

Alpine Hut Living

One of the main attractions of mountaineering in the Alps are the huts. They enable us to wander through the big mountains with only light packs. In fine weather the huts can be quite busy, and living in such close proximity to others can be a bit trying. If you know the ins and outs of hut living, the whole thing is a bit less mysterious, and easier to manage.

Hut guardians have a tough job. They have to cook, clean, check in and check out a new crop of tired (but hopefully happy) climbers every day. There are certain "rules" and procedures that make their job easier for them. Understanding these improves international relations and makes our stay more pleasant.

Arriving at the hut

Huts have a foyer in which you can get suited up if the weather outside is poor, and also to store certain items that the hut keepers don't want inside the main part of the hut. Leave your boots, your ice axe, and crampons in the foyer. If you keep your crampons inside your pack, in a protective sack, it is OK to bring them into the hut.

Usually we leave our packs in the foyer until we have been assigned bunks, at which time we bring the packs to our rooms.

Find a pair of hut slippers that more or less fit you and change into these (the huts supply them). Boots are never permitted in the dormitory rooms, or in the dining room. Leave them in the foyer.

In the morning put your boots on in the foyer, replacing the hut slippers on the rack whence they came.

Storage baskets

Most huts have little storage baskets you can use to help keep track of and organize your gear. Look around and see if you can find one - they are usually inside. If the hut is busy, limit yourself to one basket, leaving some for other climbers. The baskets can be carried into the dorm rooms or kept in the main dining room.

In general, we try to keep our gear confined to one basket and our packs, the better to avoid loss or wasted time searching among far flung corners. In most huts we can take our packs up to the dorm rooms and place them by our bunks. Remember crampons must be either hidden deep within your pack or left in the foyer.

Hanging gear up to dry

Folks often hang stuff up to dry, usually in the main dining room, or in the dorm rooms. Try not to get too spread out or to hog too much space. Keep track of what you hang up so you don't lose it. Labelling your gear with markers before you leave home is a good idea.

Assigning of bunks

We will check in with the guardian. The guardian will assign bunks to everyone. If we arrive early at the hut, they may not be ready to assign bunks, in which case we'll need to wait a bit.

We'll be assigned a room and everyone a bunk number. Once we receive our assignments we like to put an article of clothing on our bunk and perhaps spread out the blankets a bit, indicating that the spot is occupied. This decreases the chance that someone will "borrow" your blankets or your pillow, encroach on your personal space or pre-emptively "assign" themselves your bed.

Keep your pack near your bunk, or in one of the appropriate cubby holes. You can use your bunk space to help you organize.

Getting organized

You'll need to organize your gear a bit. We often put on a "hut shirt", getting out of our damp and smelly "climbing shirt". We hang up wet gear to dry, and we pull out of our pack whatever gear we need for our night's stay. This is the stuff we want to have handy in the evening. Usually this includes;

- Any clothes we need (to go outside to the WC if necessary)
- A headlamp
- Our thermos or water bottle. (Thermoses are given to the hut guardian the evening before the climb, usually after dinner.)
- Reading material if you have any
- Earplugs for the night
- Money for drinks and snacks
- toothbrush and toiletries
- And whatever else you feel you need.

Quiet and lights in sleeping rooms

In the afternoon and evening, and especially at bed time, folks will be trying to sleep in the dorm rooms. Try to be quiet if anyone is resting in the room. Keep talk to a minimum, and at a whisper. Avoid using the room lights if possible—use your headlamp and avoid shining it in sleeper's eyes. Minimize thrashing around in your pack or fiddling with gear, or take your pack to the foyer for major reorganization.

If you are trying to nap or sleep and folks are talking loudly, it is OK to "shhhhhh" them, especially between 10 PM and the wake-up hour.

Paying for drinks and extra food

Normally we will settle up for the fixed dinner and breakfast, as well as your overnight stay, in the evening just after dinner. You can pay us back later. You will also need to pay for other menu items and all drinks as well. Often we run a tab in the guide's name. Tabs are paid when we settle up for meals and lodging. If we keep a tab, keep track of what you ordered. Alternatively you can pay for things as you order them, which is generally easier.

All of the bottled drinks in the huts, as well as the food, are flown in by helicopter. This makes them rather expensive. A litre and a half bottle of water

can cost as much as \$7 or \$8 US, sometimes more, so if you want to buy bottled water be prepared. Tea is usually cheaper. You can also order bottles of hot water. They will not, however, sell cold water other than what comes bottled, as there are health concerns with this.

During lunch time, you can order hot food. Find a menu or see the list of offerings on the wall. Röstli (Swiss hash browns) are good, and when served with cheese, or bacon ("lardons" or "speck" in French or German, respectively) provide plenty of calories. There are also usually pasta dishes, soup, omelettes and many different kinds of drinks. Usually they will stop serving hot food for lunch around 2:30 to 3. After this time, you can ask, but don't be surprised if they decline to make your röstli.

Thé de marche (tea for walking, pronounced "marsh tay" with a little gurgle with the r)

Marche thé is tea sold for the next day's trip—marching tea. Different huts dispense this in different ways, but in general, the hut keeper will gather bottles and thermoses the evening before and fill them the following morning. We'll pick up the bottles in the morning before we leave. Marche thé is added to the bill before we pay it in the evening. Bring your bottles to dinner and we can in turn give them to the guardian after dinner for morning filling.

Regular water bottles can either be filled with marche thé or from purchased bottles of mineral water.

Dinner table assignments

Dinner is usually served between about 18:30. Different huts have different dinner times. On particularly crowded days, there may be multiple sittings.

In most huts we will be assigned a table for eating. This may not be the table we happen to be sitting at before dinner; hence we may have to move. The hut keepers do this in order to be sure to seat everyone. Often they will put a note on the table indicating which parties are to sit at that table, and the number of people in each party.

Cleaning up table

After dinner, we are expected to carry dirty dishes back to the counter by the kitchen. Usually the guide does this, but we can all pitch in if it seems appropriate. When we are done with dessert we need to wipe down the table with a cloth usually provided near the kitchen. We need to clean up the table, remove garbage and personal items, and finally wipe it down before we go to bed. If you are the last of your group to leave the table (the guides, in their exhaustion, having gone to bed!) be sure it is clean and clear when you turn in.

Usually there is a recycling receptacle for aluminium cans, and often one for the clear plastic bottles many drinks come in, marked PET.

Hut keepers dinner time

After the climbers in the hut eat, the hut keepers often take their dinner. Usually you can ask for more drinks during this time, but keep your requests simple so as not to too greatly interrupt their dinner.

Paying the bill

After the hut keepers finish eating their dinner and cleaning up the kitchen we will settle up the bill for the night. This is when the tab gets closed. Anything you want to buy after that time you need to pay for with cash, at the time of purchase.

If we are staying multiple nights in one hut, we can usually pay everything all at once on our last night there.

In all of our Alps summer climbing trips you will need to pay your own hut fees, meals and drinks. Normally the guide pays the bill and you reimburse the guide. You will need about \$60 per night (in either Euros or Swiss Francs, depending on where you are) to cover these costs. A very few huts accept credit cards, but they are in the minority.

Ordering breakfast and lunch

At some point in the evening your guide needs to tell the hut keeper what sort of drink you will want in the morning. The options usually are coffee, tea or chocolate. Also, if you would like to order a packed lunch for the day, we need to do this in the evening, before we close out the tab. We often order a lunch if the next day is particularly long, but otherwise a couple of candy bars (sold in all the huts) are generally enough.

Getting up in the morning

Departing in the morning is often a rather hectic affair. This is especially so when an early start is called for.

Usually, the entire hut will get up at once. If some of the occupants of your room choose to sleep in, try to be quiet when you get up. In some huts with a variety of climbing objectives nearby, there are different wake-up times. For example, there may be breakfast service for one group at 1 am, another at 3 am and so on for 5 and 7 am. We'll choose the time that best suits our needs. They often divide the guests into rooms sharing the same wake up time.

A quick departure

Often your guide will be quite anxious to get out of the hut quickly. This is especially so for the Matterhorn, where your position in line can spell the difference between summit success and failure. For many other climbs, however, a more leisurely start is fine. Ask your guide if the following morning calls for a speedy departure.

The trick in departing is to be ready with your pack already packed as much as is possible before you go to bed. Be organized in the morning and everything will go more easily.

The first thing we do is to change into the clothes we will most likely use that day (except for our outer shell jacket which we put on just before we go outside. Keep these handy, by your bunk, so that you can get dressed quickly.

After we get out of the bunk, we fold the blankets. Some huts even post directions as to exactly how they like you to fold your blankets. In any case, fold them neatly and stack them and your pillow as you found them.

Do a last check of your sleeping area to be sure you have not left anything under a pillow, etc.

Stuff your belongings quickly into your pack (you will be able to organize them better after breakfast) and bring it and your basket (if you have one) downstairs to the dining room. Find a place to stash your pack out of everyone's way, and find your way to the breakfast table.

If you need a bathroom stop, try to do this early, as the WC lines seem to get longer as it gets later.

After breakfast and the ritual clearing of the table, we pack up our packs, put on our boots and head outside.

Remember that the vast majority of the time we will be wearing our harnesses all day long so consider the donning of your harness to be part of getting ready for the day, and try to make your last bathroom stop before you put on your harness.

Also remember to pick up your ice axe, crampons, trekking poles and anything else you left in the foyer. Think about whatever you left in various parts of the hut, and be sure you have them with you. If you left something up in the dorm room you will need to take off your boots to go looking for it. The hut keepers don't like guests to wear boots in the dorms or upstairs.

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