


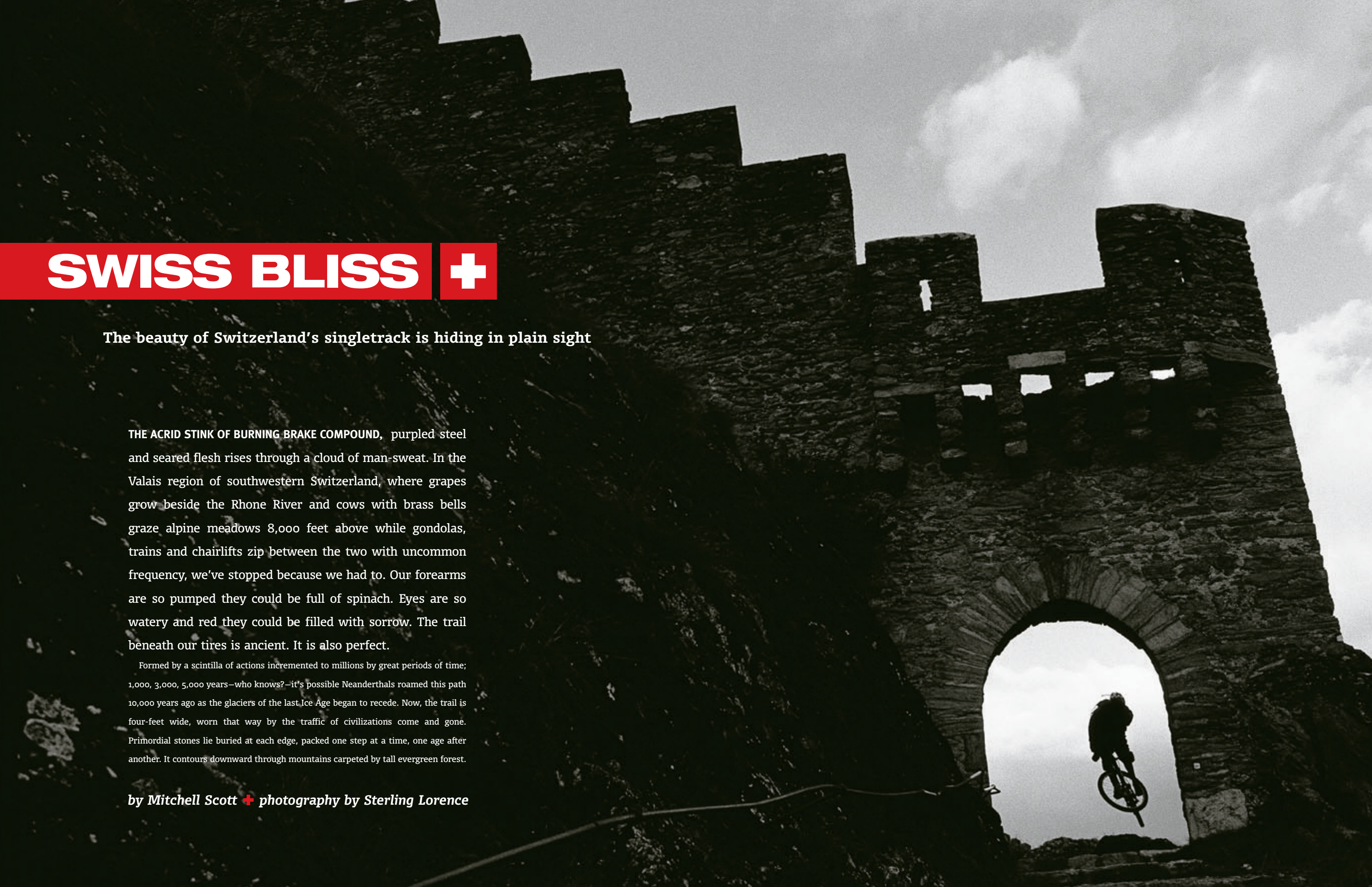
SWISS BLISS

The beauty of Switzerland's singletrack is hiding in plain sight

THE ACRID STINK OF BURNING BRAKE COMPOUND, purpled steel and seared flesh rises through a cloud of man-sweat. In the Valais region of southwestern Switzerland, where grapes grow beside the Rhone River and cows with brass bells graze alpine meadows 8,000 feet above while gondolas, trains and chairlifts zip between the two with uncommon frequency, we've stopped because we had to. Our forearms are so pumped they could be full of spinach. Eyes are so watery and red they could be filled with sorrow. The trail beneath our tires is ancient. It is also perfect.

Formed by a scintilla of actions incremented to millions by great periods of time; 1,000, 3,000, 5,000 years—who knows?—it's possible Neanderthals roamed this path 10,000 years ago as the glaciers of the last Ice Age began to recede. Now, the trail is four-feet wide, worn that way by the traffic of civilizations come and gone. Primordial stones lie buried at each edge, packed one step at a time, one age after another. It contours downward through mountains carpeted by tall evergreen forest.

by Mitchell Scott  photography by Sterling Lorence





The Valais region is home to Europe's largest glacier, the 14-mile Aletsch. Here, Andrew Shandro gets a glimpse of its smaller neighbor, the Grenzletscher glacier.

And it is fast. On one side is a ditch with water trickling toward the Mediterranean, channeling its descent in and out of villages; past slate-roofed farmhouses and cafés; meadows; and views...always views.

Down and down, the trail's center worn to a smoothed rut from the plod of infinite footsteps, an effect that berms corners magnificently. Miraculously, almost sacrilegiously, this trail has no name, but it does indeed exist.

What is perfect singletrack? You hear it often, from friends, guys at the bike shop and even right here in this magazine. What exactly is it? What does it look like? Feel like? How does it get there? Where is it? Perhaps these questions can be answered in Valais, a 2,000-square-mile region in the Pennine Alps on the eastern edge of Lake Geneva, home to Western Europe's highest peak, 15,771-foot Mont Blanc.

of trails built from millenniums of leg, lung and foot.

Mountain bikers don't usually blow big cash on plane tickets to go halfway around the world to one of the planet's most expensive countries...just to ride a bike. Surfers go to budget beaches. Climbers dirtbag on desolate peaks. Mountain bikers go to Utah. What would make riders like Wade Simmons and Andrew Shandro leave the world-class trails of their North Shore backyard? Why would a government statistician blow off his fiancée, half of his vacation time, and a good chunk of his savings to ride in the same clothes for more than a week? Why would a bike shop manager from Whistler leave A-Line? Our stories could all be laced back to friends who had their minds blown on a trip to Valais last year. They promised perfection.



TEN MOUNTAIN BIKERS have gathered in Valais to ride perfection...or at least that's what they've been told. With Whistler, British Columbia, native Chris Winter and lifetime Valais local François Panchard as guides, as well as a host of local Swiss rogues as companions, this band's mission is to pillage singletrack. All the while, no one is aware of what they are doing. "Why do those men laugh and hug?" the locals ask. "Why throw head skyward and scream with joy?" This voyage presents them with 80,000 vertical feet of descending in eight days. They are some of the first foreigners to ever experience Switzerland like this—to blend the modernity of lifts, the technology of all-mountain full suspension bikes and the antiquity

THREE YEARS AGO, 32-year-old Chris Winter, an entrepreneur and avid rider, started looking into guiding bike tours in the Swiss Alps, a place he spent a portion of his childhood skiing, a place he always had an infatuation for. His quest led him to 34-year-old François Panchard—a fellow not normal by Swiss standards.

The son of a mountain climber, Panchard's freaky green eyes and conniving grin belies a certain imbalance. He is not following the footsteps of his 30-something peers, taking high profile jobs in New York and Paris, making heaps of cash in Geneva playing with oil baron cash, driving BMWs with in-dash DVD players and wearing designer clothes and fancy watches.

Instead, Panchard runs his own CD-ROM trail mapping business, spending day after day documenting the labyrinth of singletrack that drapes his country like a giant gill net. He lives high in the mountains in a tiny little cabin with his beautiful Hungarian wife, and almost every summer day he explores his homeland by bike. In the last four years, he has gone from a tight, light cross-country rig (the Swiss mountain bike of choice) to a four-and-four all-mountain machine with disc brakes and wide rubber. Even still, he wants more suspension. Like I said, he is not a stereotypical Swiss.

Panchard knows something most of his countrymen don't. He is one of the very first in Switzerland to discover what could be the greatest jewel in the mountain bike universe. Lifts. Yes, lifts. Ski lifts, gondolas, tiny double chairs, trams, quads, funiculars, trains that go to 12,000 feet. Hundreds of them. Everywhere. Idiot, you say, that's easy. You've skied at Swiss resorts that have hundreds of lifts. You've traveled 50 miles in a day and barely walked. Everybody knows that. But that is winter. In summer it is a landscape dominated by hikers. Mountain bikers are nowhere to be seen.

"The Swiss mountain biker rides up the gravel road and down the gravel road," explains Panchard. "They

don't ride singletrack and they think lifts are for wimps." But Panchard, like he's done most of his life, has gone against the traditionalist ways of his countrymen and swallowed his pride. He rides lifts with his bike all the time. Almost all of them—of which there are hundreds—allow bikes, some on platforms, some on little hooks, some you have to hold yourself. From the top of each one spreads a weave of hiking trails, cow paths and doubletrack that meander through some of the world's most spectacular mountains. Some traverse, some go up, but once you've won an elevation of 8,000 to 10,000 feet, most go down—for a long way.

Worn smooth since the Dark Ages, by a people confined to a relatively small, rugged and mountainous land, with a knack for perfection and industry, the Swiss have made a labyrinth of walking paths, many linking farms and churches and villages from peak to valley bottom. And just like everything else Swiss, they are of superb quality. This is a country obsessed with time, so it makes sense everything is built with an ageless quality—local villages even hire unemployed residents to rake and manicure its proximate trail network. There are some 42,000 miles of them, naturally contoured and wonderfully irrigated, with drinking fountains and benches in the farthest reaches of every



Above the clouds and below the Mont Blanc massif, Andrew Shandro and Wade Simmons working for another 7,000-foot descent near Verbier.



Shandro and Simmons sample a mere fraction of the 37,000 miles of singletrack created by centuries of farm animals and foot traffic.

valley. But they are also special for another reason: Very few have ever seen the roll of knobby rubber. They are virgin, fresh, unspoiled. Yes, Panchard is a lone sailor on a sea of gold.

ON THIS DAY, Panchard has a capable crew—who understand the unclaimed treasure that envelopes his very existence. We find ourselves high above the glitz of Verbier. Earlier that day we traversed narrow, derailleur-claiming cow trail through alpine hued by an August dawn, descended to a decommissioned road, through winding, dipping singletrack as it runs beside a medieval aqueduct. Wandering across a steep, forested slope, we then climbed 3,000 feet on gravel road high into the alpine, to a cross, and a hike-a-bike up a steep path that tops out somewhere near 9,000 feet. And here we sit, fairly blown.

The starting point of our ride, a quaint stone and log hostel near the top



of a ski gondola, is barely visible across the valley. We sit, eating cheese and sausage and chocolate, marveling downward at 7,000 feet of vertiginous relief to the Rhone. Panchard readies his home-fashioned helmet cam. He has a crazed look, like we're about to ambush unsuspecting prey, absolutely certain we're going to get away with it.

It seems like hours go by until we stop. Steep singletrack melds to wider, more rhythmic trail that rails through sub-alpine meadows with ground cover that is brick red, mustard and rust.

Rotors sizzle. Eyes cake with dust. There is a collective tingle when we notice the Rhone is still an age away; its patterned vineyards and orchards and roads barely enlarged from the vista of before.

And then into forest, where the trail widens even more, and berms and jumps emerge with regularity as flow and speed and the clang of cow bells and bright green and cramping fingers and aching feet and rattling biceps and blurred forest and focus and elation rush upon you in a single wave of sensation. At the bottom, you don't know what to say...so you say nothing.



AFTER 12 MILES OF SOLID, uninterrupted descending, we whiz through vineyards to a village where we buy beers and cappuccinos and sandwiches. We load our bikes into the trailer, crowd into our van and drive an hour up the mountain-walled Rhone Valley to another neat little gondola, two at a time, up to a mountainside village. We spin through the narrow streets where cute blonde children wander amongst shiny little sports cars and stilted houses from the 1300s. We stop at a grocery store where the CamelBak is stuffed with wine



and cheese and more sausage and bottles of weak European beer. Then it's off to another gondola, this one smaller than before—a ski lift, up to a modern little hostel tucked above the bullwheel. On a sun-draped deck we indulge with Löwenbräus and views of glaciers and ragged peaks and lush green valleys. We drink and eat and try to recall the thousands of spectacular intricacies of the day, and the day before that, afraid we'll forget because there are so many worth remembering.

This goes on the next day and the next until it's a blur of rightness. Flow comes

easier. Over the course of eight days we ride an average of 25 miles, 2,000 feet of up and 10,000 feet of down per day. We begin to feel like animals, traveling wide, far and long, each mile the bike becoming



more an organic extension than a piece of metal, plastic and rubber.

The locals ask us why we're lazy, why we don't ride up the road like all the other cyclists. Panchard rambles in French that we like to ride downhill and that we're Canadian, and the lean, weather-wrinkled old men with felt hats slap back disapproving looks. But they don't know. No one here seems to.

In Zermatt, a picture-perfect ski village in the Upper Valais, we cruise like a pack of wolves through streets lined with geraniums and Rolex shops. We've got these five-and-five suspension bikes with stuffed day packs and we're not wearing spandex and we haven't shaved in days. People stare a lot. In the train station, littered with glitz and leather and wealth, we stand out like sore thumbs. We look like rogues that are up to something. We're not cross-country riders, they've seen those before. We're not boisterous British climbers, they've seen those, too. We pile our bikes into gondolas and funiculars, speak bad French and laugh overtly. We're here to take their treasures without them even knowing what their treasure is.

WE RIDE THE APOGEE of Swiss ingenuity, a train up to Gornergrat, a lookout at 10,270 feet, where a four-star hotel stares out at views of Europe's highest peaks—the 15,200-foot Monte Rosa, right there. The Matterhorn, in your face. Mega glaciers close enough to refrigerate you.

We wait until the people with Tilley hats and graphite walking poles finish their business. The sun begins to set and the hikers and the trains have all gone. I fall in behind Simmons and Shandro and submit to a path that is more a living, pulsing vein than a trail. We are cells coursing to a preset destination, our direction already known, already pre-programmed. We travel in unison and only react to the subtle turns and dips and switchbacks of hard-packed earth. The moment is otherworldly. Instinctual.

WE SPEND THE NIGHT in a chalet, high above the shimmering opulence of Zermatt. The Matterhorn fades through the window and someone says we may as well be kings. And there is a feeling that

we've found it: Raiders who have sailed forever and finally landed on that dreamed-of shore. The one that was promised to you, that made you take all the risks to get here, a place of copious treasure, too much to even conceive and there is no one to fight it from, no rush to hoard it. And now we're here. In the land of perfect singletrack. Not in a single stretch, but in a trail that goes and goes...and then goes some more.

Maybe perfection is the addition of the infinite—built by the foot and exhumed by the tire. It's hard to tell. But I ask you: What will your little stash in the woods look like if you padded it down foot by foot? And you and your kin and their kin did that for 500 years? And there would be lifts up to the top of each one. Energy efficient, self-loading lifts and upward monorails, gondolas and pretty little red trains. Not because you are lazy. It's that these rides are so huge, the relief is so damn big, riding from the bottom would kill most mortals. You toss in convenient villages and cafés to refuel. Lay down a complicated network of glacially-fed runoff to dug out logs so you could stay hydrated. And benches with views and, oh yes, character-rich chalets at the top of each one so when you wake, the alpine is right there, your trail is right there. And then, one day you snip the ribbon. Open up all the trails to be ridden by you and yours for the rest of all the days. Could this be perfect singletrack?

"Yes," you say. "Yes it is."



411 Big Mountain Freeride Bike Adventures will run its "Cloud-raker" Swiss Alps Tour twice in 2004. Duration of the tour is 12 days, 11 nights, with nine or 10 days of riding, and one day spent in Geneva. Dates: August 12 to 23 and August 25 to September 5. Land cost (includes transportation, breakfast, dinner and all lift passes): \$2,100. For more information visit www.ridebig.com or contact them directly at 866-894-0220 and info@ridebig.com.

Airfare to Geneva, Switzerland, starting point for the tour, can be organized through Swiss Air, Air Canada, British Airways, KLM, or a number of other international carriers.

It's suggested you bring your own bike, ideally an all-mountain full suspension, at least two sets of brake pads, tubes, tools and extra parts.

Minutes from the four-star digs of the Gornergrat, 5,000 feet and one little red train above Zermatt.