

Via-Stockalper

“Via Stockalper - Stockalperweg”

VIA STOCKALPER links **Brig** in the **Canton of Valais (CH)** with **Domodossola (ITA)** through the **Simplon Valley**: it is one of Switzerland's 12 Cultural Routes of national interest, following in the footsteps of the trade route established by one of the key figures in the history of this region: **Kaspar Jodok von Stockalper**.

A great 17th-century Valaisan businessman, entrepreneur and politician, **Baron Stockalper** spoke five languages fluently and owned pastures, mountain pastures and mines. From his palace in Brig, which he had transformed into a magnificent castle, he controlled trade with Antwerp, Paris and the Channel ports to the north, and with Milan to the south. It was he who restored the ancient route across the Alps, equipping it with bridges and shelters to allow caravans of goods to pass through even in winter, thus becoming one of Europe's most important merchants.

Kaspar von Stockalper was born in Brig in 1609 into an already very wealthy family of probable Italian origin. His affluence enabled him to travel throughout Europe and thus begin to lay the foundations for his future trading ventures. His knowledge of languages was of great help in his dealings with the various European courts. His turnover in the five-year period 1665–1670 yielded an income four times that of the whole of Valais. His estate has been valued at around 450 million euros in today's money; he owned all the mines in the Valais and employed a total of around 5,000 men. When, coming down from the Simplon Pass, one reaches Brig, it is impossible not to notice on the right a large grey building adorned with three tall towers of a vaguely oriental style: that was his habitual residence, as well as a warehouse and sorting centre for goods bound for Italy or Central Europe. His main source of income came from his monopoly on trade across the Simplon Pass. It was precisely thanks to the growth of this trade that the local population finally experienced a period of prosperity, so much so that, even in difficult times, **Baron Stockalper** was always recognised as a benefactor by the people of Valais. His continued successes aroused the envy of the Valaisan political nobility, who could no longer compete with his standard of living or his stature as a politician. Having branded him a traitor, they sentenced him to a hefty fine and the forfeiture of all his possessions. Stockalper went into voluntary exile in Domodossola, where he was received with full honours and had a house built on the Sacred Mount Calvario. Five years later, in 1685, following the death of one of his political opponents, he returned to his homeland to find his popularity undiminished. He died in 1691 at the age of 82; his remains rest in the church at Glis, near Brig.

VIA STOCKALPER route starts at **Stockalper Castle** (www.brig-simplon.ch/en/culture-city/stockalper-palace) in **Brig (CH)**, climbs to the **Simplon Pass** (2,005 m above sea level) and descends to Simplon Dorf and then to **Gondo**. From here, the route to Domodossola begins, following the Via Stockalper Valle Bognanco variant along the “Via del Monscera”.

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It starts from Gondo, climbs through the **Zwischbergental valley** to the **Monscera Pass** (2,103 m above sea level) and then descends the **Bognanco Valley** until it reaches **Domodossola**, ideally ending at **Sacro Monte Calvario**, a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** (www.sacrimonti.org), where Baron Stockalper lived in exile.

The “Via del Monscera” was once a strategic route: from the Monscera Pass, troops from Valais stormed down and invaded the Ossola region on several occasions, but above all, it seems certain that a distinguished figure, Pope Gregory X, passed through here on his return from the Council of Lyon in the autumn of 1275: as a token of gratitude to the local population for their help in the difficult crossing of the pass, the Pope donated a parchment of great historical and religious value containing the bull “Transiturus” promulgated by Urban IV in 1264, which established the feast of Corpus Christi. This important document was rediscovered in the 1960s in the parish archives of the Church of San Lorenzo.

*Thanks to works to be carried out as part of the **Interreg “Via-Stockalper” VI-A Italy-Switzerland 2021–2027 project**, the route will once again be fully connected along **the Via Stockalper Valle Divedro**, with a fascinating and scenic route linking Gondo (CH) to Paglino and Iselle (ITA), continuing towards Trasquera, Varzo, Crevoladossola and ending in Domodossola, linking the wonderful existing sections of the route.*

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“Via Stockalper – Bognanco Valley”

Stage 1 – Briga (CH) > Passo del Sempione (CH)

From **Stockalper Castle** in **Brig (CH)**, the route climbs up through the upper part of the village, past beautiful timber-framed houses, before emerging onto the Ried pastures, which offer a wonderful view over Brig. Here, you enter the gorge of the Saltina stream, following a wide, well-maintained path that runs along the cliff face until it comes out onto the cantonal road at Schallberg. From here, the route descends steeply to Grund and climbs up the narrow valley, crossing the stream several times via numerous small wooden bridges.

After a final steep climb, you reach the **Simplon Pass** (2,005 m above sea level).

Points of Interest

This first section is characterised not only by the imposing Stockalper Castle, but also by the Walser dwellings in the small hamlets overlooking Brig, the rugged Saltina Gorge, the small medieval village of Grund, the Taferna Valley with its characteristic 1684 rest stop, and the Simplon Plateau (the ancient Summo Plano).

Details:

Starting point: Briga (CH) 672 m asl

Route: Briga, Lingwurm, Brei, Chumma, Schalberg, Grund, Taferna, Simplon Pass

Length: 19,9 km

Ascent: 1677 m

Descent: 364 m

Total walking time: 7h 00

Difficulty: E – T2 difficult due to the significant elevation gain. Most of the route follows a mule track and wide paths. Take care only on the section between Grund and Taferna.

Signposting: brown arrows marked ‘Stockalperweg’ (trail no. 90)

Recommended period: from late June to October

Useful information:

Briga is reachable by train: www.trenitalia.com - www.bls.ch

The Swiss Autopostale bus service connects Domodossola to Briga: www.postauto.ch

Restaurants and Accommodation: www.brig-simplon.ch

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Stage 2 – Passo del Sempione (CH) > Simplon Dorf (CH)

The stage begins on the barren plateau of the **Simplon Pass** (2,005 m asl), where numerous lakes lie nestled amongst the majestic peaks. From the distinctive Simplon Eagle, you can admire the Bernese Alps to the north and the Fletschhorn to the south. Directly opposite stands the imposing hospice commissioned by Napoleon, which is still run by the Canons of the Great St Bernard. The path winds across the plateau, crossing small streams between the rocks and through a rich variety of flora, until it reaches the large Gâmpisch plain with its two distinctive buildings: the Old Hospice, completed in 1666, and the Barralhaus, 120 metres long and just seven metres wide, built in 1924.

The path continues alongside the stream, entering a bright larch forest. You reach Engiloch and, further on, Maschihuis, where you follow another section of the original mule track with steps carved directly into the rock. Between the villages of Egga and Simplon Dorf, the collapse of the Rossboden glacier in 1901 left a fifty-metre layer of debris and ice, where today a wonderful larch forest lies nestled amongst large boulders. Shortly after the forest, **Simplon Dorf** comes into view; with its stone houses, it has a distinctly Mediterranean feel. The stage ends in front of the Hotel Post, from where Brig and Domodossola are 31 kilometres away respectively.

Point of Interest:

The entire Simplon Pass area offers stunning natural scenery, with small lakes, streams, peat bogs and rocks smoothed by the glaciers of the past. In Simplon Dorf, the **Simplon Ecomuseum** (www.ecomuseum.ch) is dedicated to the natural environment and its historical context. Housed in a 14th-century building with wooden ceilings and thick walls, the museum transports visitors back in time, revisiting, for example, the first flight over the Alps by the Peruvian Geo Chavez.

Details:

Starting point: Simplon Pass (CH) 2,005 m asl, accessible by Autopostale bus service www.postauto.ch – Brig – Gondo – Domodossola Line

Route: Simplon Pass, Alter Spittel, Nideralp, Chlusmatte, Engiloch, Maschihuis, Egga, Simplon Dorf.

Length: 8.9 km

Ascent: 50 m

Descent: 550 m

Total walking time: 2h 30

Difficulty: E - Easy route. Mostly follows mule tracks and wide paths.

Signposting: brown arrows marked Stockalperweg (trail sign no. 90)

Recommended period: from late June to October

Useful information

The Swiss Autopostale bus service connects Domodossola (ITA) with Brig (CH): www.postauto.ch

Refreshment stops and accommodation: www.brig-simplon.ch

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Stage 3 – Simplondorf (CH) > Gabi > Gondo (CH)

Leaving the village of **Simplon Dorf**, the gentle descent towards Gondo begins, heading east. After crossing wide meadows, the steep descent through the woods begins, following beautiful stone steps until you reach the hamlet of **Gabi**. After crossing the stream, the route continues alongside the Doveria stream (Diveria in Italian) to Alte Kaserne (an old Napoleonic barracks converted into a museum of the history of transport along the Simplon Pass) where, flanked by imposing vertical rock faces, you enter the picturesque Gondo Gorges via a thrilling path featuring metal walkways and suspension bridges. In this section, you can still see a few bridges and other remains of the Napoleonic road. Further on, the route enters a 350-metre-long tunnel at Fort Gondo (www.ecomuseum.ch), dating from the First World War, which bears witness to the strategic importance of the gorge. At the end of the Gorges, **Gondo** comes into view, a border village dominated by the Stockalper Tower, which today houses an exhibition on the valley's gold mines and a conference hotel.

Point of interest:

The historic centre of Simplon-Dorf and the Simplon Ecomuseum (www.ecomuseum.ch), the Gondo Gorges, the Alte Kaserne Museum, Gondo Fort, the bridges of the "Napoleonic Road", and the Stockalper Tower in Gondo.

Details:

Starting point: Simplon Dorf (1,474 m asl), accessible by Swiss PostBus www.postauto.ch – Brig – Gondo – Domodossola line

Route: Simplon Dorf, Gabi, Alte Kaserne, Gondo

Length: 9 km

Ascent: 50 m

Descent: 745 m

Total walking time: 3h 00 min

Difficulty: E - Easy route. Mostly follows mule tracks and wide paths. Some suspension bridges over the Gondo Gorges may cause discomfort for those with a fear of heights.

Signposting: brown arrows marked Stockalperweg (trail no. 90)

Recommended period: June to October

Useful information:

The Swiss AutoPostale bus service connects Domodossola (ITA) with Brig (CH): www.postauto.ch

Refreshment stops and accommodation: www.brig-simplon.ch

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Stage 4 – Gondo (CH) > Passo Monscera > Graniga (ITA)

From **Gondo**, you enter the **Zwischbergental valley**. At the start, the path cuts across the hairpin bends of the road. At Hoff, cross the bridge and head up the valley on the right bank until just before the lake, where you switch to the left bank; you then follow the lake's edge as far as **Zwischbergen**. From here, take the path towards **Passo del Monscera**, which cuts across the hairpin bends of the mountain pasture track. You pass Alpe Pussetta and, after a final steep section of steps, reach **Passo del Monscera** (2,103 m asl.) and enter Italy. Descend diagonally to the **Gattascosa** mountain hut and, passing by **Lake Ragozza**, continue down to San Bernardo. Following the D00 trail markers, descend to Gallinera and Gomba, finally reaching Graniga, a hamlet of Bognanco.

Point of interest:

The Zwischbergen Valley (Valle Vaira in Italian) opens up to reveal the magnificent Grosses Wasser waterfall and the potholes, followed by the gold mines (the Gondo Gold), the dam forming a small lake, the only beech forest in the Valais, and, higher up, larch forests and steep mountains with vast open pastures. More pastures, peat bogs and dozens of small lakes come into view in the upper Val Bognanco with its mountain huts.

Details:

Starting point: Gondo (855 m above sea level), accessible by Swiss Autopostale www.postauto.ch – Chur – Gondo – Domodossola line

Route: Gondo, Hof, Roosi, Bällega, Piäneza, Sera Stauser, Härd, Pussetta, Monscera Pass, Gattascosa Mountain Hut, Lake Ragozza, San Bernardo Mountain Hut, Ciuppinella, Gallinera, Gomba, Alpe Ronchetti, Graniga

Length: 19.0 km

Ascent: 1,270 m

Descent: 1,020 m

Walking time: 6h 40

Difficulty: E (moderate) Mostly follows mule tracks and wide paths

Recommended period: from late June to October

Signposting: brown arrows marked 'Stockalperweg' (trail no. 90) to the Monscera Pass, then trail D00 with brown diamond symbols 'Via Stockalper'

Useful information:

The Swiss AutoPostale bus service www.postauto.ch runs up the Zwischbergental valley.

Refreshment stops and accommodation: www.brig-simplon.ch (CH) and www.distrettolaghi.it (ITA)

Graniga, a hamlet of Bognanco, is served by the Autoservizi Comazzi bus service www.comazzibus.com Domodossola – Val Bognanco line

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Stage 5 – Graniga (ITA) > Bognanco > Monteossolano > Domodossola (ITA)

From **Graniga** on nice mule tracks we go down to Saint Lorenzo and thus to Bognanco Fonti. At the end of the village, in correspondence of a house of an intense green color, we take the D00 path towards Ca' Monsignore, which can be reached having passed the trough of the Rio Rabianca river on a nice stone bridge. The path first follows along the mountainside and then goes down steeply to a torrent which can be crossed via a small stone bridge thus allowing us to reach in a brief amount of time the Dagliano Oratory. Following first in a slight uphill path and then flatly on the nice mule track we come to **Monteossolano**. Having left the church dedicated to Saint Gottardo, we follow on a paved road reaching Pregliasca. From here, first along a fire road running across the hillside surpassing a few streams and then along a steep mule track in the woods, we go down to **Cisore** and thus on a perfectly preserved mule track we reach **Mocogna**. We cross the road bridge on the Bogna Torrent and going down along the carriageable road we reach Castanedo. From here we take a wide, optimally preserved, mule track which goes up to **Vagna** (Maggianigo). Around Vagna many chapels and oratories disparaged across the woods tell about the local popular religiousness (for instance, the Baby Jesus Procession (Processione del Bambin) is held in June with the traditional small baskets "cavagnette"). We thus in a brief amount of time go back up to Croppo and proceeding first along a path in the woods, and then along an unpaved road, we reach the agglomerate of Motto and the Marisch Chapel. Finally, on a nice mule track with big steps we go down to the **Sacred Mount Calvario**, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Following the Crucis Way we go down to **Domodossola** and in a brief amount of time we reach its historical centre and train station. From Castanedo, a signposted route takes you straight to the centre of **Domodossola**.

Point of interest:

The Bognanco Valley with its picturesque villages (www.valbognanco.com), Bognanco Fonti with its spa (www.termedibognanco.it), the stone bridge and the Dagliano Gorge, the charming village of Monteossolano with its church and ancient wine press, the village of Cisore, Vagna and its hamlets with splendid examples of traditional rural stone architecture, the Sacred Mount Calvario in Domodossola, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Way of the Cross, and the village of Domodossola with its characteristic medieval old town (Piazza Mercato, Palazzo Silva, Palazzo San Francesco).

Details:

Starting point: Graniga, a hamlet of Bognanco (ITA) 1,110 m asl, accessible by bus www.comazzibus.com - Domodossola – Val Bognanco line

Route: Graniga, San Lorenzo, Camisanca, Possetto, Bognanco Fonti, Cà Monsignore, Oratorio del Dagliano, Monteossolano, Pregliasca, Cisore, Mocogna, Vagna Maggianigo, Motto, S.M. Calvario, Domodossola

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Length: 14.5 km

Ascent: 480 m

Descent: 1150 m

Walking time: 5h 00

Difficulty: E (moderate) Mostly along mule tracks and wide paths

Recommended period: May – October

Trails: Trail marker D00 and brown diamonds marked 'Via Stockalper'

Useful Information:

Refreshment points and accommodation: ATL Distretto Turistico dei Laghi www.distrettolaghi.it (ITA) and Associazione Turistica Pro Loco Val Bognanco (www.valbognanco.com)

Graniga, a hamlet of Bognanco, is served by the Autoservizi Comazzi bus www.comazzibus.com Domodossola – Val Bognanco line

Source: Aree Protette Ossola (www.areeprotetteossola.it) – Author Alessandro Pirocchi