

# Underestimating the Alps

Photos and story by Aaron Teasdale

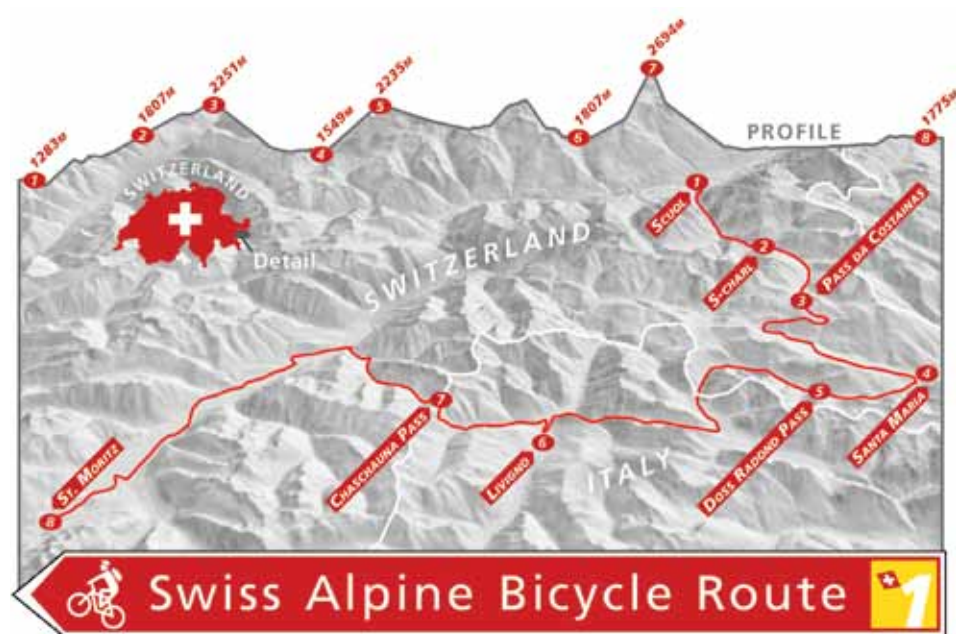
A ride on Switzerland's new nation-spanning mountain-bike route



“Why in God’s name didn’t I take the Alps more seriously?” I say to myself while desperately clenching the brakes as my bike careens down a snowfield high on a wind-blasted mountainside. It’s the first week of October and my riding partner Crash and I are at 9,000 feet somewhere in the remote mountains along the Swiss-Italian border. Everywhere there’s snow and cliff and one monstrous mountain after another plummeting into an uninhabited valley far below. A trail can be seen there, in the distant valley floor, leading away into a tightly-packed labyrinth of peak and valley. We would very much like to reach this trail, but to get there we’ll have to navigate this snowfield and then find our way to a series of snow-choked, plummeting switchbacks packed with loose rocks and gullied by running water. I pause to contemplate our situation when clouds envelop me and I lose sight of Crash. He’s somewhere flying down the mountainside ahead and soon to enjoy his second, and not final, unintentional dismount of the trip.

You’d think that if you were heading over to one of the most mountainous countries on earth to ride a new mountain-bike route across one of the world’s most famously rugged ranges that you might, you know, do a little planning. Not Crash and me. We show up undertrained and shockingly uninformed.

Consider our flight to Zurich when Crash says, “I should have gotten some francs in the Chicago airport.”



“Franks?” I reply, while wondering why he would want to bring hot dogs.

“Yeah, to have some money for when we get there.”

Realizing my mistake, I recover quickly and say, “I bet they’ll have some there.”

It’s not that we’re wilfully ignorant or that I’m obsessed with hot dogs, it’s that as fathers, husbands, and professionals, our lives are packed full of weighty responsibilities. We don’t have time to plan. Which is why we’re here — Swiss Trails, the national organization that books trips on the country’s many cycling routes, makes it easy. All I did was tell them the route we wanted to ride and bought plane tickets. They arranged our lodging, sent us maps and an English-language guidebook, and had full-

suspension mountain bikes waiting at our starting point. They even promised to haul our luggage from village to village.

For someone used to bikepacking in the North American wilds, this sounded impossibly posh. So what if we’ve never been in the Alps before — this is Switzerland, a meticulously organized country where cycling routes are signposted at virtually every turn. I figured there’d be espresso-serving mountain villas every few hundred yards staffed by buxom Heidi lookalikes and men in lederhosen playing those long wooden horns. Heck, there aren’t even grizzly bears in Switzerland. I was looking forward to a leisurely tour through a civilized mountain range.

The first clue that our ride in Switzerland



**Climb to the sky.** Crash gets out of his saddle to keep momentum going on one of many ascents along Alpine Route 1.



**Chaschauna Pass.** The route was often so steep between Italy and Switzerland that walking was necessary.

might be a bit tougher than planned comes early on the train ride from Zurich. It’s our first view of the Alps, and not only are they shockingly large and steep, they’re covered with snow.

“Are we going, like, right over those?” Crash asks as the train carries us into Switzerland’s far eastern hinterlands.

“Pretty much,” I answer, and then, “I think.” The truth is that I don’t really know. All I can say for certain is that we’ll be spending the next week riding Swiss Alpine Route 1, their recently created answer to North America’s Great Divide Mountain Bike Route.

Our next surprise comes in the mountain village of Scuol, the route’s starting point, in the canton of Graubünden, the highest and least populated region in the country. A poster in a visitor’s center shows a grizzly bear with cubs wandering through a meadow in the neighboring

national park.

“They have grizzly bears in Europe?” Crash says.

We ask the gray-haired man behind the counter who politely tells us that he doesn’t speak English — in German. Or maybe it’s Romansh, a variant of Latin still spoken in Switzerland’s isolated eastern mountain communities. I’m not even sure what he said; all I know is that Crash and I don’t understand a word. Like classic American doofuses, we’ve made the mistake of thinking everyone in Switzerland would speak English. Fortunately, we’re good smilers, which at least makes us friendly doofuses.

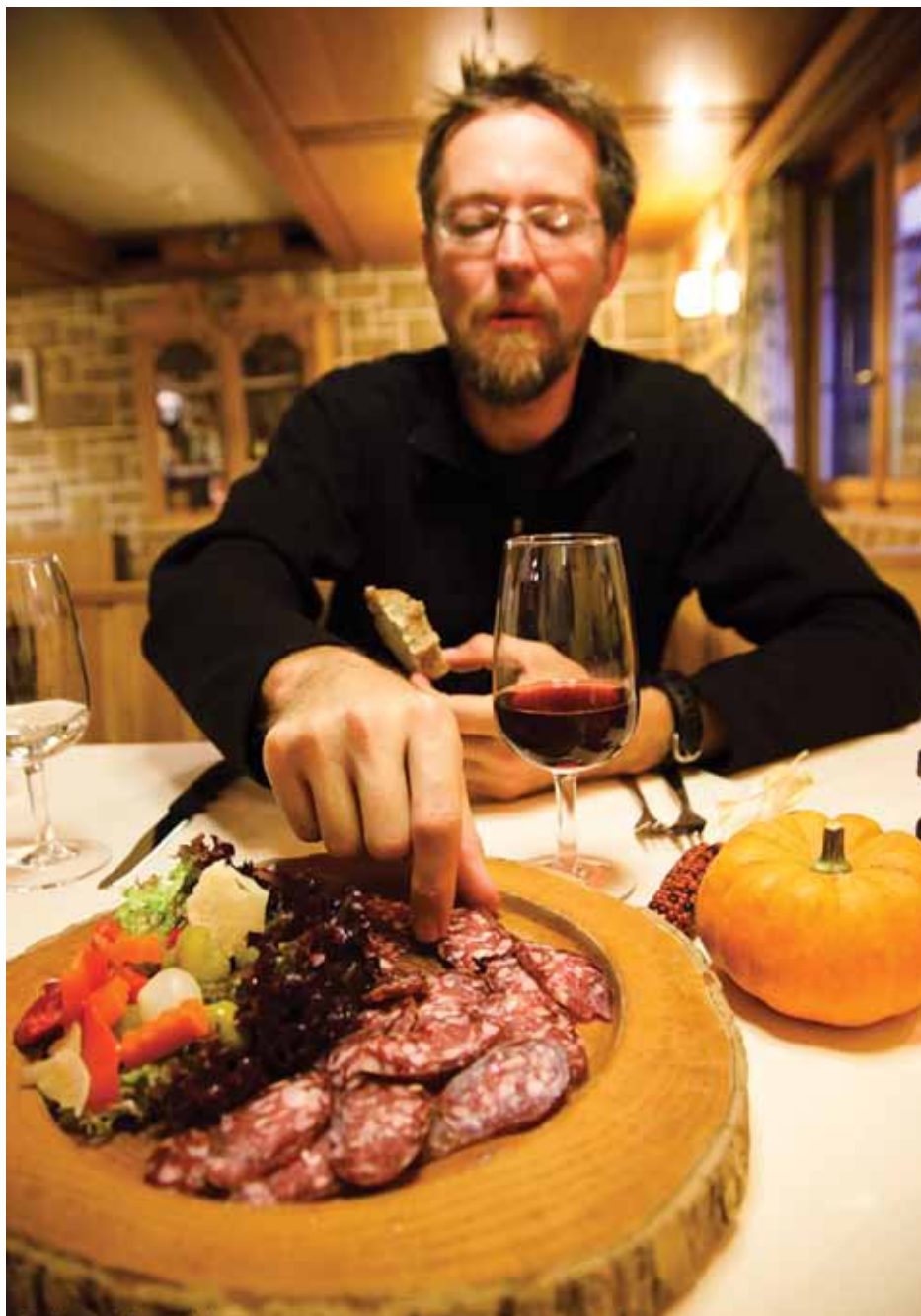
We look over our Swiss Trails packets and maps that night in the castle-like Hotel Engiadina. The elevation profiles are daunting — over 3,500 feet of climbing each day. It’s the first week of October when Swiss weather is typically still sunny and warm, but an early-season storm has

buried the mountains in snow and the forecast calls for highs in the 40s. On our itinerary is a handwritten note: “Ask about snow getting over Chaschauna Pass. You may need to find an alternate route.”

I fall asleep that night to visions of me lying hypothermic in a snowbank in the Alps while a grizzly bear gnaws on my leg.

The note launches a debate that will continue between us for the next three days — do we attempt Chaschauna? We’re slated to cross mountain passes every day, but at 9,000 feet Chaschauna is by far the highest. I’m inclined to go for it, but Crash is less sure. Of course, he’s also developing an unnerving habit of wiping out unexpectedly, his first spill coming on wet stairs during our ride around Scuol. Plus, as an emergency room doctor, he has a front-row seat to the grisly consequences of people’s bad decisions, so I consider him biased.

Leaving our bags in the hotel lobby for



**Late-night meal.** Crash enjoys the delicacies of the only place serving food in Santa Maria.

the Swiss Trails luggage van to pick up, we head out the next morning at the civilized start time of 11:00 AM. Crash, my original riding buddy from college, recently emerged from the black hole of medical school, and we're thrilled to be riding together again as we pedal up a paved road into the mountains at a conversational pace. The Alps slowly emerge, their snowy summits piercing patches of cumulus cloud, and we talk about our lives, marriages, careers, and the incomprehensible fact that we're both teetering perilously close to 40.

As we climb into the alpine mountains, cutting into the sky on all sides, the village of S-charl appears, one of Switzerland's

most remote and picturesque villages. White homes with window flower boxes and wooden shutters overlook pastures of grazing horses. The steeple of a white church casts a shadow over a cobbled square. We roll up to a wooden chalet where a scattering of hikers enjoy drinks on a sun-drenched deck and it occurs to me that the only things missing are singing elves and a few prancing unicorns.

"This is the Switzerland I envisioned," I say to Crash while we sip iced mineral water on the deck.

After gorging on pasta and fried trout, we spin up a wide dirt path along a creek into an alpine wonderland of meadow and

glade and towering, snow-laced summits. To our right is Switzerland's national park — as the only one, it's commonly called "the national park" — and the mountains to our left form the border with Italy. We keep our eyes open for grizzly bears. After being extinct in the country for almost 100 years, they have recently begun ambling over from a remnant population in Italy, bringing a dash of wildness back to the landscape. But there have only been three sightings of them in the last five years, so we don't get our hopes up.

As we near Pass da Costainas, recent avalanches visible on the mountains, marmots ducking into their burrows at our passing, we assess the snow, which blankets the nearby mountainsides and clings to shadier patches around us. We're still 1,200 feet lower than Chaschuana Pass. This does not fill me with optimism.

Our descent, however, delivers enough endorphins and stunning beauty to render optimism irrelevant. A ragged dirt road spirals down through a tidy larch forest, the tree's needles brilliantly bronzed by the cool kiss of autumn. Rocketing out onto a cliff ledge, the roadside drops off into a distant blue valley 2,000 feet below. As the sun slides behind snowy peaks, we stop at a pasture where the oversized cowbells that seemingly adorn the neck of every cow in Switzerland ring through the mountain air. A pristine Volvo parked outside a nearby farmhouse speaks to Switzerland's status as the 10th wealthiest country in the world. In Switzerland, where farmers drive Volvos, being picturesque is apparently the national ethos.

"They might not have wilderness here," I say to Crash. "But, man, have they got beauty!"

Our lodging for the night is in the village of Santa Maria, which is slightly off the actual route, leaving us to freelance our way there. Rather than the certainty of a valley-bottom road, we opt for the adventure of mountainside singletrack. Through darkening forest, we plunge down steep goat trails and feather our brakes through switchbacks, occasionally passing through farms and backyards, while the flickering yellow lights of villages constellate in the valley far below. Switching on our lights and chasing their illuminated circles, we yell and yodel our way down, boyishly giddy from the feeling of controlled peril, until we roll into a village along the valley-bottom highway. Except there's no way we're spoiling this golden day of mountain

biking by riding the highway.

"Hey, it looks like there's a singletrack running along the creek into Santa Maria," I point out as we study the map by headlight. We find where it cuts in along a tumbling creek and ride on, laughing and hollering as we fly down the creek through black forest.

"Aaaaauugggh!" I hear Crash yell ahead, grabbing my brakes in momentary shock. A huge man is standing with an axe over his head, about to swing down onto the trail. Crash laughs as he realizes it's a wooden carving, left trailside for either macabre decoration or to terrorize nighttime mountain bikers. Turns out there are many wooden carvings decorating Swiss forest trails — beavers, marmots, bears, and, apparently, Swiss lumberjack axe murderers.

"Man, that was so much fun!" Crash says as we cross the bridge into Santa Maria, where we reach our hotel at 9:00 PM just before they lock the doors for the night. Remote Swiss mountain villages are not known for their nightlife, and we wander narrow cobblestone streets only to find all four restaurants in town closed for the evening. Thankfully we convince, through the kind of desperate pleading only a cyclist at

the end of a 10-hour-day can deliver, the matriarch of a family-run hotel to serve us a sprawling platter of salami, cheese, and bread. We gratefully devour our meal in a low-ceilinged dining room of wood floors, wood ceilings, wood walls, chairs, tables, and grandfather clocks. Virtually everything our eyes behold is wood, much of it ornately carved. Not surprisingly, they don't take credit cards. Indeed, the very presence of plastic here feels like an affront. We've somehow been transported into Old Europe, removed from the modern world, where people speak Latin and all is wood and stone.

On the walk along the cobblestone back to our hotel, through the cool nighttime air of the Alps, we both agree it's been one of the finest days on bikes we've had in ages.

While we're casually gorging on a hearty breakfast in the hotel's mountain-bike-themed dining room at 9:00 AM the next morning, the Swiss Trails luggage van arrives to pick up our bags.

"Oh, crap!" we cry, then run to our room, jump into our riding clothes, quickly think through and pack into daypacks everything we need for the day's ride, and bring our luggage down to the van driver, who gives us an annoyed look and speeds

away. Soon we're interrogating the front desk clerk, one of the only people we've met in Santa Maria who speaks English, about the best trails to take out of town. The density of trails and tracks lacing the mountains here is unlike anything we've ever experienced, which makes sense when you consider how long people have been building trails here. Some of the routes date to Roman and even pre-Roman times. We ask the clerk, who is a keen mountain biker, about Chaschauna Pass, which we're due to hit tomorrow. He shakes his head and says it's sure to be buried under snow and, with a look over the rims of his glasses to stress his seriousness, it's "very steep."

"Chaschauna can't be much steeper than this," Crash says later that morning, as we muscle our granny gears up a car-free dirt road through larch forest. Views through the golden needles reveal clouds sweeping across high mountains, which birth long, slender waterfalls. It feels like a mystical fairyland — a mercilessly steep mystical fairyland.

"I guess this is why people always say places with steep, pretty mountains are the Alps of wherever," Crash says.

"Yeah, that might have been a good clue



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for us to train a bit more," I say between gasps.

As we crest the pass of Doss Radond amid bracingly cool mountain air, the clouds begin to clear, revealing an impossibly beautiful scene of snow-draped mountains, soaring gray cliffs, and a gravel path threading into the distance along a grassy valley bottom. I try to pay attention to the roll of my tires as the sun reappears and hides, but I'm soon completely lost in the play of alpine light across mountain and meadow. We pass a group on horseback and two different couples on mountain bikes whose steady smiles confirm that it's not just the doofus Americans who are feeling exalted by the landscape.

A short while later we're in Italy, having unceremoniously crossed the border somewhere along the trail. We can tell because the trail signs have changed — they now show actual distances to locations, not time in hours like the mystifying Swiss signs.

When we meet a group of hikers with binoculars, I tell them we've just seen a pair of rare endangered vultures up the trail. Well, I don't actually "tell" them — flapping my arms like wings, I pantomime the message that there are huge birds up ahead.

Hours later, we've climbed to another pass where the sky darkens and turns an otherworldly blue. A new valley drops away ahead of us, deeply cleft and shadowed by massive pyramids of stone. We've only another hour or so of daylight, so we shoot down a cart track into the valley through golden tunnels of larch, waterfalls spilling over cliff faces at our side. Crash laughs demonically as we cross narrow wooden bridges and slide through turns, coming perilously close to their open-aired edges. Emerging at a lake that fills the lower valley, we stop to rest our braking fingers and revel in the thrill and beauty of what we've just ridden. A relaxed path delivers us to the ski resort town of Livigno, Italy,

where we head straight to a bike shop to ask about Chaschauna Pass. The owner tells us there are between 30 and 50 centimeters of snow at the pass.

"Do you know how many inches 30 to 50 centimeters is?" I ask Crash quietly while he examines booties and waterproof shoes.

"No idea," he replies. "But it's a lot."

Glitzy Livigno is no sleepy mountain village like Santa Maria, and at a four-star hotel a dapper, suit-wearing man at an immaculate front desk offers us champagne glasses of orange juice and cookies the minute we walk in. Our gusto in devouring the cookies may shock him, but he stays professional. When he introduces us to Severin, a fit-looking Swiss lad in his 20s who is the hotel's mountain-bike guide, we immediately ask him about Chaschauna, explaining that no one we've talked to thinks we can get over it.

"You can make it over," he says confi-

## Nuts & Bolts: Switzerland

**When to go:** July through mid-October is your window. September and early October typically offer good weather and less tourist traffic.

**Alpine Route 1:** One of the world's premier mountain bike routes, the Alpine Route 1 spans the Swiss Alps for 413 miles. Though



much of your time is spent on paths and dirt roads, those without serious mountain biking skills need not apply, as every day will feature sections of outstanding, sometimes technical singletrack (and, yes, you need a mountain bike). The route is generally well-signed, but

there can be junctions with specific Route 1 signage. As long as you have a map (provided by Swiss Trails) and basic navigational skills, you should be fine.

**Switzerland's Route Network:** Switzerland has the most elaborate, most meticulously-organized, best-signed cycling route network in the world, with over 7,500 miles of road and mountain bike routes rated for varying ability levels. There are also hiking routes, canoe routes, and, curiously, inline skating routes that crisscross the country. All are bookable through Swiss Trails or can be ridden independently (though it's recommended to get their excellent route maps).

**Getting around:** You're responsible for getting to and from your starting and ending points on Swiss Trails trips, but, unsurprisingly, Switzerland's train and bus systems set the gold standard for convenience, comfort, and ease of use. It's even possible to cherry pick stretches of a route, using buses or trains (both of which accommodate bikes) to leapfrog along.

**Swiss Trails:** You won't find an easier-to-organize international trip anywhere in the world. Swiss Trails will organize your itinerary, book your rooms, transport your gear daily, and have bikes, maps, and guidebooks waiting at your starting point. Offering five levels of accommodation for

their rides, you can stay anywhere from four-star hotels to hostels to barnyards. We chose the Standard level, with nights in clean and comfortable hotels, hearty breakfasts included. For five days and four nights expect to pay around \$800 for Standard, or \$550 for hostel-style accommodations.

**Bike rental:** Swiss Trails rents high quality, full-suspension European mountain bikes with hydraulic disc brakes. We brought our own helmets, shoes, and pedals. I'd also recommend bringing basic trail tools, including a shock pump, and giving your bike a good once over before setting out. We needed to make a few minor adjustments to get our bikes in tip-top shape (derailleurs, shock inflation, etc.)

### Resources:

- Swiss Trails, [www.swisstrails.ch](http://www.swisstrails.ch).
- Switzerland Mobility, [www.switzerlandmobility.ch](http://www.switzerlandmobility.ch), has printable route maps for every cycling route in the country.
- Swiss tourism and general travel information: [www.myswitzerland.com](http://www.myswitzerland.com)
- *DK Eyewitness Travel Guide: Switzerland*. Of the several guidebooks referenced, this succinct, photo-intensive book proved the most useful and informative.

**For more about bike travel in Switzerland, check out our web-exclusive "Traveling Solo Swiss Style" by Gigi Ragland at [www.adventurecycling.org/soloswiss](http://www.adventurecycling.org/soloswiss).**



**Night lights.** When caught riding into Santa Maria after dark, the guys were sure glad they brought their bike lights along.

dently. "There will be some snow, but you can make it."

Crash and I look at each other and smile. Severin, a young man about the same age Crash and I were in our riding glory days, has given us all the reassurance we need — Chaschauna is on. This is also a good reminder that whenever you need encouragement to do something everyone tells you you shouldn't do, just ask a male in his 20s.

After having a relaxing breakfast interrupted again by the unfortunately punctual luggage van, we pedal out of town the next morning toward Chaschauna. Up a side valley, through satellite villages, past grazing cows with giant bells, we ride, turning at a dirt road that vaults high into the treeless peaks. 3,000 feet above us is the pass.

Marmots chirp at us from the mountain-side and we're quickly reduced to pushing our bikes up an incline so steep it almost seems physically impossible to ride.

"That guy in Santa Maria was right," Crash says, "This is insanely steep."

Snow begins appearing in the shadows. Alpine choughs, birds of the high Alps, whistle past. High on the mountainside

where the road ends, a concrete-walled *refugio*, now closed for the season, provides a temporary windbreak as we prepare for the final push. Now on a trail, snow blankets the ground and a metal crucifix appears on a pole ahead, seemingly floating in the sky. Clouds engulf us in blinding gray as we trudge through snow and, somewhere, cross from Italy back into Switzerland. We've reached Chaschauna Pass.

Wind slices through our clothes and we don't spend time noticing the lack of a view. The snow is deeper on the pass's backside, but now, with the benefit of gravity, we climb on our bikes and begin a treacherous controlled slide down the mountain, hoping to find the trail that will deliver us into the valley below. My hands are so frozen I can barely squeeze the brake levers.

We pick our way down the mountain-side with significantly less abandon, using our uphill legs as outriggers as we execute a sliding traverse to where we've spotted the trail. But the trail is no relief. It's stunningly steep and technical, and we ride controlled slides through loose rocks and

running water. The lunacy reaches its peak when my rear wheel comes off the ground and I barely steer a nose wheelie around a tight switchback, an eye-popping drop off the side.

Minutes later Crash loses control and smashes his ribs into the back of his seat.

"Dude, that might be the burliest descent I've ever ridden," Crash says, while probing his ribcage and looking back up the trail. Having ridden with him on the mountain trails of Crested Butte, Taos, and Moab, this was saying something.

His propensity for unintentional dismounts aside, Crash is a handy partner for an overseas mountain-bike tour. Not only is he an ace ex-bike mechanic, but he's an emergency-room doctor, which means that he can adjust derailleurs *and* knee strains. Of course, it also means that after he, say, slams his ribcage into his seat, he internally catalogs the possible consequences, then turns to me and says, "Don't take this the wrong way, Teas, but if I go unconscious, it's because I've ruptured my spleen and I need a surgeon."

Fortunately his spleen stays intact, and as we rocket down the trail, then dirt



**Through the mountains.** One of many carefully-carved tunnels on Alpine Route 1.

road, into the lower valley, we ride side by side, giddy from having made it over Chaschauna. We're covered in mud and laughing, hooting, and catching simultaneous air off any berms and ripples that come along. Severin had been right. This was a victory for young males everywhere, and, er, not-actually-that-young-anymore males, too.

After hours of exploring forested side trails and following bike paths through a chain of hamlets, we roll up to the ritzy resort village of St. Moritz that night, where our beds feel like gifts from angels. It takes me approximately 43 seconds to fall into a sleeping coma. Nope, we're definitely not 23 anymore.

For three more days, we pedal out each

morning from a different village in one picturesque valley or another — our day packs stuffed with provisions — and follow trails, paths, and roads across the Alps. It becomes clear that St. Moritz marks the end of Switzerland's wild country and the beginning of a more developed, traditional Switzerland. Trading in the rugged passes and lonely valleys of the country's southeast corner, we ride from village to village, where farms, chalets, and trim pastures spread up the mountains. To our surprise, it's just as fun as the boonies. The wintry conditions of the first few days are replaced with 70-degree sun as the route takes us through a riot of terrain and riding styles. Roads hug sparkling blue lakes, tunnels carve through cliff faces, rocky trails plummet down mountainsides, and everywhere are snowy peaks, golden forests, and centuries-old villages so perfectly manicured they look like paintings. I now understand Goethe's description of Switzerland as a combination of "the colossal and the well-ordered."

Besides its easy-to-navigate orderliness, the long European heritage of public access serves cyclists in Switzerland well. Being from the U.S., where private land pervades, Crash and I quickly learn to appreciate

the less restrictive sense of property in Switzerland, even if it does leave us occasionally befuddled.

"Is this the trail?" Crash says hesitantly to three women talking by a wooden farmhouse. We've just ridden past chickens and into their backyard. A large pig watches us from a nearby pen. The women laugh and assure us it's the trail. Or at least we think that's what they say.

Other times we found ourselves riding through quasi-industrial zones, across dams, along train tracks, and through lumberyards. Rather than detract from the ride, it adds intrigue, like we're riding guerilla-style through secret Swiss backways. Except this is a national bike route, and each junction is signed and leading us ever closer to the next mountain pass, the next thrilling descent, the next immaculate hotel with perfect beds. Even Crash's final and most spectacular wipeout of the trip, coming as he lost his traction on wet rocks and slid hard into a boulder, can't dampen our enthusiasm.

On our last day of riding, it hits me that we'll soon be saying our goodbyes to Switzerland, and to each other. We've talked a lot about how we wish we could ride the whole route together, but neither of us have the time. We've got busy lives and responsibilities waiting for us back home.

As we catch air off rocks and take corners a little too fast, it occurs to me that might be exactly why I hadn't taken Switzerland more seriously. Maybe we needed something like this. After years of building careers, leading families, dialing back the excesses and impetuosity of our youth, never leaping without looking, here we were, fathers, a doctor and a writer, riding mountain bikes across a faraway land without the slightest clue as to what we were doing, where we were going, or even how to talk to anyone. Neither of us had been this spectacularly unprepared for anything in ages. It was exhilarating. Sure we're "responsible adults" now, but those college kids who rode their bikes into snowdrifts two decades ago are still in there and they're having the most fun they've had together in years. **AC**

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