



LITTLE SWISS SECRETS

With miles of singletrack descents and seven secret cablecars to access it, the Valais villagers have a lot to keep quiet about. Forget chocolate, in Switzerland mum's the word!

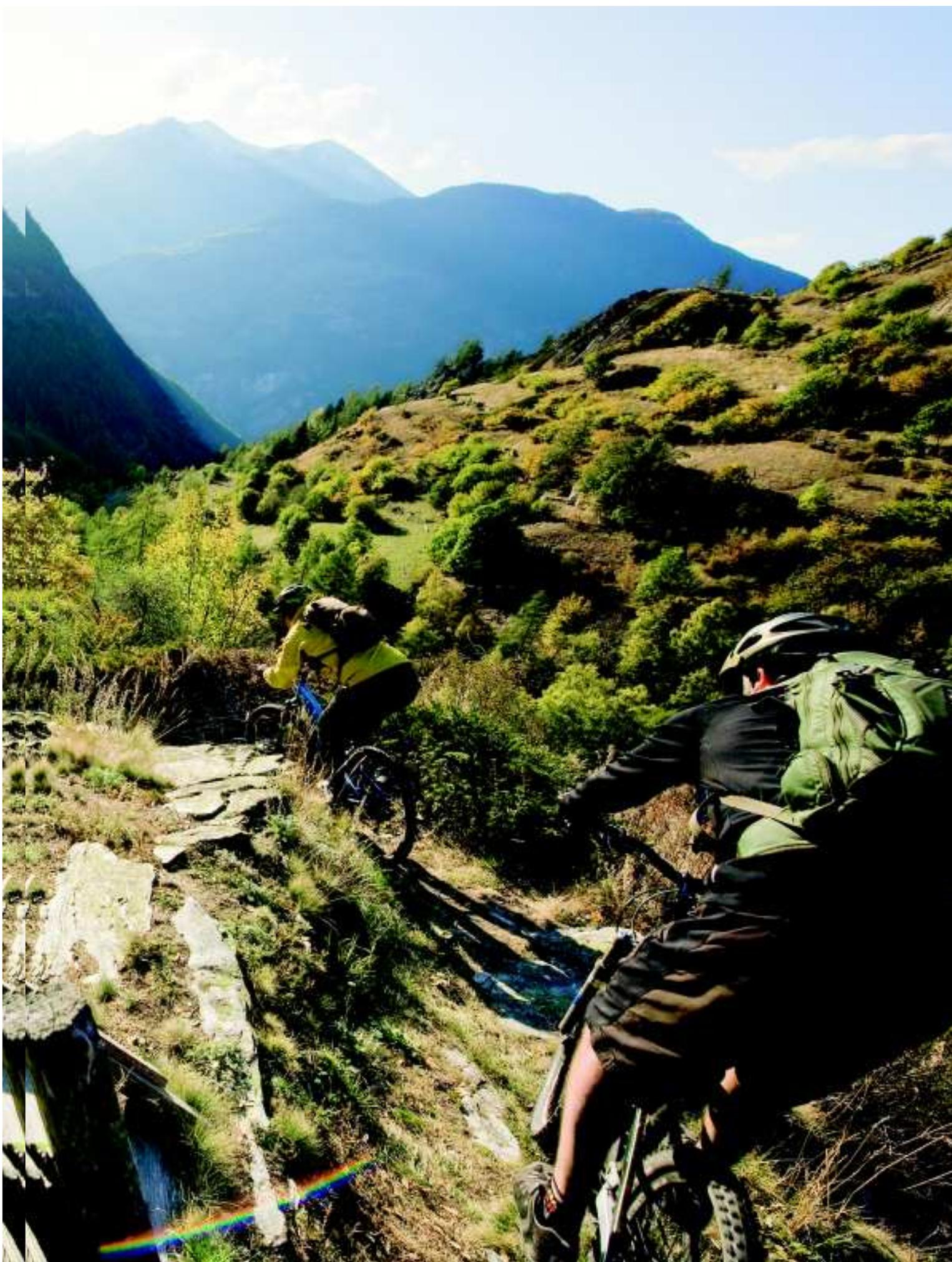
Words and Pics Dan Milner

As I look at the lift in front of us, I'm starting to wonder as to the whereabouts of Rudolph. The little cablecar that we're about to use to rise 600m up a Swiss mountainside is very sleigh-like in appearance. OK, so it's green, but whip it from its cable, pop a couple of skis on it, add reindeer and you have guaranteed employment come Christmas.

Lucky for us the Santa season is a few months away, so we pop the wheels off our bikes, load the dismantled rigs into the back seat of the green sleigh and squeeze in beside them for the open-air express to the trail head.

The green sleigh might be unique in appearance, but it's not an uncommon phenomenon around this part of Switzerland. The Swiss have never been shy of thinking outside the box, so when it comes to accessing the dozens of remote villages strewn about the steep Valais region, they decided that cablecars were the way to go. This was back in the 50s, but as mountain bikers today, we have no reason to question their way of thinking. Lifts mean descents and this one valley alone boasts seven such lifts, all installed merely as a way of accessing the mountain villages. Skiing, let alone mountain biking, was never on the





What bike?

FULL SUS, BIG TYRES,
NOT TOO MUCH HEFT

Most of the trails you'll ride here with OTP are fast-rolling, buff singletrack with great natural berms, but may include some testing technical rocky staircases and steeps too, so body armour is worth considering.

It's not the Megavalanche though, so hit this part of Switzerland on a 120 to 140mm (4.7 to 5.5in) travel full susser such as a Trek Ex or Yeti 575 and you'll be lapping up the vertical with big smiles. Fast-rolling, bigger volume tyres such as Maxxis' Ardent 2.25 will offer enough grip.

Remember these are hiking trails as well, so you'll need to be aware of other trail users.



The singletrack that sweeps down the mountainside is barely a metre wide in places

agenda at the planning meetings. Still, we're only a hop and a skip away from Verbier and Zermatt – established ski and bike destinations. But unlike those tourist Meccas, the twisting trails we'll ride during our two days here rarely feel the caress of fat tyres.

Rising to the occasion

It's early October when we hook up with Big Al, Chris and logistics expert Jeff, from Zermatt-based OTP mountain biking. The lifts and bermed trails at Verbier are now closed and Zermatt's epic Gornergrat descent is buried under snow. None of that matters though – we're here to see what secrets Switzerland's village lifts hold. Our meeting point is fairly off the beaten track and the roundabout directions we've been given make me feel like I've been blindfolded most of the way. Swiss secrets, I guess, are secret for a reason.

Like many of the lifts, our first – known as La Ficelle and serving the remote village of Iserable – was originally the only form of village access, apart from the winding singletrack path that snakes its way up or down the mountain. We roll our bikes into what is the biggest lift we'll use during our adventure, a 20-person cabin that replaced the original five-person lift that had run from its

conception in 1942 until only last year. Despite having a road up to the village since 1960, the lift is still popular with the village's 900 inhabitants.

We should have heeded Big Al's warning, but we start off too fast, with all the excitement of a basketful of puppies. Forced to grab fistfuls of brake, we send a clattering of scree off the 15m drop to the side of the trail. OTP use this lift as part of their week-long Valais tour and Al knows every twist and turn like the back of his gloved hand. We let Al set the pace from now on. He deftly pokes the front end of his Kona Dawg down the next barrelling section, and we follow. It seems more like a bobsleigh run than a bike trail, thanks to its natural flowing berms.

By the time we're catapulted out the bottom of the descent and through a patchwork of rust-leaved vineyards to emerge back at the lift station, we're a little blown away by the ride that's now behind us. "Well?" says Al, asking how this appetiser has gone down. His face mirrors our own broad grins. "I think we'll have to do that again!" I reply, catching nods of mute agreement from my fellow riders Mike and Jez.

With two brake pad burning laps of La Ficelle behind us, we drive a short distance west along the Rhone valley to sample the downhill delights of >>



There's a whole network of hiking trails, all perfect for mountain biking...



The descent swoops through trees decked in autumn colours

It's not all about furious downhills, there's technical stuff too

So where's Rudolfph?

Lucky Santa rests in October, there's not much room with the bikes in here

The cablecars are popular with all sorts of people

today's other lift. Unlike this morning's lift, the DAC cabin is tiny and, as I stand looking at the rudimentary aluminium bin in front of us, I wonder where we're going to put our bikes. "Ah," says Jeff, "the Swiss have taken care of that," and he points to a set of hooks projecting from underneath the cabin.

Despite its diminutive size, this lift, built in 1957, hauls 20,000 passengers a year up 673m to the tiny village at its top. As we pluck our bikes from the inverted rack, I scour the cluster of chalets and wonder what 20,000 people do up here. My answer soon comes in the form of a snaking singletrack that

forms part of a cobweb of hiking trails that stretch across the mountain. Al and Chris's choice of descent leads us down challenging technical sections awash with autumn leaves, one that just goes on and on. It's so long, that by the time we're at the bottom it's nearly dark.

The art of keeping a secret

We start our second day with a dip into the region's best-kept secret by jumping aboard the small cablecar to Embd. The village, perched above a spectacular but worryingly unstable rock face is tiny. The cablecar operates on a timetable but there's a phone that enables

The guided option

A LITTLE HELP TO FIND THE TRAILS

The little lifts around the Valais region are not hard to find, but the best trails down from the top can be.

OTP (www.otp.co.uk) have been guiding mountain biking in the Valais and Zermatt region since 2003. Their popular Chablais, Valais and Brig tours and Zermatt weeks include the use of many of these village lifts for serious uplift. With years of

locally accumulated knowledge there are few who know these trails as well as Big Al, Chris and Jeff.

Groups are between two and six to keep it tight and they run women-only groups too. Five days' half-board including transfers and guiding starts at £349. Flights to Geneva or Zurich start at £40 return (plus £40 bike carriage) with EasyJet or BA.

locals to hail the lift out of hours. It's the kind of service you'd appreciate living in a remote chalet on top of some precariously balanced rocks.

Winter has set in early here and the peaks are white with snow. Despite the mercury sitting at 4°C, when we set eyes on Rudolph's green sleigh we can't ignore its charms. Minutes later we clamber out at 1,900m high Schalp, a village that boasts a population of four. With Al guiding we lap up 1,100m of descent that starts among snow and the golden needles of larch forest, threads its way down the mountainside and lunges into a dusty race-paced finale.

Finally a short hop in OTP's minibus brings us to the icing on the secret Swiss cake. We squeeze into a six-person lift at Stalden to be whisked up to a descent that will take us more than an hour to ride before we roll, wide eyed and dry mouthed into the concrete surroundings of Visp, more than 1,000m below. The descent will sweep along half-metre wide traverses, drop down helter-skelter-like spirals and punctuate a hell-for-leather singletrack chase with a dozen sharp switchbacks. As our cablecar disgorges its contents of bikers, only our guides know what's ahead of us. That's the beauty of secrets. They stay that way until someone shares them with you. 🌀



Switchbacks aplenty if you like your riding fast-paced



"What? I didn't do it..."



An ingenious way of getting the bikes to the top



Plenty of trails to choose from, but a guide can help you find the best

Need a lift? YOUR VALAIS UPLIFT OPTIONS

Rising from the low altitude Rhone valley floor the seven village lifts around the Valais region access trails from spring until autumn. Hundreds of kilometres of trails extend out from these lifts, with brake-burning descents from 600 to 1,100m. The original lifts were built between 1942 and 1960 and most still run as part of the Swiss PostBus scheduled service to access the villages on the mountainsides.

Operating punctually between 4am and 10pm, many lifts run up to 20 times a day, while others have a telephone to call the operator to send the lift down – uplift on demand! They're popular lifts with the locals more than mountain bikers: the La Ficelle lift carries 60,000 passengers per year and hauls some 250 tonnes of provisions up to the Iserables village.

