

Part three of the Alpine Arc: Andermatt–Lötschental. The Bernese Oberland

Friday 20th March 2015. I met up with Phil and Mark in the Rheinfelder Bierkeller in Zurich, after I'd arrived at the Limatthof hotel by Zurich train station and packed for the trip to Andermatt the following morning. While unpacking I noticed that the back of my skis appeared to have delaminated and were coming apart at the back. I figured I could get them patched up when we got to Andermatt. Phil showed up at the Bierkeller having rented a pair of light-weight touring skis and bought a new pair of La Sportiva touring boots – identical to my new ones. We went on to find a Mexican restaurant and after a couple of margaritas, a series of fish tacos and a couple of beers went back to the hotel, relatively early to be ready for an early start.



Phil and Mark enjoying a Margarita in Zurich.

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Day 1. Saturday 21st March 2015 At 6:45 the following morning with excess luggage stowed at the hotel, new boots on, and my trusty Volkl's over my shoulder, we walked over to the train station, and boarded the 7:09 to Andermatt. Well, sort of. The 7:09 to Arth Glodau, then the 7:52 to Göschenen and then the 8:53 to Andermatt. Each train was waiting for the previous one, and we were in Andermatt for 9:05. We got tickets and hopped on the ski-

bus that was waiting for the train to the Aurora hotel bar for a coffee and kit check before heading up the Gemstock I cable car. Andermatt has few lifts but lots of terrain. Two cable cars took us to the top of the Gemstock, where we clipped in in bad visibility and started skiing down the Girtschengletscher and into the Bussi run. The visibility quickly turned really bad, with a total white out, bumps and soft snow on top of refrozen ice. However, we powered down, slowly at first, taking it easy and warming up. That first run was hard getting warmed up in poor light, and didn't bode well for the rest of the week.



Phil booting up the Schwarzbachfirn to the Guspis

Doug was due in at 10:15 and we were back at the Aurora by 10:25 when Doug texted me that he was at the lift – unfortunately at the other end of Andermatt. By the time he's got down to the Gemstock, and we'd done a kit check and had a second coffee,



Helmet-cam frame of what no skier ever wants to see. The snow cracking ahead and above at the start of an avalanche. My ski tip is visible at the bottom

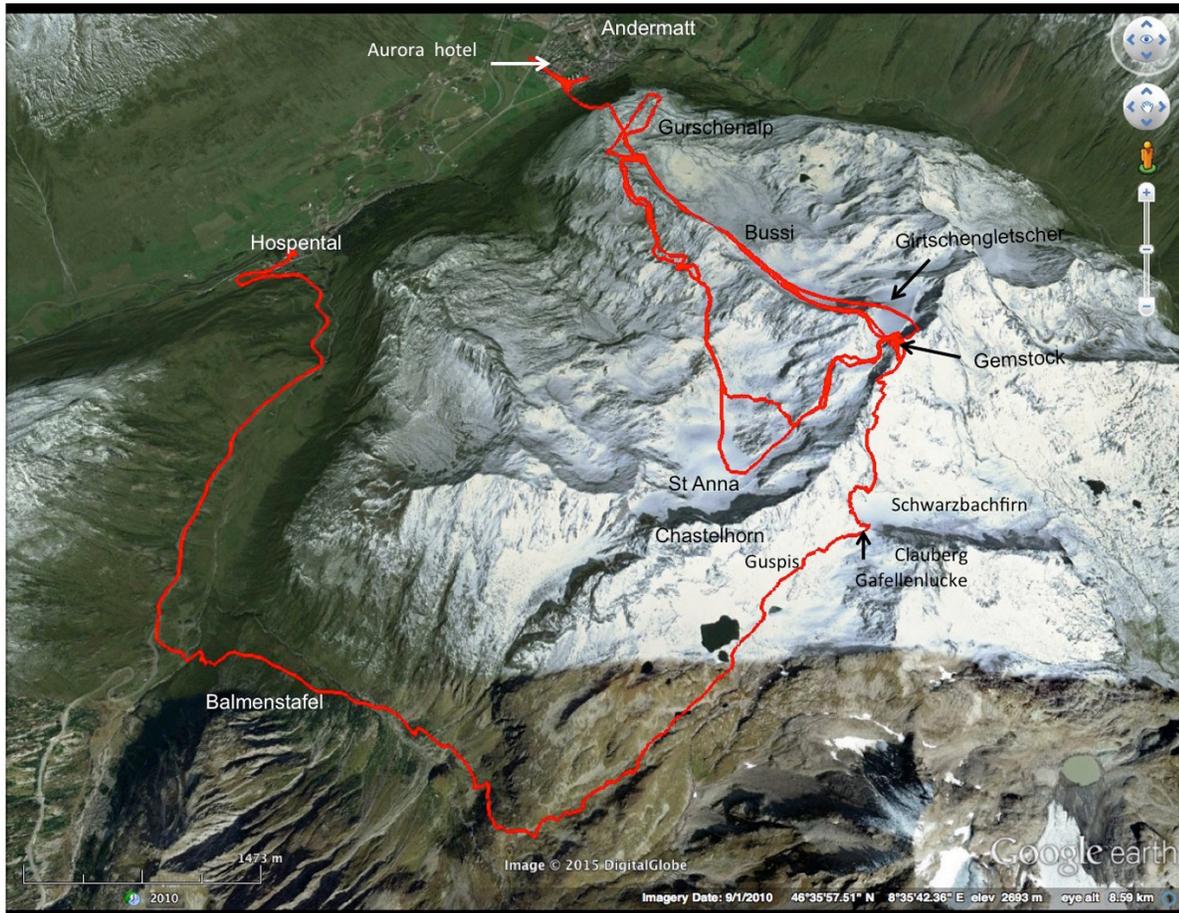
we were ready to get some proper skiing in and went back up the cable car to the top. This time we took skiers left into the St Anna Gletscher and skied down through the piste to the Gurschenalp lift. A quick chair up to the Gemstock II again and another run down the St Anna, this time with some off piste thrown in to get powder legs back and we were at lunchtime. Nourishing gulaschsoup and a quick beer, and we were ready to head over to Hospental. Up the Gemstock II and then off the back into the Schwarzbachfirn, where the off piste was crusty, visibility was poor, and the route to the Guspis was not as I had remembered it. Eventually we traversed across the bowl below the Gafellenlucke col, and started booting up. However, we started too early,

and were heading for the higher of the two cols so Mark booted across underneath a cornice to the routine Guspis entrance. Visibility was better on the other side, but it was still lightly snowing with lots of wind. The light was flat so we took it slowly, but once off the top, contrast improved, and, although the conditions were hard, icy and windblown, the visibility was OK, as we headed underneath the Chastelhorn and past the high ridge of the Clauberg on our left-hand side. Half way down, I made a choice to take the right side, as the wind was blowing across the valley, loading the faces on the left. However, at one point a terrain trap had accumulated windblown snow, and as I traversed across the top, it cut from underneath me, and started to slide. After a second or so of that terrifying “how big is this?” feeling, I skied out (see [video](#)), and then called for Phil and Mark to keep going across so that they wouldn't trigger another slide. They didn't and were fine, although when they got down to me, they did ask me why I was saying “go, go, go” when my words were “No! No! No!” Improved communication maybe needed here – stop might be better! We continued into the base of the valley, where the snow started to get very soft, and slides were apparent from above, so traversing quickly across, we spread out underneath the ridge, reached the Balmenstafel and skied through the trees in heavy snow to the road, with Mark carrying out a perfect 360° forward somersault just at the end of the run. A short hike up to the road, and we skied down the Gotthardpass road all the way to Hospental, and to the bar at the Hotel zum Turm, where we were staying.

There, Simon, the fifth member of the team had just arrived from Stockholm, having picked his kit up from Alpina Sport in Andermatt. Simon's a retired medic, (psychiatrist), with many years skiing experience, and of hiking in Patagonia and the Himalayas, but hadn't been ski touring before in its modern guise. We grabbed a beer and within half an hour our guide, Nigel Shepherd had arrived. Nigel is one of the most experienced British guides in the alps, an examiner on the guide's qualification course and an old friend of Kathy Murphy. Small, with a slight stoop and grey beard, he had the air of a grizzled old-timer, who had seen it all, and taught most of it. I told him about my skis coming apart at the back, and he looked at them with some concern. We definitely needed to get them fixed, and so the two of us caught the bus into Andermatt to see what could be done. At Alpina Sport Ursula and Christian (also a mountain guide) were clearly old friends of Nigel, but when Christian saw the state of my skis he was not impressed. He thought it unlikely that any fix would keep for a week. The options were to fix and take them, on the uncertain basis that they would stay fixed, rent a pair and come back and pick them up at the end of the trip or say goodbye to my trusty Volkl's after 5 years. I went for the latter, on the basis that damaged skis are worse than no skis, and so I rented a lightweight pair of Movement Logic with Diamir Vipek touring bindings. Bindings and skis together weigh just 3.2kg, nearly 2.5Kg less than my Volkl Mantras – a hefty weight saving which became more apparent each day. However, new skins (Colltex Whizzz, glueless) and new harscheisen also were needed, and so I packed my old skins and sent them back to Notts, probably to sit on a shelf for eternity. Back at the ranch, the boys were preparing for dinner by drinking my beer, so by the time we got back, dinner was ready and a pudding-less meal (soup, salad and chicken in sauce) was eaten.



Phil at the top of where I had triggered the slide (outlined by dotted lines). It had slid about 10m further down the slope from where I was standing.



Google earth view of the Andermatt-Hospental route.

Nigel told us that plans had changed – the proposed trip over the Furka pass was not possible due to the weather and we'd have to take the train to Oberwald in the morning and get a "taxi" up to the Grimselblick hotel at the Grimselpass. This was not welcome news, as we were keen to get skinning, but did mean we didn't need to get up until 7:30 as the train left at 9:15. With the room echoing to the snores of the five of us we fell asleep.

Day 2 Sunday 22 March 2015. Hospental-GrimselPass. Woken by a chorus of snoring at 6:00, we got up, and packed our stuff to leave. After a quick breakfast and settling up last night's beer bill, we walked down to the station at Hospental to meet up with Nigel. There we had a lesson from him in "how to use the bindings" as neither Phil, Simon or I had ever toured on pin bindings before, and needed some tips on how to use them. The only comment of note was Nigel's incredulity at the weight of my poles. Once the train arrived, we quickly passed through the Furka pass to Oberwald, where we dropped our skis off by the tiny sledge lift for kids under the watchful eye of the Sunday morning "host" and wandered through town looking for open cafes.

Oberwald is a sleepy little village between the Grimsel and Furka passes, which specialises in cross country skiing, with a number of tracks and runs, and hence a few cross country ski shops. A small supermarket seemed the only thing open, but they told us of a coffee shop where we could grab a quick caffeine hit before the taxi picked us up at 11:30.



Top: Delaminated Volkl's. Below – saying goodbye to them

The taxi was a snow-cat that apparently took 10 people – our six and a family of three going up to the Grimselblick. The snow cat took our skis in a basket outside, we hopped on and trundled very slowly up the snow covered road to Grimsel. It was noisy, vibrated a lot, and only then did Nigel reveal that it took an hour and a half to get up.

Unfortunately I was sitting by the window watching over the edge of the snow track as the road got narrower and narrower, and we ended up ploughing up a footpath (wanderweg) with a sheer drop off one side. It wasn't helpful seeing Nigel's face, dropping in incredulity as we passed too close for comfort



The taxi up to Grimselblick



Nigel Shepherd, Mountain Guide

to the collapsing edge of the snow path, with a 1000ft wooded drop down one side. Mark was more concerned about his pole in the

outside basket bouncing around as though it was about to jump out and disappear. We passed a couple of people going for a walk and after about 30 minutes stopped and the snow cat reversed around and we all got off. This was the place where we switched snow cats for a larger one

that could cope with the steeper sections. This one did have a bit more room, but with us all seated sideways the poor ten-year old kid at the back was being squashed by Mark and Phil within 2 minutes. The handrail hanging off the ceiling did not invoke confidence, but we were surprised and delighted when coming above the treeline we met two packs of huskies out sledding with their owners. The huskies weren't keen to get off the path, and the mushers had to drag the sleds off. We finally reached the Grimselblick about 12:30 in time for lunch (gulaschsuppe –can't go wrong).

After lunch Nigel took us out for a short tour to check out the route for tomorrow – a planned long ski tour over the Sidelhorn pass and up to the (currently unmanned) Oberaarjochhutte – a high hut that wasn't due to open until Friday. The snow was coming down hard and the wind was really high from the south, and as we skinned up towards the road from the hotel, we were tightly wrapped up. The skinning wasn't difficult but the wind had scoured the snow to make it icier, and once we reached the road, the snow had drifted right across



Setting off for a short explore – from l to r Dave, Phil, Simon, Nigel, Mark

it, leaving only one edge as a marker. The direction was poor too, as the snow was being blown onto the face that we would have to travel over the following day, and as Nigel came round the corner, large overhanging snow drifts were apparent on the high, steep, north facing slopes above the road. The snow stopped for a couple of minutes and a clear view of the Haslital valley leading down to Guttanen and Meiringen was available, before the snow closed in again. Nigel was clearly concerned about avalanche danger, and so we turned round and headed for the Sidelhorn pass on the other side of the ridge. This is a 550m as-

cent from the hut to get over, and is on the east facing side with a number of gullies leading up to it. While trying to find a route over the gully, in a complete white out, Nigel had to take care not to fall off the cornice into it.

We eventually realised we were too high and took off our skins, and I then realised



View down the Haslital valley as we reached the road (marked by the post in the foreground) that was completely drifted in. Our planned direction was round the left side of this picture.

that putting Vipek bindings on in soft snow and a white out is not as easy as it is on a nice flat station platform. Finally after about the 10th attempt I got them on and we skied slowly and pitifully badly down to the bottom of the gully, where Nigel finally found a lower entrance to cross the gully. I promptly fell off it, with my incorrectly put on binding releasing for the first time. After again about five attempts I finally got it back on and we started to skin up the now sheltered slope up to have a look at the Sidelhorn. The going was now easier with less

wind, and softer steadier snow and we climbed up about 100m along the crest of the gully, until the cornice collapsed under Nigel as he looked for a route into the higher end of the gully. Without any visibility he had not been able to see where the edge was exactly,

until he was on top of it. He only slipped a few feet, but it was sufficient for us all to stop and take a bit more care. We waited while he explored further, flinging handfuls of snow ahead of him to get some contrast in the whiteout. Eventually he told us to follow and we started climbing up a medium steep gully away from the loaded face on our left. As we reached the top of the gully, the light was closing in and he decided it was time to head back to the hotel. That meant taking off skins, and trying to get the skis back on – slightly easier this time, and then a slow ski down through fresh snow trying (and failing) to avoid the skinning track which we'd hopefully be using tomorrow. After reaching the bottom of the gully we realised we had either a herringbone up and pole across or could put our skins back on and leg it back to the hotel. We did the latter and found our way back to the hotel, where we did a quick test of kit – how to put on “knives” (ski crampons or harscheisen), boot crampons, and finally to tie a figure of 8 climbing knot. At this my mind completely blanked. Despite having done it on a climbing course less than a year earlier, my hands just could not remember how to do it. Cold, but not particularly tired, we went in, set up skins and other wet clothes to dry off in the restaurant by the stove and settled down for a quick beer before dinner. When dinner arrived we were a bit over-awed with soup, salad then a 200g sirloin steak on a hotplate with croquettes and fresh veg- a huge piece of meat sizzling away, cooked as you want it, as part of the half board. Possibly the best meal I've had at the top (well almost) of a mountain. After-



View of the Sidelhorn from across the Grimsel plateau. We skinned up the central gully, round to the left and up to the saddle in the right of the peak.

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dinner pole drinking (Strathslay) was the only way to aid digestion, and we crashed around 10pm with a note from Nigel that we needed an earlyish (6am) start the following morning.

Day 3. Monday 23rd March. Grimselpass-Fiesch. This was going to be our toughest day. We were due to get an early start and head to the Oberaarjochhutte, about 12 km away.

The hut was unguarded – not due to open until Friday, and we were taking our own food. We were expecting a long uphill skin with about 1400m of vertical and a long lake to get there. When we got up it was a beautiful morning – clear skies, stars out, and the wind had died down. However, Nigel was not happy. The forecast was that we would get one good day and then the weather was going to close in again. We might get to the Oberaarjochhutte, but we might not get out again. From there, there were two passes to get over to get to the Konkordia hut and if the weather was bad that could be tricky. Worse, the guardian of the hut, currently at the Konkordia, had called him and recommended that he didn't go, and that we would have to dig the hut out when we got there.



Phil and Mark after an hours skinning on Monday Morning. In the background the hotel is visible and behind that the Furka pass that we should have descended on Sunday.

Over breakfast he told us we should go and have a look from the Sidelhorn col. The lower, road route was too dangerous but the higher route might be OK. So we set out at 7am to skin up. In beautiful weather the mountain was unrecognisable from the day before, with the peak of the Sidelhorn towering 800m over us, with the rising sun glinting on its peak. First up, one of Phil's skins looked like it had split at the top, but it was only the rubber connector that had come out – the metal was bent (maybe before he used them) – and we managed to get it back in with some faffing with Doug's trusty Leatherman. Then we set off up the way we had gone yesterday, but this time with perfect visibility.



Mark and Simon skinning up our track to the Sidelhorn

We soon reached the cornice, which looked pretty harmless in good light, and then climbed up the gully, past where we had stopped, and continued up, with the Sidelhorn ahead. A bowl opened up as we came out of the gully, followed by a steeper slope that we traversed back and forth across until we could see the shoulder of the peak, with a cornice showing on our right, and a clear route up on our left. However, as Nigel was about to make the

final turn he seemed to be having some trouble with the snow continually slipping and giving way. He turned round and headed back across the face – the sun on the snow, even at 9:30 in the morning – was directly on that part and causing it to melt. One more kick turn and he was up. However, as I made the turn my binding came off again. Now I was standing with one ski pointing one way, the other pointing 170° the other way, and on a steep, slippery slope with melting snow and ice underneath. I had to get my binding back in, and quickly. I kicked my loose boot into the snow and brought the other ski round, and then for the first time in three days, lined the pins up with holes and my boot clicked in. The satisfaction of the boot going in first time was almost worth the previous hassle. I continued up to the top where Nigel was pacing back and forwards, skins still on his skis, having a good hard look.

And what a look. The view as I came over the saddle was magnificent. To my immediate left was the final ascent to the Sidelhorn. To my right, the valley dropped away 500m to the Grimsensee, a high lake fed by the glacier that comes off the Finsteraarhorn – one of the 4000m + peaks, which stood ahead and to my right in the distance. Between them was a small lake, higher up, about 200m below me and a dam with a glacier behind leading up to a col between two peaks – the right hand one, the Oberaarhorn, and the col between them the Oberaarjoch, where the hut was. Behind me Phil was helping Simon up that last turn, where he was struggling with the snow conditions, just as I had.



By the time we were all up it was 10am, and Nigel was looking decidedly unhappy. First there was the snow loading on the descent to the lake. That wasn't too much of a problem as the slopes weren't too steep or too loaded. That would probably be fine. Then there were the north facing steep slopes above the Oberaarsee, which were loaded and could come down on us as we were traversing. Then, and probably most importantly, there was the fact that it would be at least another 6 hrs of skinning to get to the Oberaarjochhutte from where we were. That was normal guide time from where we were. But we had spent nearly 3 hours getting to the saddle. His guide time was a 2hr skin. That meant we were 50% slower than would be ideal. If it was a 9 hour skin we wouldn't get to the hut until very late, then have to dig it out and then hope we could get out. It was too much of a risk, and he decided to head back down to Oberwald and take the train to Fiesch. We switched direction, took skins off and skied down through the powder, easy bouncing turns through soft 6 inches of fresh powder, leaving parallel plough tracks behind to just above the gully we had stopped at the day before. Being closest behind Nigel, I was the second to stop and turn round, to admire handiwork – unusually for us there was a nice easy set of plough marks all the way down. He then asked to give him some room, and wait till he was out of the gully. On the way up we had spotted some hotel guests kite-skiing – using a large kite to pull them uphill, and we could see from here that one of them had made it all the way to the gully. Nigel and I skied past him as he was putting his kite away, round through the gully avoiding the north facing steep edge where the powder had built up. Doug, Phil, Simon and Mark followed us down, but just after Phil had made the turn through the gully the kite-skier came off the top of the lip and triggered a slide that came careering over Phil's tracks a few seconds after he had cleared it. As Phil joined us he was still cursing the irresponsibility, saying he was just keen to get out of there before any other idiot came through it. The danger was clear from below – a large slide of maybe 30m had been triggered right on top of our exit route. A few minutes or seconds earlier and he would have taken out one of our party in perfect visibility and ideal conditions. We skied down into the base of the basin, switched to skins and then skied up to where the dogsleds had been the day before. From there it was variably fresh, windblown, ice, slush, heavy, crust all the way down to the road in the trees followed by a long easy ski out and slight skate to the end of the road where the piste-basher had picked us up the day before. A short walk to the train station and a beer for lunch (we had 45 minutes to wait for the train to Fiesch). We found a hotel in Fiesch on the internet – a Sport Hotel Youth Hostel for CHF220 for the five of us and booked it straight away. Unfortunately as we went down to catch the train, an official arrived to tell us not to

walk over the track (a crossing) but to go under the tunnel. The train arrived while we were under the tunnel and had left by the time we got up again.

Nigel was standing there agog wondering why we'd missed it – we hadn't even known it was there. Another beer, more sandwiches and we made the 3:00pm to Fiesch. We got off and asked the local bus driver, waiting to pick up from the train station, where the sport hotel was. He told us to get back on the train and get off at the next stop – a little incredulous, I asked the train conductor, and she said, yes, it's 1 minute on the train, get back on. We duly did and one minute later we got off at the Fiesch-Sport-Hotel train stop. A huge concrete establishment overshadows the railway, looking more like a post-modern University campus (think York or Keele) sitting on the high side of the railway, but it appeared completely deserted. We wandered up to reception, where they had keys (watch straps) waiting for us and the rooms were ready. Nigel legged it to dump his stuff and catch the last cable car up to check out the route for tomorrow, while the rest of us wandered up to the Youth Hostel Block, a few minutes walk from the hotel. This was clean, looked new and had clean sheets, hot water, but no towels. We found a stack of clean absorbent undersheets that would serve, sorted out our wet skins, gloves, etc and repacked (yet again), and then finally had a shower and change. Phil, Mark and Simon grabbed a quick nap, and by 5pm we were ready to go meet Nigel in town. About ten minutes wander along the train track brought us into Fiesch, a small town with a spectacular back drop and one cable car going up to serve the ski resorts of Riederalp, Bettneralp and Fiescheralp. We met up with Nigel on the way in and found a bar with a terrace (which wobbled and bounced with the waitress), overlooking the river with the sun going down over the Aletschhorn mountain right at the top of the Bernese Oberland. A quick beer and the sun dropped so we went inside for hearty Swiss fare. Phil and I ordered a fondue, but were reconsidering after Simon's tale of surgery for the removal of hardened cheese balls as a consequence of combining fondue with coke. Having been assured that a cheese baby would not need to be delivered if we combined the fondue with copious amounts of wine, a couple of bottles of Fendant were ordered to keep us company. After dinner, we explored the vibrant (not), lively(not) and welcoming (☺) village, by finding a bar by the cable car to wash the cheese baby down. A short wander back to the Sport Hotel and we were again in bed by a reasonable time.

Day 4. Tuesday 24th March. Fiesch-Konkordia hut (2840m) – Die Grosse Aletschgletscher.

Up and at 'em with the larks, (well, 7am) we went down to the "restaurant" for breakfast. The restaurant could clearly have held 500 "youths" on a summer camp, but there were only the six of us in a huge refectory hall. Holidays don't start till next week when this place will be buzzing with teenagers being teenagers, but today it was tranquil in a weird surreal way. Grabbing some extra sandwiches for lunch we checked out and started for the cable car in Fiesch. We were on the 8:30 going up on a one way ticket (Nigel went free) and got to Fiescheralp half an hour before the first cable car up the Eggishorn was due to go. The weather was ominous. Although visibility in Fiescheralp was good the Eggishorn was wreathed in clouds and visibility looked bad. We headed for the nearest cappuccino bar while Nigel went off for a stomp. He came back in after ten minutes with good news. If we spoke nicely to the liftie, we could take a new chair lift up the side of the Eggishorn which would take us to the Eggisjoch, a col from where we could ski down to the Aletschgletscher – the major challenge of the day – the largest glacier in the alps, heavi-



View from the top of the Eggisjoch up the Fieschergletscher – I initially thought we were going to have to climb up its snout!

ly crevassed and leading all the way up to the peak of the Munch, Jungfrau and Eiger mountains. And it was going in five minutes. We downed cappuccinos, and swaggered back to our skis and packs. Hoisting them on, we glided down the short slope to the chair lift, and were let in round the side of the gates onto the lifts. When we got off, Nigel did a quick transceiver check and then headed straight down across the barrier into the descent to the Aletschglacier. The view from here was stunning –we could see the tongue of a beast of a glacier, with the icefall cracking over the snout -



The Aletschgletscher from the Eggisjoch



Crevasses on the Aletschgletscher

and for a second I thought we had to climb that - but that was the Fiescher-gletscher coming down from this side of the Finsteraarhorn. Then we rounded the corner to see the long sweeping Aletsch disappearing into the mist. The cloud cover was high enough for decent visibility but the light was flat, and we skied down cau-

tiously through the rocks and gullies, 500m down to the edge of the glacier.



Skinning up the Aletschglacier in the mist.

There we put our skins on and dutifully followed our guide up onto this huge expanse of ice stretching out into the distance. Thus began a four hour skin up through expanding crevasse fields, alongside overhanging seracs and, towards the end, alongside releasing scree that sent rocks tumbling down the sides of the mountains onto the edges of the glacier – but out of our reach. The slope was gentle but continuous – we climbed just 400m in 3 hrs, after which, Nigel stopped and got us to rope up as we needed to cross a series of crevasse snow bridges to come off the glacier. We wound our way round a crevasse field with drops through the ice falling down either side into nothingness, until we started to descend off the glacier.



Roped up as we were coming off the glacier with the lateral moraine crackling up ahead.

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We could get glimpses of the buttress ahead on which the hut stood, but it kept coming in and out of the mist, and with my eyesight it was too vague to make out the hut itself. With the

eerie crackling sound that the lateral moraine makes when the rocks crackle and spit as the glacier frees them from pressure, we started to make headway towards the hut. Eventually even I could make out the hut sitting on the rock face a good 200m above us. We passed by

the buttress and round the corner, eventually hooking up with a path, which led us to a stash of skis under a rock, and opposite a stairwell – 8 visible metal rail switchbacks bolted to the rock rising 130m off the glacier up to a small flying Swiss flag which was the Konkordiahut, at 2890m. This was where we should have arrived from the Oberaarjoch-hutte rather than from up the Aletschgletscher.

We unroped, de-skinned and packed the skis and poles by a different rock, and started the climb up (after I had explained, to Nigel's disdain, why my poles were also going up the stairwell). Standing on a small metal ladder, even with a handrail, bolted 100m above the ground is a novel, if not entirely unpleasant feeling. However, it was also a good 300 or so steps up the top, and the view from up there was fantastic, especially as the cloud began to clear and the visibility up across the Konkordiaplatz to the Dreieckhorn, Kranzberg, Aletsch, Jungfrau and Äbeni-Flue became clear. The Strath Isla was even more impressive from up here. The hut was basic, but welcoming,



The ladders to the Konkordiahut

with a lovely large dog (Chibo) and three small children, one still in a sling, and a swing in the middle of the hall. Two exhausted looking young Englishmen were sitting looking slightly shell shocked when we arrived, but we never worked out whether that was their normal expression, or they were just a little bit overawed by the whole thing. They had skied down the glacier from the Munch railway station at the top of the col. The hut guardian had the youngest child (8 weeks old) in a baby sling while he got dinner ready, and their mother was pouring beers within minutes of us walking in. A few minutes afterwards another party arrived, a Ski Club of Great Britain group, with Hannah Burrows-Smith as the guide. A mix of a group, as ever



with the SCGB, they were friendly and told us of their aborted trip up to the Finsteraarhutte. They had started from the Munch railway too, so we felt a little smug as the only group to have skinned up to the hut. Dinner was standard fayre – soup, chicken and pasta, pudding, with a couple of bottles of wine for good luck. One of Hannah's group was an optometrist and while Phil was explaining to Simon the VEGF concept, he jumped in, fascinated by the VEGFb story. Bed followed with plenty of droning from the bunk above (Phil), the bunk beside (Mark) and the next one over (Simon) – I think Doug was either not drinking enough, or not working hard enough to sleep, because he was strangely silent.

Day 5. Wednesday 25th March. Konkordia-Hollandia – the Konkordiaplatz. A reasonable start (7:00am) and breakfast. I think I was the only one who didn't get up in the night – an advantage because the toilets are outside, it was -11°C and blowing a gale. Apparently there was a snowdrift to wade through, and it was, shall we say, on the cold side performing one's ablutions. Better in the daylight I thought – but maybe not. Breakfast in the

huts is always surprisingly good. Apparently freshly baked bread (surely not), cereal and yoghurt, but the coffee takes some getting used to at best, and no getting used to at worst. Our plan for the day was to head over the Konkordiaplatz, a meeting point of four glaciers, the Grosse Aletschfirn, the Jungfraufirn, the Grüneggfirn and the Ewigschneefeld that meet to form the Grosse Aletschgletscher that we had skinned up yesterday. These descend off their respective mountains, the Aletsch ahead, the Mönsch to our right, the Jungfrau ahead and to the right. The Aletschfirn in turn is fed by the Gletscherhornfirn, the Kranzbergfirn, the Abeni-fluefirn, so the Konkordiaplatz is where 7 different glaciers finally meet. We were ready to go by 8:30, and started out from the hut. When the hut was built it was a short climb up from the glacier, up a small wooden ladder, still visible in one of the rock faces. However, over the last 100 years the glacier has dropped by 80m, leaving an impossible climb up for hikers and tricky for mountaineers, which is why the hut maintains these imposing steps. The descent to the glacier was probably more unnerving than the climb because the steps at the top were narrow enough to have to go down backwards in ski boots. Once we got down we retrieved our skis, put skins on and headed straight out to the glacier. This time no ropes were needed, and it was a straight run along the Konkordiaplatz, a climb of about 500m, but about 8km, to the Hollandia hut. It was an easy gentle pace, but for some reason Simon found it very hard going. He was puffing and coughing and really struggling with his breathing all the way across the glacier. The previous day he had not seemed in particular difficulty but today, whether it was the altitude or the equipment, he was suffering badly. We found out afterwards that it was at least in part due to having his pack straps very loose so that the weight was pulling back across his chest the whole way. He had to stop a number of times to get across, although we continued to make steady progress, and 4 hours later we emerged from the mist, across a ridge to see the Hollandia hut a few hundred metres away on the Lötchenlucke col underneath the imposing Anuchnubel peak.



Simon having reached the Hollandia hut underneath the Anuchnubel face.

Despite the imminent dramatic contrast of the Aletsch above and to our right, most of the day had been spend gently sliding across an unremarkable glacier, pretty in its own right, but nothing spectacular. As we neared the hut we passed a series of seracs on our right that hinted of more dramatic scenery but nothing really else to remark on it. We spied Hannah's group a few times, first ahead, then level, then ahead of us as we neared the hut. It was approaching 2pm by the time we arrived at the Hollandia hut – time to hang up skins, pack and repack a light pack for tomorrow morning, and grab a bowl of soup (Phil, Dave, Simon), split a rösti (Doug, Mark), or eat a whole one (Nigel) before getting some kip for the afternoon. After a couple of hours we roused, came down for dinner and a beer, a couple of lovely bottles of Dole (yes!) and another early night.

Day 5. Thursday 26th March. Hollandia (3150m) to Blatten (1450m) via the Abeni Flue (3950m) At 5:30 the following morning we were up and packed, ready for breakfast at 6. At least Doug, Phil Mark, Nigel and I were. The plan was for the five of us to skin up the Äbeni-Flue, the 3950m peak adjacent to the Jungfrau, and directly above the Hollandia hut. The stars were out, a beautiful clear sky and the drama of the mountains in contrast in the twilight. As dawn broke we could see clear blue skies with just some wisps of cloud in the distance, but below us fog in the valley. After a brief breakfast of cheese, ham, bread and yo-

ghurt, we packed our stuff leaving out all non-essential items behind – i.e. no toothbrush, sleeping bag, extra fleece or the harscheisen that I didn't need to bring in the first place (for my Volkl's). Everything else, it appeared (ice axe, boot crampons, sling, rope, water bottle, ski crampons, etc) counted as necessary. And chocolate.

We ended up leaving the hut and started skinning at 6:50am, with dawn well and truly cracked, and another group of three Frenchmen ahead of us, making tracks. We skinned up through a spectacular crevasse field and on to the Äbeni-fluefirn. With the sun up the views were absolutely spectacular. The Aletsch towered above us with ice fields literally hanging



Phil and Nigel preparing to go up from the Hollandia hut, with the Sattelhorn and Aletschhorn behind the hut and the Konkordiaplatz visible to the left.

down off it, and an expanse of snow all around with a Bergschrund running all the way round the crater, the right side of which rose up to the head of the Äbeni-flue. By 8:30 we were at the base of the peak, and started to climb the left hand side of the ridge. As we criss-crossed and kick-turned up the slope the snow started to firm up as the wind picked up. As we traversed across, the track started to slip out from underneath us and it was clear we were traversing across hard,

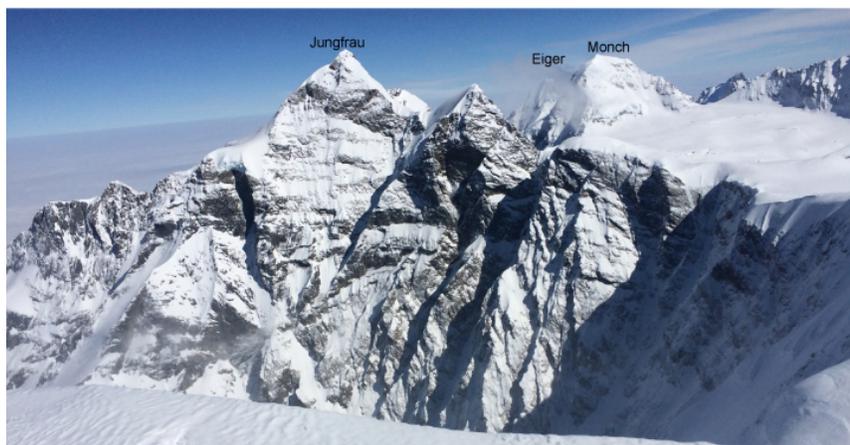
wind-packed ice with some wet sun damaged snow on top. Nigel stopped and yelled to put the harscheisen on. He seemed to whip his out of his pack and onto his skis in a few seconds, but mine were caught round a sling in the bag and I couldn't get them free. We were standing on a steep slope with a slick icy base, and taking one ski off felt perilous. However, my boot kicked into the slope and once extracted the crampon slipped onto the ski binding much more easily than my old ones did for the Fritschi bindings. Once again I was grateful for renting new ski technology.



Nigel crossing a ridge between two huge crevasses on the Äbeni-fluefirn

As Mark came up behind me he got the message about putting crampons on and I followed Phil across the ice slope. However, a few paces further on, on the steepest bit with crampons digging into the ice, his toe binding suddenly released. The ski stayed still but Phil had to re-adjust on one ski with a slick slope stretching down below, reposition ski and boot and clip in – successfully on the third attempt. Relieved he continued to knife his way across the slope until we reached the ridge where the wind was picking up. Nigel was already layering up with a windproof as we started to close up zips, and hood-up for the climb to the top. As Doug joined us from the back he asked what we had stopped for, which was when we realised he hadn't got the message and was still without ski crampons – on a ledge 2000ft above the drop into the Jungfrau. He quickly started digging around for his crampons while we shivered, and eventually once he had them out, we started off into the wind.

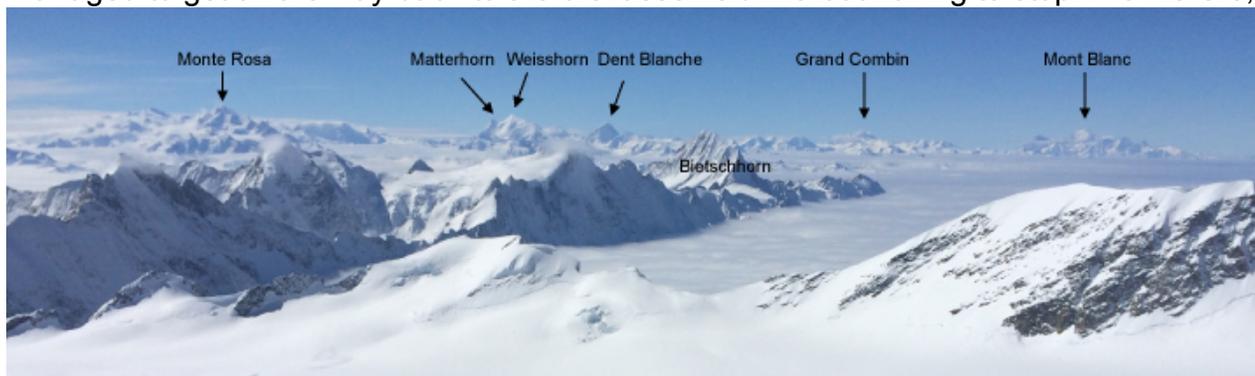
He caught up quickly as we knifed up on the harscheisen through ice packed snow up the ridge towards the top. On the way up we passed the three French guys heading down back through the crud, and I did hope we weren't going back that way. We crested the summit at



10:30 and suddenly the whole Alpine arc was laid out below from the Piz Buin in the east across to Mont Blanc in the west – a magnificent sight, in perfect weather. A quick roll of the mountains visible from here – Jungfrau, Eiger, Munch, Finsteraarhorn, Oberaarhorn, Monte Rosa, Weisshorn, Matterhorn, Dente Blanche, Pigne Arolla, Grand Combin, Mont Blanc –

all the major peaks of the alps visible from one spot. From there, with photos, we took the skins off, packed the bags, and got skis on ready for the ski down.

After a few turns, I jumped over the small Bergschrund (much to Nigel's disgust), and we were ready to take the descent through the powder - we got two steady descents through 200-300m of fresh, knee high powder and left a nice trail of five ploughed turns down, then continued to ski along the skinning track, all the way across the glacier, at pace to try and avoid any more skinning. The guys in front had laid a good track across the glacier and we managed to get all the way back to the crevasse field without having to stop. From there, we



crossed the snow bridge again and then skied down to the hut. We grabbed a quick hot chocolate and some cake, picked up Simon who had spent a glorious morning taking in the view from the hut, re-packed the bags with what little we had left behind in the morning, and started off on the long trek to Blatten. The first 500m or so descent was through nice ankle deep powder but as we descended into the valley there was a substantial amount of heavier, cement-like snow, eventually leading to breakable crust, followed by slushy wet snow. We continued into the cloud, which broke at about 2000m as we entered into the wooded valley leading down to Faffleralp. This was a combination pole and ski out to what was obviously a summer retreat, but uninhabited in winter. After a short skate along the road, it angled down and we could get some speed up, as we skied, skated and occasionally poled all the way down to Blatten. As we reached the end of the ski track at the village, we were met by a local woman and her dog – “not much of a day for skiing” she indicated as we came off a 2500m descent in fresh powder and mostly sunshine. “it certainly is up there” we explained. The hotel Edelweiss was visible from the bottom of the track, and so we walked up there for a beer – it might have been 2pm but it certainly felt like beer o'clock.

The Edelweiss is a lovely hotel with a sauna, hot showers, comfortable beds and a nice, if limited to Swiss, wine list. More Dole, Fendant and grappa, vegetable soup, salad and a hearty lamb steak with rice went down very well, but we were still all snoring by 10pm.

Day 6. Friday 27th March. Lötschental. We were up and ready to go at 7:00 the following morning – breakfast in the hotel, and we were packed up, checked out, paid up, booted and suited at 8pm. A very short walk down to the bus stop and a short ski bus ride (doubles as a school bus) down the valley to Wiler where the Lauchernalp cable car to Lötschental goes from. Hannah's group boarded the bus at the second stop in Blatten, as they had come down too, and were planning on skiing the Lötschental too. Our plan was to ski to the Lötschenpass hut and then skin up over the Gitzifurkapass and down to Leukerbad.



However, when we got to Wiler it was snowing heavily. From the top of the cable car we took a two person chairlift – still snowing, then a four person high speed detachable lift – still snowing, and as we got off that skied towards the gondola that goes up to the Hockenhorn (stil snowing). This Gondola was just opening as we got there, but there was a good foot of snow on the ground. As we got off that lift, Nigel said “carry your skis, we’re hiking” which is what we did along a clear path that had been put in since he was last here. The hike took about ten minutes, but we were somewhat concerned to see, above us, snow sloughing off and triggering small slides, one of which came right across the path. Nigel seemed unconcerned and so we ploughed on. Eventually we came round a corner to see the Klein Hockenhorn, a short tooth of rock sticking up, and we put our skis for the short descent to the hut. The wind had picked up now, and it was snowing heavily with little let up. My



Doug and Simon about to head up to the Gitzifurkapass in the snow.

face was getting a good scouring as we set off, but two turns in, Phil flipped over, as his ski had come off (again). This time he really couldn't get it back in and I went over to help him. It looked like the binding wasn't staying in, and try as I could I couldn't get it to stay in either. I went to fetch Nigel who had been helping Doug with a problem – apparently Doug's boots had locked in walk mode – meaning they were extremely floppy and useless for downhill skiing. Eventually Phil got it locked in, although it released whenever he put any stress on it, so we skied carefully down past the Klein Hockenhorn to the Löttschenpass Hütte in a bitter, sandblasting gale, with minimal visibility. As we approached the hut, Simon disappeared in a full 360° forward roll over the side of what looked like a piste put in on the way to the hut. He was fine, but it highlighted the dangers of being out there in bad weather. Once we got into the hut, and ordered a large bowl of coffee, Nigel and Phil started looking at his binding. It did appear to trigger a release at the front with minimal loading, but the Dynafit bindings have three levels of resistance to binding release, and on level 2 it didn't come off. Phil was happy to ski like that, so we turned attention to Doug's boots - they had apparently just iced up on the walk, and were now fine to lock into ski mode. With both things fixed, we put the skins on and started towards the Gitzifurkapass. This is about 250m vertical climb up the Ferdengletscher with cliffs both side. There was plenty of snow and Nigel was breaking ground, although there was another group of Swiss skiers up ahead. We zig-zagged up the climb, at one point moving over the left hand side of the gully before making a turn underneath a steep rock lined slope. This was a little more exposed, as sloughing snow coming down could trigger a slide. Nigel ploughed on until he was just underneath the rock face, when we heard a loud shout of "fuck" and then Nigel yelling, "watch out" as he triggered a small slide. The crown wall of the slide was shoulder height above him, and as it slid, it buried him up to his waist, without moving him off the track – the slide went about 30m down the slope, not quite reaching our zig zag. We were well out of the way of the slide, so were safe, but it took him a few minutes to dig himself out – taking photos all the time. Then we started to skin up, as the Swiss group ahead of us started their descent through what was clearly deep powder on the way down. Our plan was to reach the summit, then ski down the other side, but the weather was still bad, and snowing hard. As we reached the top of the col the weather was just beginning to lighten up a little, and Nigel wanted to go have a look at the route down. We waited while he wandered off into the mist, but very quickly the cloud started to lift, and the valley down to Leukerbad started to become visible. Nigel had turned round the corner, so we couldn't see him. We grabbed some food and water and waited, watching the weather clear with the Balmhorn on the right and the Ferdenrothorn to the left. The valley kept appearing and disappearing in the mist, a rolling descent down through deep powder, with steep cliffs on both sides. We'd have to stay in the



Simon, Mark and me, skinning up the Ferdengletscher



Nigel digging himself out of a slide he had triggered on the way up (dotted lines)

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middle to avoid getting caught from either side. Eventually, Nigel came back, and was clearly turning things over in his head. He was worried about the avalanche danger going into the first 1000 feet or so, where rolling snow banks had been built up by the wind, and could be triggered easily. There was a route down, which would take us underneath those banks, rather than having to ski over them, but the possibility of them triggering was there, and the concern was how clearly he could see it. His view was that in perfect visibility it was probably safe, but with variable light, snow coming in from time to time, he couldn't justify to himself the decision to go down. It would be safer to go back down the valley, where the snow was more sheltered and would bring us down into Ferden.



Mark (front) and Simon launching into the powder on the Ferden gletscher

So we shucked our skins and dropped into knee-high powder down the route we'd skied up. The powder was light, forgiving and plentiful as we whooped down back towards the hut,



then bearing right into the Ferdenbach valley, below the Kummenalp holiday village and down into the trees. Some scrambling on skis through the trees and we ended up on a path. Doug decided to launch himself forward off a tree route at this point cannoning into me to stop himself – his ski fortunately came

to rest just below him, and he was unhurt.

Looking forward to seeing the Go-pro video! We finally reached the road, which had snow on it for about 200m before we came to the end, and walked the mile down into the village. A welcome beer awaited in the bar by the bus stop. Just enough time before the bus arrived to take us own to Visp, and the end of this year's trek.



Phil walking down the last mile into Ferden. The valley up to the Hollandia hut is visible in the middle.

A few noteworthy points after the skiing ended: When we got to Brig on the train, Simon and I took our skis to the station, paid CHF25 and they shipped them back to the ski rental place in Switzerland. No fuss, no hassle – fantastic.

Secondly, we stopped for a beer in Visp to say goodbye to Nigel, (it's where he'd left his car), and as we were leaving the bar, Phil knocked over the beer at the next table of bikers who were outside. We went out and told them what had happened, apologised and offered to buy them a beer. They said not to worry, these things happen. Nice. Third, on the train on the way back we were joined by a platoon of the Swiss army

who treated the whole dining car to renditions of traditional Swiss songs, including yodelling! Finally, in Zurich just down the road from the Limmathof we found a lovely Brazilian restau-

rant, had an outstanding Brazilian merlot, and a nice caiparinha (not in that order). Simon and I left Phil and Mark to find a club and crashed early as we both had early flights.

All in all, a successful trip. Not quite Andermatt-Leukerbad, more Fiesch-Ferden with chance to view the Oberaarjoch from the Sidelhorn, but still a great time, some awesome mountain experiences, some hairy ones, and more learning for all of us. Next year – filling in and maybe last lap to Chamonix.



The last beer at the end of the trip in Ferden.