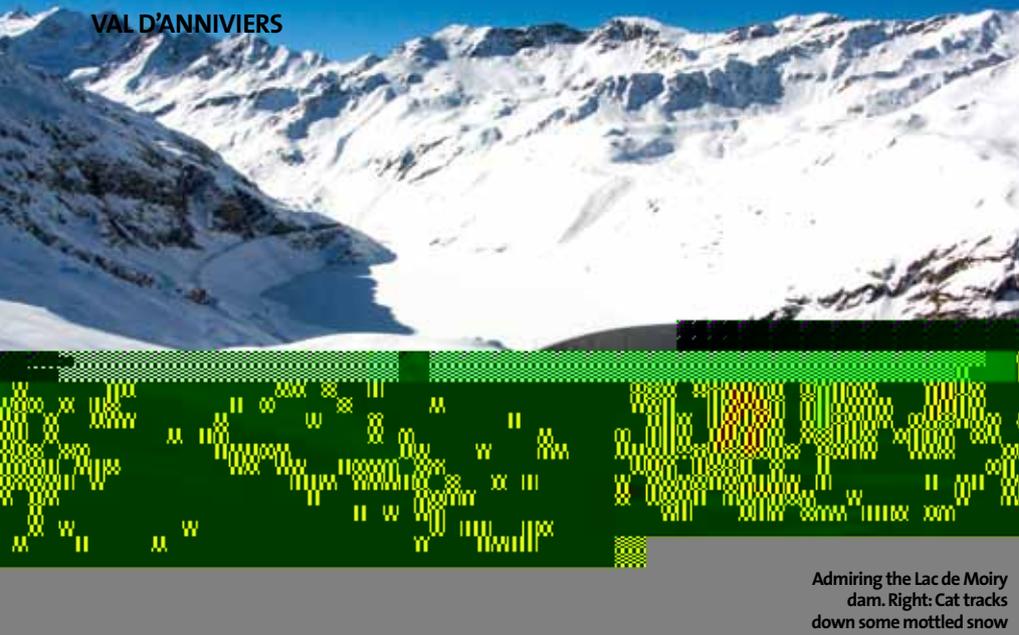




TREASURE HUNTERS

On a hectic off-piste day tour in newly lift-linked Grimentz and Zinal in Val d'Anniviers, Switzerland, seeking out pockets of fresh spring powder is the name of the game

WORDS Catherine Weakley | PHOTOGRAPHY Penny Kendall



Admiring the Lac de Moiry dam. Right: Cat tracks down some mottled snow



“Stay light, turn carefully,” Nick Parks says when the point of no return comes. In front of us is a shining expanse of icy hard-packed snow, swirls of light powder eddying across it in the light breeze, snagging, rarely, into soft piles. As our group follows him one by one, the skittery surface creaks, as if to emphasise the threat that a ski could suddenly drop through breakable crust.

Before we set off, Nick – a British mountain guide who knows the backcountry routes of this off-the-beaten-track area in Switzerland intimately – also warns against following in each other’s tracks. Rather than ensuring safety, using that particular security blanket increases the risk of breaking through the top icy layer of snow.

Obediently, I choose my own line and try to keep weight even on both skis, skidding and scraping around each turn. The noise of our slow, tentative descent clatters off the serene, empty landscape. Unsettled, some big black birds flap across my eye line several metres below.

IT’S EARLY MARCH, AND WE’VE SET OFF from the Corne de Sorebois at nearly 3,000m in the small Swiss ski resort of Zinal in the Val d’Anniviers. Its summit is a short, sharp, skis-over-shoulders scramble from the top of the chairlift of the same name, and a pause at the top is essential, though not just to catch breath, or put off the descent. Spread around us are the mighty peaks of the Couronne Impériale – Imperial Crown – and Nick ticks them off on his fingers as he turns to point them out. The elegantly curving ridge of the 4,221m Zinalrothorn, the tooth of Cervin – aka the Matterhorn – at 4,478m and the still higher Weisshorn, 4,506m, are perhaps the most famous of this cluster of 4,000ers.

We can also fully appreciate the enormous bowl containing Zinal’s 35km of pistes, and see across to its avalanche-controlled (but not patrolled) freeride zone. Val d’Anniviers joined the freeride revolution early, with the zone and a transceiver search park opening in 2002. Since

then, more avalanche-protected itinerary runs have opened throughout the valley.

We’re heading on a classic but short and accessible route from Zinal to next door Grimentz, via the Lac de Moiry, spectacularly penned by a 148m dam and frozen into white silence for the winter. This is a warm-up day for a Mountain Tracks off-piste week, a test of our skiing and skinning skills within striking distance of the lifts.

Instead of leading us down the fall line, Nick weaves around the contours making decisions on the hoof, looking for softer conditions down one route, deciding against it, moving on. It’s a journey through every type of snow, often hard, but I do get two creamy turns in a short stretch that’s just hit the right temperature. After traversing high across a plain in front of the dam, we swoop down a few more gentle pitches, and end with a push along a track to finish in a car park a five-minute walk from the access lifts in Grimentz.

TWO SEASONS AGO, WE’D HAVE HAD TO get a bus back to Zinal, but last season the link from Grimentz was improved by the installation of a cable car costing 28 million Swiss francs. The investment was partly aimed at making the ski area increasingly appealing to intermediates, who can now more easily get piste-cruising value from the 75km of long, mainly red runs covered by the joint lift pass.

It nonetheless caused some controversy in an area that still has a number of long, challenging drag lifts and just one tough piste between the two resorts, plus numerous off-piste fans who grumbled ▶

The noise of our slow, tentative descent clatters off the serene, empty landscape

FIVE RESORTS ON ONE PASS

As well as **Grimentz** and **Zinal** a **Val d’Anniviers pass** covers the nearby resorts of **St Luc** and **Chandolin**, with 16 lifts and 60km of linked slopes, and **Vercorin** at the entrance to the valley with 11 lifts and 35km of pistes. A 20-minute drive or free bus trip from G-Z, St Luc clings to the side of a steep hillside, with a funicular up to a plateau and the ski school base. Sunny, wide, long, mainly intermediate slopes are served by drags and go up to 3,026m; there are also two long itinerary routes. This season the Forêt drag is replaced by a chair, giving easy access from a car park nearer the mid station. It also makes it easier to get to family-friendly Chandolin (they merged in 1998) – particularly worth a visit for the Cabane Illhorn restaurant with its sunny terrace and filling soup (below).





Peak spotting near Orzival. Right and below: Nick leads the way to powder stashes



about the potential for increased traffic on the secret stashes between Grimentz and Zinal, now more visible and so likely to be tracked out more quickly.

Before riding the super-lift, however, we're heading to Roc d'Orzival at 2,853m on the Grimentz side. This takes three lifts, and the final one, Orzival, is a memorable 1,250m drag with a dog-leg, which climbs 220m. And it's not the longest in the area – that honour goes to Becs de Bosson, also in Grimentz, which is 1,600m long and climbs 340m to the eponymous peak. And this is still overshadowed by the one-after-the-other Lona drags, also to Becs de Bosson (3,149m, no wonder it takes so long to get there) which together climb 570m and are 2,340m long. Personally, I enjoy the long slide towards the tantalising peaks, not slow, not windy and giving ample alone time to drink in scenic majesty.

From the top of Orzival it's a 10-minute hike to the start of our run. "Short, but it gets a bit airy," says Nick, advising us to put skis on packs. Since the ridge we're heading up stretches ahead, rocks and ice visible through the snow, sheer drop-offs on either side at intervals, it's easy to guess what he means.

AIRINESS AND MY OCCASIONAL NEED TO use both hands and feet to ascend notwithstanding, the walk's soon over, as promised. A cairn of stones at the top demands another break, this time for admiration of close-up views of more giant peaks – Mont Blanc and Grand Combin as well as Becs de Bosson on the other side of Grimentz's ski area.

Our breath back, Nick leads us on a traverse to a rocky outcrop, looks one way around it, comes back, checks another route, weighs up the risk of crud over the certainty there won't be any, plumps for the route that'll be so much more fun if the snow turns out to be good. I love this attitude; we only get one chance at this pitch on this day, so aim high.

He skis in, followed by one, two of the others. Their reactions are muted, the snow crunches under their skis. I look at the pitch, doubtful, choose my line, breathe and drop. And drop, as through a cloud, into super soft snow, one turn, two, three and then it's over. The surprise gives me goosebumps and I'm grinning as I turn the corner past the rock, before finally hitting the crud.

It doesn't always turn out like that. The next pitch we try is shady, it looks smooth – photographer Penny, Britt one of two Norwegians in the group, Nick himself, struggle as their skis are sucked into a morass of gluey snow. The rest of us traverse left staying high, grateful we don't have to either tackle it or hike up through it. And then we zigzag on, picking up on Nick's good-snow indicators – such as looking for "mottled" snow – sections that look dimpled and that time and time again give miraculously softly under ski.

After half an hour or so, we hit a long shady pitch where we can spread out and each do 10 or 15 pure powder turns. Cold spray explodes around each of us as we take it one by one, and now this group of five who mainly only met the day before are grown close with joint experience, nervous silences at the previous night's dinner table as we all wondered how we'd cope a distant memory.

The run continues through a garden of snow covered rocks that are fun to dodge and bounce off, and as we come to a halt, Nick points to a tree, standing green and lush against the blue sky above us. "We could climb up there, shall we climb up there?" he says almost to himself, before setting off, side-stepping. Britt's other half, Thorleif, finds a better line; we all follow. The couloir on the other side is shady, with a strip of sunshine on the far



I drop, as through a cloud, into super soft snow. The surprise gives me goosebumps

NICK PARKS' G-Z OFF-PISTE HIGHS

LAC DE MOIRY INTERMEDIATE

From Summit of Sorebois, Zinal
To Grimentz Time 2hrs

Commonly known as "the dam run", this is an easy itinerary for all levels.

The entry can be intimidating but quickly eases, for fresh tracks down to either side of the Moiry dam itself. All options are spectacular and you often see ibex on the slopes above. Once below the dam a summer road leads swiftly to Grimentz.

ORZIVAL INTERMEDIATE

From Summit of Roc d'Orzival, Grimentz

To St Jean Time 2hrs

This hidden gem behind Grimentz reputedly holds the best powder in the valley. Lots of variety awaits, with options galore in a real wilderness setting.

THE THERMAL RIDGE ADVANCED

From Summit of Sorebois, Zinal
To Grimentz Time 2hrs

The most compelling line between Zinal and Grimentz includes a bit of everything – a technical ridge, trees, steeps, powder meadows and a five-minute boot pack.

EAST SIDE OF LONA ADVANCED

From Col du Becs de Bosson, Grimentz

To Grimentz Time 2hrs

A real ski on the wild side. Involves a 15 to 30-minute boot pack but worth every step.

DIRECT TO MOTTEC EXPERT

From Summit of Sorebois, Zinal
To Mottec Time 1hr

One of the most challenging and beautiful descents in the valley. It's for accomplished freeriders only, and only possible in stable conditions. Continuously steep and committing throughout, descents can be planned to coincide with the Mottec bus service back to Zinal or Grimentz.





side. Nick, Thorleif and Stuart, the final member of our group, all find beautiful lines down it, slipstreams of powder evaporating behind them, excited whoops floating up towards me while I wait my turn.

I've already picked my line, a clear untracked swoop towards the sun on the far right of the couloir, a sharp turn along the ridge, a drop straight down to the group. The snow is amazing; I reach the sun and as I turn lose it slightly, then, recovering, slash deeply into the snow spraying it all over myself and truly wallowing before bouncing out to continue the run. It's an awesome feeling.

WE KEEP GOING, HITTING POCKET AFTER pocket of miraculously soft snow, agreeing that we'll continue past the traverse to a lift and skin out. It's hard work. Our kick turns are rusty, the sun is beating hard, stomachs are rumbling. But the hunger to make the most of these conditions is greater, and the promise of five flavours of tarte flambées at the Florioz restaurant in Grimentz keeps us going. Back at the ski area, we speed down to it through slushy bumps as one, riding the high of our shared adventure.

Our kick turns are rusty, the sun is beating hard, stomachs are rumbling

Sated, it's finally time to ride the new cable car, and it's impressive, taking less than eight minutes to whisk us back to Zinal. The views are as breathtaking as the technology that put it here, and after the exertions of the day, far better than waiting for a bus.

Pottering Parks-style back to base, we search for mottled snow amid cruddy off piste under the cable car, then head back up to the Corne de Sorebois to cruise past paragliders along the col. Clipping the edges of the designated freeride area, we swerve it in the too-warm afternoon conditions, in favour of a final skiddy piste to valley floor.

We talk it all over in Zinal's coolly unorthodox Bar e Vox, decorated with pieces of helicopter and red and white wood partitions salvaged from the old Tracuit mountain refuge. And again back at Ski Zinal's laid-back Chalet Edelweiss where we're staying. Then we're all in bed by 10pm; the combination of exertion, emotional rollercoasting and personal challenge brings a feeling of weariness combined with total satisfaction that only comes from experiences like these. And it's only day one. ■

► NEED TO KNOW

A week's guided off-piste adventure with Mountain Tracks (mountaintracks.co.uk), staying half board in Ski Zinal's Chalet Edelweiss costs £1,295 per person. Nick Parks' Grimentz-Zinal Backcountry Adventures (backcountryadventures.co.uk) also runs day tours in the area. Ski Zinal (skizinal.com) offers weeks in Chalet Edelweiss from CHF1,180, chalet board. A Swiss Transfer Ticket for international visitors costs £92 and covers return train/PostBus transfer from Swiss airports to resorts. Find out more at myswitzerland.com.



Clockwise from top left: Cat wallows in the white gold; Eric Kendall heads into Mottec; Skinning towards Grimentz



MORE REASONS TO VISIT VAL D'ANNIVIERS



Easy, scenic transfer

Fly into Geneva, hop on a train in the airport station, which takes a couple of hours to reach Sierre, and the link with the yellow PostBus. It winds on up via rustic villages, until a change to another waiting bus in larger, laid-back Vissoie, where geraniums decorate the chalets. Bus drivers move luggage, and the journey winds on, until about three hours after leaving Geneva you're able to get off right outside Ski Zinal's Chalet Edelweiss.



Ski Zinal Eric and Penny Kendall

first visited Zinal in 2004, following their powder noses on the recommendation of a mountain guide. This led them to start Ski Zinal in 2009, a pretty renovated former auberge in the village of Mottec, between Grimentz and Zinal at the end of an off-piste itinerary run from Zinal and served by ski bus. Eric and Penny's knowledge of the area is vast and the service includes a tour of the ski area. Scott test skis available in the chalet.



A grand plan

Last season's new 125-person G-Z cable car was the culmination of a seven-year project and the latest step in Val d'Anniviers' long, gradual plan to broaden its appeal, which started with the merging of the five resorts/lift companies in the valley on to one pass. Future plans include an easier piste from Grimentz to Zinal to complement the black, and replacement of drag lifts, including the consecutive Lona 1 and 2, which climb 2,340m in Grimentz, scheduled for 2017.

FAST FACTS SIX-DAY LIFT PASS CHF280 // MORE INFO valdanniviers.ch

ZINAL 1,670m	GRIMENTZ 1,570m	ST LUC 1,650m	CHANDOLIN 2,000m	VAL D'ANNIVIERS	SLOPES 1,340m to 3,026m	LIFTS 57	PISTES 220km	DIFFICULTY 36% 52% 12%	SNOWMAKING 14%

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