

CABANE DU MONT FORT

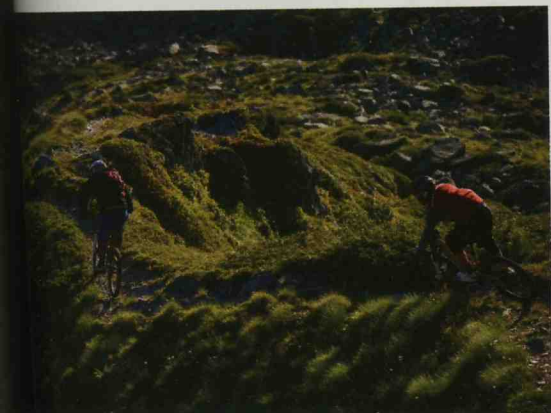
's awesome. On sunny days in the winter, people had straight for the Mont Fort to sit in the sun and drink their faces off. There's this narrow little ski run on the way down that has nets so drunken skiers don't go flying off the edges and die." Blake's words ring in my head as we gun a final shot of apricot liquor before starting our twilight descent from the Mont Fort. La Cabane du Mont Fort is part of the Haute Route or the High Route, a series of mountaineering trails that run between Chamonix, France and Zermatt, Switzerland. The Verbier Free Skiing Championships are held on the steep slopes above La Cabane and looking out from the deck you can't help but marvel at the view. Here on the rooftop of Verbier, you can see Mont Blanc, Europe's highest peak and the

toothy ridgeline of Chamonix, clearly visible in the evening light.

We've spent the last few hours sitting in the sun drinking good beer and gorging ourselves on thick, rich cheese fondue that is sitting in my belly like a little golden bowling ball of nap-inducing sludge when Chris tells us it's time to mount up and ride the 6,000 feet back to Lourtier as nightfall looms. With the sun dipping behind the mountains, we start another decent on a trail as gooey as the cheese in my belly and start to make the push for our day's destination. We race the sun as it dips below the distant peaks, the sky golden in twilight turning to molten silver as we descend through alpine towns as the streetlights of Lourtier blink into wakefulness around us in the mounting darkness.



in Switzerland



LA VALLÉE EXPRESS

The trail is steep – and it's exposed ridgeline that drops straight to the valley floor. The Big Mountain crew calls the trail La Vallée Express because the steep, rutty switchbacks are the back door of Hotel la Vallée in our town of Lourtier. The locals call the trail Vertigo because of its obvious exposure, but also because of the way it racks up the vertical feet. I put my tire rack in front of me, tucked in behind Chris' bike, and started my descent.

Before long, with the hotel far, far behind me, I was soon lost in the rhythm of the trail. Riding down the exposed ridgeline I remember thinking about how the hotel looked like it was a straight-up road on a floor and that I could be at the dinner table in Lourtier quickly if I was to go over the bars; no more of a dot the landscape over here. Riding is a series of switchback after tight switchback every few feet the way to a perfect tunnel of alder trees. The light at the end of my Big Mountain adventure is the church bells of Lourtier ring us home. I'm here in Switzerland and after a record-breaking 10,000 feet of vertical riding in the books, I feel like I've scraped the surface of what's to be next.

A month back at home, I can still hear the church bells ringing even as my bike, covered in mud, sits in the corner of my B.C. loam sits drying in the corner next to the leftover traces of Swiss goodness. My mind is fresh and closing my eyes I can still see the steep, technical, full-commitment line of the trail. I fast singletrack with my fellow riders with my friends. When I open my eyes, I want to go back to the stoke up my friends. I tell them to close their eyes and imagine the best trail that they have ever ridden. Then imagine it being over 100,000 feet

Big Mountain is offering three Alpen...



Wade's Passion

Riding B

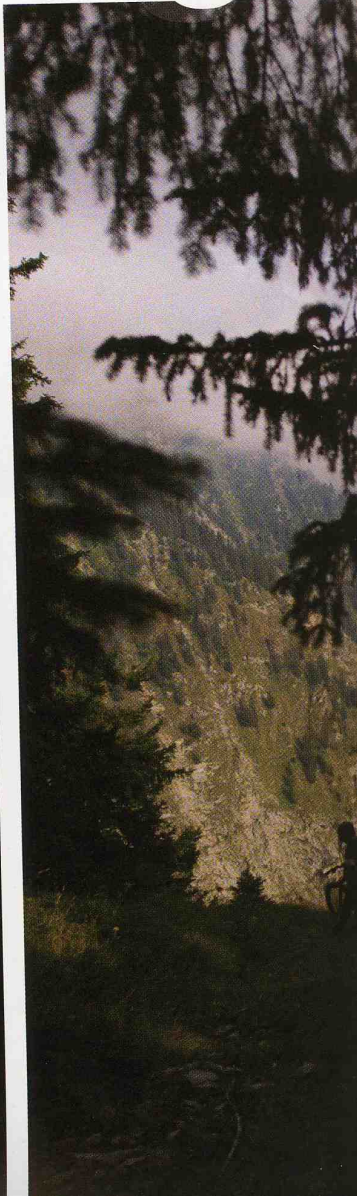
4 the sport and his drive to keep exploring never ceases to amaze me. I have honestly never seen someone have so much fun on a bike.

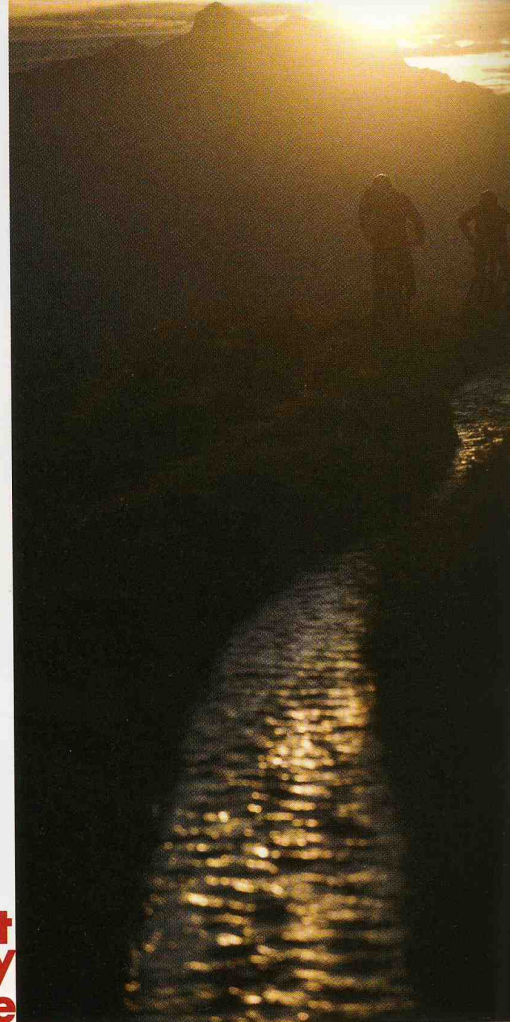
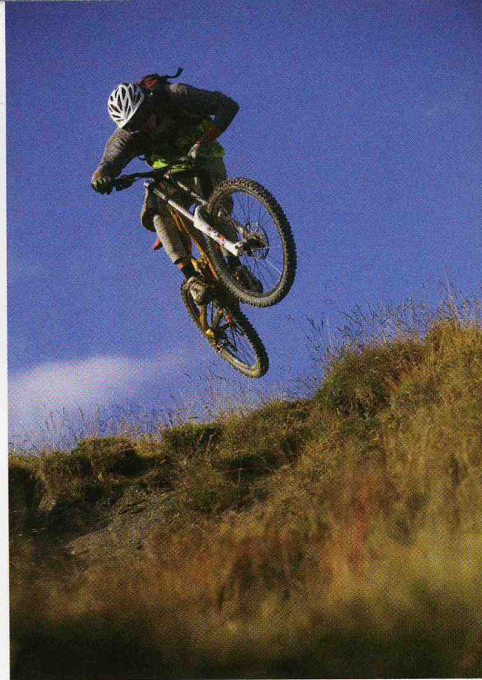
VERBIER BIKE PARK

The storybook town of Verbier is a bit like going to... well, a storybook. From the red-shuttered windows to the well-manicured lawns around the whole town, it wouldn't surprise me to stumble across a Heidi look-a-like as we line up for our first gondola ride of the day. As my eyes cast around the valley, I note that there seems to be lifts going up everywhere. Having ridden Whistler and numerous other bike parks in North America, I was excited to give the park a rip. I was interested to see how the manmade trails stacked up against the gooey singletrack that my tires had been stuck to for the last week. Guided by Swiss DH racer, Ludo May, we turn a lap on the local DH course, Tires Fire. The course is a good mix of rough toilet-bowl-sized berms that flush me into rough off-camber stuff that have me grabbing more brakes than I'm used to.

I've already had one visit to the clinic to have

my knee sewn up and I'm not eager for any more Swiss needlework. That thought is clear in my mind as I navigate a mishmash of tight treed corners, gaps and Shore-like structures hidden in a cluster of trees above the finish line. While Blake is working the camera hard, snapping shots of Ludo, Chris checks his watch and notes that we're running late. In a very real sense we are racing the clock on this lap since we arrived in the park late in the afternoon. We need to be at the bottom to catch the last tram to the Cabane de Mont Fort high in the alpine above Verbier. Much like my time here in the Valais, the day has slipped away and while I wish we had more time to truly explore the park, we're on the clock. Although our time here has been short, I generally get the sense that the best riding is away from the park and with that in mind we raced to the bottom to meet the rest of our party.





ROLLING ORGY OF MEDIEVAL FLOW

A multitude of vertical feet has begun to blend into a trail and today we will keep racking up the miles on a trail known to the Big Mountain crew as the Rolling Orgy. Not many of the trails we ride have names, and Joe's morning planning sessions usually revolve around riding "that trail where the cows were," but on this morning I can see their faces in my mind at the thought of riding the Rolling Orgy. The trail starts in the hills above Martigny and will descend through the vineyard-covered slopes of the Rhone valley. Another few thousand feet click off the dial as we turn another lap of high-speed descents and navigate the scary ridgelines that redefine "exposure" with the turn of a switchback.

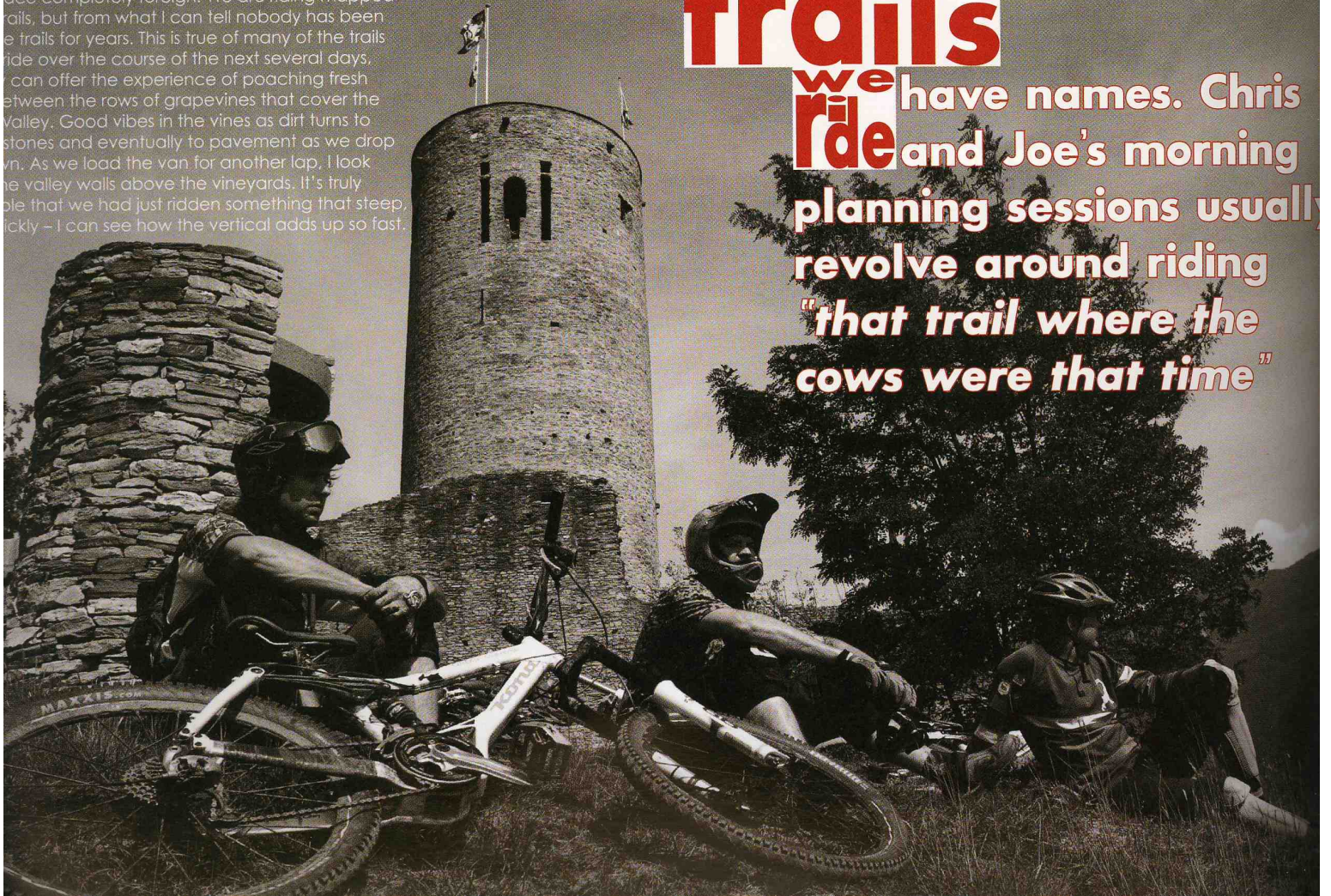
The trails are steep and covered in two inches of mossy loam and with dried pine needles roosting near the tire, it's the closest thing to skiing fresh powder that I can imagine. Medieval Flow takes on a new meaning as we navigate ancient Bisse ways that snake along the ridgelines. These stone aqueducts are a remnant from the past when Switzerland was hit by drought and are now another feature that reminds us we are riding in a place completely foreign. We are riding mapped trails, but from what I can tell nobody has been on these trails for years. This is true of many of the trails we ride over the course of the next several days, but we can offer the experience of poaching fresh grapes between the rows of grapevines that cover the valley. Good vibes in the vines as dirt turns to stones and eventually to pavement as we drop down. As we load the van for another lap, I look out over the valley walls above the vineyards. It's truly incredible that we had just ridden something that steep so quickly - I can see how the vertical adds up so fast.



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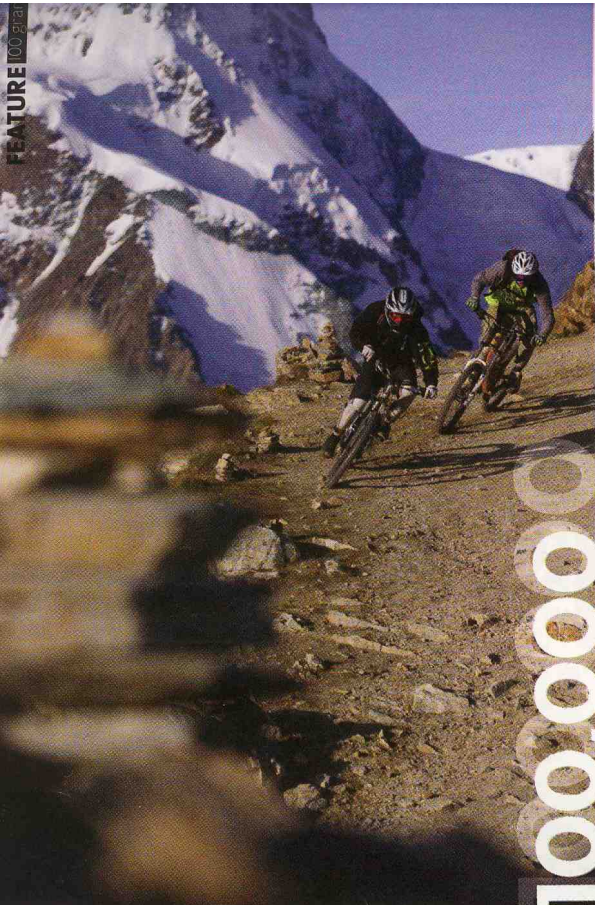
CRANS-MONTANA BIKE PARK

It's an unusual day for the group on the tour. We're going to turn laps on one of the few manmade networks of mountain bike trails in Switzerland. The hillside town of Crans-Montana boasts one of the few DH-specific mountain bike parks in the country. The tram drops riders at the top of the ski area and winds along ridgelines and forested gullies before popping out at the town below. The day our group was there was damp to say the least and most riders got dirty but everyone came back with smiles. The helmet cam footage of the day had everyone in stitches as we laid on the lounge room floor at our hotel that evening as the riders cut into each other like old friends.

The video would be my only experience of that portion of the trip. I had slashed my knee wide open the day before and spent the better part of the day with

my foot up wondering if my trip was over. I wasn't alone; while everyone else was cowering behind their muddy smile-on, Blake Jorgenson, our photographer, and I spent the day sitting in the lounge room, victims of off-bike moments that had occurred within mere miles of each other the previous day. We thought it was pretty funny that the photographer and the journalist were taken out on the same afternoon, but Chris wasn't laughing. He had that 100,000-foot goal in mind and he wanted it documented so Blake and I wrapped up our respective wounds and from then on limped whenever we didn't ride. The quality of the riding and the sheer amount of vertical we planned could be the best cure for any injury – and we were in Switzerland; we hadn't come all this way to sit on our duffs.





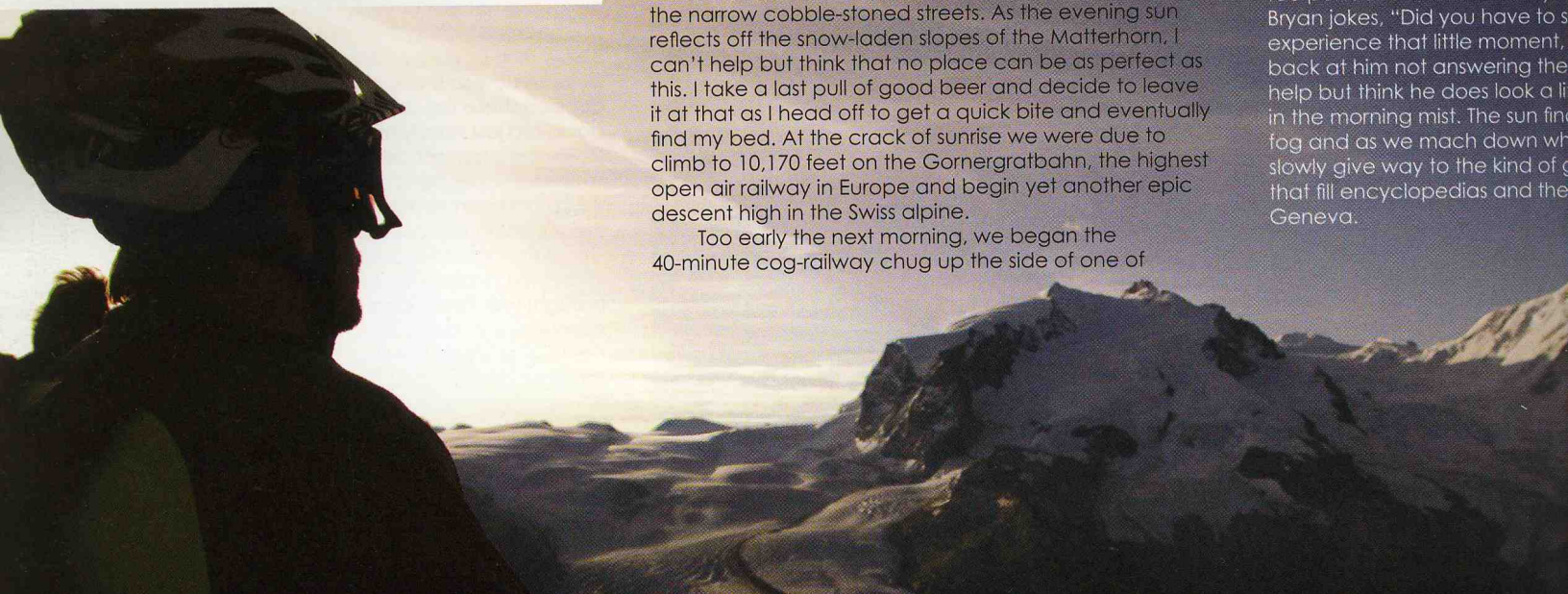
THE HIGH ALPINE: ZERMATT

Zermatt is pretty much the ideal version of Switzerland that everyone imagines except there are way more tourists. Zermatt lies in the shadow of the famed Matterhorn and has been a destination for adventurers of all kinds for over a century. Accessible to travelers only by train, I can't imagine a more ideal place as we ride our bikes from the station and marvel that the town is completely car-less. Everywhere I look there are people on bikes, hikers with fresh dirt on their boots, and fellow tourists filling their face with chocolate on the narrow cobble-stoned streets. As the evening sun reflects off the snow-laden slopes of the Matterhorn, I can't help but think that no place can be as perfect as this. I take a last pull of good beer and decide to leave it at that as I head off to get a quick bite and eventually find my bed. At the crack of sunrise we were due to climb to 10,170 feet on the Gornergratbahn, the highest open air railway in Europe and begin yet another epic descent high in the Swiss alpine.

Too early the next morning, we began the 40-minute cog-railway chug up the side of one of

Zermatt's gigantic peaks. After reaching the summit of the Gornergrat we... Somewhere behind me I hear Walt Horn!" and smile as I look up at a... always dreamed of visiting. While checking the Matterhorn off my destinations, I hear fellow Vancouverite Walt mutter that he's "ruined." I... and with a gesture that's half-apologetic he's caught himself wondering... top this experience. I have to admit... the physical dangers, the real high... blissed-out by the sheer volume... enjoy the fact that you are riding... handful of riders have ever heard... In a moment of pure selfishness... little more privileged than the crowd... of tourists we had just left behind... were enjoying these mountains... adventurers, our tire treads place... prints left behind by the other... made this journey for centuries.

The temperamental weather... is such that one minute you can... clear blue skies with the snow-capped... Matterhorn looming behind you... you're moving through an otherworldly... mist, razor-sharp rock and boot... I can dimly make out Chris' silhouette... in the dense fog and I'm half-remembering... Frodo on his way to Mordor around... corner. As if to punctuate that... hooves reverberates in the mist... chamois charge down a nearby trail... their morning feed by the trail-head... too perfect a moment as my Vancouver... Bryan jokes, "Did you have to... experience that little moment... back at him not answering the... help but think he does look a little... in the morning mist. The sun finally... fog and as we mach down what... slowly give way to the kind of... that fill encyclopedias and the... Geneva.



VALAIS: VERBIER

first thing that I notice is that there is singletrack everywhere. Gondolas and ski lifts seem to connect the towns to distant peaks like power lines and the possibilities for good riding seem limitless. When I booked the trip six months prior, this is what I thought riding Switzerland was going to be like. In the weeks previous, I dreamt of a narrow string of singletrack that would wind its way forever through green rolling hills with white snow-capped peaks in the distance – yep, check that wish off the list.

There are so many trails that Chris will put rubber to the multitude of trails that he's never ridden before, all the more impressive considering he has been coming here for over ten years. Right now he's along for the ride just like the rest of us, following Joe through little creases in the tall grass and riding trails that may have only ever seen a handful of riders in their lifetime. The adventure and the quest to discover new trails has veteran riders like Wade turning year after year, saying, "After my first trip to Switzerland, I knew that I needed to come here to ride at least once a year for the rest of my life!"

At one point during the ride, I looked over to see Wade and Chris with their heads together and of course I went to the polite thing and eavesdrop on their conversation. Always looking for new ways to challenge himself, Wade wants to see if he can set a record trying to descend a million vertical feet never repeating the same trail twice. Chris smiles and says that "this is the place to do it" if he wants to try and I can see Wade pouring over maps in his head trying to make it work. "Well, a million in two weeks would be impossible, but maybe in three or four. What do you think?" Wade's passion for the sport and his drive to keep exploring never ceases to amaze me. I have honestly never seen someone have so much fun on a bike. That infectious enthusiasm gives him the uncanny ability to pick up a group of saddle-weary riders and energize the lot of them. Moving through the group, Wade offers advice on everything from bike handling to the secrets of "using what the trail gives you" and after two weeks of The Godfather's tutelage I am beginning to see only possibilities. It's no wonder to me that the man has more riding buddies than anyone else – every rider in his friend and every trail is there to be enjoyed to its fullest.



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Riding Big in Switze



"BOOM! MOUNTAINS!" THE

WORDS EXPLODE FROM THE MOUTH OF BIG MOUNTAIN'S SENIOR GUIDE JOE SCHWARTZ WITH A TOOTHY GRIN AS WE PILE OUT OF THE VAN LIKE A BUNCH OF

OVEREAGER FIFTH GRADERS ON THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. MY ENTIRE 360-DEGREE VIEW IS RINGED WITH KNIFE-EDGED PEAKS AND GREEN ALPINE MEADOWS AS THE DISTANT SOUND OF COWBELLS RING IN THE DISTANCE. BELOW ME, A NARROW RIBBON OF SINGLETRACK WINDS IT'S WAY THROUGH A POSTCARD PERFECT SWISS MEADOW BEFORE DISAPPEARING INTO THE TREE LINE. FINALLY, AFTER 24 HOURS OF TRAVEL THAT UTILIZED EVERY MODERN CONVEYANCE KNOWN TO MAN, I'VE ARRIVED AT THE BEGINNING OF MY JOURNEY.

I'm in Switzerland.

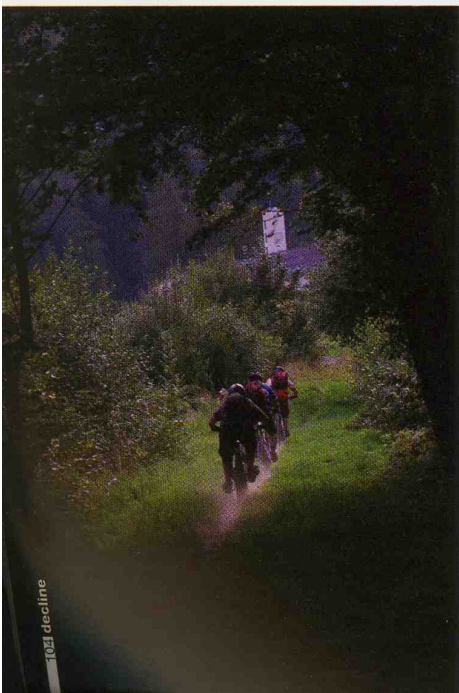
Still more than a little jetlagged and as eager as I am to ride, I deadpan a question to Joe: "What are your feet today, huh?" Just as seriously he smirks, "I don't know, trying to find shorter trails for the first day, but I can't find any!" I stare at him blankly, wondering if he's kidding, but I would soon learn that Joe may joke about things but not about vert. Big Mountain Bike has been operating from the town of Lourdes, France, below us in the Val de Bagnes region – for more than six years now so it's appropriate enough that the trail I'm on is dubbed these first descents the Backyard Track. The backyard just happens to be the canton of Valais, home to Europe's highest peaks, and a 3,000-foot climb to the top is what they consider a "warm-up" lap. I give myself a little shake and start to think that this trip could be a lot more fun before going to double check a few bolts on my bike.

When Vancouver, B.C.-based owner/guide Joe Winter first started coming to Switzerland in 2001, he brought with him his big downhill bike, years of experience and a thirst for discovering new trails. With the help of a few like-minded locals, he began to build together a network of trails that are second to none and continue to change and grow to this day. The descents are not unusual for both clients and guides to make a descent on the same day's ride, creating an adrenaline rush for everyone. On this particular day, the descents are a little apart from the group, still deciding which trails they are going to take us on. It's not just the variety of trails that are spread out below us that are giving them pause, it's because they have a plan to want to break the company record of just over 100,000 feet descended in a week and they think they have the right mix of riders and weather to make it happen.

Gleaming downhill sleds lie in the grass along the trail. Lightweight, all-mountain rigs as their owners introduce themselves. As people busied themselves taking photographs and tightening bolts, I looked around at the riders in our group, thinking that the bikes were mismatched as their owners. They are from all walks of life, from students on a much-earned break, to a wily-Phoenician contractor, to the easygoing pair of Australians who effortlessly deflect friendly Foster's jokes from the glib North Americans. The four remaining riders, myself included, have journeyed from Vancouver, B.C., all friends and veterans of the Big Mountain Bike Adventure experience in Costa Rica the year before. While carving up Central American loam we had learned the potential of Switzerland's limitless singletrack by celebrity guide/jokester Wade "I love Cheese!" Simmons, who would be joining us a few days into our adventure. For over a year, Wade has been promising us more epic singletrack than we could possibly ride in a lifetime and we aimed to hold The Godfather to his word as we pointed our front wheels towards the distant rooftops in the valley below.

100,000 Riding Big in Switzerland

By Dave Smith; Photos by Blake Jorgenson



...they want to break the company record of just over 100,000 descended in a week



-MOUNTAIN, GRAVITY RACING, FREESTYLE

Deadline



barred
for life