

Notes du Rhône

We've all got our favourite trails haven't we? Well get this — your new favourite trail is in the Valais Alps. It's a lumpy corner of Switzerland that's got it all...

📍 & 📷 Dan Milner



Everyone has his or her favourite trail, right? It might be one you ride every week, the one where you know every swooping bend and shock-stuttering root, or it might be one you only get to hit a couple of times a year. Either way, it's usually the one you picture in your mind's eye every time you want an escape from the daily toil. Just close your eyes and you can picture it as if you rode it yesterday.

But even favourite trails, if I can say it, can seem at times a little repetitive, a little staid. Variety is the spice of life after all and there's nothing like swooping along a new trail, never knowing what lies in store for you around the next switchback, to ignite your senses and fill your body full of endorphins.

So imagine spending the best part of a week riding Alpine trails and never crossing the same track twice. Enter the OTP's Tour de Valais: a four-day spin through a lumpy corner of Switzerland that takes you from one side of the Rhône region to the other, by any means necessary, but mostly on lovely singletrack.

I already have a favourite trail. It starts in Switzerland and ends in France somewhere on the Tour Mont Blanc circuit. But being someone never afraid of topping up on my endorphins, I hastily accepted the invitation to check out the new Valais ride with OTP. You never know, maybe by the end of the week, I might have a new favourite trail?

MOUNTAIN MEN

While riding in the Alps often focuses on being based in one spot for a week, the new Tour de Valais starts in the extreme-ski town of Verbier and finishes in Zermatt, spending four nights in different accommodation and five days on different trails along the way.

While the term 'tour' suggests, to me at least, starting and finishing in the same place, it's a good term for the riding that guides Al Pittar and Chris Patient have plotted across the Swiss mountains. As the crow flies the start and end points are only 30 miles apart, but the cunningly devised route these guys have discovered meanders around every valley and hillside they can feasibly link together to make a solid five days of riding.

It's only day one, but I find myself chasing the rear wheel of the guy in front of me. Carl is setting a cracking pace on the descent. A cloud of dust rises behind him; I can feel it gathering in my eyes, while his wheels scatter pinecones like a thousand scaly mice running for cover. It's fun to be chasing another rider from behind the bars of my hardtail, even a guy on a Turner, and when we pull up at the next junction in the trail I am left grinning from the pursuit. I only met Carl the night before so he doesn't know me from Adam. For all I know he might think I'm some kind of stalker, but for the moment at least he grins back.

The cheery and welcoming group of riders I've joined is an eclectic mix of thirtysomethings that, back home in native Blighty, are literally spread out as far apart as is geographically possible, from St Annes to Blackpool. Having all met through the social calendar that is the Polaris event, they have organised themselves an annual group ride to somewhere 'exotic' every year since. This is their return trip to OTP's Switzerland and they have come prepared, boasting an armoury of full sussers from Turner, Marin and Santa Cruz, along with a sackful of body armour that is delved into at the start of every descent. I feel a little



Suisse - cheesel



underdressed in my padless XC baggies, but then one look at the guides Al and Chris, who are similarly padless, placates my anxious mind.

JUST A WARM-UP

On the previous day the group had ridden a healthy warm-up loop around Verbier, including a spin in the bike park, before returning to the chalets in Nendaz. It was here that I joined them late afternoon as they flipped open beers and cleaned their bikes. Sitting down to a banquet of food I felt glad that, with four days ahead of us, I was starting with fresh legs.

I needn't have worried though.

Next morning's ride starts by taking a lift to gain height above Nendaz town. It's only a 10-minute spin to the lift but it's far enough for one of the group to spectacularly dismount into a stream.

The sun is climbing and already we feel the hot day ahead. "At least his shoes will be dry by lunchtime," I think.

The Tracouet gondola deposits us above a ribbon of singletrack that heads straight back into the kind of forest you'd expect bears to romp through, and as I poke my front wheel down the swooping trail I have to remind myself that this is Switzerland not Canada.

Taking a left fork in the trail, Al leads us onto the ultimate traverse following an irrigation canal. These ancient canals or *bisses*, made of stone, wood or metal, still channel water for miles around the mountain and are followed closely by a smooth, rolling footpath to access them



for maintenance. With a very gentle downward gradient our *bisse* provides us with 40 minutes of almost pedal-free, effortless riding: all you have to do is pump the bumps and keep some momentum. Every now and then the *bisse* crosses a ravine by way of a rickety wooden aquaduct that looks like something from the Yukon gold rush. As I freewheel along the narrow plank on the side of the aquaduct I half expect a bearded gold prospector in tattered britches to leap out from underneath, hollering and clipping his heels together.

GOLD STRIKE

On the other side of the ravine our own gold strike continues, the *bisse* eventually emptying us out on a track which leads us to another chairlift. Although distinctly XC in nature, taking the occasional lift during the Tour de Valais is not seen as a cop-out. The lifts (there are five in all along with a couple of short train rides) allow us to save a little of the energy that's vital for concentration. There are plenty of technical descents ahead that will need it.

Refuelling at a mountain cafe at the top of the chairlift, we sit and enjoy a little pause in the July sunshine. It's not really as if we need it. Day one of the tour is an easy day, with mostly traverses and descents to ride. Al and Chris have done well to work out a route through this mish-mash of interlocking mountains, a project that took them a couple of years to complete and one that could only be accomplished by going out and riding the trails to see where they popped out.

It's on the second day while climbing a lung-busting grunt through Crans Montana (one of the two serious climbs on the tour) that the effort they've put into route finding becomes clear. When I ask why we've not taken the cable car that is speeding upwards above our heads instead of sweating our way up a road to the unfortunately named hamlet of Plumachit (yes, it is pronounced Plume-a shit) Chris replies, "We tried it once. That was enough," adding without interrupting his breathing, "But it took us all day to climb down with the bikes on our shoulders."

Without Al and Chris to point us in the right direction, we would already have missed out on a quiver of great trails by now, and we're only on day two of the tour. This

morning's *bisse* traverse had threaded us along the route of the infamous Cristalp, the Swiss mtb marathon that covers 132km while climbing 4,700 metres and descending an equal amount in one day.

The second night's stopover is in the hot springs resort of Leukerbad. We would end up using a merciful van shuttle steered by OTP boss Jeff Michel to climb the last few hundred metres of road to Leukerbad, but we had earned our soak

in the thermal pools with a spin along a riverside road, a cog train up to Crans Montana and the aforementioned grunt up to Plumachit. Like many resorts in the Alps, Crans Montana is embracing mtb tourism with open arms, realising that although it was once a household name among the *Ski Sunday* audience, climate change may well force it to look toward 2.1in tyres for its income.

TOUR DE SOMETHING ELSE

Although the term 'tour' is synonymous with both pannier-lugging Germans and doped-up roadies alike, our four-day

traverse of the mountains sits at the other end of the bike-riding spectrum Without a bar-bag in sight we roll into the purpose-built bike trail which is still so new it is still an ugly gash of loose stones and severed tree roots; it's a little too freshly cut for my preference, but give it time.

Still, it goes downhill and that's welcome right now. We spin out of the end of it still far above the valley floor. A couple of hundred metres further Al signals a tiny drop off to the right and we begin down what is one of the sweetest bits of singletrack you're ever likely to ride, period.

This is more like it. The trail cuts a long, gradual diagonal path across the mountainside, with a perfect gradient and enough roots and swooping bends thrown in to keep you on your toes. For its whole length it never widens much more than a foot, and 15 minutes after dropping in I burst out of the end of it as if shot out by a cannon, grinning uncontrollably. I have found my Valhalla, a new favourite trail.

It has been a long day, with 60 kilometres behind us, but later as I soak in Leukerbad's thermal baths I find it difficult to relax. Sure, it's easy to close my eyes, but every time I do I am riding that trail.

VERTICAL LIMITS

The 9am Gemibahn lift out of Leukerbad sees us immediately suspended high above the vertical cliffs that separate the resort from the rest of Switzerland. The day starts easy but fast along a gravel track at 2,327m, which catapults us along a wide valley chiselled out between muscular grey rock faces.

The scenery is changing, becoming less Alpine and noticeably more Dolomite-like. It's good to hammer out some speed but Al pulls us up before the start of the descent. It's a wise move and without it we'd have probably piled into the loose, gravelly descent way too fast and

disappeared over the edge of what I note is a very unforgiving drop off the side.

By the time we pull up in Kandersteg to grab a 10-minute train ride through a tunnel and back into the Rhône valley, we are caked in dust. Everyone is on a high and the train is full of comradely banter. The rest of the day's trails maintain the high, throwing in short, technical climbs and long, rocky descents. Even the 400 metres of road up to Moosalp fail to dampen spirits.

But today is where logistics are really put to the test. First a fall on a technical rocky section results in a sprained wrist and the day's ride is over for one of the group, and later a wheel wrecking experience on the last descent of the day pushes Jeff's support role to the max.

ON SCHEDULE

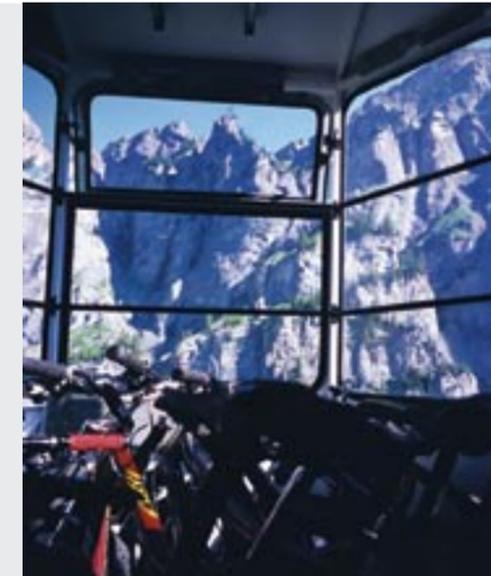
By the time we sit for breakfast next morning however, Al has already been out and about and secured spokes to rebuild the damaged wheel and the whole group rides out of town almost on schedule.

It's with this energy and unwillingness to let anything spoil a good ride for all that Al approaches his role as a guide. At the top of the Hahnigalp lift he lets the group know that it's now that they might want to don their pads, before skipping off down a rooty staircase of a trail with the gay abandon of someone who loves what he does — riding bikes.

This trail, like so many over the previous few days, is fast with just the right amount of rocks and roots thrown in to make you keep your mind on the job. We wing alongside yet another *bisse* canal and down yet more squiggly S-bend descents with the finesse and composure of people who've ridden these trails every day for the last month.

Every section of trail though, like every view through a gap in the forest is unique. Maybe it's the feeling of being on your

bike for several days in succession, or maybe it's the pressure-free atmosphere of the group that makes it all come together. Or maybe it's the fact that around every bend a new set of challenges opens up before us, beckoning, challenges that we set upon like a rabid pack of helmeted delinquents, hungry for more. I guess that's the beauty of always moving on, of never knowing exactly what's coming up, of riding new trails. 



FACTFILE

OTP offers the Tour de Valais as a six-day package, with the first day spent in Verbier and five days moving from there to Zermatt. After the first two nights in Nendaz, luggage is transported so you only need carry kit for the day's ride.

THE RIDING

The tour is very XC with a mix of fast fireroad descents, technical (rooty and rocky) singletrack descents and traverses, plus a couple of big climbs. Elbow and knee pads are recommended if you are used to using them (and are anxious about descending without them), but will have to be carried for the duration of each day when not worn. A good lightweight waterproof is essential, though in the summer temperatures can easily sit around 30°C. Finding water is not a problem en route (every village seems to have its own clean spring to refill from), and cafes are plentiful for essential apple strudel refills.

PRICES AND DATES

The Valais tour runs in July and August and costs £499 per person. Price includes all accommodation (mostly two-star hotels) on a B&B basis, airport transfers, six days' guiding, van back-up and support, luggage transfers and 50 per cent discount on lift tickets. If you self-drive to Switzerland you will get a discount on the package price.

GETTING THERE

Geneva or Zurich with www.easyjet.com, www.ryanair.com, www.ba.com, www.swiss.com from £50 return (plus £15 each way for bike). OTP package price includes transfer from airport. Self-drive option available.

OTP

OTP has been operating in Switzerland for more than 15 years and hosting mountain bike trips out of its home valley of Zermatt for three years. Its guides, Al and Chris have more than 20 years of collective experience of the Zermatt area. Contact OTP on (UK) 0871 871 8084 or check out their the website for further details at www.mountainbiking.uk.com.