

Part 1 of the Alpine Arc. Ischgl-Klosters. The Silvretta Tour

Day 1 (Friday). Ischgl-Heidelberger hut. Phil, Doug, Kathy and I met downstairs in the Tramserhof hotel five minutes outside of Landeck for breakfast. Phil showed up with a terrible hangover having stayed for an extra hour or so in the bar drinking Schnapps with the locals after Doug and I had gone to bed. He arrived at breakfast fully kitted out, smugly proclaiming himself ready to go. The rest of us finished breakfast and went to get our stuff for an 8:30 departure in Kathy's car. When we got back downstairs the three of us checked out, loaded the car up and waited for Phil, who appeared at 8:35 from the



The group ready to head off from Ischgl – from left to right, Phil, Dave, Kathy (guide) and Doug

coffee lounge having been wondering where the hell we were. We paid up and left for Ischgl around 8:45. Five minutes into the drive down into Landeck, we stopped the car as Phil had left his iPhone at the hotel. We went back to get it, and then stopped in Landeck to get cash, batteries and some stuff for lunch. A short drive up the valley to Ischgl and we drove around looking for a parking place where we could leave the car for 6 days. Eventually we found the underground car park, switched into ski boots, and headed up to by lift tickets, while Phil disappeared again. When he reappeared looking slightly less hungover, we turned the corner to

find a massive lift line. Fifteen minutes into the queue, we finally got on a huge 16 person gondola, the Silvrettabahn up to the top of Idalp, where a wide plateau contains several lifts clustered together. Kathy wanted to do some warm up runs, and as it was nearly 11:30 by this time, and we'd spent so long faffing about we took a quick lift up to the Idjoch at 2750m. It was a blue sky and lots of fresh snow around, having stopped snowing just the night before, but while the pistes were busy, there were very few people skiing off the sides of the pistes, so a lot of untracked snow. We took a short route down through the off piste to the bottom of the Greitspitzbahn and then came through the powder underneath the chair. Back up that lift and we



Doug and Kathy preparing to set off from Ischgl.



Phil not faffing.

scooted over to the Palinkopfbahn and took a knee high powder run down towards the Schwarzrand restaurant. I'd noticed that my boot wasn't fitting snugly into the binding at the front, and Kathy was of the opinion that the binding hadn't been properly adjusted for the boot. While skiing through the powder, following Kathy's smooth line, we were adjusting to the concept of skiing with a 12kg pack on our backs. After stopping for a bite to eat outside the Schwarzrand restaurant, we skied over to the nearby Palinkopfbahn to adjust my binding. A few turns of the screw with the lifties screwdriver, and the skis were fitting much better. We then took a long descent from the Palinkopf at 2864m down to the bottom of the Gampenalp lift at 1975m, along an itineraire route (off piste, but marked), with knee high powder.

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Adjusting to the differing snow conditions (light at the top, heavier down below), was interesting, and Doug was the first to catch an edge. The problem wasn't the minor fall, but trying to get back up with the pack weighing him down, but he eventually made it and we took the lift back up, ready to head off into the backcountry. From the top of the



Kathy skinning up to Piz Val Gronda

Palinkopf we skied down a couple of hundred metres off to the left of the piste, and then into the fresh powder of the piste edge. Laying down tracks for Kathy to admire/judge/criticise, we got about a 10 turns in before coming to a halt underneath the slope leading to the Piz Val Gronda. We switched to skins, and started up the trail behind Kathy laying down new tracks. The first 200m or so vertical were fine, nice skinning, beautiful weather through a fresh track, but after about half an hour of this we came onto what looked like a groomed piste going straight up. Ischgl were building a new lift up to the Piz Val Gronda, and the machinery had already gone up that morning.



Dave finally making it up to the Piz Val Gronda

This actually made skinning harder for me, as my skins weren't gripping well on the more icy packed powder run, but we kept a good pace up to the col at 2752m. At this point Kathy, Phil and Doug started to leave me behind as I was starting to slip badly on the steeper run up to the summit of the Piz. I ended up having to herringbone up the last 15m or so, and arrived a good 5-10 minutes behind them to hoots of derision about keeping everyone waiting. Served me right for dishing it out to Phil for his hangover, and Doug not being able to get up. After a

break and drinks, we took skins off, packed them away and started out across the (unmarked) Swiss border on a short ski across the Val Gronda. For the first few metres, my skis were sticking like crazy, as the glue from the skins accumulated ice and snow on



Making tracks down to the Heidelberger hut

the bottom. It cleared and we soon reached a small peak which we had to boot up with skis on backpacks for about 40m to gain elevation for a route through the Fenga Pitschner valley through nice knee high fresh powder in sunny weather down to the Heidelberger hut, where we arrived at about 4pm ready for a

drink. Phil was still hungover, so a cup of tea went first, before sorting out skins and boots to dry, skis and poles away in the ski locker, ice axes left outside (apparently good etiquette in the huts), and dropping bags and getting changed in the attic room we were staying in. Two large sets of mattresses were set out across each side of the room, which had a very low ceiling with hooks hanging off it. Kathy, Doug, Phil and I took one side, and there was a Dutch couple on the other. The ceiling hooks looked vicious and were to claim Doug's head later on that evening.



Heidelberger hut.

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Nothing too serious but a painful one. Phil crashed out to try and finally sleep off his hangover, and Doug, Kathy and I chased down a beer/glass of chardonnay before dinner. A filling tomato and cream soup, salad, then pork in gravy with Kathy's dreaded



Doug having skinned up the Vadret da fenga

polenta hit the spot, together with a beautiful bottle of Leo Hillinger Small Hill red, a blend of Merlot, St Laurent and Pinot Noir, unusual but stunning in both fruit and intensity. I initially thought it might be a Syrah/Cinsault blend, but was completely fooled. At €23 a bottle in the hut, we considered it good value. Phil did finally manage to try this one having stayed dry all day, when we were surprised by an accordion playing, oompah band starting up across the dining room. Clearly a Friday night tradition, this large hut was easily reached by snowcat from the Ischgl valley, and many people had come up for the night. We crashed out about 10pm and slept well, apparently without disturbance from the Bates brothers snoring duet.

Day 2. (Saturday). Heidelberger – Jamtal. After breakfast the following morning we got our stuff together, applied Compeed to the developing blisters on our feet, paid the bill (approx €60 per head between the three of us, including Kathy's food and accommodation) and headed straight for the skins room. With skins on right at the beginning of the trek out from the hut, we skinned up Las Gondas ridge up to the Davo Dieu plateau that sits below the Vadret da Fenga rise to the Breite Krone in gorgeous sunshine. Kathy wanted to check out the ascent of the Piz Tasna at 3183m. We headed up to the Forclas da Tasna (2820m), the col at the top between the Breite Krone and the Piz Tasna.



Phil at the Forclas da Tasna

We could see down to the Lai da Faschalba lake, which would eventually come out at Scuol in Switzerland. Kathy didn't think we would have enjoyed that route up (correctly) so we turned round took the skins off, and skied down laying fresh tracks into the Vadret da Fenga, where we switched back to skins, and headed up in beautiful clear skies and lovely weather through fresh tracks up 270m to the Kronen Joch. Skinning was fine through the powder, a really nice run, but when I got to the top, again I started slipping on the icier slopes with my skins not wide enough for my skis. At the top, a short plateau led to a ridge at 2980m, and the sign showing us going back into Austria. The wind was calm, it was a beautiful day, and we were, to put it bluntly, knackered. It was 12:45 so we took the skins off, had lunch, with beautiful views over the Futschol glacier,



Switching to skins for the Kronen Joch ascent

and then skied down through gentle fresh powder for 500m until we reached the Finanzerstein, a small refuge hut where we spent an hour or so doing avalanche training. We continued down to the Jamtal hut, a large, impersonal hut, but with double rooms, single beds, hot showers and good food, if not good wine. We got there around 2:30 in

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The Futschol glacier from the Kronen Joch.

time for a quick shot of whisky from my Coldpoles, a beer, some pea soup, and then to get skins, boots, etc sorted out. I managed to get wifi access here and face-timed with Lucy and the kids, which made me feel a lot better. I had definitely caught the sun despite being generous with the sun-cream, and looked a bit lobster like, and all of us (apart from Kathy) now had some serious blisters. An early dinner of some unidentifiable soup, salad, beef in gravy and pancakes for pudding in a large dining hall showed up how flustered the hut guardian was, offset by her jolly husband doling out

beers or (robust) Zweigelt red wine. Kathy got told off at least three times for some minor breach of hut etiquette. We crashed at 8:30pm with Phil' snoring occasionally waking me up and vice versa.

Day 3. Sunday. Jamtal-Wiesbadener hut. After a quick shower and breakfast in the noisy dining room, again with the hut guardian getting upset at everyone we left at 8:30 to climb the Jamtalferner glacier. The weather this morning was overcast with cloud up at the 2800-3000m level. The Dreilanderspitze, the ~3200m peak that towers over the Jamtal valley, was completely covered for most of the morning.

After a short ski down (<300m away, and just a few metres of vertical), we put on skins and started the long trek up the Jamtal towards the glacier. An hour took us to the base of the glacier at 2400m, and I was still



Arriving at the Jamtal hut

slipping a lot on my skins. I had an aborted attempt to engage my ski crampons, which didn't seem to help much, before finally stopping for a cup of tea from Doug's thermos (genius!). We then headed up slowly into the mist on the glacier. An hour in and we had



Kathy skinning up underneath serracs on the Ochsentaler Glacier

made the first col, at 2700m with 280m of steep climbing to go. A quick drinks break and addition of some extra layers (I finally put on my fleece), and we made a final attempt up to the Obere Ochsencharte, the col that separates the Jamtal valley in the Tyrol from the Vermuntschglacier in the Vorarlberg. Under the shadow of the Dreilanderspitze, a few hundred metres to the South that marks the border with Switzerland, the cloud cleared and was calm, allowing us to take off the skins, grab a bite to eat, and then to slice down through 100m or so of lovely fresh powder. It didn't last long however, as we hit breakable crust on the west facing slopes, and soft cement on the east facing slopes with variable snow in between. We scraped through this rubbish passing all sorts of people having trouble on the poor snow until we reached the Wiesbadener hut at 12:30 in time for lunch. This is a smaller, really friendly hut with two Slovakian girls working as

waitresses, with big smiles and really helpful attitudes. When asked whether the water was drinkable, one of them answered "Of course it is – today. Tomorrow, who knows?" Just slightly surreal, but really nice. An excellent Gulaschsuppe for the three of us, and a

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huge Wienerschnitzel for Kathy, with a well earned beer, and we spent a lazy afternoon – in Phil's case asleep for most of it, catching up, relaxing and checking blisters with a glass of Gluhwein (excellent) to keep us company. While we were waiting a man was brought in with what looked like a serious injury, possible broken leg. Apparently he'd been climbing with crampons round the back of the hut and had fallen. A helicopter appeared after about 10 minutes and took him away. An early dinner of soup salad, sweet and sour pork and a cheap but robust Zweigelt (€15 per litre), and I was ready for bed. Kathy however, had seen enough of my slipping around and decided my skins needed surgery. She took a sharp kitchen knife and sliced them lengthways in two from about 10cm below the top to about 10cm above the bottom, so half of each skin could go on the edges of the skis, to try and increase the grip. A group of climbers from the Lake District were also there, and recognised Kathy from when she was growing up, so we left them to catching up, and crashed out.

Day 4. Monday. Wiesbadener – Silvretta Hut. After a continental breakfast (bread and cheese again), we put skins on in the ski locker, with a little more difficulty for me with the split skins, and started out to climb the Grune Kuppe a ridge that takes you onto the Ochsentaler glacier that leads over the Silvretta Pass into Switzerland. It was only 140m or so but it was a hard steep climb, yet the skins worked perfectly. No problem whatsoever with steep or icy patches. Having reached the top of the ridge, we had a short ski down with skins on in Telemark mode. The next climb, onto the glacier



The Bates boys on the Ochsentaler Glacier

revealed a stunning, crevasse studded, serraced glacier. The weather was slightly misty with the sun almost but not quite breaking through. The skin up was stunning, reasonably steep, and in tracks previously made, up onto the plateau of the glacier. At this point most of the tracks diverted south to the Piz Buin, the 3312m peak that is the highest in the area, and relatively easily climbed. However, we were heading for the Silvretta pass and there were no tracks going that way, so Kathy struck out for the Fuorcla dal Cunlin, the col between the Signalhorn and Piz Buin. This is the Swiss-Austrian border again, and while the skin was pleasant and by this time we were acclimatised and used to the skinning, the last 15m or so were too steep to skin. Kathy took her skis off, booted up to a flat plateau just below the rock separating the countries, and dropped a rope. Phil and I had our skis on the packs, ready to go, so Phil booted up first, and I followed up



Kathy sipping whisky from the Colpoles at the Wiesbadener hut.

using his footholds. The climb was steep although short, and would have been much scarier without a rope. After disengaging from the rope, we sampled the poles while waiting for Doug to come up on the rope, something he'd not done before, and didn't look too happy, especially with a 12kg pack and at least 5kg of skis on his back. The weather up to this point had been OK, overcast and occasionally a little misty, but with good visibility. We then climbed over the rocks into Switzerland. It was noticeably warmer on the other side, where we switched our skins off, and then started the traverse across the top of La Cudera, a wide flat plateau that leads down to Scuol and the Tuoi hut. We needed to traverse underneath the Signalhorn, and then across towards the

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Glatscherscham, a 3173m peak. The Silvretta pass is between these two peaks, and at 3003m leads onto the Silvretta glacier, but it is a nebulous wide area of flat glacier, and the visibility soon closed in completely. We couldn't see much in front, with Kathy's shape just about visible from a few metres away, but with no horizon, no contrast, and nothing to distinguish up from down, Kathy was negotiating by GPS alone. We shuffled along for about half an hour until our GPS co-ordinates were in the right place. We were deciding how to proceed when the cloud lifted for a few seconds and we could see the Glatscherscham right above us, indicating we were in the right place. We then started to descend slowly onto the glacier, but again with no visibility and Kathy not being able to



Kathy booting up the Fuorcla dal Cunlin

see even a few feet in front of her she was becoming increasingly concerned about crevasses, so she got the rope out again and we roped up with Phil behind her, Doug in the middle and me at the back. We slowly snowploughed and sideslipped through 2.5km of glacier, with 10-20cm of powder on top. At one point we did find the crevasses, one either side, deep and with an ice bridge between them that we crossed carefully. Gingerly we sideslipped along the bridge, until we were clear, and eventually came to the rock marking the edge of the glacier at 2651m, where we could unrope and ski normally again. We then hit breakable crust, still with no visibility and had to shuffle uphill for a way before starting another slow descent. A ridge appeared on the right, as Kathy's GPS reading told us we were just 500m from the hut and 100m above it. However, the ridge was in the way. While we waited she disappeared into the mist to check out the ridge, and after a few minutes of waiting we heard the call to "get your skins on and follow me". She was now standing about 30m above us halfway up the ridge. We got our skins on and ploughed after her up and over the ridge. On the other side there was still no sign of the hut, but another small valley with a ridge on the other side. We climbed over that and saw we were standing on the top of a series of chutes leading down into a valley. With still poor visibility it was not looking good, but Kathy headed along the ridge, and as she did so the mist cleared and we saw the first markers showing the way to the Silvretta hut, then the hut itself. At this point we could see that the chutes led down to the valley above the hut. My skin flipped off at the top of my right ski so I took the ski off and went to hook the skin back on while asking Kathy if we



Doug coming over into Switzerland at the Fuorcla da Cunlin behind Phil.

skiing convexities in avalanche terrain and poor visibility at this time of day so get your skins back on". Nuff said. We eventually traversed round to a short drop into an open slope that was not dangerous, but as I moved over the edge of the ridge my binding started to wobble, and there appeared to be far too much movement in it. I caught Kathy up just as she was taking skins off to ski down, and she looked at the binding. "That's fucked" was the verdict. The attachment to the ski had sheared and was gone. The binding would just about hold while I was skiing carefully down, but Kathy's comment about possibly having to helicopter down didn't fill me with confidence. We skied down to

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the hut from here and were relieved to have made it. Whisky was sampled, skins put away, and then we went in to talk to the guardian, Stefan and the host Steffi, who had hiked up that morning from Klosters. We were the only guests in the hut, as all the other expected visitors had cancelled due to the weather. We were made most welcome with Italian Schnapps, and were delighted to find that this small cosy hut had a fantastic wine list. To my relief Stefan said he had a spare Fritschi Diamir binding that he could replace mine with. However, it was now snowing and the forecast was for a full day of snow the following day. We would make a decision about the next step of the journey, which could be either: stay in the hut for a day; ski over the Rote Furka to the Saarbrucken hut; or ski down to Klosters in Switzerland and take buses back to Landeck. A bottle of To chardonnay, a Dolcetto Dogliani, a Nero D'Avola and a meat fest later, and we were ready for bed.



Visibility on the Silvretta glacier. Doug's helmet, is visible, he's roped to Phil who's roped to Kathy hoping not to find a crevasse

arrived around 3:30 saying that the visibility was not too bad, but the heavy snow made it slow going. A relatively early night (compared with last night) in preparation for hopefully a sunny Wednesday.

Day 6. Wednesday. Silvretta Hut - Galtur. A bright and early start on a bright morning. Blue skies with a few clouds showed us 20-30cm of fresh snow outside the hut. The decision now was whether the avalanche danger was too high to go over the Rote Furka before skiing out. The Rote



The Rote Furka with slides down either side but not the middle where we would need to

Day 5 Tuesday. Silvretta Hut. Up for a 7:30 breakfast feeling slightly the worse for wear to find out that it's snowing hard, has been most of the night and the rest of the day would be stuck here. Went back to bed for most of the morning, getting up in time for lunch and spent the afternoon playing dominoes. A second group (English, also from the lake district but a different group)



The Bates boys happy to find a welcome and a beer from Steffi at the Silvretta hut

Furka pass is just 300m above the hut back up to the glacier, and the first 200m are safe. The last 100m however, is a steep avalanche prone slope with a final boot up of 20 or so metres. The avalanche forecast from the valley said it was 2, but that didn't seem real compared with what we were looking at outside. Kathy decided that we would skin up to the pass and have a look at it from the bottom. Then we could either go over it, if it was safe, skin back up over the Silvretta pass and out to Wurl, or ski down to Klosters if that was not feasible. So we put skins on and left Steffi preparing for a helicopter delivery of supplies and started up to the glacier. It was a beautiful morning, clear skies, high alps, dramatic peaks and ridges,

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as we skinned up. Our tracks from two days earlier were barely visible in places, and the Lake District's group were clearly visible. It became clear that we had skied right through the major crevasse field on the glacier, whereas the Lake district group had missed them completely to the right hand side, whether through luck or judgement only they would know. We reached the Rote Furka after just less than an hour and it was clear that while there had been slides down both sides of the pass the centre section had not slid, and had a large overhang of loose snow on the top. As we looked at it the other group came up from behind, and it was clear that Kathy did not think it was safe. They had a think about it while we moved on, heading back over the Silvretta pass. After another half hour of skinning we were up on the Glacier and stopped for a drink and a break. The other group went past us and soon after that we heard the crack of a slide coming off the cliffs to our left. We turned to see a major avalanche of snow coming down off the cliffs, onto the glacier below, left of where we had been, but nevertheless a sign of the instability of the snow. As we skinned up the glacier, keeping the steep slopes away from above us we heard and saw three more slides, although not on the Rote Furka. The day was clear, the sunshine was out, but it was still cool enough not to be uncomfortably hot. We made it up to the top of the glacier in about two and a half hours, and then, after a break, started the uphill traverse back across the slopes above La Cudera. This was tricky, as the sun had now started to soften the snow and we were in an exposed situation where slides from above were likely due to the steepness of the aspect, and a slip would take you down onto the glacier below. The group ahead were struggling to cut a path and it was slow going, but eventually we reached the Fuorcla dal Cunfin about 11:30. We took skins off, and climbed over the col back into Austria. The second group had gone and left four distinct tracks. As we switched to skis from skins, we could see a great big open powderbowl all the way down to Wurl, with an initial steep deep section followed by a gentle slope down the glacier. Phil headed off first, taking a wide line round the steep bit and stopped down by the base far enough to be away from sloughing. Then I followed taking the steeper line, but my skis were sticking from the skin glue, and ice build up and I couldn't get any momentum. As I went over the steep part my skis kept sticking underneath me, throwing my weight forward until I double somersaulted down through the powder losing both skis in a straight track behind me. Doug had taken the wider route, but also lost it and face planted into the powder, pushing his glasses into the bridge



View on the way up the Silvretta Glacier.

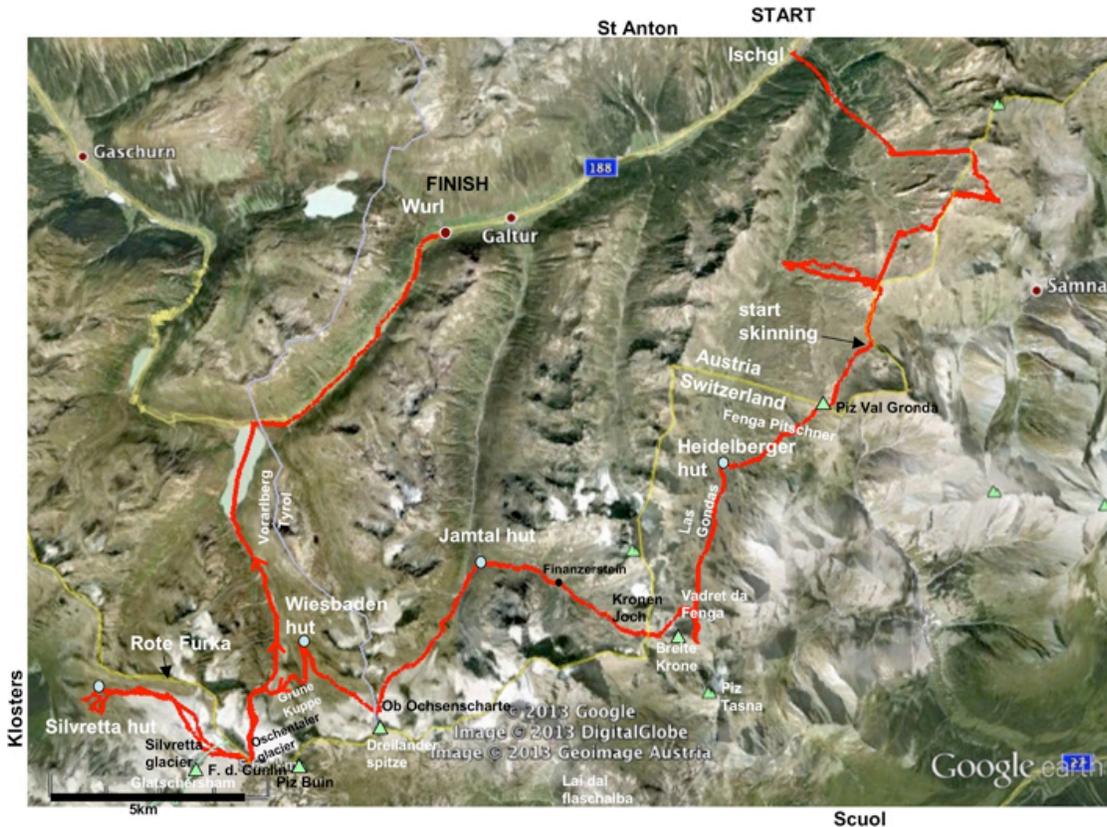


A well earned beer at the bottom of the Wiesbaden valley

of his nose, causing blood to smother his face. I pulled my skis out without too much hunting, while Doug got himself sorted out. Kathy then followed giving us grief for making a right mess of it. After patching up Doug we had a long, flattish powder run down the glacier, and through the crevassed areas. This was nice powder skiing, with excellent visibility, lovely snow and good pitches. We were chasing Kathy down, until we hit a long flat stretch all the way out to the Silvretta Stausee lake below the Wiesbadener hut. This involved a 2.5km skate/walk/cross country ski along the frozen lake followed by a 50m vertical walk up to the Berghof Piz Buin. We arrived exhausted, ready for lunch and

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downed a Gulaschsuppe and a beer. Back in the realms of normality we skied down the road to Wurl, the higher of the two Galtur ski resorts, where we got the bus back to Ischgl and the car. Arriving back at the hotel in Landeck around 4:30pm, we stopped for a beer and to see Kathy off as she headed back to Chamonix.



Map of the whole trip from Ischgl to the Silvretta hut and back. Total distance: 63km from starting skinning in Ischgl to Wurl. Total altitude gained on skins. 3505m