

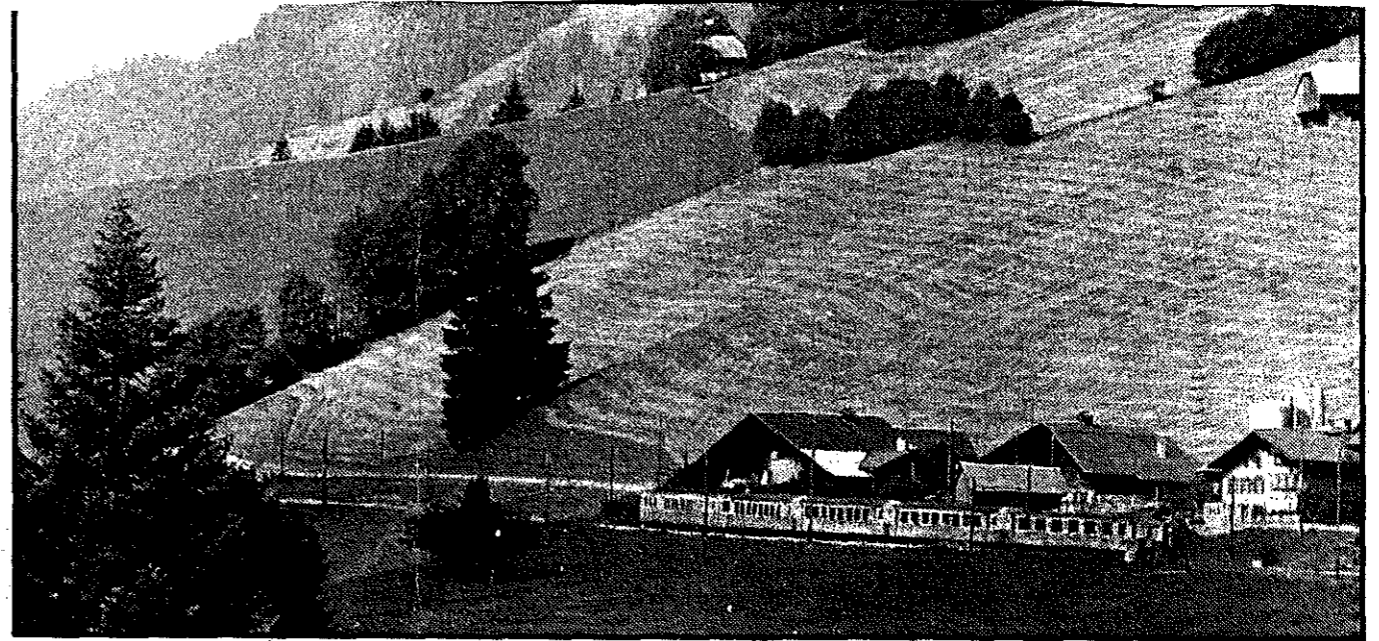
Travel

Adventures in the Alps



Hiking on a trail above Kandersteg near Blümlisalp glacier.

Navigating the hairpin curves of the Swiss Valais. By John Dornberg. □ Admiring the scenery from the little cog railway of the Bernese Oberland. By Alice Furlaud. □ Walking in a nation of ardent hikers. By Gary Wasserman. □ Rappelling with the kids. By Nicholas Fox Weber. Pages 14 to 16.



The Montreux-Oberland-Bernois cog railway on its way to Château d'Oex after passing Rossimere. Ginette Vachon for The New York Times

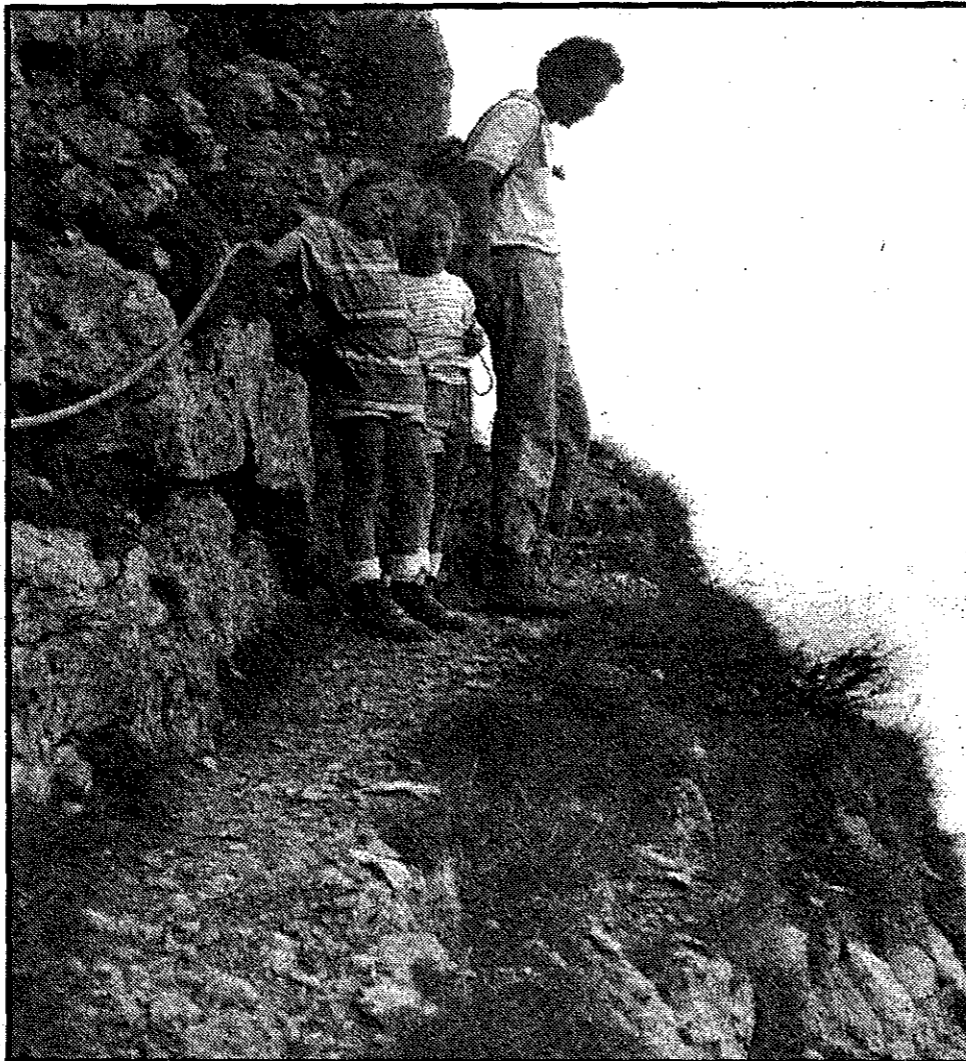
Rappelling With the Kids

By NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

FOR YEARS I had longed to hike on those isolated Alpine peaks I had only glimpsed from inside a packed airplane. Last summer my two daughters and I made this dream a reality in the Swiss village of Kandersteg. The journey had one completely unexpected dimension. It featured rock climbing and rappelling, the first time for all of us.

What made such an adventure even thinkable was that we were safely in the hands of a first-rate mountaineering guide. Reas Junger — his first name, pronounced like a mellifluous race, is short for Andreas — is an expert rock climber and skier, as well as a high school teacher. As any parent knows, children often respond better to someone other than ourselves. The very sight of Reas made Lucy, then 8, and Charlotte, then 7, want to show what strong hikers they are. He exuded a competence that put me pretty much at ease as well. But that I would allow my precious girls to scale up and down any part of that looming vertical limestone expanse — and then have to account for myself to my wife and to doting grandparents — was more than I had bargained for.

We had been in the woods for only 15 minutes. Reas climbed some distance up the impressive cliff and pulled his strong yellow rope through a giant screweye that was already embedded in the rock. After climbing down he had Lucy step into a harness, to which he attached one end of the rope; he tied the other end to a support around his waist. After a couple of false starts, Lucy made her way up to the screweye, both by climbing and



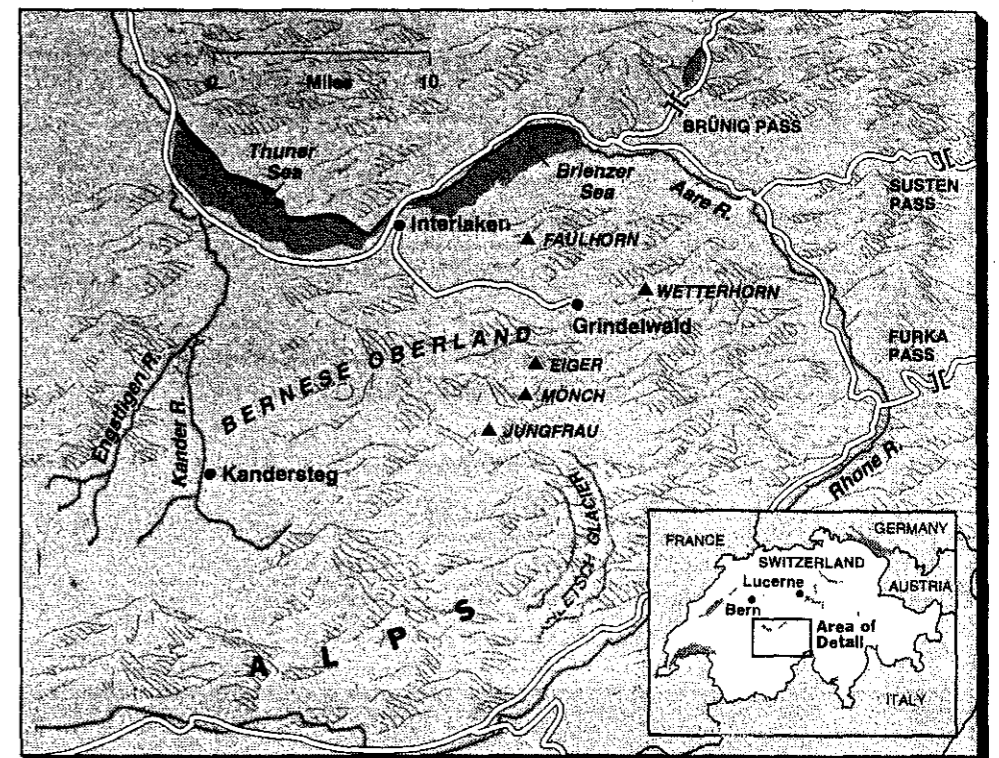
Lucy, left, and Charlotte with Reas in Kandersteg. Nicholas Fox Weber

by being pulled. To get down, she rappelled, which is to say she followed Reas's instructions to "walk down" by firmly stepping with her feet pointed outward and her legs spread. Leaning backward so that at times she was almost parallel to the ground, she held the rope attached to her waist and descended, with a great grin on her face. Reas commented to me on the wonderful confidence of children. Charlotte followed, and then I took a turn, doing my best to emulate their faith in the ropes and in Reas's methods, and proba-

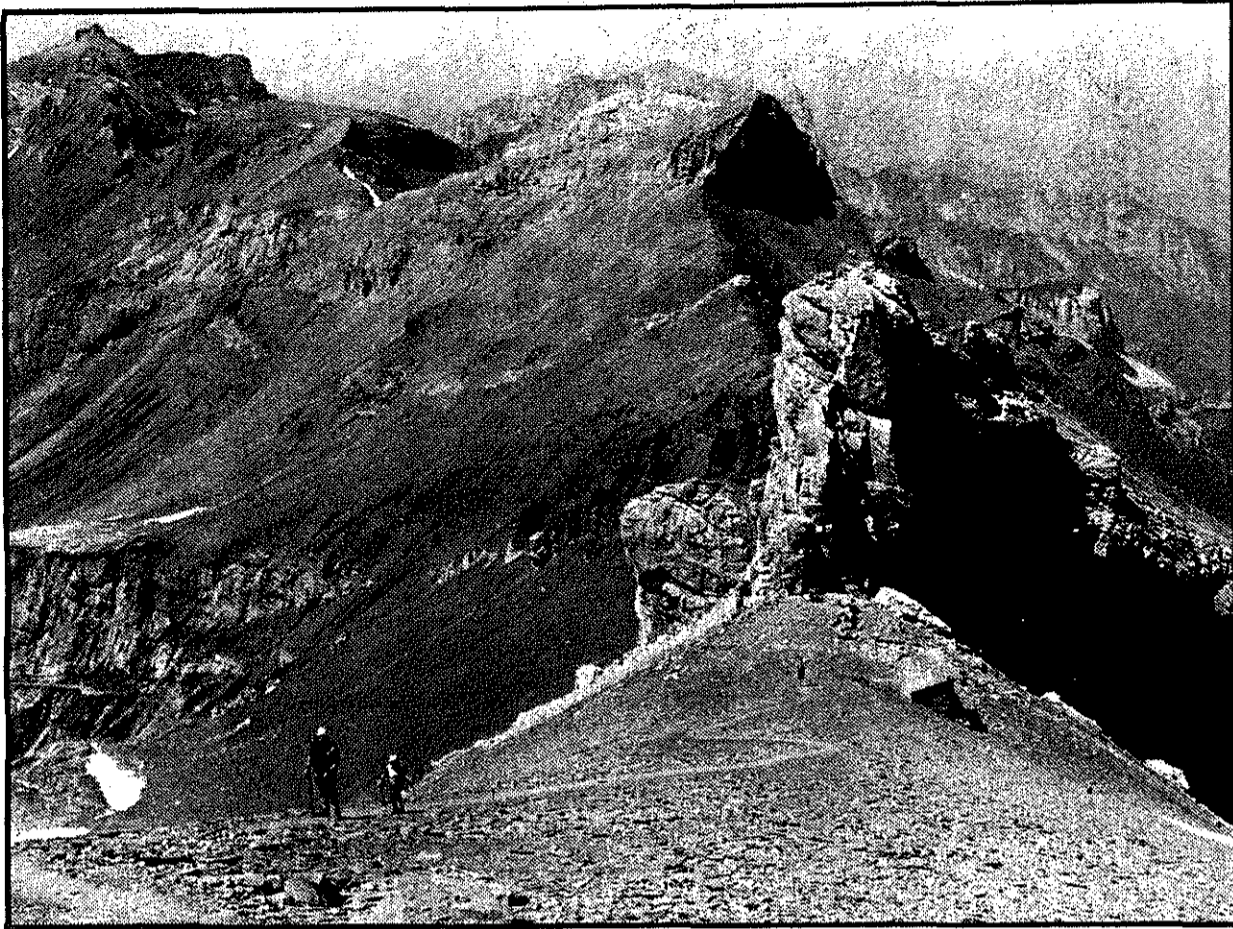
bly smiling as ecstatically as they. We all insisted on second turns. To move in this particular way, with the patient instruction of an expert Swiss mountaineer, is one of the greatest pleasures imaginable.

My wife's ideal holidays depend on indoor plumbing, so this was a trip we did on our own. Since moving around with children can be the most arduous part of travel, I had opted for a single village as our base of

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Climbing With Kids



Philip Lieberman

Hiking trails on the Alpine peaks above the village of Kandersteg.

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operations. Kandersteg was ideal. It is deep in the Bernese Oberland, famous for its rich valleys and limestone cliffs and its jagged peaks like the Jungfrau and the Eiger. Mark Twain stopped there in the summer of 1878, and described it in "A Tramp Abroad":

"Toward sunset we entered a beautiful green valley dotted with chalets, a cozy little domain, hidden away from the busy world in a cloistered nook among giant precipices topped with snowy peaks that seemed to float like islands above the curling surf of the sea of vapor that severed them from the lower world. . . . Here and there, in grooved depressions among the snowy desolations of the upper altitudes one glimpsed the extremity of a glacier, with its seagreen and honeycombed battlement of ice.

"Up the valley, under a dizzy precipice, nestled the village of Kandersteg, our halting-place for the night."

Like Mark Twain, we found it the perfect home base for manageable hikes in settings of splendor.

Lucy and Charlotte and I had driven the scenic route to Kandersteg from the Zurich airport. I had telephoned Kandersteg's tourist office and mountaineering school well in advance, which is how we had arranged for our guide on the day after our arrival. On the first day we hiked on our own along one of the flawlessly maintained trails that start in the village. The Wanderweg — wandering way — meandered upward to the dramatic Oeschinensee, a glacial lake. The trail offered precisely the sort of scenery one longs for in the Alps. There were thick woods with larch-scented air. Meadows abounded in wildflowers, and although late summer is past the best season for these, the blue-violet Alpine columbine and purple gentian and deep red martagon lily were still blooming everywhere. We had moss beds on which to rest, and periodically the woods would open to meadows with tremendous views down into the valley. The hiking itself was occasionally steep but never too difficult.

Eventually we crossed under a chairlift and joined a wide trail along which herds of tourists were walking from the top of the lift to the lake surrounded by rocky, snowcapped mountaintops. Much as I regretted the presence of civilization, I was also grateful for its benefits: a small hotel in a wooden, hut-style building overlooking the lake, with ice cream and soft drinks for sale. Lucy and Charlotte won out and we took the chairlift down. This did not fit in with my imagined walk in the wilds, but it had its charm.

The next day, however, was entirely the real thing — and one of the most memorable of my life. A guide for a day is costly, but while we willingly stayed in a low-priced inn and ate inexpensive meals, this was the right way to spend money.

Reas was waiting for us that morning in front of the one-room mountaineering school. Before we hit the trail, we headed down the main road to a small store to buy supplies for lunch. Reas remarked to the girls that these 60 yards alongside automobile traffic would be the most dangerous walk we would take all day. We bought the low-fat sausages, perfect for outdoor roasting, that are preferred by Swiss mountaineers, a crusty dark bread, native apricots, a chunk of aged farmer's cheese and juice. Then the girls had the rare experience of hearing me encourage them to select candy bars, each settling on our guide's recommendation of bitter-sweet chocolate with hazelnuts.

Reas's and my backpacks loaded, we headed off behind the tiny, fairytale-like village church (it dates from before the Reformation) toward the mountains. Our next major moves were up and down the limestone cliffs. It's just as well that this activity came early in the day; to have anticipated it would probably have made me feel more at the edge of a precipice than I did when we had the ropes around us. After the climbing and rappelling, we hiked for about an hour and a half, ascending the steep mountainside both on and off the trail. Reas's presence was a luxury; I never had to figure out where we were, and he fielded the children's questions and requests for rests.

We headed toward a glacial stream at the side of which we would build a fire for lunch. Mark Twain marveled at this sort of "rushing brook [that] becomes a mad torrent and goes booming and thundering down towards Kandersteg, lashing and thrashing its way over and among monster boulders, and hurling chance roots and logs about like straws." But because of the recent dry spell the lower reaches of the stream offered nothing but bare rocks, and while we found a spot with splendid small falls of rushing water, it was no torrent. It did, however, provide an ideal spot for Reas to form a semicircle of rocks into which he laid and lighted some firewood. He and I then stripped green branches into roasting sticks and we all set about cooking our lunch. The flavorful browned sausage on hearty bread was one of the best meals we have ever eaten.

AFTER lunch the trail grew so steep and tricky that Reas looped a long rope around the girls' waists to assure that they could not tumble out of reach. We hiked on to an extraordinary landscape. Stepping out of a pine forest, we were surrounded by a field of tall lilies. Beyond it was a towering, ragged limestone cliff, and off to the left a landscape purely of grayish stone, sloping upward, resembling lunar mountains.

Staring at all of this, we saw, for the second time that day, the animals called gemse (chamois in English) loping along. Initially, the girls and I thought they were deer, but then realized that their bodies were more like goats'.

The girls' rope-belts firmly in place, Reas next led us along a narrow angular path that was like a sloping shelf cut into the cliff. Although I can hardly bear the sight of my children riding a Ferris wheel, I felt little fear at the sheer drop to our right. Lucy and Charlotte were up to the occasion, and our guide had taken all due precaution.

It was a terrific ascent, after which we reached a short plateau. We looked downward and off several miles at the right to the Oeschinensee, even more exciting from this isolated point than it had been close up. Reas pointed out a mountain hut, and suggested that the next time we hiked with him we would sleep in one

at the edge of a glacier. He told the girls that now they had experienced true mountaineering.

On the trip down, the woods opened periodically to pastures, and at one point to a field where farmers were cutting grass with wood-handled scythes. As late afternoon approached, we worked our way down behind Kandersteg. We crossed a stream on a single wooden plank, and then Reas led us through the woods to a small waterfall so turbulent that it never freezes. He held each girl by the waist, sweeping his arms as a pendulum, so that she could slurp in the icy water. Wobbly-kneed and fairly punchy by now, we continued through marshland and then alongside a grassy pond, where Lucy and Charlotte got happily soaked and muddy to the thighs.

In the course of the day Reas and I had covered endless topics of conversation, from serious personal issues to Swiss food. I had expressed regret that our hotel didn't offer raclette; he invited us to have some at his parents' house that evening. Behind the village church, we arrived in their garden, and made our evening plan. His parents graciously dug some new potatoes for the raclette, while the children repaired to a swing set and Reas and I set off into the village for cheese and a bottle of the Swiss white wine Fendant.

Later on, sitting behind his parents' house in the shadow of the mountains we had climbed, Reas's father, the local pastor, filled us in on the history of the region. He told the children that when Mark Twain had been here he was so intrigued by the notion of glaciers moved that he tried sitting on one to see if it would take him where he wanted to go. Perhaps that part of Twain's travels appealed to them above all — that and his depiction of *Alpensänfte*: the rugged sedan-chair-like contraptions in which Victorian ladies, blindfolded so that they wouldn't see the terrifying drops alongside them, were carried by mountain guides.

The next day we could hardly walk up a flight of stairs; our knees were more stressed than after a week of skiing. It was a perfect morning to idle through the town's small shops before heading down to the large lake of Thun, where we swam in view of snowcapped peaks across the water. In Bern we saw the great collection of Paul Klée, his work gaining new dimension amid the world that nurtured it. The autobahn to Zurich was efficient and practical. What would have taken Mark Twain days by carriage or train took us little more than an hour. Yet the mountains over Kandersteg had been much as he had found them. ■

Heading for the summit

Getting Started

The Mountaineering School in Kandersteg, telephone (033) 75 13 52, will arrange for a guide. Rates, calculated at 1.5 Swiss francs to the dollar, are \$180 to \$213 per day, depending on the particular climb.

Accommodations

Hotels in or near the village range from simple inns and guesthouses to luxury resorts. The Tourist Office (the Verkehrsbüro), at Kandersteg 3718, Switzerland, can provide brochures and addresses; (033) 75 12 34. The address for all of the following is Kandersteg 3718, Switzerland.

Hotel Ermitage, (033) 75 15 12, on the outskirts of the village and near a chairlift and large parking lot, has the advantage of having some rooms with kitchenettes. It can also be a bargain if you stay there and have breakfast and dinner. Some guests, after spending days in the mountains, might object to the prevalent cigarette smoke and radio noise.

Rates: \$87 to \$106 for a double with breakfast; dinner \$16 extra per person.

Waldhotel Doldenhorn, (033) 75 18 18, is an especially appealing and quiet rural inn. Just a short walk from the main street of the village, it is nestled into a mountainside with quiet, lovely grounds and a rushing brook in the front. Regional cooking. Rates: \$100 to \$133 for a double room, with breakfast.

Royal Hotel Bellevue, (033) 75 12 12, is all that the name suggests: wide lawns, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a sauna and solarium, ornate rooms filled with antiques, a dress code at dinner. It owns riding stables as well as motor and sailboats on Lake Thun, about a half hour away. Rates: \$195 to \$400 for a double room, with breakfast.

Dining Out

There are good restaurants and cafes in the village. But, even if you only want to go there by chairlift, you would do well to have lunch up the mountain overlooking a glacial lake at the Hotel-Restaurant Oeschinensee, (033) 75 11 19, which specializes in regional dishes, fresh trout and homemade cakes.

N. F. W.