

## Part Four of the Alpine Arc: Lötschental-Verbier. The injury prone tour

**Friday 19<sup>th</sup> March 2016.** This time we flew to Geneva where Mark and Phil were waiting for me in the hotel bar. We took a train to Martigny, getting there around 8pm, and checked into the hotel. After Chinese we retired to the hotel bar for a few beers to make sure Phil's alcohol tracker was fully stocked before we started the trip.

**Day 1. Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> March 2016** At 8:15 the following morning we donned ski boots, packed up any non-touring kit into suitcases and left them at the hotel. The three of us then caught the train from Martigny to Le Chable to meet Doug for a warm up day on Verbier. The little single track line up to Le Chable is through a stunning steep sided valley, with every available piece of land planted to vines, and takes half an hour to get to the cable car at the bottom of Verbier/Bruson. Phil and I were renting touring skis



this year, so when we arrived at the station we hiked up to HappySport, about 5 minutes walk from the station in the village of Le Chable. Although I had emailed a booking they could find no trace of it, but the manager found Phil and I a pair of K2 Waybacks each, a 179 and a 185cm pair, ideal for the two of us. These had Dynafit pin bindings on them – light and ideal for touring, but not ones that Phil and I had used before. With skins and couteaux (ski crampons) packed and a couple of hats

picked up we stopped next door for a coffee while waiting for Doug. First lesson of the week – a bottle of water is ridiculously expensive (9ChF) in Switzerland, including at the bar at the bottom of the Le Chable cable car. Doug texted me from the car park while we were drinking the coffee so we walked down. Doug was fully ready to go, with a full pack, all his kit, and his usual laid back easy going approach to a week's touring. We bought Verbier area only day tickets, and headed up the gondola. The previous day's beer was still gurgling in my stomach on the way up, so I was glad to get out at Medran to relieve the wind building up - unfortunately this was the half way station, and I had to get straight back in the gondola. Now, this is not the first time that Phil and Mark have had to cope with a noxious gondola, and they weren't too impressed, travelling most of the way with noses out the window. By the time we got to the top of the gondola, they were in need of fresh air, so a quick ski down on piste was in order. After agreeing to ski down to Attelas, the fast chair that goes up to the Verbier ridge, Doug and I took off, but Mark and Phil weren't behind us. They took a wrong turn going down the other side, and by the time we met up again we'd each had three runs down and were warmed up. We then took the long bump run that we had first skied on the learn to ski tour with Kathy Murphy in 2008 - a lot easier with better kit and better skis than our original attempts in Wellington type touring boots, and modified downhill skis. That run brought us down to the limit of the Verbier ski area, as our tickets didn't cover the ride up to Mont Fort, we grabbed a lunch of veal sausage and onions – uninspiring to say the least. We then went back up the Chassoure gondola and took the run down into the Valle D'Arby, a ski itineraire route that starts with a light bump run into a mountain path cut into the snow, off which are several steep couloirs that can be got into when the track isn't cut too deep. On this occasion it would have required scaling a six foot wall, but the end of the path led to a beautiful north facing slope of around 28-30° for about 300m with excellent snow down into the trees. We topped and tailed this and it then goes into a tree skiing zone which is steeper and tighter, but has excellent snow, including areas of untracked powder, despite a lack of snow for at least five days. As we reached the bottom of this lovely steep tree zone there was a small run out past a bridge of the stream that

runs to the skiers left. I went down onto the mountain path, and then stopped to wait for the others. After about ten minutes, they came along. Mark had come off the bottom of the slope onto the path a little too fast, hit a bump and flown off the path into the stream. While doing so he had pulled a muscle in his groin and was in quite some pain. We continued down to the bottom of the Tzoumas lift and stopped. While he was fine to ski down he wasn't sure about walking up, so we used the opportunity to try out skins on the rental skis. It quickly became apparent that Mark wasn't going to be able to do any skinning and that this was a fairly serious muscle pull. Phil Doug and I put the skins on, and walked up the side of the piste for about 20 minutes while Mark rested to see how it was going to work out, but when we skied back down to him, it was just getting worse. Although he could ski down OK he couldn't move his left leg up and so there was no way he could ski tour. We skied to Savoleyres and then went up and skied down to Medran. Knowing exactly how Mark felt, having blown my own ski tour five years earlier on the warm up day, I took him down to the tourist information, and the Medical centre, where he got confirmation from the GP - torn adductor and no holiday going forward. Gutted, we returned to meet Phil and Doug in the Relais des Neiges restaurant by the Medran lift. By this time it was nearly 5pm, and as we were meeting the guide at 7:00 in Le Chable, we had dinner. The restaurant is actually a really good place to have dinner – excellent fondue (Phil and I) and steak (Mark and Doug). We then took the gondola back to Le Chable where we met up with our guide for the week, Oskar Cametti. Oskar is from the Aosta Valley, and was recommended to us through a relative of Doug's, who is a mountain guide. As we were planning to ski from Loschental to Gryon and the nearest train station to Gryon was Bex, the plan was to leave Doug's car at Bex, and then Oskar to drive us all to Loschental. However, Mark wasn't going anywhere but home, so we dropped him back at the hotel in Martigny, before driving up to Bex, where we finally found a car parking place for Doug to leave his car. We then drove to Loschental, about an hour from Bex, and the Petersgrat hotel. It was gone 9:30pm by the time we got there, so we all crashed and got a good night sleep before the tour started properly.

**Day 2. Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March 2016**

After a hearty breakfast at the Petersgrat, we settled up and, grabbing skis and poles from the car, walked the ten minutes up to the Lötschental cable car. We got there, and bought tickets, just in time to see the first cable car leave. We caught the next one 15 minutes later, and then put the skis on, and took the long chairlift up to the base of the gondola that rises to the top of the Hockenhorn mountain. The weather was beautiful unlike the last time we were here last year. The views across the Lötschental valley is nice, but after a quick photo we



quickly put our skis over our shoulders and hiked the 10 minutes or so along the ridge below the Hockenhorn. This time the calm wind and beautiful sunshine made it a really pleasant walk, and with skis on it was just a few minutes ski down to the Hockenhorn hut. We skied straight past it, and put on skins at the bottom of the Furtzipass, and then skinned up the same route we had done last year, in about 45 minutes. From the top, the view down the valley to Leukerbad was clear and although the snow was hard and skittish, it was a clear run down the valley. In variable, interesting, treacherous, crusty, and sometimes smooth conditions, we took the 1500m descent through high Alpine conditions, through wide, and not particularly steep couloirs, con-

tinuously taking the left hand edge and traverses down into the trees, where we hit the snow covered road from Leukerbad. At this point the road runs a couple of hundred metres above the river at the bottom of the valley, and here was untracked powder, perhaps a foot deep through the trees. Oskar took us into the trees, where I took my first face plant, as I caught a tip. With Doug smirking from behind and Phil whooping on ahead, we continued through the powder down to the hiking trail at the bottom, and then skied down until it joined the pistes at the bottom of the Leukerbad ski area. Leukerbad is situated in a gorge, with one side sheer rock rising up 2000m and the other a gentle piste served north facing slope with a few lifts. There is a cable car that goes up above the cliffs to a plateau, where a restaurant and backcountry skiing can



be accessed. Just as we arrived, the next cable car, which runs every half hour was going so I quickly bought tickets, and we jumped on the tram.

The trip up is spectacular, but as we got the top, the lift attendant stopped everyone asking for Professor Dave. It turned out I'd left my credit card at the bottom of the lift and so we had to grab a coffee at the restaurant and a quick

snack while we waited for the next cable car to come up. By the time it had arrived we were ready to go. The Lammernhutte is approximately four kilometres from the cable car, across a small lake and on top of a 200m cliff. However, there was a party of about 30 high school students from Switzerland with touring skis, or snowshoes and snowboards, just getting ready to go. To keep ahead of them, we skied straight down to the lake, and then put skins on. This was our first novel skin with Oskar, and so it was interesting to see how his pace was. He was definitely quicker than Kathy or Steve Hartland and much quicker than Nigel. Moreover, as long as we were on his heels he gently accelerated, although the pace he was setting was within our limits, it was a brisk pace, which I felt we could probably keep up for an hour or so, but not for a four hour climb. The path snaked across the lake and towards the cliff, and there were clearly three ways up - a steep couloir to the right, a steep snow covered face in front, or a long slow climb round to the left. As we neared the face in the middle we could see a path cut into it zig zagging across the face up the steep slope. Oskar took us straight towards it and then we got to the bottom of the face which was about 150m high. The climb was actually quite straightforward, but did require our first kick turns of the week, always an interesting experience with all one's weight on the downhill ski, followed by flip of the uphill ski of a transfer of the upper ski to 180° (or in my case as close as possible), followed by a weight transfer onto the uphill ski and a kick of the downhill ski to get the tip up, and then bring it round - preferably in one smooth movement, but at the beginning of the week, more like three or four rough ones. After four kick turns we reached the top of this, and then had a short flat plain of maybe half a kilometre to cross to the hut. The Lammerenhutte is a well served pleasant hut, with good services. It takes about 80 people, and was pretty busy, as it was Sunday, and lots of people were going for the night, including the school party. As we arrived, about 2pm, we had a cup of tea and then put up skins to dry, grabbed beds and had a quick beer, before having a nap for an hour - a feature of ski touring, early start, get a nap before dinner. A hearty dinner of soup, spaghetti Napolitano (tomato sauce with chunks of ham), salad, and a packet chocolate pudding was accompanied by a bottle of Dôle between us. I was still in work mode and was talking to Doug about the cancer

course I was working on. After a brief discussion over a beer, we headed to bed by 9pm to get a decent night's sleep.

**Day 3. Monday 22<sup>st</sup> March 2016** Another beautiful day with the sun coming up over the Hockenhorn from the windows of the bunk where Phil's snoring from one side of the cabin had been well drowned out by a pillow over my head most of the night. Breakfast was muesli, bread, cheese and ham, and we stocked up for the day as this was likely to be a reasonably long skin up to the Wildstrubel peak. We left the hut at 8:00, ahead of the kids, who were from the local high school on a school ski trip, into the backcountry. The trip today was a long skin up the Wildstrubel, a 3244m peak that sits above the Semmental and Rhone valleys. The skin included a longish flat start to below the Wildstrubel Glacier with its distinctive seracs overhanging the end of the glacier. We then took the skin up the right hand valley in warmer and warmer sunshine, a long skin at Oskars pace up to the top of the ridge above the Wildstrubel glacier, and then up the peak itself. The view from the top is spectacular encompassing the whole pennine alps from Mont Blanc to Monte Rosa, incorporating all the major peaks, including the Matterhorn, Weisshorn, Dent Blanche, Grand Combin, Dom de Mischabel, Tasch and Zinalrothorn. This is the border between German and French speaking Switzerland (the Valais and Bern). After a brief stop



for a sandwich and having removed skins we skied down the west face of the Wildstrubel down onto the Glacier de Plaine Morte, a 4.5km long flat glacier that sits above Crans Montana. We tried to get as much distance as possible from the descent, but even then still had 2.5km to skin across, even after a long pole. Once we were about halfway across, Oskar asked me if we would like to skin up to the crest at the top of Crans Montana and ski down again, but thinking he meant to ski back to the glacier I said no – apparently he meant spend the afternoon skiing in Crans – an attractive proposition if I'd understood what he meant. However, we ploughed on across the Glacier until the end where we could see the Cabane de Wildstrubel sitting about

100m above the glacier, but with a clear route round the side to get to it. By this time, we were beginning to wilt in the heat, and the last 50m or so to the hut felt like half a mile, but we reached it tired and thirsty around 2pm. Again, cup of tea, water and then a beer was good, but this hut didn't seem to be quite as welcoming – just one elderly lady and her daughter run off their feet with a tiny 1 year old. Outside the cabin there was a military lift which brought up supplies and clearly this was the day before supply day. After a brief nap, we had a dinner of a weak mushroom soup, spaghetti Napoli (again), with overcooked pasta, and a reconstituted pudding. It was sufficient fare to keep us going, and washed down with a bottle of wine we were feeling pleas-



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antly tired. Oscar had an idea of going tomorrow to the Cabane des Audannes instead of Wildhorn, as this would give a more even day, 1000m tomorrow and then a similar day the day after instead of a 1400m day on Wednesday. We were told that breakfast had to be 7:00 the following morning because another group was asking for it at 6am, and the staff didn't want to wait until 7:30, so although we didn't need to leave till gone 8, we got an early start. Doug and I hammered out some more details on the course over a beer, and we were all in bed by 9:30 and sleeping like babies – although very noisy ones.

**Day 4. Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2015.** Breakfast in the Wildstrubel hut was sparse at the least. Four slices of cheese between four people and an inedible sour yoghurt/oats mix meant a few slices of bread and jam formed breakfast. We left the hut at 8 and walked up to the top of the entrance to the couloir we traversed across last night. As



we followed Oscar into it his ski came off and he fell over- gave me some confidence that it even happens to guides. Binding not on properly. We then skied down the couloir, wide and open, and not particularly steep, with ice packed and criss crossed, sketchy snow, down onto the left shoulder of the plain below the hut. We then hugged the left side underneath the Wetzsteinhorn to maintain as much height as possible traversing a kilometre or more down into

the hanging valley above the Lac de Tseuzier. Once we reached the stream at the bottom of the valley we put the skins on and crossed over and traversed up and across the steep south facing slopes of the Schniderhorn, and into the valley of the Schniderjoch. This is a long couloir which finishes in a small lake called the Lac de Tenehet, and the slopes along the south facing sides had all avalanched over the pre-

vious few days, and then the snow frozen into shards of ice that needed to be carefully crossed, before we could start the ascent of the Schniderjoch itself. As we were going up the Wildhorn, we took the traverse across the valley and then up onto the shoulder of the Wildhorn glacier. Once level with the left Schniderjoch pass at 2800m, we could see over into the other side of the Bernese mountains, down towards Gstaad. From there it was



a continuous nearly 2hr, 400m ascent on skins up to the top of the Wildhorn from where there was a beautiful view across the whole Pennine alps. Sandwiches at the top were followed by a rapid descent in untracked powder down and then off the glacier, enabling a combination of beautiful turns and good pitches 600m in total in untracked snow down to the Cabane des Audane, where the host, a priest on sabbatical, was waiting to give us a warm welcome. The usual routine (dry skins, unpcck, beer, nap, dinner) was accompanied by the sounds of the weather closing in, and late on the arrival of the only other guest, a local who had hiked up from the valley below for some pastoral care.

**Day 5. Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2015**

We woke up to a lack of sunshine for the first time on the trip. The weather had closed in and the clouds had come down but it wasn't snowing at this point. Oskar was of the opinion that we should try to skin up to the Col Des Aubane and then traverse across the Glacier du Brochet over the col and then descend to the Geltenhutte. We left the

hut at 8am and skinned for 450m vertical in an hour. However, as we skinned up the weather took a turn for the worse.

The wind picked up, it started to be driving snow, and windblasted as the temperature dropped too. We eventually reached the ridge of the Col des Audannes, and started putting on boot crampons to hike over the top. Oskar went on ahead to scope it out and after about twenty minutes (while we were still trying to secure crampons on in a howling gale), returned to give us the bad(?) news, that it was not safe to continue. There was zero visibility on the other side, and with major cliffs out of sight to the left, an avalanche danger from the



cliffs to the right, and the consequences of missing the Col du Brochet in a snowstorm could mean falling a long way, he figured that discretion was the better part of valour



and we should return to the hut. We snapped skis on and turned round. As soon as we got off the ridge, we were sheltered from the wind, and we had a fabulous powder ski, arcing turns down through the fresh snow and then riding out the last 200m to the hut. We regrouped over coffee and biscuits, and made a new plan. We could ski up over the Combe des Audannes (just 3-40m high) and down into Ayent, a route that would bring us all the way down to the bottom of the snow line above Visp. From there we could take a taxi down to Visp, which is the town below Veysonnaz, on the other side of the Rhone valley, which is linked to Verbier. So we trekked across the Lac Des Audannes in the driving snow and started descending underneath the cliffs of the Combe de Serin. Here we ex-

perienced the unusual sight of wind blowing snowballs at us from the top of the cliffs, with chunks of snow and ice as large as boulders coming off the cliff. Not wanting to hang around in a fire-storm of ice, we pushed on until we reached the forest, and skied through the trees until we reached a road underneath a stationary chairlift. This was the ski area of Anzere, a small resort above Visp. The road eventually reached a ski



piste, and we continued down it until we reached a welcome sight – a restaurant. However, with no one in sight it was clear that it was closed, as was the lift. With the road below it containing no snow, and no one in sight, we called for a taxi to take us down to the train station. He arrived after half an hour and we took the only way down when the snow has gone. We took a train back to Le Chable, while Oscar went to pick up his car, and stayed in the same hotel as on the Saturday night.

**Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> March 2016**

We took the gondola up from Le Chable first thing and carried on up to Le Chaux and then skied down to the base of the Mont Fort Cable car. We took first the Jumbo then



the Mont Fort cable car right to the top and then traversed round the back to the top of the Verbier Backside face, an extremely steep descent down to the right of the Mont Fort Glacier. This is seriously exposed, with a 1000ft fall either side and with the weather fair and the conditions slippery one poor turn could have been treacherous. Doug was particularly uncomfortable at this point but Oscar guided him down the ridge one turn at a

time, and then we skied onto the plateau below the Rosablanche. At this point we switched to skins and skied up to the base of the Rosablanche, about 250m vertical to open up a clear and untracked powder field down to the Lac de Cleuson. This lake, above the Barrage (dam) de Cleuson is memorable for the number of times I've poled alongside it thinking that the poling will never end! Eventually we reached the dam, and skied down alongside it, then through the trees to Siviez, where we grabbed some lunch – a type of pizza with a pastry base – very nice, and very filling. We then skied down to Nendaz and took the lift up and skied over to Veysonnaz, directly above where we had caught the train from yesterday. We then started back over to Verbier getting back in time for a beer at the end of the day at the Relais des Neiges. We then took the bubble down to le Chable and went for dinner and a drink at the Couloir, where Oscar met up with some guide friends to check out the plan for tomorrow.

### **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2016**

We caught the first gondola up, this time with light day packs, and headed straight for the Mont Fort cable car. Taking up the Jumbo, Oscar headed down and to skiers left



across underneath the Col des Gentianes across the cliff face above the Valle de Chaux. Phil was hot on his tail and I was behind Phil, when I heard a shout and saw Oscar disappear over the edge, closely followed by Phil, who flipped over out of the track and onto the cliff face, down about 10ft into a snow trough and then over the next rock face, another 10ft or so and

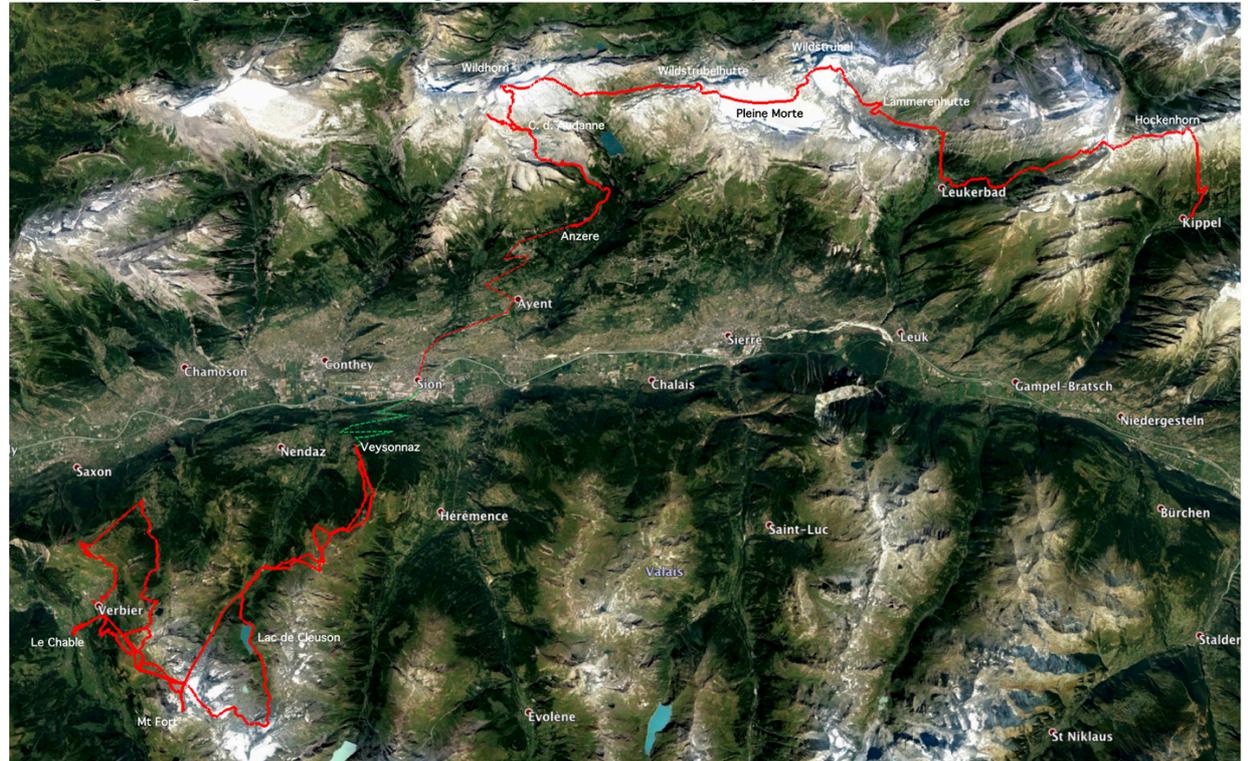
then hit the second lot of snow. As I rounded the corner I could see that both of them had hit a rock in the middle of the track that had flipped them, Oscar forward and down, missing the cliff, and Phil straight over the edge. Phil slid into the second snow batch and dug in, stopping himself right on top of the bigger 20ft cliff above the valley. Oscar's ski was at the bottom of the valley, and Phil's was below the cliff, but to his left there was a snow filled gully he could climb down, which he did. I halted Doug and backed up a little, skiing down the slope before the cliff, and picking up skis as I went along. When we convened at the bottom, Phil and Oscar were clearly shaken, with Phil having got a few scrapes and a sore shoulder from where he landed on the rocks, but they both said they were OK. We took our time to slowly reconvene at the base of the Glacier de Chaux, and Phil and Oscar both said they were OK to go on. In hindsight, the adrenaline was still going, because Phil had quit badly hurt his shoulder, and Oscar's knee was cut, and starting to swell up. Phil had a nasty cut on his knee

too, but they both wanted to press on, so we put skins on and skied up the col de Chaux, with the idea of skiing up the Rosablanche for the powder descent. It's a 200m skin up, which went quite smoothly, but by the time we got to the top, Phil was hurting, and was clearly shaken from his fall. To cap it all, as we got to the top, I put my boots back into downhill mode, and a piece of plastic snapped off, preventing them from snapping back in. Oscar had a look at them and after some discussion, we felt, with the weather closing in as well, we would be better taking the route back to the Mont Fort hut, getting some coffee, sorting out kit, patching up people and stay in bounds for the rest of the day. The descent back down was great, nice untracked (except for our tracks going up), but I was skiing them with one boot with no tension, almost like Tele skiing down. We took the piste across to the Mont Fort Hut. While in



the hut I managed to get my boots back in downhill mode, Phil managed to get some coffee, and ibuprofen down him and Oscar patched up his leg. We then skied down to the village for lunch at the Relais des Neiges. The afternoon, we thought we'd try the Vallon D'Arby, and take Oscar through the chutes there that we started on in the week. However, by the time we'd got to the top of the Attelas lift, the weather was closing in, and as we descended down towards past the Lac Des vaux it was turning into a white out. There was no visibility in the Vallon D'Arby, so we traversed across the Col des Mines, down the ridge to La Tzoumaz, and then across and back over to Medran. We'd pushed it far enough for one day, so called it a day at 3:30, and stopped for a few beers at the RdN. After paying off Oscar, and saying goodbye, we reflected on what had been close to being a completely injury interrupted week, but one which we managed to get ¾ of us through to Verbier. Next stop Chamonix.

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From Lotschental (Kippel) to Verbier. Red line is ski track. Dotted line is taxi. Green line is where we could have gone on the bus to get up to Veysonnaz.