

The Valais Tour Fit but 40, the girl's perspective!

For those of you considering a mountain bike tour or perhaps you have idly wandered onto the OTP web site as a distraction from your work and you begin wondering whether the Valais Tour would be the one for you... read on! Having spent a week this summer (July 2008) riding the Valais Tour I vowed I would share the experience... it would be just too selfish not to. The week was probably the best week I have ever spent on my bike and the Valais Region is truly beautiful.

If you like being outside in stunning scenery, enjoy mountain views, and love riding a mountain bike on fabulous trails and single track and also like the quality things in life... comfy hotels, delicious food and the odd glass of wine... then this is the tour for you!

Arrival

We arrived at Nendaz late on Saturday afternoon to be met by Chris our guide for the week, Jeff the OTP boss and his faithful partner in crime, Rocky the golden retriever. Soon we were extremely comfortably settled into the Hotel Les Etagnes and were able to watch the end of the Tour de France Alp d'Huez stage in the bar. Later that evening we discussed tomorrow's route over a delicious dinner (Arno's wife proved to be a stunning cook). A 9:30am start was negotiated over a glass of wine.

Day 1 - The Start!

Chris our guide in yellow and Jeff & Rocky joined us for the first descent.



Day 1 of the Valais Tour provides a great introduction to the stunning scenery and fantastic trails that will be with you throughout the week. We started by taking the Tracouet cable car up the mountain. The week also happened to be the Alpine Horn music festival and our start to the tour was heralded with the haunting melodies of the horn. The scene by the lake at the top of the mountain was something to behold - stunning blue still water, the trio of alpine horns and a solo echo returning the tune from across the water. Jeff couldn't quite take the credit for organising this at the start of the tour but what a beginning!



Now down to the serious business of mountain biking...

I had been quite apprehensive prior to coming on our holiday with thoughts, I suspect, which are quite common amongst the fairer sex - "Will I be able to manage the trails?" "What if I have to walk it all?!" "How many times am I going to hit the ground?!"

Now my husband, Phil, has little time for this sort of pondering. "Of course you'll be fine." is his normal sort of response.

Usually uttered just prior to me departing company with my bike on a near vertical drop! At home I hadn't been convinced. I would describe myself as a relatively fit (but 40!) cyclist, who can ride for a good number of hours each day but certainly no speed merchant or down hill specialist!

I started the first trail trying to remain positive and determined to enjoy it - after all I was on holiday!

My fears however were soon put to rest - what a great trail it was!



The tracks were fabulous, a great mix of singletrack and wider paths cutting through the mountainside. We headed for the bottom of the Tortin chair lift to gain access to the Mont Fort cable car, but such was our glee we decided to ride up the path under the chair lift to the cable car itself. A few kilometres of relatively easy climbing, a bit of sweat and some glorious sunshine soon helped us to our destination where we enjoyed a coffee whilst we waited for the next cable car.

At the top of the Mont Fort we took in the views and then started our descent picking our way through a stony piste, Phil and Chris swooping round the bends, and me following a little more sedately but with the same thrill and fun level!

We took a late lunch at the top of the Les Ruinettes and then descended back into Nendaz down beneath the Tracouet cable car.

What a day! We covered 50km, finishing slightly earlier than we might have done (being serious viewers of the Tour de France!) - as there was an option to go back up the tracouet lift and descend back into Nendaz on a different run. However we decided to finish the day on a high from our fabulous descent, enjoy a luxurious shower (you need to experience it to appreciate it!) and catch up on the days action in the Tour prior to another delicious meal. This time in a local restaurant, enjoying a chabonnade (a mini barbecue at your table where you cook your own steak and feast on chips and salad!).



Day 2

Day 2 was a longer day with us needing to cover 68km to reach the village of Leukerbad. We left Nendaz and descended until we were able to traverse across the mountainside, following the line of the 'bisse'. A bisse is an very old mini canal which is a couple of feet wide and there is a network of them throughout the Valais region. Some of the riding proved quite tricky as the paths were very narrow and there were steps up and down and bridges to cross. Phil was able to ride the whole of the



traverse but I hopped on and off my bike at times to surmount various obstacles. Chris our guide was superb and talked us through the trail ahead. He quickly got to know my ability and what I was happy / not happy to ride and was able to advise me on the forthcoming tracks. There was no pressure for me to ride anything I felt uncomfortable with and plenty of encouragement and celebration when I did accomplish a awkward section. Chris challenged Phil to ride all the tricky bits and took great delight in watching him handle his bike (jammy bugger!).

After 10km of bisse we descended into the village of Vex and enjoyed a coffee and sticky pastry from the local patisserie. (Girls - there is nothing better than being able to tuck into a large delicious cake knowing you are working off the calories!)

More sections of fantastic single track and trails (including the jungle trail...) and we finally ended up in the valley. Here we needed to head towards Sierre riding along the concrete cycle

track by the river - into a headwind. As is only right - the boys took the lead - after all one was the guide and the other my husband! And I cracked the whip from my sheltered position behind, tucked nicely out of the wind "Faster lads, come on lets time trial it!"



30 minutes later we had reached our destination and caught the funicular train up to Montana. From here we had a 6km climb (reasonable tracks and hard surface) to the wooden cross at the top of Mont Bonvin. A little café proved the highlight at the top with a extremely affable, if a little wacky, proprietor who told us to help ourselves to drinks out of the water trough (where they were cooling) and insisted I had his rhubarb crumble cake (even though I asked for the plum cake several times in my very best French!) He did however prove right as the cake was served warm and gooey and simply delicious!

We then were ready to ride the Montana descent - known as the best single track descent in Switzerland! And we would agree... kilometre on kilometre of pure single track through woods, across the mountainside, breathtaking views, tricky sections to make you concentrate and single track that just went on, and on, and on...



You have to ride it to know how good it is!

The day finally finished at the bottom of the 8km hill climb up to Leukerbad. Jeff is normally waiting to pick clients up in his 4WD people carrier and bike rack!. We had however decided as true roadies to ride the climb and earn our dinner! It seemed a good idea at the time!... 4 km into the climb the idea was less good and things were getting distinctly hot. However I rounded one of the hairpins and there was Jeff, armed with wet sponges, in true support style, encouraging and cheering us on. Refreshed and motivated, I carried on and we arrived in

Leukerbad and cycled to our hotel, (be warned the hotel isn't the one sited at the bottom of the village!) ready for a quick bath and delicious dinner.

Dinner on day 2 was at the Chinchilla restaurant and following Jeff and Chris's example we opted for the Chinchilla spaghetti (please note this is the name of their house special - we didn't eat chinchilla - honest!)

Day 3

Day 3 was spent riding trials around Leukerbad. The riding is so diverse and varied - all with incredible views and scenery. We did 3 major loops / runs. The first was switchback city with technical tight corners, tree roots by the million and exposed steep tracks (mmmmm.... I elected to take the photos and keep out of trouble, riding on the straight bits!)



The second loop I christened "The Girls Route" - a fast but safe loop on fantastic tracks and trails through stunning woods and out high on the mountainside. You couldn't not enjoy and appreciate this trail.

After some consultation the third run chosen was a highly technical twisty path down the hillside. A walkers trail with many steps cut into the track - rideable only for the very experienced, but worth seeing (and walking) for all! I wanted Phil to have his challenge for the day and I was happy to walk part of the way and ride as we got further down towards the village. Jeff joined us for this trail - wanting to try out "the Wombat" - his new Kona downhill bike! (more akin to riding on a sofa...?!)



We arrived back at the hotel by 4:30pm in time to collect our swimming things and head for the Leukerbad Spa. There are over 20 spa baths in Leukerbad all utilising the naturally heated water from the local springs. As I floated lazily around, lay on the bubble beds and looked at the mountains surrounding the village I reflected that as far as days went - there could not have been a more perfect day!

Day 4

Day 4 was another long day with us needing to reach Grachen by the evening. The day also included some of the most spectacular traverse across alpine mountainside, swooping single track and the odd cow blocking the way!



The riding in the Valais region proved so varied and during Day 4 we also encountered a fabulous rocky twisty descent (I made most of the bends on the bike!) with the mountainside falling away at the side of the path! The track really was as hard as you wanted to make it with Phil haring off down the descent like a madman! I opted for a much more conservative pace, and took pleasure in making it round the bends, awarding myself points for bravery for riding some of the safe but exposed single track and making it down some of the steeper loose rock sections without getting off the bike.



We met up with Jeff at the bottom of the descent and climbed into the Beast Deluxe (his people carrier with bike rack!) for a well earned lift up to Grachen. That night we dined in a local restaurant and continued to enjoy excellent food (lamb fillet with honey and thyme hit the spot for me!) and the odd glass of wine. The hotels and the fabulous food really added to the whole tour. Although we were there for the mountain biking the welcoming hotels and carefully chosen restaurants really did add an extra dimension to the holiday - a MTB gastro tour!

Day 5

Day 5 saw us leave Grachen and make the last point to point journey to Zermatt. We took the cable car up to Seetal with stunning views across the swiss mountain range. Following a quick photo session we embarked on the descent - all of us initially by foot across a glacial boulder field! The boulders soon gave way to smaller rocks and then finally a path emerged, for me slightly further down the descent than for the others but soon enough!



It felt like riding on the top of the world. Fantastic tracks leading into no where...



We swooped down to below the tree level and the fun started within the woods. Some gnarly tree roots (but not too many) and some tricky corners challenged us all and I took the opportunity to catch some action on film.



Lunch stop was at the "crows nest" - a little mountain side restaurant perched on the top of a rockface with stunning views. The afternoon provided riding of equal quality and we took in mile after mile of fire track, single track and beautiful paths traversing across the mountainside.



Over the 6 days of the tour we rode a huge variety of tracks - hairpins, woodland, rocky descents, alpine meadows, mountain side traverses - the diversity was amazing. The views were always fabulous and just when you thought it couldn't get any better... it did!

We finished the day cycling up to Zermatt along cycle tracks and then the last 3km following the road.

Zermatt is a vehicle free town and the only traffic hazards are the electro carts that whizz through the pedestrian streets - with no traffic rules!!

We arrived at the Hotel Couronne, an extremely lavish 3 star hotel which provided excellent accommodation for our last two nights. For those of you who don't know Zermatt it is a great town with an eclectic mix of climbers, walkers, mountain bikers and tourists all enjoying the hubbub of the shops (sports/outdoor shops galore!) and the restaurants and bars. Towering over the town is the Matterhorn asserting its authority and magnitude on all.

Day 6



The final day of the tour and we didn't want it to end! The last day of the tour takes in the Downhill Run - riding from Zermatt down to Brig. Lots of down hill swoops and fun - and just the Gebidum Pass standing in the way!

The day starts with a great descent out of Zermatt and heads down towards Tasch, taking in a mixture of woodland paths and tracks.

The first few kilometres was fairly easy going with lots of fun and fast riding. Once we reached Stalden we took the telecabin to Gspion where we needed to start our serious uphill stretch to conquer the Gebidum Pass. The climbing was on a mixture of narrow and wider paths winding their way up through



the trees and around the mountainside. I was determined to ride the whole way and soon my legs were burning! We stopped fairly often - to admire the view of course and allow our legs just to recover slightly before we pressed on.

Our drinks stop took place 2/3rds of the way up the mountain pass at a shepherds hut! There was no one to serve us but coke chilling in the water trough and payment into the honesty box served us well. Sadly I cant see this system working quite so well in England....!

We continued to ride up, and up and finally my legs refused to work any longer! I had to walk the last part of the climb and the top 10m had even defeated Chris and Phil! The path opened out onto a tremendous open plateau just in time to catch the only rain we had in the whole of the week. Thunder rumbled and the clouds grew black but we actually escaped with just a little rain on our backs - nothing compared to our English downpours, and it was warm too!



From the top of the Gebodum Pass we started our final descent down into Brig. The descent was a great mix of stony track and single track winding its way down the mountainside. To add interest we enjoyed a range of paths, bridges and waterfalls before we finally popped out at the bottom of the descent to meet Jeff outside the local bike shop in the town.



We had finished the Valais tour in style!



Reflections:

A truly fabulous week. Both Phil and I felt that we would both love to repeat the whole experience - the very next week if holiday plans had allowed! The Valais Tour provides all things to all riders. It provided the challenge and technical demands for experienced riders who like to ride fast and hard and yet it also provided a fantastic week's riding for myself, taking things slightly more steadily but still riding the majority of the trails. Yes I fell off - twice! Both times on slippery mud rather than on any of my more daring moves (but isn't that always the case!). We rode from 9:30am each morning through to mid afternoon but with stops for coffee, cake, photos and lunch the riding was a pleasure - with achy legs at times but no saddlesores! Chris proved to be a superb guide and tailored the exact route to meet our needs and although the Valais Tour follows the same general route no two tours are exactly the same as Chris modifies some of the choice of path depending on the riders wishes - hectic down hillers can be accommodated as well as cross country riders. What every Valais Tour provides is the same stunning scenery, quality single track and an array of highlights throughout every single day.

I have not been commissioned to write this diary (!)... the tour truly inspired me and I wanted to share our experience with others. Jeff and Chris were the most amenable and helpful support crew and made our holiday the best ever!

You have to try it for yourself to know how good it is!

