



**THE SECRET
VALLEY**

*The Val d'Anniviers,
a bastion of bygone
Swiss culture, has some
of the most pristine
slopes in the Alps.*

*by Tom Robbins
Photographs by Christian Kerber*

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TO GET TO SWITZERLAND'S VAL d'Anniviers, you head to Sierre, a bustling city on the banks of the Rhône, then turn off the motorway onto a narrow road that immediately begins to climb. There are views of apple orchards and vineyards, but the road soon demands your full attention. It clings to the mountainside—sheer rock through the driver's window, clear air through the passenger's, a view that swaps as you make a series of rapid switchbacks, up and up. Signs warn of rockfall. You glimpse avalanche barriers, pass through a dark tunnel, and cross a dizzying bridge. Then the gradient eases, the yawning drops are replaced by snow-covered meadows, and you find yourself in a dead-end valley ringed by 13,000-foot peaks.

It is as if the tide of modern life never made it this far. Villages scattered about the 15-mile-long valley are filled with traditional chalets, their larch beams blackened by centuries of sun, walls clustered close to keep out the worst winter storms. Skiing arrived in the 1960s—five villages put up small lifts, then slowly expanded their slopes until some merged: first Chandolin and neighboring St.-Luc, followed in 2013 by Zinal and Grimentz. But they have remained quiet, family-oriented operations, barely known internationally. The big sport here is still cow fighting—not man versus bull, Spanish-



style, but cow against cow, the muscular local breed locking horns until one turns away and the other is declared the queen. Here the most celebrated après-ski activity is not dancing on tables or sabering champagne bottles but tasting the valley's distinctive "glacier wine" in the dark cellar of the House of the Bourgeoisie, a Grimentz chalet built before Shakespeare was born.

And yet these sleepy communities are finally finding themselves at the center of something big. To explain what that is requires an unlikely shift of focus, away from the valley's cobbled alleyways to the bright boulevards of Vail, Colorado. Anyone who skis will have heard of Vail Resorts' Epic Pass, a season-long lift ticket launched in 2008 that, for a bargain price, gives access to all of the group's ski areas, as well as those of several partners (at last count, some 65 in eight countries). It's a simple idea—an attractive deal to hook skiers into a family of resorts—but the results have been transformative. In the decade since the pass was launched, Vail's stock price has soared fivefold. The group snapped up trophy resorts like Park City and Whistler while rivals scrambled to establish alternatives.

The odd thing is that the big guns of the European ski industry have been so slow to follow suit. Last winter, when rumors spread that the region would get its first Epic-style pass, many assumed one of the vast, storied resorts—perhaps Chamonix, Courchevel, or Val d'Isère—would be behind it. In fact, the new **Magic Pass** (\$515; magicpass.ch) would offer unlimited skiing in 30 rather different resorts—not the big players at all, but the little villages of the Val d'Anniviers and others like them nearby. Many of the names were unfamiliar even to avid European skiers. The smallest, Mayens de Conthey, has a single lift.

"We'd been following Vail and the Epic Pass for a while," said Pascal Bourquin, director of the Grimentz-Zinal lift company and a key mover behind the Magic Pass. Bourquin spent three years working for Vail Resorts in the 1990s, but also drew inspiration from things like gym memberships,



A church in the town of Chandolin. Opposite: The Hôtel Bella Tola, in St.-Luc.

where lowering prices boosted sign-ups and overall revenues. "Passes like these change the way you look at skiing," Bourquin said.

For the smallest resorts, facing an uncertain future as climate change makes snowfall unpredictable, the plan could be a lifeline. "People who used to ski four days a year are skiing 12 or more," said Bourquin. "But what we underestimated was how much people would want to travel around, trying these authentic little places—some are doing tours of them in motor homes."

Even more significant than the savings for skiers has been the spotlight the Magic Pass has shone on tiny, little-known resorts, giving them the confidence to invest in lifts, restaurants, and places to stay. Above all it raises an intriguing idea: that, despite decades of the resorts' battling to outdo each other with the greatest number of lifts and the most miles of piste, smaller might actually be better.

ON OUR FIRST MORNING, I awoke early in our rented chalet in Chandolin, at 6,350 feet one of Europe's highest villages. Anxious not to rouse the rest of our three-generation skiing party, I quietly made coffee, pulled a puffer jacket over my pajamas, and walked out to the terrace.

Outside it was perfectly still, brutally cold, and dazzlingly silent, as if the world had been frozen to an icy halt. Beyond the handrail a field sloped away, dotted with frost-covered pines sparkling in the weak light. Ordinarily there



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are views across to Vercorin on the far side of the Val d'Anniviers, even to the Rhône 4,000 feet below. However, today a sea of milky white cloud filled the valley, leaving me alone with the spire of the village church and the pine trees, sequestered in the sky.

Later we headed out to ski and hit a novel problem: We couldn't find the lifts. These villages are not purpose-built. There are no boutique-lined central plazas, no name tag-wearing greeters, no Muzak from outdoor speakers, and no toy train to take you from parking lot to ticket office. There are also no lift lines, and certainly no rush of backpack-wearing powderhounds pushing past each other to get first tracks. When we did eventually locate the chairlifts a few hundred yards outside the village center, the only other people getting on were schoolchildren with toboggans rather than skis.

Not including the tiny magic carpets for toddlers, Chandolin has just five lifts, which are linked to neighboring St.-Luc, which has six. Yet behind the low-key vibe and those piddling statistics lurks some astonishing skiing. Gratefully—and a little guiltily—my wife and I handed our young kids to their grandparents and rode the lifts up to the Arête des Ombrintses. There, fingers of snow drop steeply between rock corridors—a series of couloirs that would be famous were they in Jackson Hole or Alta. We lapped them, entirely alone, scaring ourselves just enough to get the adrenaline pumping and to celebrate our temporary release from responsible parenthood. Afterward, we climbed an old, slow T-bar to the summit of the Bella Tola, which rises to almost 10,000 feet, for a run down that sprayed powder into our grinning faces.

It was an epic morning's skiing, and yet when we stopped for lunch, in a slopeside chalet called Tsigère la Cohà, we found no screens showing extreme ski movies, no testosterone-heavy crush at the bar, just the strong smell of melting raclette cheese and the occasional popping of a cork. On the tables lay lyric sheets for traditional folk songs, presumably

entertainment in case of bad weather; on the walls hung portraits of sturdy brown fighting cows wearing bells.

ONE OF THE JOYS of the valley is that so many of the chalets are available to rent, something that would once have been possible only through a local contact but

can now be done through Airbnb. After a couple of nights in St.-Luc, we moved to a second Airbnb in the village of Vercorin, three miles as the crow flies but more than 13 by car, via winding roads down one side of the valley and back up the other. We met our host, Céline Siggen, outside the church on the edge of the village. She led us through ever narrower lanes to Chalet Altitude, which is 200 years old, as pretty as a doll's house and not much bigger. Downstairs the cattle's quarters have been converted into a smart suite, above is a cozy lounge, and upstairs again, two more wood-paneled bedrooms, their floors sloping like a ship in a storm, plus a terrace with views across to the pistes. Before she left, Céline told us about the bakery a few doors down, where we would buy bread in the morning and raspberry, apricot, and rhubarb tarts on the way home from skiing.

Life here could have worked out very differently. At the start of the 20th century, locals devised a plan to build a railroad along the valley, mirroring a track recently completed to Zermatt, where it had prompted a tourism boom. (Today Zermatt is by far Switzerland's most visited resort.) However, when the First World War broke out, the Anniviers plan was shelved. Any tourist wanting to reach Zinal, at the far end of the valley, would have to walk or ride a mule—the road didn't get that far until 1957.

Those switchbacks up from Sierre have done a good job of keeping mass tourism at bay, but word about the Val



Opposite, clockwise from top left: A backstreet in the village of Grimentz; the Val d'Anniviers viewed from the Chandolin Boutique Hotel; a display in the small private museum of Claude Antille, in St.-Luc; speed flying, a combination of skiing and paragliding, which is covered by the Magic Pass.

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d'Anniviers is starting to get out, and those who go can find it hard to leave. On another morning, I met up with an old friend, Nick Parks, a British mountain guide (*Grimentz-Zinal Backcountry Adventures; backcountryadventures.co.uk*) well-known across the Alps for his smile, sense of humor, and diminutive stature (leading to the nickname "pocket guide"). We first met in Kashmir, and since then his peripatetic career had seen him leading skiers and climbers around the world, as well as acting as long-time safety consultant for Bear Grylls's TV shows. Six years ago he decided to put down roots, spurning Chamonix, the capital of alpine adventure, in favor of little Zinal. "There's much variety: trees, couloirs, bowls, and so few people skiing them," he told me as we inched along a snow-covered ridge, high above the pistes of Grimentz. "I'm still finding new runs 15 years after coming here." He threw down a rope, and we lowered ourselves into the Couloir S—a sinuous, powder-filled chute that dropped 2,000 feet back to the village.

In Mottec, a hamlet between Zinal

and Grimentz, Penny and Eric Kendall tell a similar story. She is a photographer and he a travel journalist, and together they spent a decade skiing 300 resorts around the world. A guide they met in central Switzerland mentioned that when he had a day off and wanted to ski powder, he'd go to the Val d'Anniviers. "I didn't even know what country it was in, but we arranged to visit, and after four days I was hooked," Eric told me as he waxed guests' skis at **Chalet Edelweiss** (**€** from \$1,200 per person per week; *skizinal.com*), the guesthouse they now run.

Amazingly, Bourquin says skier visits across all of the areas covered by the Magic Pass were up 48 percent in its first winter. There are signs of investment too. A smart 29-room hotel and spa, the **Chandolin Boutique Hotel** (rooms from \$255; *chandolinboutiquehotel.ch*), opened last year, while Vercorin and Zinal have sleek new serviced apartment developments, under the SwissPeak brand. Is there, then, a risk of the valley's finally changing, an urgent need to go now before the old ways start to be forgotten?

I shouldn't panic. One night toward the end of our trip, I drove back to St.-Luc to visit the **Hôtel Bella Tola** (**€** rooms from \$210; *bellatola.ch*), the first proper hotel in the Val d'Anniviers. Built in 1859, the structure has been lovingly restored by Anne-Françoise Buchs-Favre and her husband, Claude, and is now something of a living museum (pause as you pass reception to admire the flower-laden table, made in 1764) as well as chic lodging. We drank glasses of local pear juice, and she explained more about the valley's past—how the people were nomadic until the late 1940s, each community moving en masse several times a year down to the Rhône to tend the vines, then back up to the mountains to graze livestock. The village must have changed greatly during her lifetime, I ventured. She looked momentarily stumped. "Well...there are two sport shops now, and when I was young there was only one. It really doesn't change so much." ☞



The view from the 30-room Hôtel Bella Tola.