

Globe Travel



STERLING LORENCE

High above Verbier, riders traverse narrow cow paths through meadows hued by an August dawn. Over the course of eight days, they climb an average of 600 metres daily and descend more than three kilometres.

CYCLING THE SLOPES

SWITZERLAND

MITCHELL SCOTT uncovers mountain biking 'perfection' in the Swiss Alps, plunging down ancient trails by day and dining on raclette and fine wine in chalets by night

ZERMATT, SWITZERLAND

In the Valais region of southwestern Switzerland, where gondolas, trains and chairlifts bridge the gaps between river and ridge with uncommon frequency, I stop my mountain bike because I have to. My forearms are pumped from braking, but this isn't the only reason I must pause: The trail ahead of me contours downward through mountains carpeted by tall evergreen forest, providing yet another stunning view.

The path beneath our tires is ancient, and right now, on a bike, it is delivering otherworldly joy. Slightly more than a metre wide, it has been worn by the traffic of civilizations coming and going.

Ten mountain bikers from British Columbia have gathered here to ride "perfection" — at least that's what we've been told.

With Whistler native Chris Winter and Valais local François Pançhard as guides, our crew will cover 25,000 vertical metres of single track over eight days, dine on *raclette* and fine wine in Alpine chalets at night, and stop for cappuccinos and *pain au chocolat* halfway down 2,600-metre descents just because we can.

We are some of the first foreigners to experience Switzerland like

this — the first to blend the modernity of lifts, the technology of full-suspension bikes and the country's historic trails.

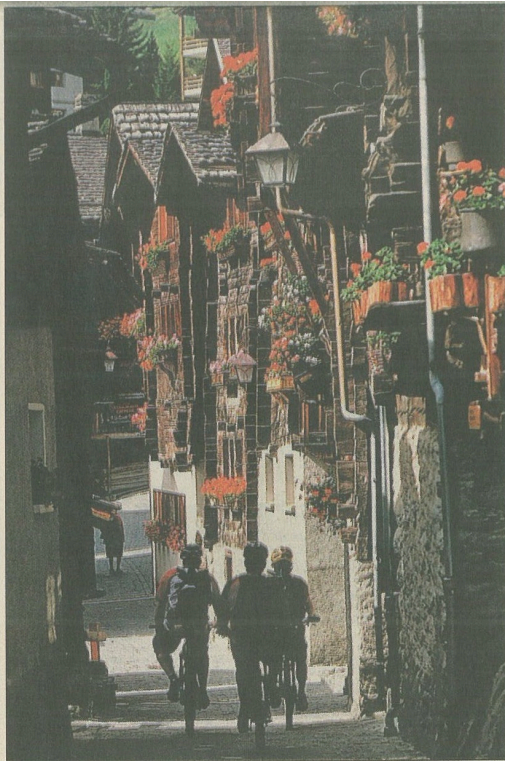
Three years ago, Winter, an entrepreneur and avid cyclist, started researching the possibility of guiding downhill bike tours in the Swiss Alps, where he had spent a portion of his childhood skiing. His research fuelled the formation of his tour company, Big Mountain Freeride Bike Adventures, and eventually led him to Pançhard.

The son of a mountain climber, Pançhard's green eyes and conniving grin belie a certain imbalance. He is not following the footsteps of his thirty-something peers, taking high-profile jobs in New York and Paris, making heaps of cash in Geneva playing with oil baron cash, driving BMWs and wearing fancy watches.

Instead, Pançhard runs his own CD-ROM trail-mapping business, spending day after day documenting the labyrinth of single track that drapes Switzerland like a giant gill net.

He lives high in the mountains in a tiny little cabin with his beautiful Hungarian wife, and almost every day during the summer explores his homeland by bike.

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STERLING LORENCE

Alpine villages such as Grimentz, above, hire local residents to rake and manicure their proximate trail networks, such is the Swiss dedication to path maintenance.

CABIN FEVER AT 35,000 FEET, T2

PARIS'S PERFECT ARRONDISSEMENT, T3

CANADA

Brake failures and crash landings aside, The Globe's **DAWN WALTON** discovers there's more to the growing sport of freeriding than pointing her front wheel downhill

PANORAMA MOUNTAIN VILLAGE, B.C.

I was told that by the end of the day my arms might feel a little like Popeye's, forearms throbbing from holding the handlebars and squeezing the brakes.

I thought of that as I feathered, pumped and put a death grip on the brakes of the high-performance, full-suspension Kona Stinky I'd rented at B.C.'s Panorama Mountain Village. Yet the bike refused to respond. As I careened down the rocky track on an otherwise green ski run, I launched Plan B.

Ignoring downhill etiquette to avoid causing erosion off trail, I zig-zagged across the mountain hoping the traverse would slow me down.

But I just seemed to gain more speed. I noticed a rocky embankment to my left at the edge of the run. It would be Plan C.

I rode the bike toward it, slammed into it, jumped backwards off the pedals and onto some stone slabs.

"I'm okay," I yelled as I threw my arms in the air in a perfect Nadia Comaneci dismount to the relief of the group I was riding with.

That was my introduction to downhill mountain biking, also known as freeriding.

It's a sport that involves hurtling down hills and launching yourself

in the air and requires nerves of steel and a fat wallet. Freeriding is growing in popularity as Canadian ski resorts from Whistler-Blackcomb to Blue Mountain look for summer revenue and thrill-seekers chase an adrenalin rush as the appetite for extreme sports refuses to abate (unicycling down a mountain anyone?). Most fans of freeriding have crossed over from winter mountain sports, myself included. But the sport is still male-dominated — I'm told it's a good place to meet men. I'm here, however, to test my mettle.

Despite the brake failure — not uncommon and likely due to cable stretch — I was still up for the second day of a two-day women's beginner course at Purcell Mountain Bike School at Panorama in southeast British Columbia, about 300 kilometres southwest of my home in Calgary.

My instructor, Becca Wright, a 31-year-old bubbly school teacher and ski instructor and four-year veteran of this sport, witnessed my speedy descent and was impressed with my gumption after just a few runs. That was until she realized I was out of control and mercifully rode my brakeless bike to the bottom of the mountain.

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THE RISE OF DOWNHILL BIKE GEAR, T4