

# SWEET DREAMS

**Eric Kendall** makes for the Heavenly Mountains, a Central Asian mountain chain that leaves the Alps in the shade

PHOTOS **PENNY KENDALL**

I remember the first hut I stayed in. Just before entering, our guide explained the strict ban on ski boots inside. So what should we wear on our feet? we wondered, to which he replied: "There's a massive rack of plastic clogs in the boot room. Choose the least minging pair." Since then, I've come to love huts, minging clogs and all. But I still fantasise about a proper moving-on ski tour, which swerves the high-altitude lodgings in favour of something more ritzy. So when Wendelin, one of Grischu Bergsportschule's guides, suggested a tour from Bivio to Vals in the south of the Swiss canton of Graubünden, several things struck me. First, the skiing: "It's the crème de la crème of ski touring in Graubünden and very unspoiled, with little chance of seeing other tracks", said Wendelin. ▶

Welcome to the crème de la crème of ski touring

“Just over 3,000m, with a steep snowy ridge, then rock-step to finish, with a view of tomorrow’s mountains. Stunning”



Simply point. And shoot

‘Molto contento’ pretty much sums up this spot



Second, that Penny (German not a strong point) would be calling our guide ‘Windolene’ for the full duration of the tour. And third, when I saw where we’d stay en route, that we were in for a treat: not a hut in sight, but a series of historic hotels, with proper restaurants and all mod cons. It sounded as if we were entering a parallel universe.

Which – sort of – is what much of Graubünden is. Mountainous, remote-feeling, but with a lot of practice at giving hospitality. It celebrated its 500th anniversary in 2024 and for much of that time has been looking after visitors. People have been getting from the flatlands in the north, over the Alps to Italy, and back again, for centuries.

Our first night, in the Hotel Post – a hotel since 1778 – in Bivio, is just a few twisting hairpins short of the Julierpass. Martina Lanz, eighth generation host, not only puts us up in fine style, but can’t resist an extensive rundown of the history of the building and village. We should be staying for a week, not a night. Every corridor is an art gallery, and the guest books in the Stube are a good browse. Of the entries in English, someone over a century ago remarked, ‘Excellent butter & very good tea.’ And Mr & Mrs Bickley

Graubünden: mountainous, remote-feeling, but with a lot of practice at giving hospitality

of Sevenoaks thoroughly enjoyed their 1902 cycling holiday. That’s impressive – they could only have had three gears at most. More relaxed was a student from Milan, Carlo Michele, in July 1890: ‘Molto contento’.

It’s a feeling we share, but there are mountains to be climbed, and skied down. We’re heading to the Avers valley to the west (a place Martina mentioned they would yomp over to, for parties; return journeys were more of a crawl). Wendelin – a reasonable man – is letting us use two out of Bivio’s three lifts, saving us 800m of climbing. That leaves plenty in the tank for the short traverse and climb to Piz Turba. It’s a good one – just over 3,000m, with a steep snowy ridge, then rock-step to finish, with a view of tomorrow’s mountains. Stunning. Then there’s the down, steeply, to the north-west, with the Avers valley arcing away in the distance below, and – somewhere down there – our bed for the night.

**A FUSION OF OLD AND NEW**

After Bivio, the Hotel Bergalga in Juppa is an oasis of calm. No, really: Bivio has 200 inhabitants. Juppa might have only two, both of them our hoteliers. As we skied along the valley floor to slide



Mellow laps aplenty here

A hefty 150m in the first 6km, then about 1,000m in less than half that distance. Oof!

the final gentle metres to the door, we passed cow barns and clusters of chalets, but saw no-one. It's a magical valley, both wild and serene at the same time. And the view from our room at dusk, framing empty mountains – we're above the trees here – and looking along the Bergalga valley (tomorrow's challenge) is as good as it gets.

Today is out and back before moving on by bus. There's a lot of along... then straight up. Arguably, a bit too much foreplay, but when it happens, there's no two ways about it. Afterwards, I checked the map: we went up 150m in the first 6km, then about 1,000m in less than half that distance. Oof! But worth it for a mellow ski down the huge gully we climbed, and a ski-out that worked better than expected, given the gentle angle.

Juppa is a different place on our return, with its two lifts in full swing. The longest is a wondrous thing: definitely one to return for, with wild-looking pistes that you imagine would see less PistenBully action than your typical red run in the Trois Vallées.

Next stop is the village of Splügen, too far, with our timetable, to reach on skis. Our trip started and will end by train, so a bus in the middle seems appropriate. We're there in time for the evening's guided town tour. Splügen is all about its location, at the foot of the Splügenpass, a trade route over into Italy.

The only problem with our exploration of the architectural highlights of the village is that we're staying in the Weiss Kreuz hotel in the middle of town, and quite frankly, within the confines of that one building, you have all the history you could possibly want, but with a drink in hand and wonderful food on the way.

You enter through a great arched doorway into a vault-ceilinged, cobbled space; descend a handful of wonky granite steps to leave your skis in a cellar, which was possibly once a cave.

Off the main hall is a bar and restaurant – a fusion of old and new – where they hand you a cartoon key (except that it's real and about 500 years old), which lets you into your creaky-floor boarded, perfect ancient room, with a 21st-century bathroom sitting unobtrusively in the corner, opposite the massive stone stove; the bed has a duvet that's as thick as it is wide. I can tell we're both thinking the same thing: how will we tear ourselves away before sunrise tomorrow morning?

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**PAYBACK TIME**

With Wendelin's gentle encouragement, we do, negotiating icy cobbles up out of the old town before a skin up the Stutzbach valley, a long curving cleft with steep meadows on one side and a rearing sweep of cliff the other. In the ghostly morning light – pale sun glowing through at best – it's an atmospheric 1,200m to a summit I think might be 'it'. But Wendelin's straight over and down the other side – skis off and onto his shoulder to negotiate a scramble down – to follow a ridge leading to 2,928m Bärähora. Up top it's time for a geography lesson and a snack, interrupted by the arrival of a substantial old girl in woolies, announcing, "Here's Granny!" in Swiss German, then serenading us with a yodel. She's not even out of breath. Is it genetics, cheese, or practicing every weekend? Whatever, I need some of what she's having.

Of all our descents, this is the one I'd have loved in fresh snow; even on windblown, crusty 'bit of everything' there's a rhythm to it, from high exposed face, then across meadows above the Rabiusa river gorge, and dropping down past summer huts into the bit of



Have bus, will hop from epic run to epic run



Time for a snack and a quick 'find the summit' geography sesh



“Our final day, up and over the Tomülpass to Vals is a fitting end-piece”

Next stop, the thermal spa...

the Safiental, which is sparsely inhabited year round. Heading for the Gasslifthof – another template of how to preserve a characterful ancient building, but with comfy bits added – we pop into Eva Gredig’s workshop. She makes the shingles that roof the chalets of the valley, splitting them from logs with a special knife and an implausibly large mallet, which she wields with a Zen-like fulfilled-ness; she’s serene even in the face of my clunking efforts.

Our final day, up and over the Tomülpass to Vals, is a fitting end-piece, down through a high river plateau, surrounded by steep ground. It’s the route’s crux in terms of avalanche danger, as well as the chance of falling in as you wade the river. We pop out at tree-line, with the promise of a huge descent into the Vals valley, prompting me to wonder why no-one (apparently) skis this route. I can’t tell the exact look on Wendelin’s face behind his goggles, but he grunts, “You’re about to find out” before disappearing down

a track of sorts. This turns out to be the start of payback time, for the superb days we’ve enjoyed to get to this point, and possibly (depending on which belief system you follow) something more karmic – like maybe every bad thing you’ve ever done in your life.

The zigzagging path is blocked by a succession of bouldery avalanches, with a few trees thrown in for good measure. But it comes out beautifully, just a few slaloming turns through boulder-strewn meadow down to Vals and the bus stop.

Wendelin’s off – a winter of guiding work to continue – while we head for our final dream-mountain-retreat, the Hotel Steinbock, and on to Vals’ most famous thing: the ‘7132’ thermal spa. After a tough day on the hill who doesn’t love a bath? This one, made from 60,000 slabs of local stone, is the one of your dreams. ✉

## ESSENTIALS

### ✉ TRAVEL

Zürich is the nearest airport. From there it’s XXXXX via public transport; visit [sbb.ch](http://sbb.ch). If you want to arrive with more than the ski kit you stand in, use the luggage-forwarding service for a fresh set of clothes when you reach your final destination: made for ski touring.

### ✉ SKI

Wendelin Schuler (+41 79 539 60 08; [bergsportschulegrisch.ch](http://bergsportschulegrisch.ch)) offers day tours based from Avers; five nights half-board with three days’ guiding from CHF1,080 (£1,000) per person.

### ✉ STAY

Hotel Post Bivio ([hotelpost-bivio.ch](http://hotelpost-bivio.ch)) offers doubles from XXX; Hotel Bergalga ([bergalga.ch](http://bergalga.ch)) offers doubles from XXX; Hotel alte Herberge Weiss Kreuz ([weiss-kreuz.ch](http://weiss-kreuz.ch)) offers doubles from XXX; Hotel Steinbock Vals ([hotel-steinbock.ch](http://hotel-steinbock.ch)) offers doubles from XXX.

### ✉ SPA

Vals Thermal Baths ([7132.com](http://7132.com)); entrance from XXX.

• For more info visit [c](http://c).

Info to come