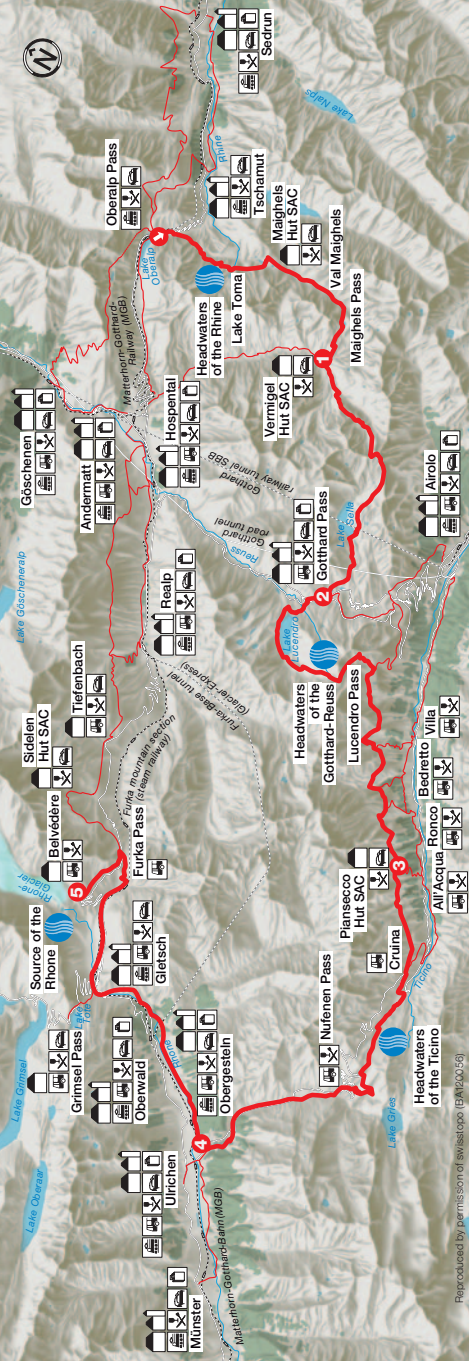




A hike to the headwaters  
of the Rivers Rhine, Reuss,  
Ticino and Rhone.

# Four Headwaters Trail through the St Gotthard Massif





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**INFORMATION ABOUT**

**STAGES 1-5**

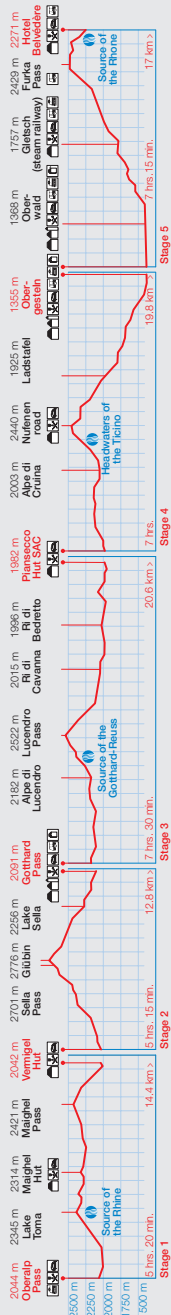
**EFFORT** Distance: 85 km/Time: about 32 hrs./ **GETTING THERE/AWAY** Starting and end points are serviced by buses or trains  
**ASCENT**: 6,161 m/Descent: 5,932 m  
**DIFFICULTY** Continuous, mostly hiking on marked trails (SAC rating: T2/T3)  
**START** Oberalp Pass  
**FINISH** Hotel Belvédère

**DAY HIKES** Stages can also be done as day hikes

**MAPS** Switzerland national map 1:50,000, No. 5001 "Gotthard". Excerpts reduced 15 percent (see pages 10, 16, 22, 28, 34), **INFORMATION** [www.four-headwaters-trail.ch](http://www.four-headwaters-trail.ch)

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# Four Headwaters Trail through the St Gotthard Massif

A hike to the headwaters of the Rivers Rhine, Reuss, Ticino and Rhone.

Edited by  
 Four Headwaters Trail through the St Gotthard Massif Foundation

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## Four Headwaters Trail through the St Gotthard Massif

The Rhine, Reuss, Ticino and Rhone rivers all begin in the Gotthard region and that gave Paul Dubacher from Seedorf the idea for the Four Headwaters Trail. He's something of a specialist when it comes to hiking trails and was instrumental, for example, in forming routes like the "Swiss Path" around Lake Lucerne and the "Railway Trails" of the Gotthard region.

In 2009 Dubacher got to work once again. That same year the Four Headwaters Trail Foundation was founded with well-known people from the four cantons that make up the Gotthard region (see page 78). The inauguration followed in 2012.

For more information please visit [www.four-headwaters-trail.ch](http://www.four-headwaters-trail.ch).

### Mountain hiking in five stages

The Four Headwaters Trail is a family-friendly trek of about 85 km through the alpine country where the Rhine, Reuss, Ticino and Rhone rivers begin. It is broken up into five segments, each of which with starting and end points that are serviced by public transport.

Hiking through portions of cantons Uri, Graubünden, Ticino and Valais takes you through unique landscapes



*Paul Dubacher,  
founder and project  
leader of the Four  
Headwaters Trail*

and highlights the central role that water has played for man, animals and plants.

### Things to know about the Gotthard

The hiking guidebook to the Four Headwaters Trail includes trail descriptions as well as fascinating background information on the region's cultural history, flora and fauna, geological phenomena, climate change and the harnessing of water for hydropower.

In this way a hiker can make sense of and learn more about the area. The best bits of background information will become apparent: How have humans throughout the ages impacted the Gotthard region; why mountains are never at ease; which plants are worth a closer look; and how important is it to turn the region's water into power.

## Off to the headwaters!

Water and springs have a magical power of attraction. Springing discretely from the depths and flowing eventually into the sea, water lends itself to a cross-cultural metaphor for the fate of us all: The lively, happy-go-lucky brook of youth matures into the wide ship-bearing current of adulthood before fading away into the infinity of the sea.

### Water as a creative power

Springs are a reflection of the times: In moments of uncertainty the call to return to our roots and where it all began rings loudly. In times of heady optimism it's easy to forget origins and tradition. Springs are places of power, purity and life. They were even the places where children came from, according to some old folk tales.

Water has the two faces of Janus: It can destroy with a flood and spawn life with a refreshing rain. Water shortages spark wars or create laws founded in peace. The Code of Hammurabi (1850 BC) includes stipulations over water rights.

### Hiking lends wings to thoughts

Glaciers have held stores of water for millennia and have become a symbol for security, hope and confidence. By contrast their disappearance triggers a fear of the future, but fear and hardship also foster human ingenuity. From that has sprung an environmentally friendly and sustainable art of engineering.

Water is a magical power: People have harnessed its force with mills and turned it into electricity. Water is a splendid artist: Its power has formed marvelous, often bizarre and savage landscapes, as well as fields that nourish people, plants and animals.

When you head to the four headwaters of the Gotthard massif, maybe keep this thoughts in mind. Over hills and down the dales, let yourself separate real everyday problems from those that are imagined. He who wanders sifts through his thoughts to find gold nuggets of insight here and there. Your body isn't just the better for it. Your mind is, too. Now off to the source!

*Josef Arnold-Luzzani, Schattdorf*



*A worthy goal – the idyllic Lake Toma.*

## INFORMATION ABOUT STAGE 1

**EFFORT** Distance: 14.5 km/Time: 5 hrs. 20 min./Ascent: 1100m/Descent: 1100 m

**DIFFICULTY** Continuous, mostly hiking on marked trails (SAC rating T1/T2).

**START AND FINISH** Start at the Oberalp Pass. Finish at the Vermigel Hut.

**ROUTE** Oberalp Pass (2044 m) – Lake Toma (2345 m) – Maighel Valley – Maighel Pass (2421 m) – Alp Portgeren – Vermigel Hut (2042 m)

**PROVISIONS** Maighel and Vermigel SAC huts (during hiking season).

**ACCOMMODATIONS STAGE 1** Vermigel Hut, reservations recommended, Tel. 041-887-17-73 or 062-534-00-35, [vermigel@sac-zofingen.ch](mailto:vermigel@sac-zofingen.ch). Maighel Hut (about halfway through first stage): Reservations: 081-949-15-51, [info@maighelshuette.ch](mailto:info@maighelshuette.ch).

**GETTING THERE** Train to the Oberalp Pass from Andermatt (Uri) or Disentis Sedrun (Graubünden).

**RETURN FOR DAY HIKES** Walk to Andermatt from the Vermigel Hut (2.5 hrs.). Train and bus connections available in Andermatt.

**MAPS** Switzerland National Map: 1:50,000 No. 5001 "Gotthard" (good for all five stages). See page 10 for map excerpts of stage 1 (reduced 15 percent).

**INFORMATION** [www.four-headwaters-trail.ch](http://www.four-headwaters-trail.ch); Tourist Info Uri: [www.uri.info](http://www.uri.info);

Andermatt-Urserntal Tourismus GmbH: [www.andermatt.ch](http://www.andermatt.ch);

Graubünden Tourism: [www.graubuenden.ch](http://www.graubuenden.ch); Leventina Tourism: [www.leventinaturismo.ch](http://www.leventinaturismo.ch);

Tessin Tourism: [www.ticino.ch](http://www.ticino.ch); Train and bus connections: [www.sbb.ch](http://www.sbb.ch)

# From the Oberalp Pass to the Source of the Rhine

The first stage leads from the Oberalp Pass, past the source of the Rhine at Lake Toma and concludes at the Vermigel Hut. The Maighel Pass marks the highest point of this section of the hike where the idyllic Lake Portgeren invites visitors to linger.

The Matterhorn-Gotthard Railway (MGB) runs to the top of the 2044-meter-high Oberalp Pass from canton Graubünden from the east or from Andermatt in the Ursern Valley from the west.

It's possible to reach the pass on foot from Göschenen, Andermatt, Sedrun or Tschamut (see map overview, page 1). Get your bearings at the yellow hiking sign and head out on the trail toward Lake Toma.

Those who prefer a longer, more sporty variation to reach the lake can follow the signs to the Pazolastock (2740 m). After a short, sloping section along the pass road **1** a path climbs gently across the flanks of the Pazolastock. The imposing wall of the dammed Curnera reservoir is visible for a short while to the south. At a fork in the trail at Trutg (2056 m) **2** a path winds upwards along a gravel road to the Maighel Hut **6**. The hut, at 2310 meters, is run by the Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) and offers room and board. But to complete this section of the hike continue to climb southwesterly for about 300 meters up some switchbacks through steep pastures that become increasingly

## THE STAGE IN FOUR SECTIONS



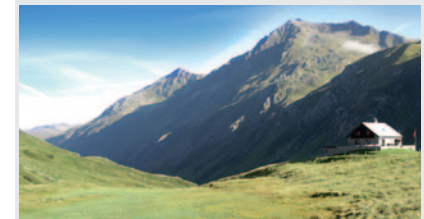
*The young Rhine flows toward Tschamut.*



*The source of the Rhine at Lake Toma.*



*Lake Urlaun in the Maighel Valley.*



*The Vermigel Hut, the first day's goal.*

littered with large boulders and natural stone steps. Up here the invasive noises of civilization – namely motorcycle traffic on the nearby pass road – fade into silence.

After this first, steep ascent the brilliant waters of a mountain lake tucked in a basin at the foot of the Badus begin to gleam: The Lai da Tuma or Lake Toma (2345 m), the source of the Rhine **3**. The lake's Rhaeto-Romansh name recalls the lake's features: it's located behind a Tuma or hill – so Lake Hill, if you will.

Those who have the time, strength and will can opt to do an additional loop either along the lake or over the summit on the right to the Badus Hut (2503 m) at the foot of the Pazolastock. A refreshing plunge from a protruding boulder at the back of the lake into the chilly pool is only recommended for the hardiest of hikers.

After taking in a pleasant panoramic view of the upper Surselva and Calmot, behind which loom the Oberalpstock, Tödi and other imposing peaks, two small steps is all you need to cross the young Anterior Rhine which rumbles

### THE “REAL” SOURCE OF THE RHINE

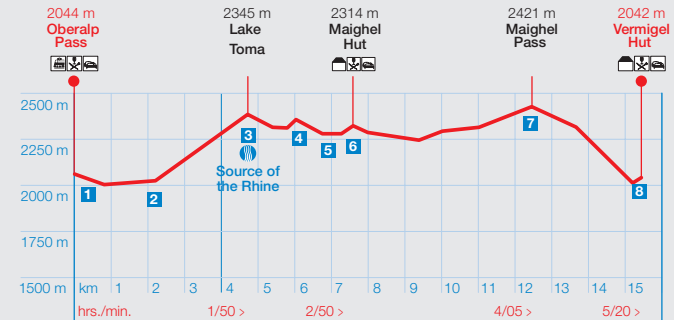
The source of a river is generally considered to be the highest or farthest point (along the river) from its mouth. In the high mountains many nameless streams from various directions all converge in a small lake, which is why the word “headwaters” is often used. Lake Toma was dubbed the source of the Rhine by Placidus A. Spescha (1752-1833), a Benedictine father and a naturalist who made the first ascent of the Badus. If you go by the point farthest from the Rhine's outlet, the Medelser Rhine would actually be the river's source since it flows through both the Cadlimo and Medel valleys and is a good 5 km longer than the Toma Rhine.

through a narrow, steep trough down toward Tschamut through the Plaun Verdastch. (To read more on the name “Tschamut” and early settlements in the valley please see page 42.) Be careful crossing the stream: snow can last well into summer here.

Following a newly built path that replaces the rough descent to the dusty road leading to the Maighel Hut, the trail leads to a sunny saddle (2358 m) **4** above Lake Urlaun. The path then in-



**STAGE 1** > Distance 14.5 km > Time 5 hrs.20 min. > Ascent 1100 m > Descent 1100 m



**THE WAY OF THE RHINE**

After a long, 1,230-km journey the Rhine flows into the North Sea near Rotterdam, Europe's largest port. Along the way, many tributaries transform the feisty little stream at Lake Toma into a wide river that has become the most heavily used waterway in Europe. At Reichenau/Tamis the Anterior and Hinter Rhine join together to form the so-called Alpine Rhine, which flows into Lake Constance. From there it becomes the High Rhine until Basel, with the Aare River flowing into it at Koblenz. After Basel, the river is known as the Upper Rhine, which runs to Bingen, Germany, and is joined by the Neckar and Main rivers along the way. From there the river becomes the Middle Rhine until Bonn, a stretch joined by the Lahn and Mosel rivers that flows around the mythical Loreley cliff near St Goarshausen. Finally the wide and placid Lower Rhine begins after Bonn, flowing through the north German lowlands and forming the Rhine-Meuse Delta at the German-Dutch border. It then eases through a large natural region to spill into the North Sea near Rotterdam.

tersects the access road just mentioned (2263 m) **5**. A few meters beyond the intersection a trail branches off to the right toward Lolen Pass (Pass Tagliola, 2399 m), and a bit further to the south, a spur trail heads toward the manmade Curnera reservoir.

Stay on the access road that soon ends with a well-beaten, often mucky path that leads into the wide, flat area of the Maighel Valley and its many tadpole-choked ponds. The valley boasts the typical flora and fauna of a wetland with cottongrass, sedges and yellow-orange blossoming saxifrage. The moors are green in summer and spring, yellow and brown in autumn. In a few

places peat has formed over the centuries. (For more on the flora and fauna see page 53).

At the “Piogn Crap” (roughly translated as “Bridge by the Rock”), behold a magnificent masterpiece of nature: a several-meter-deep gorge, narrow at the top, carved by centuries of water flowing down from the Maighel Glacier and the Bornengo Pass. It is so narrow at the top that one is almost lured into leaping over it. Later the trail crosses the terminal moraine that the eastern Maighel Glacier left behind after its last advance around 1850.

Soon the trail arrives at another fork at Plaunca Portgera (2374 m) and climbs to the right up to the Maighel Pass (2421 m) **7**, where the idyllic Lake Portgeren twinkles. North American lake trout, brown trout as well as rainbow trout make this a popular place for anglers. The view spreads to the north with the Portgerenstock, to the southwest over the slopes of the Alp Wildenmatten and up to the Piz Giubin near the Sella Pass. The Maighel Pass marks the end of canton Graubünden and the Rhaeto-Romansh-speaking regions.

Traditionally five dialects of Rhaeto-Romansh are spoken and written in canton Graubünden of southeast Switzerland: Sursilvan (in the Anterior Rhine region), Sutsilvan (in portions of the Hinter Rhine region), Surmiran (in the Upper Engadine and Albula valleys), Puter (in the Upper Engadine) and Vallader (in the Lower Engadine). In order to create consistency out of the truly different dialects for bureaucratic matters, a standard dialect called “Rumantsch Grishun” or “Romansh of



*Lake Toma, or Lai da Tuma in Rhaeto-Romansh, at the base of Piz Badus, means “lake behind the hill.”*



*Shy marmots are always around.*



*Scheuchzers cottongrass, a common wetland plant.*

Graubünden” was developed and has been used as the official dialect since 2001. On the way from the Oberalp Pass to the Maighel Pass, one can learn a few words of Sursilvan: plaunca (slope or flank), piogn (catwalk-like bridges often running along the sides of cliffs), trutg (mountain path), crap (rock or crag).

The route then zig-zags along a path (that's also an official mountain bike trail) over alpine meadows, past ponds and down to a bridge over the Unteralp Reuss river (1978 m). A short but steep climb brings you to the goal for the day, the Vermigel Hut (2042 m) **8**, which can sleep 40 people.

**DAY HIKING** This section can be done as a day hike by wandering down through

the tranquil Unteralp Valley for a good 2.5 hours to reach Andermatt. Watch for chamois on the eastern slopes of the Gafallengrat and the Gurschenstöckli, particularly during mornings and evenings. On the right you'll probably see marmots with their shrill whistles. To avoid bike and vehicular traffic, you can cross the Unteralp Reuss near Heuplugg and wander through lonely meadows, passing a rest area, to reach the center of Andermatt directly. Save a little energy for a visit to the Mariahilf Chapel above the village. After a hard winter in 1720 the priest is said to have attached a picture of the Virgin Mary to a tree. The townspeople started to put their faith in this small wayside shrine and in 1724 build a chapel there. **•**