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CARLA DUARTE

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## The Stone Sea: a walk through mountain research

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### tags

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### Abstract

This visual and textual essay takes the reader on a walk across the Stone Sea – a mountain range in the Austrian and Bavarian Alps which I researched over the course of four years. The research itself concentrates on the every-day lives of people living and working in this mountain range during the summer season, using storytelling to draw out people's experiences and understanding of life in the Stone Sea. The accompanying photographs, informed by people's accounts and my own experience of walking in this mountain range, help create an intimate visual ethnography that provides insight into some of the complex issues of mountain life such as tradition, tourism, modernisation and environmental sustainability. This research could only be carried out through walking this difficult mountain terrain, tracing the footsteps of sheep farmers, hunters, mountain rescue teams, innkeepers and many others. Walking the same footpaths many times over in this weathered landscape of rock, in varying weather conditions, physical and mental states, and with people's narrative accounts in mind, has contributed to a better understanding of the political and social worlds of the people traversing this terrain on a regular basis. Through a phenomenological approach that shifts the focus onto movement, affect and memory, this essay intermingles the personal journey of my physical, emotional and visual experiences of mountaineering with the narrative accounts provided by others. It takes the reader on a geographical and metaphorical walk, a route through memories that connect to the present. It is a process where walking is a way of thinking and feeling through research and where research is a way of thinking and feeling through walking.

## Introduction

*The Stone Sea: a walk through mountain research* is part of a visual ethnography which researches and documents the everyday life and work practices of mountain folk living and working in the Stone Sea, a mountain range in the Austrian and Bavarian Alps. Although there is an abundance of chronicles, yearbooks and glossy mountain magazines that detail mountain tops, trails and treks and places to sleep, as well as celebrate the achievements of extreme (male) mountaineers, there is a distinct lack of ethnographic work that shifts the focus onto people living and working in the mountains and their everyday experiences. Through photographic and archival research, storytelling and walking, I have been documenting

the social world of people inhabiting this mountain range in order to recognise their experiences and knowledges of mountain life and celebrate their versions of life and communities in the Stone Sea. As access is only on foot, the research process has necessitated regular walking of this terrain, intermingling the stories told with my own physical experience of being and walking in this mountain range. This visual and textual essay takes the reader on a geographical and metaphorical walk, a walk that connects the landscape with personal memories and experiences, and themes such as mountain tourism, loss of traditions, sustainability and landownership.

### Image 1:

The northern side of the Stone Sea, September 2018.  
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### Different ways of walking in the mountains

I have been walking in the Stone Sea since my childhood. Two of my aunts were innkeepers for many years and my father was involved in helping out with deliveries, construction and rescues. I often went with him – many a time to complete treks in record speed to boast about it afterwards. My dad lived for the mountains, to escape the realities of life and enter a different realm of being, one which Austrian extreme mountaineer and academic Helga Peskoller terms 'BergDenken' (Mountain Thinking). *BergDenken* as a term represents the phenomenon of the intense desire to be in and on top of mountains, where the mind is emptied of rational thought and opened up for another way of thinking and being; a way of being that connects the mind and body with the materiality of the mountains (Peskoller, 1997: 9-11). *BergDenken* explains the lack of rational thinking in extreme mountaineers that regularly put their lives at risk: despite being aware of the dangers of death, the aforementioned phenomenon takes over the mind, spurring them on to ever greater heights. Nan Shepherd expands on the physiological element, saying that 'I am a mountain lover because my body is at its best in the rarer air of the heights and communicates its elation to the mind' (Shepherd, 2014: 7). According to her, the bodily lightness, or feyness, experienced in the heights leads one to subvert the will and supersede judgement, 'a malady of which the afflicted will never ask to be cured' (p. 8). The reason for that, Shepherd says, must be within the mountain itself. Peskoller argues that the intensity of standing on a high summit with panoramic views distances us from everyday life to such an extent that life and our human-ness become an abstraction, an abstraction the mountaineer becomes addicted to; hence the intense desire to be on top of a mountain. It reminds me of De Certeau's description of the view from the World Trade Centre: 'It transforms the bewitching world

by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god' (De Certeau, 1984: 92). As such, standing on a summit is a form of power and resistance against the strains of everyday life, even if only momentarily. My father and his colleagues, many of whose experiences feature in this ethnography, were/are certainly addicted to the elevated views that enable them to temporarily get away from the grasp of everyday life.

In later years, I started walking the same paths with a different companion, my husband, at a much slower pace and much more aware of my physical and mental relationship to my surroundings. On one hand, *BergDenken*, this close connection between mind and body with the materiality of the mountains, is part of my ontological security, my inner sense of existence and mental stability, reflected in the regular desire to be in the mountains and my feyness when I am there. But whilst seeking to get away from the stresses of life, mountaineering for me is not to climb higher and higher to escape the realities of my life but actually to spend time reflecting on those realities. It is a way of looking inwards, of exploring my mind and grounding my thoughts (Solnit, 2002: 26). It is walking in the Nietzschean sense – 'a meditative practice through which access to rational and meaningful thought is achieved' (Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017: 1). It may seem contradictory to refer to Nietzsche's strolls, but one can engage in a practice of meditative walking in challenging Alpine terrain when not focused on climbing summits but rather on *being* in the mountain. Existential introspection stimulated by the elevated position, summit or not, sometimes feels as if standing at a somewhat paradoxical Archimedean point – looking at the totality of one's own reality by having physically distanced oneself from it while at the same time existing and experiencing as vividly as nowhere else (Rousseau, 1781/1953: 157).

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The bodily lightness that Shepherd describes, the perfectly co-ordinated body and mind that allows one to walk securely in challenging terrain with a certain buoyancy, is something I only experience in the mountains. It is when body and mind reach such 'profound harmony [which is] deepening into something that resembles trance, that I discover most nearly what it is to *be*' (Shepherd, 2014: 106; original emphasis). Re-entering the realities of everyday life takes some readjustment, making me feel alien for a while.

The way I have experienced walking in the Stone Sea completely changed as I began this research, tracing the footsteps of sheep farmers,

conversations in 'their' place (Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017). This helped make sense of the Stone Sea and the political and social worlds of the people traversing it on a more regular basis. Sometimes I also walked without a particular destination, just 'to be with the mountain as one visits a friend' (Shepherd, 2014: 15). This intense immersion into the landscape helped develop a better understanding of my own physical and emotional experiences of mountaineering and the landscape of my mind (Solnit, 2002: 6). My experience (and many others') is a far cry from the heroic and very male narrative accounts of conquering higher mountain tops, of the thrill of danger and the



**Image II:**

At the western edges of the Stone Sea, September 2018.

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mountain rescue teams, hunters and others. Using mountaineering as a methodological tool, I began to explore this *weathered* landscape of rock (Ingold, 2011) in greater depth – walking in varying weather conditions, times and months, following suggested routes, walking with people and having

self-congratulatory stories of achieving the near impossible (Macfarlane, 2003: 71). Even the stories of female mountaineers who have only recently made it into the mountaineering literature despite some early pioneers (Runggaldier, 2011: 9) mirror

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the extreme and dangerous achievements of their male counterparts, mostly ignoring the more sensuous experience of being in the mountains. Scottish writer Nan Shepherd, who wrote about her connection to the Cairngorms in Scotland in *The Living Mountain* in the 1940s (published in 1977 and only recently recognised as a seminal text), and Italian author Ingrid Runggaldier, whose book *Frauen im Aufstieg* (Women on the Ascent) was published in German in 2011, have contributed to addressing this gap.

Through being in the mountains regularly, the early fast-paced walks to peaks have been replaced by slow and considered circumambulation of the

mountains. It is a way of thinking, corresponding with, and trying to make sense of, the landscape I am walking in (Macfarlane, 2012; Ingold, 2013). Much of the thinking for this research is done on foot, in silence or out loud with my companion as we walk for hours, constantly changing altitude, pace and route, to search, as Robert Macfarlane puts it, 'for a route of the past, only to find oneself delivered again and again to the contemporary' (Macfarlane, 2012: xi). It is about the ways in which my research is informed through the physical landscapes in which I move and the emotional and thought landscapes which move through me (Solnit, 2002). As Ingold says, 'the only way one can



**Image III:**

Experienced female mountaineer and sheep farmer looking out for sheep on the Stone Sea in fog, September 2018.  
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Stone Sea plateau (Macfarlane in Shepherd, 2014: xiv). Going out mountaineering has become more about going in (Muir in Macfarlane, 2012: 20); it is a research process that enables me to see, feel, be and know the mountain through my body and understand my mind through walking in the

really know things – that is, from the very inside of one's being – is through a process of self-discovery' (Ingold, 2013: 1). The ethnographic narrative which shapes the rest of this essay is a journey through the embodied practice of mountain research,



through a landscape of stories, memories and emotions, through the experience of walking in the weathered landscape of the Stone Sea.

**Image IV:**

On the plateau of the Stone Sea looking towards its southern peaks, June 2016.

©Anita Strasser



**A short journey across the Stone Sea**

It is 5 am. My bag is heavy. My body and mind feel tense – we have a 6-hour ascent ahead of us, the weather is cold and slightly unpredictable and there is still snow on the plateau after a long winter. Unlike the great explorers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and many explorers since, who seek ‘pleasurable fear in the mountains’ (Macfarlane, 2003: 73), I am more apprehensive about taking unnecessary risks. Of course, risk is relative and mountaineering is always connected to some risk. But much of the mountain literature focuses on deliberate risk-taking and self-improvement in

the world’s highest or most dangerous mountains by the bravest, mostly male, mountain climbers in the world (ibid.). A mountain range like the Stone Sea, reachable within a few hours, with its highest peak at just above 2,650 metres and without snow during most summers, would not even be considered worthy a mention in the great mountaineering literature. And yet, each year many perish in the Stone Sea, mostly because they underestimate the terrain or the force of the weather. The weather can change within minutes, snow can cover the area overnight at the height of summer, fog can appear out of nowhere, making it impossible to find your way out of this vast area of rocky and weathered landscape. Getting caught

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up in fog is my worst fear and I am always hyper-aware of changes in atmosphere, constantly checking the colour of the sky, cloud movements, changes in temperature and the smell in the air.

We reach the first hut in 2.5 hours; it is the hut which my aunts used to run in the 70s and 80s, and where I spent many weekends in my childhood. The path gently weaves upwards

of sync, with my body and legs urging to go faster and my head pulling me back. At this point, the reality of my health condition is too close and real to open up a space for *BergDenken*, feyness and meditative introspection, and my desire to be in the mountains is interrupted by the rationalisation of my condition. I enter a space of ontological *insecurity*, a minor existential crisis that challenges



**Image V:**

The mountain hut which was managed by family members. September 2015.

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through pine forests, whose aroma makes me feel alive and at home upon inhalation. I know the path inside out, yet I need to walk slowly. I have developed severe migraines and mountaineering has become difficult as the pumping of the blood and the thinner air often result in me arriving ill, in being caught up in a different kind of fog – the migraine fog as I call it. I am aware of the battle between my head, which constantly reminds me of the need to slow down, and the rest of my body, which wants to use its full capacity. It is in contrast to the experience when body, mind and the world are aligned and in conversation with each other (Solnit, 2002: 5). I feel completely out

my subjectivity as a mountaineer. This generally lasts until my headache lifts and I feel stable again.

A lot has changed since the hut was in our family. All the goods used to be carried up by horses or men, and I remember my dad and others carrying about 70kg each. One of my aunts still reminisces about the camaraderie at that time, the joys of working together with people she could rely on. Despite making the delivery of goods easier, she laments the construction of the cable car at the end of the 70s, as it slowly dissolved community networks and ‘the corrosion of character’ of the mountain carrier (Sennett, 1998). “I had to say to my family

and friends, ‘I don’t need you anymore’”, my aunt says. A friend of my aunt’s was the last officially registered mountain carrier on a much more treacherous route, a post which, despite being over 50 years ago, is still an essential part of his sense of worth. Still, when he became an innkeeper on that route, he eventually set the construction of a cable car in motion to ease delivery. One of the wooden box-type cable cars from that time (there were four in total, one for each hut), designed to carry goods only, has since been replaced by a people carrier and another by a road. Although intended for deliveries only, it may only be a question of time for further modernisation and the transporting of people. This brings to mind Austrian writer Robert Seethaler’s novel *A Whole Life* (2014), where the protagonist Andreas is full of pride when taking part in the construction of the first cable car in the Austrian mountains in the 1930s so that others can come and enjoy the mountains he loves and knows so well; only to watch in horror 50 years

later at how torrents of tourists make their way up without the sense of reverence Andreas has for the ancient mountain. For him, the lack of respectful and embodied engagement with the mountain, symbolised by the wearing of casual clothes, trainers and the constant chatter and snapping of photographs, triggers a huge sense of melancholy and loss. Indeed, most mountain ranges near the Stone Sea (and in Austria) already transport masses of tourists up in cable cars, and it may only be a question of time until the Stone Sea is another destination for day-trippers. The trepidation of this moment is omnipresent in local mountain discourse.

Although relieved to have reached the first landmark, I cannot fully relax until I am safe at the final destination. We still need to walk through the Wild Valley to reach the crossing before descending into the plateau, which is anything but flat, to then navigate it to get to the next hut. This will take four

**Image VI:**

One of the original cable cars transporting goods to a hut in the Stone Sea, September 2015.  
©Anita Strasser

hours. Once I am walking, I am fine, it is the sitting down and the anticipation of what is ahead that makes me slightly giddy. The final ascent to the crossing point is a steep climb with the help of iron cables and metal rungs. The weight of my bag is pulling me back and is dragging on my shoulders, my thighs ache from carrying my whole weight up the steep rocky steps, my palms are red and sore from holding onto the cables, my blood is pumping hard. I come to another point where I question my subjectivity as a mountaineer, until I reach the crossing and lay eyes on the Stone Sea in all its glory and vastness. For a brief moment I am in an exhilarated state of mind, almost emptied out of any thought, 'discovering what it is to *be*' (Shepherd, 2014: 106) ...until my thoughts return to the reality that I need to walk across it. Once again, my feyness is interrupted by rational thought. When speaking of mountaineering, we tend to refer only to the act of ascending, but a trek is only successful when arriving back safely on the ground. As Peskoller says, mountaineering is a method, a way to return safely to the ground (1997: 9). And no matter how often you walk the same paths, you never quite know the mountain, nor your relation to it. 'There is no getting accustomed to [it]' (Shepherd, 2014: 1). The pleasure of the view is short-lived, interrupted by the thought of descending onto the plateau. The plateau is interspersed with deep ravines and caves, and what might seem like walking on solid rock may be walking on a thin layer of ground covering a deep hollow cave underneath. This is a moment literally on edge, the edge between returning to safety, to the hut still visible behind me, or descending into the depths of the Stone Sea.

We descend, my mind jumping between excitement and anxiety, determination and worry, between enjoying the thrill of sliding down snowfields and wondering how thick the blanket of snow actually is. I feel that I am moving in an ever-shifting landscape. Unlike past beliefs that

mountains were permanent and solid formations, the ravines, sinkholes, caves and rocks, as well as the melting snow which reveals the weathered world of rock, are reminders that mountains are also 'vulnerable to the attrition of time' (Macfarlane, 2003: 43). Right now, I have no sense of time and location, and with paths hidden under a blanket of snow, I have to trust others' footsteps, stone men and sticks scattered across the plateau. I am treading carefully but finding a pleasant rhythm forging my way into the environment with my movements, breath and the sound of my footsteps. With every step I feel I am becoming more and more part of the landscape (Ingold, 2011).

Curiously, another walker suddenly coming past asks me whether I think we are walking *on* or *in* the Stone Sea, saying she had been contemplating this question along the way. I immediately respond with *in* the Stone Sea. I explain that *on* would suggest that the surface of the earth is separated from aerial media such as wind and precipitation, suddenly becoming aware of myself as wholly suspended into this forever-shifting and tightly woven landscape of earth, rock, air and sky. I think of Tim Ingold's book *Being Alive* (2011) where he states that the ground of solid rock is not a coherent surface that clearly separates earth and sky. Quoting Nan Shepherd, he asserts that life is lived in a zone of intermingling, in a zone where medium and substance mix, and where wind and weather and creatures forge through the environment through movement, making the texture of the land. As such, we live and walk *in* not *on* the land (Ingold, 2011: 119-120). As Nan Shepherd says, 'I don't feel I'm walking *up* a mountain but *into* the mountain' (in Macfarlane, 2012: 24).

We finally arrive safely at the next hut at a height of over 2,000 metres. Feeling my body and mind letting go, I suddenly become aware of just how tense I was. My migraine kicks in and I feel sick. I take my medication and wait two hours for

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**Image VII:**

View onto the plateau of the Stone Sea, looking east. June 2016.

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the pain to go, admiring the views through the migraine fog, aware of the arrival of more and more mountain tourists through a strange haze and dampened noise. The repeated extension and refurbishment of mountain huts with ever-more lounges and sleeping chambers, constant warm water and shower cabins, and hotel-like breakfast buffets, together with the new online booking system, has raised concerns about mountain tourism. Mountaineering is a growing trend with romantic ideas of a hut atmosphere but without wanting to let go of comfort and high standards, making huts for protection into places of consumption. The constant increase in comfort, prices and visitor numbers, and the need to book your trip far in advance to get a bed/mattress is making it harder for locals to find protection over night when out unplanned. Although huts cannot turn anyone away, the night might have to be spent on a bench in one of the lounges. Where people used to sleep in large rooms full of mattresses and army blankets, people now ask for their private sphere; where people used to choose from a few

basic meals, the variety of dishes on offer almost mirror a restaurant menu; where people used to wash with cold water in unisex wash rooms, these rooms are now mostly empty with walkers queuing up to have a hot shower. Some bring hairdryers, dismayed when they realise there are no sockets to plug them in. Offering phone charging stations is the next big challenge.

I am torn between the good intentions to provide hikers with every comfort possible and the lost atmosphere and function of a mountain hut due to the added luxuries of the contemporary mountain experience. Although unwilling to accept and consume some of the luxuries on offer, I do benefit from some (e.g. smaller rooms, healthier food options) due to my migraine and its consequential nausea and insomnia. I lament the fact that these intermittent conditions should make me unsuitable for mountaineering and one day I might even appreciate the existence of a people carrier, unable to ascend on foot. But the added luxuries are also a question of sustainability,

climate change and water supply. For the huts, melting snow is transported in long hoses from large snowfields on tall mountains a few kilometres away. If the winter does not yield enough snow for a dry summer, water supply needs to be heavily regulated. This is at odds with increased water use through showers and larger numbers of guests. Each innkeeper has highlighted the dependence on precipitation to keep huts running. The last mountain carrier mentioned earlier was the one to discover the snowfield behind one particular hut in the 70s. He was out hunting when he heard the trickling of water. At the time, he felt proud to have found a 'never-ending' source of water for his successors but with climate change and summers getting hotter and drier, he is not so sure there will be never-ending water supply. Despite my body crying out for a hot shower as I feel frozen to the bone from my migraine, I cannot bring myself to use a shower and wash myself with freezing water as I stand alone in the empty washroom.

The next day we wake up to a storm and minimal visibility. The innkeepers are advising us to wait

until conditions improve. Some walkers are getting irritated as they want to adhere to their carefully planned route. For them, every minute counts. Each year people perish because they do not listen to expert advice. The plateau is adorned with crosses and shrines for the deceased. One shrine in particular irritates me. It commemorates the death of a German mountaineer who, with two friends in 2007, attempted the crossing of the plateau in a heavy snowstorm against the plea of the innkeeper. The messages of heroism left by friends and family seem to be in contradiction of what happened. As Macfarlane says, it's easy to glorify the climbing dead but what is often forgotten is that people who regularly take big risks must be either completely selfish or 'incapable of sympathy for their loved ones' (Macfarlane, 2003, p.98). This occurrence shook the town and remains in local people's consciousness. This was not a case of *BergDenken* – transcending rationality to feed the addiction of dazzling views. It was a case of sticking to an itinerary and getting to the hut booked for the night. One may not understand the compulsion to stand atop



**Image VIII:**

The water hose transporting melted snow to the hut (centre right), waiting to be installed for the season, June 2016.

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the highest mountains, but the compulsion to continue with minimal visibility, serious life danger staring one in the face and against expert advice is even less understandable. Had they listened to the innkeeper, this tragedy could have been avoided and the mountain doctor and rescue team would not have had to risk their own lives, ascending in those dangerous conditions to keep the dead man's colleagues alive.

It must be noted here that mountain rescue in Austria is a voluntary organisation, relying on members doing this work in their own time without payment. The mountain rescue team cite lack of preparation, underestimation of terrain and weather and overestimation of one's abilities, all of which frequently lead to getting lost, as the most common reasons for emergency calls. Once unable to continue, the greatest danger is freezing to death. Unable to access taken-for-granted equipment, the mountain doctor works with the most basic of treatments. One such "treatment" is tea. No matter what the issue, he never goes out without a flask of hot tea as it not only helps calm the nerves of a stricken mountaineer but can also

save someone from hypothermia. When faced with injuries or heart attacks, the decision to treat the patient in the mountains or risk the precarious transport to the hospital (weather and transport permitting) is crucial, requiring expertise and on-the-spot-thinking from the doctor. With mountain tourism the new leisure trend, and the Stone Sea and its perceived lack of danger being the testing ground for the oft inexperienced, the number of emergency calls is on the increase.

The storm does not last long and visibility returns. Now the sun is shining but further precipitation and thunder is predicted for later in the afternoon. We head off to trace the routes of the shepherds that have been walked for centuries. Due to Salzburg once belonging to Bavaria with cross-border agreements, some local land is still under Bavarian control and some Bavarian land contains sheep-grazing rights for local farmers. When country borders were established in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, former cross-border sheepherding traditions were taken into account. The document sheep farmers showed me states the exact number of sheep certain farmhouses can allow in

**Image IX:**

The shrine commemorating the German mountaineer. September 2017.

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certain areas for grazing purposes. It is the oldest state agreement that is still valid today and makes landownership, borders and subsidies for farmers hugely complex. The route of one group of sheep farmers may start on land that is geographically in Austria but under Bavarian control and finish on land that is in Austria and under Austrian control but whose paths and huts are managed by the German Alpine Association. For some the route ends on land in Bavaria under Bavarian control but with grazing rights for Austrian sheep farmers. The calculation of grazing areas and subsidies for farmers is far from straightforward, with EU regulations complicating things further by paying monies only for either Austrian or Bavarian land,

We arrive at one of the shepherds' huts, a hut on Bavarian land but rebuilt and used by Austrian sheep farmers. Despite being locked up, it feels comforting to be near a hut, it provides the feeling of safety and shelter. I contemplate my experience of shepherding over the past years, an annual occurrence in autumn, where farmers walk across the Stone Sea to collect their sheep to bring them back down before the cold winter arrives. It is an event where the importance of the relationship between humans and animals and their knowledge of the mountains comes to the fore. We walk with the same group of people every year, who through carefully co-ordinated teamwork, where one has to rely on the knowledge and skills of the other, have

**Image X:**

Austrian shepherds' hut on Bavarian land, 100m from the (invisible) Austrian border. June 2016.

©Anita Strasser

not both, ignoring the fact that sheep are border crossers. Crossing over to Bavarian ground, it is strange to think that we are now walking in a different country; there's nothing to indicate this except a little stone that marks the border.

become trusted friends. We go in pairs or groups, with the elderly and weaker walking the shorter distances or keeping a look-out. This includes me as I could never keep up with the young and fit who circumnavigate the plateau to look for sheep. But I



am not made to feel inadequate – on the contrary, people are needed in various locations to monitor progress. Once all sheep are herded together, the farmer sounds a cry; the sheep recognise his voice and follow him. We too follow, surrounding the herd, keeping an eye on potential runaways and dawdlers.

As I contemplate in front of the hut, I nervously gnaw on my sandwich and I am getting restless. I tend not to rest and eat much when out walking unless I am within a certain distance, or time rather, of a hut, particularly in unstable weather conditions. By now, the atmosphere has become quite threatening, there is the constant rumbling of thunder and it is only a matter of time before a thunderstorm hits. I feel uneasy and my chest becomes as closed and heavy as the atmosphere in the air. I feel vulnerable. We leave. About 40 minutes from the next hut we walk right into a thunder and hailstorm. Much to my surprise, I do not panic. When the storm hits right above us, I throw my metal walking sticks away from us,

into every nook and cranny of my body, despite my waterproof gear. After the worst of it, we begin the final stretch to the hut in the pouring rain. Soaked through and through, we arrive at the hut. I realise that the experience has affected me more than I had thought. With shaking hands and mouth and shivering all over, I drink my flask of hot tea which I always carry with me, feeling only calmer after I have downed it all. I change clothes and warm up by leaning against the hot tiled stove. I chat to the innkeeper who says that he tends to go out in this weather to find sources of water; locations where water runs together and where he might build a funnel to transport it to the hut. He had previously told me how to behave when caught in a storm, instructions I had followed to the letter earlier. He says he is not as excited about the gastronomy aspect of running a hut than he is about everything to do with the outdoors. Even after 26 years he loves the view from the hut like on the first day, but his experience goes back much further. The position of innkeeper runs in his family and is fundamental



**Image XI & XII:**

Sheep farmers on their way back into the valley.

September 2017.

©Anita Strasser

crouch down, and lean against a rock. Once the hope of getting to the hut dry has vanished, I even begin to appreciate the experience of being totally exposed to the elements, of being *weathered*, as Tim Ingold (2011) would call it. The close sound of thunder reverberates around my body, the wind batters against my face, the hail stones are hitting me on the back and the rainwater is making its way

to his character (Sennett, 1998).

He remembers the days of the past, when local events such as skiing races and evenings with locals who sang and made music were more frequent than now. He claims that with the advent of leisure time and hobbies people have become more stressed than ever before. Where in the past

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local trekkers would devote a whole day to coming to and being on the plateau, taking their time to engage with other trekkers or staff and have coffee with him, today many come up solely for the purpose of exercise, returning to the valley shortly afterwards as they have arranged other activities. This never-ending offer of past-time activities has greatly impacted hut life with fewer social interactions and increased anonymity, he says. With 90% of overnight guests one-off mountain tourists from other areas, the local homely and

of the Stone Sea.

The most memorable night is the night before the famous pilgrimage across the Stone Sea, where the hut is so full with local and non-local people that some are forced to 'sleep' on the stairs sitting up. It is the only night without the usual lights-out at 10pm, with music and dance until the morning. The pilgrimage started in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to remember the first day nobody had died of the plague. Today, in good weather conditions, around 2,000 pilgrims

**Image XIII:**

One of the mountain huts on the south side of the Stone Sea, June 2016.

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familiar atmosphere has been replaced with a more transactional one of mountain consumption. He longs for the nights of idle chatter, singing mountain songs and drinking schnapps with friends, and cannot understand the contemporary mode of quick transactions, anonymity and lack of engagement. Some traditional social gatherings with local people, music and dance remain, though, such as the nights with sheep farmers before they collect their flocks, end-of-course celebrations with the mountain rescue team which trains there and the annual summer solstice fires, where members of various associations burn fires along the ridges

begin the ascent at 2am and climb to the plateau in the darkness (with headlamps) to meet those that have spent the night there. After a religious service, the human chain walks across the Stone Sea down to Kings Lake in Bavaria, intercepted by some stops. For tradition's sake, the border police await the pilgrims at the country border. Due to the terrain, praying is done individually. The whole trek takes between 9-15 hours, depending on fitness. Despite the chaos in the hut, it is the innkeeper's favourite night.

In 2017, me and my husband decided to join the pilgrimage from the hut until the border crossing.

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I was curious. The thought of walking amongst 2,500 people had never appealed to me. I am more of a silent walker who seeks time away from human company (except for my husband's), not least because of the constant breathless chatter that interferes with a more sensory and inward experience of the mountains. As Nan Shepherd says, going into the hills with chatterers leaves one wary and dispirited, because one cannot hear the mountain speak (Shepherd, 2014: 14). We join the end of the chain and find that not many people are actually talking. After a while I find myself walking in silence and at a pleasant pace, almost unaware of hundreds of people around me, aware only of my body movements and the

*Wanderlust*, 'a state in which the mind, the body and the world are in conversation with each other' (2001: 5). 'Walking', she continues, 'leaves us free to think without being wholly lost in our thoughts'. Through the rhythm of walking and the rhythmic sounds of this human chain, I almost reach a state of meditation, feeling pleasantly alone in this huge group of people, conversing only with my mind, body and the landscape.

**By way of conclusion**

When the group congregates again three hours later on the country border, interrupting my silent conversation, I am suddenly irritated by this mass of people and the loud noise of chatter. Me and

**Image XIV:**

The human chain of the Stone Sea pilgrimage, August 2017.

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rhythmic sounds of footsteps and walking sticks clunking against the rock. The co-ordination of vision and body movement is now in perfect unison, decisions of where to step next made in split seconds. 'One sees where one is and where one is going at the same time' (Shepherd, 2014: 13). This time it is as Rebecca Solnit says in her book

my husband turn back, walking the whole path in solitude and silence, where only moments before thousands of footsteps had hit the surface. Walking with the right kind of companion, whose whole sense of being is as merged with the mountain as one's own, enhances rather than distracts from silence (Shepherd, 2014: 14). It is as if I had only dreamt the pilgrimage, as if the noise

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and the presence of people were only a fragment of a fading dream. I slow down and the tranquillity of the empty and silent landscape I am walking into infiltrates my whole sense of being, making me feel calm and at peace, feeling once more the unison between my mind, body and the landscape.

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*All other information from own local knowledge, interviews and field notes.*



**Image XV:**  
Anita Strasser  
walking into  
the Stone Sea,  
September 2018.  
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