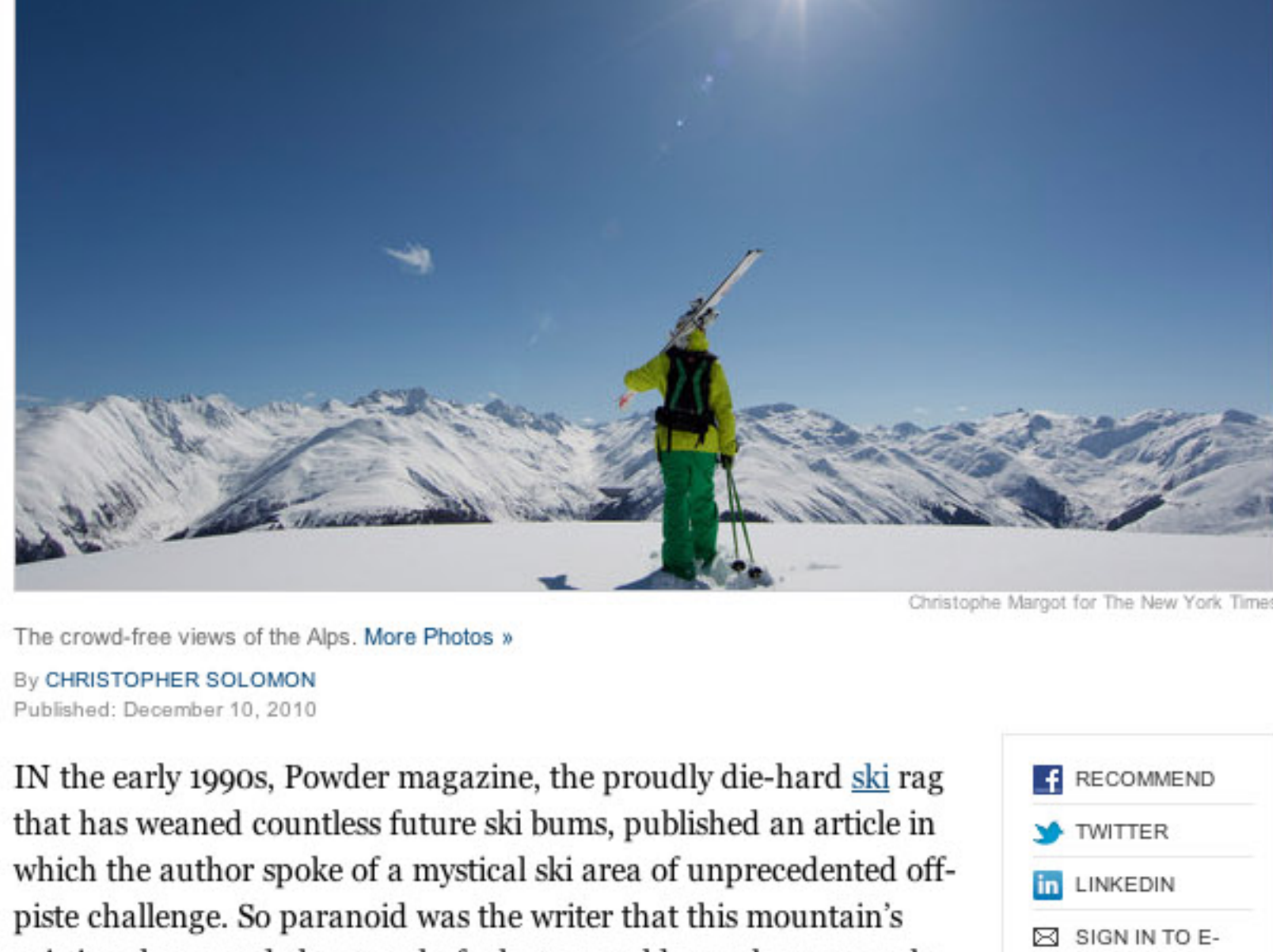


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Is Disentis Skiing's Next Big Secret?

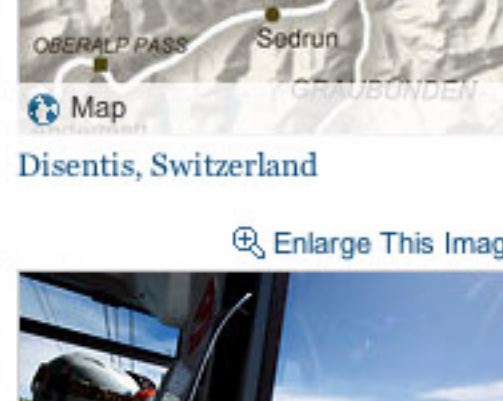


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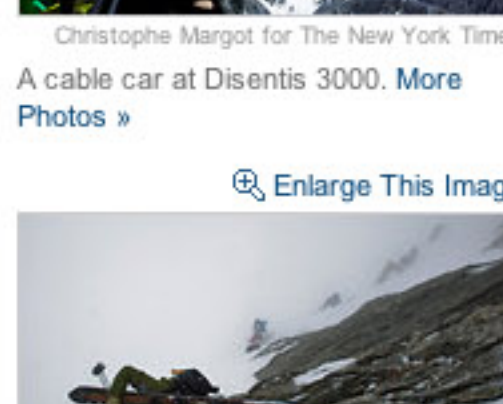
IN the early 1990s, Powder magazine, the proudly die-hard ski rag that has weaned countless future ski bums, published an article in which the author spoke of a mystical ski area of unprecedented off-piste challenge. So paranoid was the writer that this mountain's pristine slopes and elevator-shaft chutes would soon be overrun by, well, the rest of us, that he wouldn't even name the place. He would only call it — tantalizingly — Valley X.

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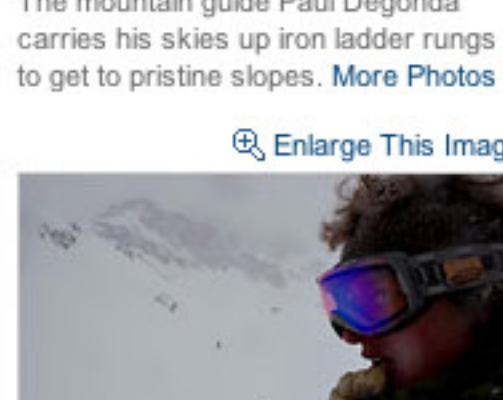
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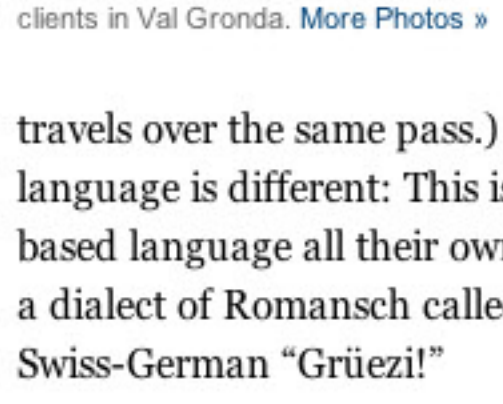
Switzerland's Valley Z. Slide Show



Disentis, Switzerland. Enlarge This Image



The mountain guide Paul Degonda carries his skis up iron ladder rungs to get to pristine slopes. More Photos >



Mr. Degonda keeps an eye on his clients in Val Gronda. More Photos >

Clearly it was time to visit, and fast, before my Valley Z got away. I won't make you hunt for clues. Valley Z goes by another name, Disentis. And fittingly, everything about it adds to the sense that it's a place apart, a half-step removed from the rest of the world — or even the rest of Switzerland. The town of 2,100 people sits on a high step of the Rhine Valley where snow closes off the main roads over the Oberalp and Lukmanier passes each winter, reducing access. (You can still drive in from the east, or — more likely for tourists — take the Glacier Express train route from points west over the Oberalp. You can also load your car onto a train that travels over the same pass.) Here in this isolated nook of the Graubünden, even the language is different: This is the beating heart of the ethnic minority who speak a Latin-based language all their own called Romansch. Most of the inhabitants of this valley speak a dialect of Romansch called Sursilvan — expect to be greeted with "Bien di!" instead of a Swiss-German "Grietzli!"

The people make up in warmth for what the small village lacks in typical Swiss coziness. For better or worse, the Twee Police haven't yet arrived here in this part of the more rough-and-ready Graubünden. Eight hotels — only a few of them of any size — sit along the valley's two-lane road, as do a dozen or so restaurants serving up specialties like capuns, a regional dumpling dish. (Public bus service along that road takes skiers to and from the nearby ski gondola on the edge of town.) There are few stores, and little to see save the ancient local abbey on the hillside and a beautiful little town church. In short, Disentis feels less like a traditional ski town than a working town in which winter tourism is something that happens for several months a year.

A feeling that Disentis is also home to a different kind of ski area was apparent even on the train into town last March. As near as I could tell, I was nowhere near the slopes and still miles from town when the train stopped high in the valley. Yet a dozen skiers boarded my incoming train. Noticeably absent were those twiggy little skis still favored by many Europeans for snugly down the groomed runs. Almost everybody carried chunky powder boards. Moreover, half the crowd was wearing ski-touring boots. Where had they come from? Answer: They'd started at Disentis 3000, the decent-size ski resort that rises above town, but they did not confine themselves to it.

Disentis has nine ski lifts and 37 miles of marked runs. But if you come to ski the pistes, you've made a terrible mistake. They're narrow, poorly groomed and off-kilter — certainly not what an American expects from groomers. What's more, the pistes are where the few crowds are likely to be found. I tried them on my first run and scarcely returned to them again during my four-day stay.

This place is worth visiting only for the powdery off-piste ridges and valleys — accessible from the lifts — often requiring little or no hiking to reach.

And for a little while longer at least, it's all yours.

"When we came here in 2008, there were not many freeriders at all," said a 27-year-old Swede with a deep goggle tan named Anders Floden, referring to off-piste skiers. "We could get up at two o'clock in the afternoon and still get first tracks." Mr. Floden is one of four owners of a bar near the base of the ski hill. (It's appropriately named Nangijala after a fantasy world in a children's story.) Now, as word leaks out about Disentis, Mr. Floden and his friends might get up a little earlier. But not much.

"I've got some professional freerider friends and it's their favorite place," he said of Disentis. "It's not really steep, but there are so many options."

The best and safest way to experience Disentis is to join a "freeride" group led by a mountain guide, who leads skiers to the best wild snow while keeping them safe from avalanches. (In standard European fashion, there is no apparent ski patrol here to bail you out; when you venture away from the pistes, you're on your own.)

The valley's few guides had been booked up weeks in advance — a worrisome sign of the growing buzz about the place — and so a few mornings after arriving I headed out (at a leisurely hour, naturally) with my friend Tim, an expat living in Switzerland, along with Mr. Floden, who'd offered to show us around.

Disentis's size and its possibilities aren't apparent from the valley floor, nor even from the foggy windows of the tram that sweeps you from the village skyward. It is only higher, from the seat of the second chairlift, that the broad-shouldered peaks fully reveal themselves, spilling into high white valleys far above the trees.

"First run, I think we'll go over there, to Bostg, because it's north-facing and the snow is pretty good," Mr. Floden said. He pointed to a ridge seemingly miles away that arched upward like the back of some beast sunning itself in March's strong sunshine. We traversed for 10 minutes, tossed skis over our shoulders and hiked for five more, and were suddenly there, atop the ridge called Bostg. Beneath our ski tips was a 2,000-foot ski run blanketed with nearly untouched powder even though the last storm had swept through nine days earlier. And we were alone. Not bad at all.

Unfortunately, not every run would be so tasty: Sunshine followed by a cold snap over the previous few days had refrozen the warmed snow elsewhere on the mountain and rendered it unpleasantly crunchy, bringing the delicious mystery I'd built up as Valley Z down to earth. Absent great conditions, we had to imagine the potential of the creek, even as we scratched our way down slopes rough and chunked with ice.

That afternoon we took the chairlift as high as possible again but this time we crossed to the other side of the ski area. We stood atop a ridge and looked into the empty Val Gronda (Romansch for Big Valley) and gaped at a yawning, treeless space peppered with boulders. "Gronda" was right — this valley could have been a ski area in itself.

The scene brought to mind an inflated version of Mineral Basin at Snowbird, or a steeper version of Vail's back bowls. But Val Gronda reminded me of no place so much as Silverton — Colorado's no-frills backcountry ski area where a single lift deposits skiers atop nearly 2,000 acres of tilted bowls, scare-your-mother cliffs and avalanche-prone gullies.

"This is incredible," Tim said. "What's the longest hike we've done — five minutes?" And then there was the silence: Again, we were alone save for two specks moving far across the valley. For a country that has so many lifts, and so many ways of getting people into the mountains, this kind of isolation is really unusual. As Tim put it: "It almost doesn't feel like you're in Switzerland."

If only the snow conditions had been up to the scenery. The skiing was, frankly, dismal due to the ricocheting temperatures. But we dove in anyway, our disappointment softened by the rare enjoyment of nearly a vertical mile of skiing. Down we plunged until the creek bed ushered us back to the main valley and the awaiting, nearly empty, tram.

After our runs — and even though the skiing wasn't grand — I felt weirdly privileged to drink a cold beer with the Swedes at Nangijala; the place was filled with Disentis's small hardcore ski crowd and the mountain guides, and for once I was here with them, instead of chasing them. After the sun dropped below the sundeck, we headed back to the comfortable, 157-room Disentiserhof, the village's largest hotel, to scrub up for a stroll about town. We needn't have scrubbed too hard: seeing little Disentis took all of about 20 minutes. We then ducked into the country rococo dining room of Die Stiva Grischuna for a heaping helping of gemütlichkeit with our Romansch fare like polenta alla nonna — granny's polenta with baked pears, veal and cream.

My last day in Disentis, a frigid morning tossed with wind and snow, I snagged an empty spot in a large "freeride" group of Germans led by two mountain guides who'd grown up in the valley. At the top lift, one guide, Iso Giossi, strapped to make sure our avalanche beacons were working. Then we shouldered skis or strapped on climbing skins and began a 30-minute trudge into the clouds. Eventually, out of the whiteness, two dozen iron rungs bolted to a mountainside materialized before us. There was no rope. No safety line. Just our own frozen grip and good sense to keep us safe. We handed up the skis, then climbed the rungs to the ridge top. "Lean back and relax a little bit," said the other guide, David Berther. It was unclear if he was joking.

A patch of blue sky briefly opened, and for a moment we could glimpse the top of 10,919-foot Oberalpstock, which looms over this area. But we weren't headed that way. On the ridge we clicked into skis for the 5,200-vertical-foot run down Val Strem.

I'm told the valley is beautiful, but the visibility that day was milk-jug white, and we felt our way through the soft new snow. As we drifted, a stream joined us, gurgling some happy commentary to our descent. The clouds lifted just enough for us to see an ibex posing on a promontory. How long was the ski run? Four miles? Five? Six? We didn't know. Nor did we worry that there wasn't a lift waiting at the bottom to sweep us back up, and that it might take half the afternoon and a train hop to get back to the resort. The lingering runs, the lingering lunches, the lingering returns — it's all part of the unhurried way that Europeans do adventure. Fittingly, we skied right into the neighboring town of Sedrun and practically right into a steaming plate of capuns to warm up.

That afternoon after a taxi ride back to Disentis, we were the only ones taking the gondola back up the mountain. There was time for one more run, and the guides led us to Val Pintga (Small Valley). They had plans for us.

As we skied down to where the valley merged with another, one of the guides, Mr. Berther, skied ahead. He stopped near a giant snow-covered rock, then ducked behind it. We followed, and found him unhitching the door of a mountain hut, smothered under four feet of snow. I had heard of that famous Romansch friendliness; now Mr. Berther was throwing open the shutters of this cabin and inviting us inside.

It was a former cheese-making hut with chamois antlers on the wall, a pair of old wooden skis on the ceiling, a black-and-white picture of a crusty old mountain guide scowling across the chilly space at a pinup girl lounging in a bathing suit. Then the guides put the coffee on. Somebody popped the top on a Calanda Edelbräu beer and handed it to me. A bottle of schnapps started to circle the room.

And it occurred to me then: Isn't this what we're really after, those of us who talk about finding The Next Great Place? We babble like statisticians about snowfall and feet of vertical drop. But in the end, aren't we really just looking for a place that's genuine, and that genuinely embraces us — where we don't feel like just another tourist banging out turns?

We sat, all 14 of us, sipping schnapps and laughing in our secret mountain hut, our breath puffing like smoke, the warmest we'd been all week.

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE

Disentis is about three hours by train from Zurich, but the more dramatic approach is to fly into Geneva and then take the five-and-a-half-hour train ride on the Matterhorn Gotthard Bahn, which uses the same tracks here as the famed Glacier Express between St. Moritz and Zermatt.

WHERE TO STAY

There are only eight hotels in the village of Disentis, and perhaps 15 restaurants. The largest hotel, and the one with the most amenities, is the Disentiserhof (41-81-929-57-00; disentiserhof.ch), about a 10-minute shuttle ride from the lifts. The 157-apartment hotel and restaurant has an indoor pool, sauna and a freestanding five-level children's castle. The hotel also picks up families and groups of more than one or two people at airports from Milan to Zurich, at no charge. A double room including breakfast during high season (three-night minimum) costs about 390 francs per night, or \$392. In low season, prices start at 230 francs per night for a double and include lift tickets for two.

The Hotel Cucagna (41-81-929-55-55; cucagna.ch) has one of the town's few bars. Double rooms there start at 250 francs per night. The hotel also has a hostel with bunks (four beds to a room) for 30 francs.

RESTAURANTS AND APRÈS-SKI

Après-ski is decidedly low-key in Disentis. One exception is Nangijala (41-81-936-44-60; nangijala.ch), a Swiss-owned ski bar a short walk from the base of the tram on Via Alpsu. It has bands or D.J.'s on the weekends. The happy hour two-for-one beer specials are a welcome relief in Switzerland, and the hamburger royal (with Parmesan, mushrooms, speck and "feta sauce" for 19.50 francs) is a post-ski crowd favorite.

Many locals agree that Hotel Alpchu (41-81-947-51-17; hotelalpsu.ch) makes the best capuns (24.90 francs) and bizozhel, another Romansch specialty (18.90 francs).

For a heaping helping of gemütlichkeit with your meal, Die Stiva Grischuna serves Romansch fare like polenta alla nonna, or granny's polenta (with baked pears, veal and cream) for 27.50 francs in a dining room of carved-wood panels and leaded windows. Entrees start at 15.50 francs.

IN DISENTIS

Off-piste skiing's the game here. A private guide can cost about 572 francs a day. A guided freeride group is about 120 francs. (A lift ticket is 51 francs per day for adults; discounts are available for multiday tickets.)

If you choose to use a guide, you should book one well in advance; there simply aren't many in this small valley. Paul Degonda, a very friendly (and English-speaking) local-born-turned-guide, is one of the owners of Alpentura, a good company (41-79-262-41-72; alpentura.ch). David Berther, one of our guides, can be reached at 41-79-301-28-88; freeride-disentis.ch. Come with your own avalanche equipment (shovel, beacon, probe) and the knowledge of how to use it. Or ask the guide service what it provides.

For on-piste skiing, the ski area of Sedrun about five miles away has more groomed slopes, and they're neither as steep nor as difficult.

For Nordic skiers, Disentis and Sedrun offer about 25 miles of trails, many of them along the Rhine. Skiers can kick and glide to adjoining villages and return by train.

More information on skiing, lodging and guiding can be found at disentis-sedrun.ch.

CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON, who writes frequently about the outdoors, now lives in Switzerland.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: December 26, 2010

An article on Dec. 12 about the little-known, remote ski area of Disentis, Switzerland, misstated the length of time it takes to reach the town by train from the region's airports. The train from Zurich's airport is about three hours, not five and a half, and the train from Geneva's airport is about five and a half hours, not six.

A version of this article appeared in print on December 12, 2010, on page TR8 of the New York edition.

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