

# Cleaving through the Alps

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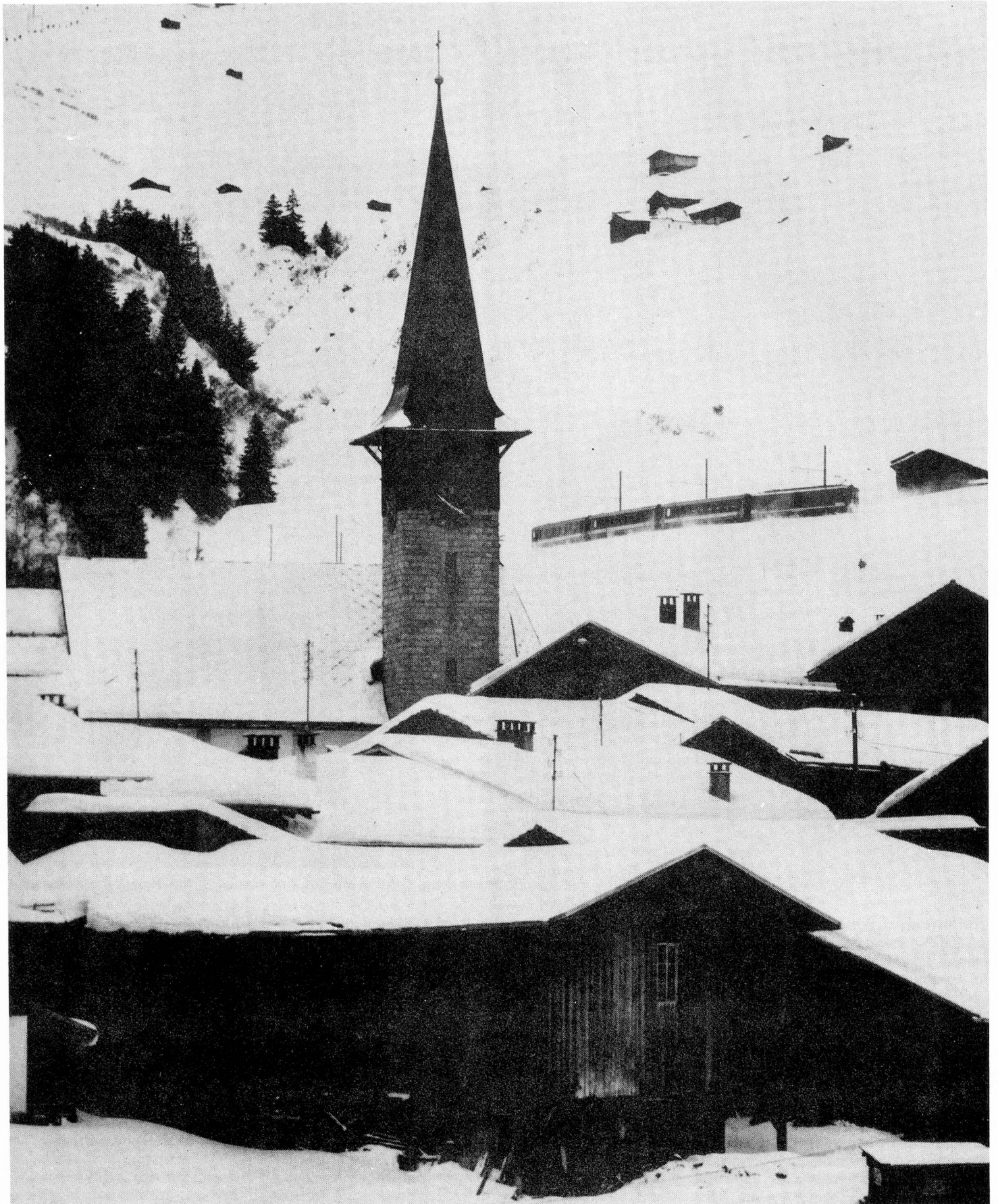
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*The scattered farms of the Tavetsch have only gradually grown into villages. Sedrun and Rueras, pictured here, are two examples. Today they are connected by a railway*

# *Surselva in winter*

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## Cleaving through the Alps

THE valley of the Vorderrhein, or Hither Rhine as it used to be called, running from Oberalp towards Chur, has two names. In German-speaking parts it is mostly known as the Grisons Oberland, but the local inhabitants prefer the original Romansh name of Surselva.

At the eastern end of the valley there is the old landslide area of Flims with its dense forest, and the country above this forest (selva) is known as the Surselva.

The Surselva is part of a huge furrow that cleaves the chain of the Alps, running from the Lake of Constance to the Lake of Geneva.

It is only at the Gotthard that a line of communication crosses the Alps from north to south.

The Surselva is bounded to the north by the mighty chain of Tödi that rises abruptly to heights of 3,400 metres and more.

There are only very few paths over these mountains and roads were never built over them.

But to the south there are a number of side valleys with numerous villages and with slopes on which brown wooden barns enliven the landscape.

The barrier of the landslide of Flims to the east keeps off most of the raw winds that blow from this quarter.

This geographical situation results in a mild climate that often has more of the character of southern parts than of the inhospitable Alps.

Grapes grow up to considerable altitudes in sheltered situations, the area around the

small town of Ilanze is famous for its fruit, and in autumn large amounts of butter and cheese are brought down from the Alpine pastures into the villages.

Agriculture, profiting from these favourable climatic conditions, plays an important role in the whole valley.

But the sequestered situation is more apparent than real. In spite of the high mountains all around, access is easy and presents no problems.

The motorist coming from Reichenau can choose between the comfortable road through Flims and the more picturesque route through Versam, which passes high above the Rhine gorge.

Postal coaches run from Ilanz, mid-point of the valley, to Flims, Ladir, Obersaxen, Riein, Siat, Vals and Vrin.

Far below, along the Vorderrhein, a line of Rhaetian Railways hurries past bizarre chalk formations to Disentis.

The Furka-Oberalp Railway continues from there, making for Andermatt and thence through the new Furka Tunnel into the Valais.

Göschenen can also be reached by rail from Andermatt in a matter of minutes. The road from Disentis over the Lucomagno Pass into the Ticino is closed in winter.

Circles of stone and ritual rocks with man-made depressions are found in many places in the Surselva and bear witness to some of the earliest human settlements in the valley.

It is impossible today to determine with any certitude the original significance of these stone monuments. Were they aids to

astronomical observation in the Bronze Age or places of heathen sacrifice?

There have been many finds from the Bronze Age and the later La Tène period in excavations carried out, for instance, in the area around Trun.

The Celts deeply influenced the local culture of that epoch, as is revealed by many place-names. The peoples who settled here are collectively designated as Rhaetians.

A period that was of great importance for this area began in the year 15 BC, when Rhaetia was conquered by the Romans.

The Latin language of the new administrators later mingled with the existing local languages to produce Rhaeto-Romanic, or Romansh.

Today the inhabitants of the Surselva speak Romansh with the exception of a few German-speaking enclaves, such as those of the so-called Walser, who entered this area from the Valais in the fourteenth century and now live, for instance, in the Obersaxen region.

Ruined castles scattered over the whole valley also tell us something of the Middle Ages and their rulers.

The history of the Surselva was for centuries largely determined by the Lucomagno Pass, which ranked among the so-called imperial passes.

Historians are well informed about the early Middle Ages, as valuable documents have survived from those times.

Among them is the famous Tello will of 765, with which Bishop Tello left his lands between Flims and Somvix to the monastery of Disentis.

The valley population seems to have enjoyed a high degree of emancipation at all times. In 1424 the Grey League was founded in Trun and brought the local inhabitants extensive liberties.

In 1471 this league joined forces with two others, the Gotteshausbund (League of God's House) and Zehngerichtebund (League of Ten Jurisdictions), thereby forming a Rhaetian state.

Feudal dominion gradually lost its hold. The next few centuries nevertheless brought periods of unrest, as for instance during what is known as the Bündner Wirren, the Grison disorders, the plague years and the French invasion (1799).

In the course of the nineteenth century the region recovered and made attempts to develop new social patterns. In some areas it proved possible to create new jobs, so that the

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A view of the village of Segnes which belongs to the commune of Disentis

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young men were not compelled to emigrate or to enter foreign military service.

The building of new roads and later of the line of Rhaetian Railways from Ilanz to Disentis (1912) brought a modest prosperity to the Surselva.

But it was only after the Second World War, when tourism began its boom in all parts of the country, that the existence of the valley-dwellers was assured.

The agriculture of the Surselva has profited at all times from the favourable climate. The

valley-dwellers were always farmers, living on the land they cultivated.

And agriculture – constantly undergoing modernisation – is still an important economic factor today. The trades, based on old handicraft traditions, have also developed.

Many towns and villages derive benefit from small and medium enterprises such as building and transport companies, garages and product distribution firms.

Industry has not been able to establish itself, with the sole exception of the textile factory at Trun.

Factory workers are also employed by the Emser Werke at Domat/Ems.

Since the Second World War a few power stations have been erected in the valley and have provided work for many young people both during the building phase and under operational conditions.

Tourism is today one of the chief economic stays of life in the valley. Once places like Sedrun, Disentis, Breil/Brigels and Obersaxen had evolved into holiday resorts with a respectable infrastructure, smaller villages began to follow suit, and in most cases their efforts were crowned with success.

# Touring... on skis

SPRINGTIME skiing in Switzerland first became popular when the higher mountain regions, which had snow as late as May or even June, became accessible after the construction of railways and ski lifts.

The real sportsman however experiences even greater satisfaction if he climbs a mountain on

his own, then skis down new slopes having no designated runs.

Powder snow, common in January, is found in the higher regions even in late spring. Yet one mustn't forget the danger involved.

Ski tours ought never be attempted alone! Skiing as a group considerably increases the

possibility of mutual assistance. Just such team-work, such dependence on one another, is indeed an unforgettable experience that many people in our mechanised world can no longer have.

Prerequisites for a 2,000-4,000 meter ski tour consists of confident, experienced skiing ability and physical fitness. Year-round intensive training always pays off.

Before beginning a tour, the skier should be thoroughly familiar with the equipment: rope, climbing iron, pickaxe, climbing harness and, above all, the avalanche search beeper.

Because the weather often changes from one minute to the next, the initial thrill soon wears off, and the tour can become a truly difficult venture.

Furthermore, each member of such a trip through the winter loneliness, far from civilization, must carry the bare essentials on his back from hut to hut.

Swiss mountain climbing schools provide a choice of guided ski tours at all levels of ability for the challenging peaks of the Swiss Alps. A fascinating experience that lives on in memory.

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BARGAIN hunters looking for a last minute skiing holiday, should contact Interhome, who have apartments available in Switzerland during March and April.

Late skiers must look for high resorts to ensure that there will still be sufficient quantities of snow about, though Zermatt, Saas Fee, Verbier/Haute-Nendaz/Mayensde-Riddes or Crans-Montana are usually safe bets.

Of course, if you book late, you have the added advantage of being able to check snow reports first.

## BACKGROUND IN PSYCHOLOGY OR MEDICINE

*We are looking for Swiss German people to work as interviewers on a project between mid March and mid May. Interesting and reasonably well paid. May suit post graduat student. Please send brief details quoting day and evening telephone numbers to:*

**Mrs Wyncoll, Eyescan, The Boathouse,  
The Embankment, Putney, London SW15.  
Tel: 01-788 8819.**