeal of a day. Just as I was beginning to drift off, though, the Guides from the floor above us came back and they were yelling and shouting, banging doors and thumping around for hours, literally.

One of our leaders went to deal with them at 02:00 and found out they'd been left with 16-year-olds in charge of them. I must say, I find them an ignorant lot – I feel very 'anti' towards them and it takes a lot to annoy me like that. They're from Scotland and we have to share the showers and toilets with them. I think very longingly of our peaceful little home in Saltash sometimes.

Wednesday 27th July

Needless to say, we didn't make it to breakfast this morning. Rachel and Alan were still sleeping peacefully at 08:00, but managed to rouse themselves when I got up at 08:15. We'd all needed to sleep on and just had two biscuits and a cup of tea in our room later. Lots of people were tired today.

It was cloudy, but still very warm. We had a free morning and Daniel said he would like to walk around Stanzach with us, which is precisely what we did. We bought a few presents and stamps for postcards, so it was a successful visit. At 10:45, we walked back to the hostel for a cup of coffee, making the most of the restful morning. Alan was still having trouble with his hip, which stiffens up if he sits still for too long and starts to hurt. However, his elbow seems to be OK.

Lunch wasn't bad at all – salami, sauté potatoes, tomato and lettuce with bread, butter and jam, plus an apple and a cup of tea. Afterwards, the Scouts were due to have their Sports Afternoon, although it unfortunately started to rain. At one point the rain stopped and the troop tramped outside – but then it started to pour and so the troop tramped back inside again.

Meanwhile, Alan, Rachel and I nipped out to the village to post our postcards and had to shelter in the porch of a very ornate Roman Catholic church for at least 15 minutes while the rain was coming down hard. We then nipped into a shop to buy some chocolate, part of which was consumed outside the shop while waiting for the rain to stop. It somehow felt quite pleasant doing that.



Rachel outside the church (in between the rain)

Back at the hostel, we had a cup of tea and a biscuit and then whiled away the afternoon reading and playing cards, while listening to the rain pouring down outside. It was actually quite cosy and relaxing, I didn't mind it at all.

Dinner was more or less OK, except for the old problem of trying to find a table with three spaces. Alan was annoyed because nobody seemed interested in helping us out. The seating arrangements are first come, first served. That's fair enough, but there's a table where the 'in crowd' sit and we're obviously among the lower echelons. We'd previously been managing to sit with two friendly Scout leaders called Phil and John, plus Phil's son Denver, but this evening we were more or less obliged to squeeze in at the 'in crowd' table, where we felt very much excluded. It was an uncomfortable mealtime.

However, we survived and since it was still pouring with rain, we spent the evening playing whist in our room. After a spot of supper, we read our books and then went to bed. It was more or less quiet after 22:00, praise be!

Thursday 28th July

A lovely sunny morning greeted us and we were first in the dining room for breakfast, so had our choice of tables, thank you very much. There were some rather nice crispy rolls on offer this morning, plus the usual cornflakes.

Daniel came up to me quietly and told me he was tired, as he hadn't managed to sleep until about 01:00 because of the noise in his dorm. He was also rather upset because someone had drunk half a bottle of the Coke he'd bought for himself. He said he'd like to come along with us this morning. It felt very much as if the fledgling wanted to return to the nest for a while, for some refuge from the rough, outside world. I told him we'd buy him another bottle of Coke and keep it in our room for when he wanted it.

We set off in the coach at 09:45 and drove again to the market town of Reutte, for some shopping this time instead of swimming. Thirteen from the group had left the hostel earlier to go on a two-day hike up a mountain, which sounds absolutely lovely, but rather than me! In the meantime, Daniel decided he would prefer to walk around Reutte with his friend after all, so I suspect his tiredness had been getting to him at breakfast time and he'd perked up as the morning went on. Actually, we didn't find much to buy at Reutte and decided to complete our souvenir shopping later on at Stanzach.

At about midday we returned to the hostel for lunch. I enjoyed the coach ride, it felt great looking out at the fantastic scenery and listening to the music being played on the coach's loudspeaker system. I mentioned that I liked the music and Alan asked the coach driver who it was – Erasure! Lunch was OK, consisting of bread, cheese, cold meat, hard-boiled egg, apple or orange and tea.

Everyone clambered into the coach again at 14:00 and this time we were driven to the swimming pool at Bach. Once again, it was lovely driving along the valley in the sunshine and we were quite happy to cool down in the swimming pool.



Anyone for a swim?

Daniel did well and swam the width of the learner's pool, but Rachel had a nasty experience in the same supposedly safe pool. She was having fun swimming along with her armbands until three German/Austrian boys suddenly jumped in and one hit her on her back with his foot. She was winded and couldn't breathe properly for a while, which was quite worrying. Her back was also hurting. Alan gave the boys his famous frown and wagged his finger at them, but they ignored him and carried on splashing and jumping around, annoying everyone.

When Alan, Rachel and I got out of the pool, Daniel joined us and we decided to leave the others to it while we walked into the town of Bach, as we didn't have to be back at the coach until 17:00. One of Daniel's friends, Anthony, tagged along with us and we all enjoyed a pleasant walk along the valley road. Rachel was feeling much better, although her back was still hurting her now and again.



A typically pretty house at Bach

Anthony seemed a bright spark and we all got along well, stopping now and again to look in some shops. One of them sold beautiful wood carvings, as it appears that wood carving is one of the speciality crafts of the valley here. The prices were unfortunately astronomical, so we bought a vase instead.

We carried along the road, taking a few photos, until we at last found a shop where we could indulge in an ice cream, before turning around and walking back to the coach on a still hot and sunny day. I also enjoyed the coach ride back to the hostel, it felt a relief to be so relaxed for once – I was amused to see an incongruous looking Spar shop along the way.

Dinner was better than the previous evening, as we sat with a table of boys, who are basically so much more uncomplicated than the 'in crowd' adults. Soup of the day was chicken and mushroom, followed by potatoes, celery sauce and some sort of meat in breadcrumbs, rounded off by biscuits.

Afterwards, we asked Daniel if he wanted to join us for an evening stroll and he did. We had a good time walking along the road out of Stanzach, taking photos of the mountains and the pretty houses in the valley beneath.

As we wandered back through the centre, we noticed a band starting to assemble, all of them dressed in national costume, so we naturally stayed to have a look and a listen. Unfortunately, Daniel went into one of his spectacular moaning sessions about it being boring and Rachel started being fidgety, so we just listened to two tunes. They sounded like an English band, the difference being that there were two girls selling small barrels of Austrian schnapps. However, we didn't avail ourselves, but returned to the hostel for some jolly fine British hot chocolate!



Rachel and Daniel pose in Stanzach

Friday 29th July

It was another lovely sunny morning. Daniel sat with us at breakfast for the first time, which felt good – I realised I'd been missing him. We were all given a bar of chocolate again and saved it for later like the time before. Somehow I can't bring myself to eat chocolate at breakfast, it simply feels wrong.

At 09:30, we all congregated to set off on what was described as: "a nice gentle walk along the river for one and a half hours." Fair enough, it did start off gently and was very pleasant indeed, gazing up at the awe-inspiring mountains every now and then, with the river rushing by below us.



One of the gentle places

However, we eventually came to a tricky place where there had obviously been an avalanche in the past and rather than turn back, Len decided we could climb across it, since the path beyond was clear. I found it slightly nerve-racking, but we managed it, even though one of the adults in our party hates heights and I noticed that she was actually shaking a little.

Unfortunately, the path beyond was only clear for a little way, but Len remained stoically undeterred and we found ourselves scrambling down another very rocky place. It was hot and the insects were biting well. Amazingly, I don't seem to have been bitten yet, although Alan, Daniel and Rachel have. Rachel said her back was still hurting a little today and Alan's hip hurts when he either stands up or sits down, but they're both basically OK and more or less fully functional.

We stopped for a drink of water and carried on, but up ahead, one of the older Scouts slipped and fell. It could so easily have been worse (it could so easily have been me!) but it turned out that he had only grazed, cut and scratched himself. Guess whose First Aid kit was at hand and who therefore came to the rescue? None other than Daniel, whereupon I suddenly came over unashamedly maternal and felt very proud of him.

Len gave in at that point and decided to turn back, whereupon we returned by a slightly different route. We still had to climb up the craggy side of a steep slope from the river to the path above, though, helped by several able-bodied males hauling us up. It wasn't exactly a gentle walk, but it was interesting! We did join the path after that, when it became significantly easier and pleasant once again, until we eventually walked back into Stanzach.

Daniel decided to do a spot of shopping there before lunchtime, buying himself a t-shirt and presents for other people. Yesterday he'd presented Rachel with a cowbell moneybox. She was delighted and quite overcome, because she kept saying, "How can I thank him?" More maternal moments...

Lunch at 12:30 was egg salad, sausages, bread and jam, cheese spread, melon and tea. After this repast, Alan, Rachel and I decided not to go swimming with the others (who really do seem to be mad keen on the watery pursuit). Instead, we walked into Stanzach again and cashed more travellers' cheques, before trying to finish buying souvenir presents. A shopkeeper in one shop was very friendly to Rachel and asked her what she was called – although I only realised this after we stood there in confusion and he asked us if we were French, then English. After Alan had finished paying, the shopkeeper gave Rachel a lolly!



Stanzach

We sat on a bench in the sun for about 15 minutes, watching the world go by. A few of the grotty Guides sauntered along, eating crisps and carrying cans of Coke. One of the Guide leaders let Alan have some of her powdered milk yesterday evening, though, so I suppose I shouldn't condemn out of hand.

The sky gradually turned grey and overcast until it eventually started to rain, so we walked quickly back to the hostel without getting too wet. It was only 15:00 and the place was more or less deserted, so we took the opportunity to have a shower in peace for once, followed by a mid-afternoon cup of tea. Simple pleasures! Thunder started rolling around the mountains and there were quite a few flashes of lightning. It became very dark and the rain poured down, so we read our books and then started to pack.

The others returned. Daniel told us they hadn't gone swimming after all because of the bad weather, but had visited the woodcarver's shop that we'd found the day before. Dinner was a little stressful, as Rachel unfortunately poured some hot soup over her hand and was crying. I had to wipe it off with a hankie and stick her hand in my glass of water. It seemed to do the trick and she ate the chicken, salad and boiled potatoes quite happily. Dessert was something that looked like custard, but wasn't...

Afterwards, Alan and I had to get ready to go out with the other adults for a meal that had been arranged earlier in the week. We hadn't eaten much at dinner and generally speaking have been quite hungry during our time in Austria, because of the slightly strange food. I'm being diplomatic, by the way. I didn't want to go out and would have been much happier staying behind with Rachel, as apart from anything else, nobody seems to tell us anything. Until Alan went to find someone to ask, we had no idea where we were going, or what time we were due to leave. We also had Rachel to consider, so Alan arranged for Daniel and two others to Rachel-sit in our room. The Venture Scouts were staying behind to look after everyone else.

Alan and I therefore met with the other adults at 20:00 and walked in drizzling rain for a short distance to a bar/restaurant in Stanzach. There were 15 of us altogether, with 10 at one big table and 5 at a smaller table. We were sitting at the smaller table, of course. It was a homely place and we were served by a friendly Austrian girl who had been to England and spoke English. I must confess I felt very awkward throughout the evening and the fact remained that I was only there to please other people, which seemed a pity on our holiday.

However, Alan and I attempted to make the best of the evening and ordered an omelette (cheese for me and ham for Alan) with salad, that turned out to be enormous. Alan had beer to drink and I had wine. The parents of Daniel's friend Richard were sitting at the small table with us, plus another man and they were very friendly, which helped. I was aware that I didn't speak much, except to reply yes or no. I really do despair of myself sometimes.

However, the choice of ice cream for dessert was wonderful – I chose one called Caramello, which was huge and delicious. Richard's mother took a photo of me eating it, which I found rather embarrassing, but also a little pleasing because it meant she didn't think too badly of me!

We returned to the hostel at midnight and found Rachel and Daniel fast asleep. I thought what a dear boy Daniel was to babysit for us like that with no fuss at all. Thus the evening that I hadn't been looking forward to in the slightest passed into oblivion. Time is kind sometimes.

Saturday 30th July

I was rudely awoken at 06:00 by the terrible Guides, who were apparently having an early breakfast so they could make a quick getaway. Hmm. It was just about the last straw, but I've tried very hard not to let them ruin the holiday, so I decided to rise above it and simply make use of the time by reading my book. After all, there's no way they could spoil the sheer beauty of the mountains and the general loveliness of Austria.

After our last breakfast here, we finished packing and wandered around outside for a while, taking photos. The Scouts then gathered together in a circle for their small farewell service, although I'm not quite sure what to call it.

Len and two others led the rest in prayers, someone read something (so explicit) and then Len gave a talk about what had been achieved on the trip, which was mainly togetherness. There was also praise for those who had got on well in the swimming pool and those who had climbed the mountain in the two-day hike.

It was quite moving seeing them all, Daniel amongst them, standing there in a circle in the fresh morning air with the backdrop of the mountains, although it was sullied somewhat by the sound of someone vomiting in the toilet block behind us. I suspect the older Scouts had been drinking last night, but everyone made a pretence of ignoring it and a rather long photo session of the group then took place, as lots of people had cameras.

Afterwards, everyone was released into freedom until lunchtime, so the four of us went for a final little stroll around Stanzach, to say farewell, to use up the last of our Austrian coins and also to use up our films. It was hazily cloudy but still very warm, so we sat on a bench to relax for a while before going back to the hostel. I have a bite on my knee, of all places, I shouldn't have boasted.



Auf Wiedersehen Stanzach

Our suitcases were packed in the coach and we vacated our rooms before having an early lunch of soup, pork chops, potatoes and beans, followed by tinned peaches. Then we were off! Alan had bagged us a seat upstairs this time, close to the stairs at the back. Alan and I sat together and Rachel sat behind us, with a vacant seat beside her. Daniel was further down the coach with Anthony.

Fortunately, it wasn't too hot and instead of sweltering and sweating bucket-loads like we had on entering Austria, it was actually very pleasant watching the mountains go by. Soon we were in Germany, but became caught up in a traffic jam that seemed to go on for ages and put us between one and a half to two hours behind. We therefore only had a couple of quick stops.

I read my book quite a lot and gazed at the scenery as we travelled along. There seems a great deal of forested area in Germany and lots of extensive planting of vines and other crops, including sunflowers. We also passed scores of 'Ausfahrt' signs. I enjoyed reading all the German signs and place names and in fact, I've enjoyed the whole experience of reading and hearing German for the first time since O-Level days 20 years ago.

I loved the experience of watching the sun set over Germany, a great red ball descending the sky. However, I couldn't help thinking of all the days, months and years the sun had set over Germany when at war with us along with so many other countries and all the ensuing personal tragedy of that terrible time.

Rachel was very well-behaved, she played Patience, read and talked to the Scouts behind her. At 21:00, she simply settled herself down to sleep – she was marvellous! We had dosed her with travel sickness pills, so I felt quite relaxed about her. In fact, I felt really proud of the way she and Daniel had behaved all the time in Austria, which was a lovely warm feeling.

At about 23:00, we crossed the Belgian border. I tried to sleep but only managed to doze on and off. At midnight we stopped for diesel and to use the toilet. Rachel had woken when the coach stopped, so I took her with me. There was a slight delay when we needed 5 Belgian francs, as we thought nobody had any Belgian money. However, one resourceful soul had a bag of foreign coins and there was one Belgian 5-franc piece among them. It took rather a long time for everyone to take turns using the same toilet, but what could we do? There are worse things than inconvenience at the conveniences!

Sunday 31st July

Rachel went back to sleep fairly easily. It had been cold in the coach once we'd entered Belgium and the drivers had put on the heater, whereupon it became much too hot around my feet. It became so unbearable that I had to put my legs across Alan's knees, so it couldn't have been very comfortable for him, either. He was suffering with a very sore throat and had taken paracetamol. During the night, my throat went all sandpapery too and I developed the cough that half the Scout troop now has (including Len, who seems quite unwell with it).

The moon was full as Alan and I dozed fitfully, until we reached the French border at 04:20. At one time, I heard Richard's mother come and talk to Rachel, who must have woken up. She asked Rachel if she was all right and covered up her legs for her, which I thought was very kind. Rachel then went back to sleep.

I saw the sign for Dunkerque and remembered our visit there in 1974. It occurred to me that the parts of Austria and Germany we'd seen are similarly clean, tidy, pleasant and pretty, whereas Belgium and France seem more like Britain. I realised how densely populated England is and not too pretty in places.

After these rambling early morning thoughts, we finally arrived at Calais at around 05:30 and joined the queue for the ferry. It was very tedious just waiting in the cold light of dawn, feeling dirty, cramped and exhausted. However, time passed and we boarded the ferry at 06:15. Rachel seemed apprehensive and said she doesn't like ferries. She also said if we gave her anything to eat, she'd be sick, so we gave her another travel sickness pill and went out on deck.

It was decidedly cold, so we quickly returned inside and visited the shop. It was a British Sealink ferry this time, unlike the French one on the outgoing journey (which had been called Côte D'Azur). Rachel seemed comforted that this ferry was English – and maybe also because we were on our way home.

Daniel came and joined us for the jostle from the passenger accommodation down to the car deck. It wasn't too bad, actually, because the British seem more safety-conscious and wouldn't let anyone down until the ferry had docked. They also mentioned the safety precautions: "in the unlikely event of an emergency," etc. I didn't hear any such thing on the French ferry, unless it had been in French and I'd been too dopey to understand.

We were among the first people back on the coach this time and I sat gazing at the off-white cliffs of Dover thankfully – but not for long, as we had to stop at Customs for the first time throughout the entire journey. Everyone tumbled out of the coach yet again, with all our hand luggage this time. All our suitcases were unloaded into the Customs bay, where we collected them on trolleys and trundled through the 'Nothing To Declare' section. We found we were missing Daniel's sleeping bag, so hoped it had been left on the coach. Alan said he didn't care if it had been lost, he was too tired to do anything about it.

We hadn't bought any alcohol, cigarettes or perfume, only several souvenirs. Luckily we weren't stopped, as I really didn't fancy having my hand luggage searched with its strange bits and pieces – half a packet of scrunched-up wafer biscuits, fir cones, hankies and other random items. Nobody in our group was searched, possibly because several coach loads had come in and they may have thought Scouts were above reproach - so it was no problem, just a nuisance.

We climbed aboard and found Daniel's sleeping bag was indeed on the coach, but I felt really low, tired and empty by the time we stopped for breakfast at a service station at 09:00. I felt as if my energy levels were close to zero and realised I should have eaten breakfast on the ferry. I revived miraculously after two hot cups of tea and two pieces of toast, though – first tea for 24 hours and first toast for ten days, wonderful!

We stopped for 20 minutes at midday, just enough time to buy ourselves some snacks. Back in the coach we whiled away the time by eating bits and pieces of spare food. I finished my book and Rachel fell asleep. Lots of people were coughing, including me, while Alan was becoming increasingly annoyed with the boy in front who kept kicking him and standing on his feet.

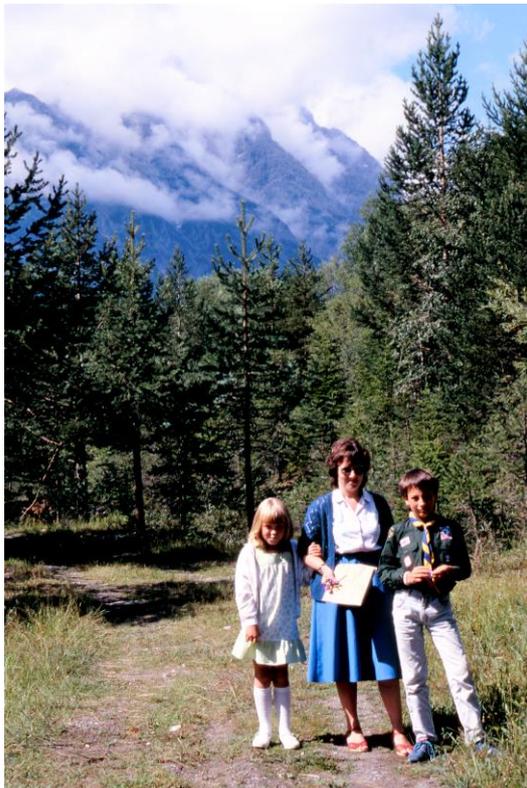
Exeter service station finally appeared, so the end was in sight. The coach stopped there purely for people to phone home. Alan decided to join the merry throng and ring my mother, while I stayed in the coach with Rachel, who was still asleep. However, she woke up and wanted to go to the toilet just as we started moving again, so she was forced to use the coach's toilet, which was only available as a last resort. Oh, for our private bathroom and toilet at home!

At last, the Tamar Bridge came into view and everyone cheered. It felt quite strange driving up Fore Street in the coach that had driven us around Austria, but such a relief. The relief deepened as we stopped outside the library and everyone piled out for the last time. There were bags and cases scattered over the pavement everywhere.

Alan went to collect our car, while the three of us stood and waited as goodbyes (and hellos to families) took place all around us. Alan returned and we tried to slip away as unobtrusively as possible. Phil, the Scout leader we had sat with sometimes at mealtimes shook Alan's hand, but I hadn't gelled with the group at all and didn't actually say goodbye to anybody. All I wanted was to go home, drink tea, wash, unpack, look at souvenirs...

It had been an extraordinary trip and I'm so glad we made it to the Austrian Tirol to see the wonderful, inspiring mountains and visit some exceptionally pretty places. I hated the journey there and also the living conditions, so would love to visit Austria again in more refined and comfortable circumstances. I returned home with very mixed feelings, but without a shred of doubt that the mountains had made it all worthwhile.

NB: The pictures included are a mixture of my old scanned photos and Alan's scanned slides, all of which are of inferior quality compared to today's standards.





I so loved the mountains!