

# Link or sink?

Is tourism the price to pay for economic survival? Adam Ruck looks at the pros and cons of linking two of Switzerland's most traditional and picturesque resorts with a huge new cable car.

On the French side of the language border in prime Swiss wine-growing country, Crans-Montana's urban sprawl and the chalet villages of the Val d'Anniviers face each other across the Rhône Valley, like adversaries in the debating society. How do you like your skiing: with oligarchs and Pétrus, or geraniums, farm visits and family baking at the *four banal* (a medieval common oven)?

Recently I crossed the valley from north to south, my patriotic chest puffed out after much flag-waving

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for the centenary of a downhill race organised at Montana by Arnold Lunn... and was surprised to find little Grimentz hitching up its skirts for a birthday knees-up of its own. It came as a shock to discover that a century ago skiing was evolving in places that had not been colonised by the Public Schools Alpine Sports Club.

The party was a celebration of the foundation of the Grimentz Ski Club, the first in central Valais, in December 1910, its objectives being to

develop the physical strength of '*la jeunesse masculine*' and organise '*les caravanes de secours en montagne*' (mountain rescue teams) in bad weather.

A period-costume parade through the old village recalled the many phases of local skiing, whose earliest manifestation involved jumping from roof to roof and clearing the road where the Moiry hotel now stands. Grimentz later won glorious victories in the Patrouille des Glaciers ski mountaineering race from Zermatt to Verbier, which has its roots in military

training exercises for the defence of the border during the Second World War. A more recent local craze was speed skiing: Upper Lona was the fastest track in Switzerland, with a top speed of 196 kph.

Glacier patrol heroes, old-time stretcher bearers and speed skiers in latex squeezed through the press of spectators, and local youth put on a display of jumping over the road near the lift station. It was while watching this show from a friend's flat that I overheard a guest apologise to her host:

"My off-piste skiing isn't up to much I'm afraid because until now I've done all my skiing in big resorts like Verbier and Val d'Isère, where powder never lasts long enough to learn in."

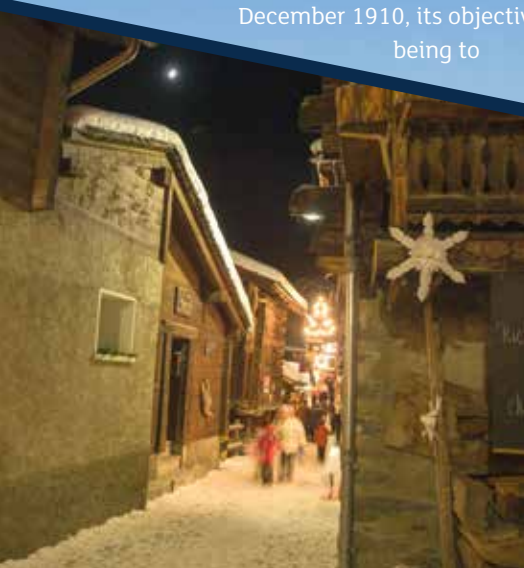
For many of us who love the

place, this goes to the heart of the appeal of Grimentz and its Anniviard neighbours - Zinal, St Luc, Chandolin and Vercorin. We appreciate the jam-and-geraniums charm of the old village, and enjoy our glimpses of community life. Visiting the cellar of the Bourgeoisie to sip the heady Vin des Glaciers from ancient barrels, or choosing the Claire Fontaine's aperitif formula of a thimble of fendant and a small dollop of raclette cheese, we feel closer to a cultural tradition than is possible over a pint in the pub in Méribel.

Not having to queue spoils us for other resorts, and with its farm visits and sunny nursery slope Grimentz is ideal for our small children, apart from the hurdle of its long drag-lifts. But what brings us back, after the children move on to resorts with more nightlife, is powder that lasts - to learn in, fall in, and have fun in, weeks after a snowfall.

There is plenty of entry-level stuff reassuringly close to the piste, but the *spécialité du pays* is backcountry tours (with or without skins) down empty valleys to a bus stop, a snow-covered forest road, a café where we can ring for a taxi, or a Poma on the edge of some other ski area which we can use as a springboard for another ski ramble home.

Poring over bus timetables, piste maps and real maps to work out the logistics of the expedition is part of





the fun. If we could set off any time we liked and jump on a lift at the bottom to do the run again, the sense of achievement would be less, the skier-traffic would be heavier, the snow would be worse, and the café at the bottom would close for the winter.

What of the next 100 years? Is it reasonable to expect this kind of minority-interest skiing to last, and Grimentz to rest on its laurels as the most famous 'best-kept secret' in

and meeting in the privacy of their Bourgeoisie's council chamber to decide important matters of policy.

At one of these meetings half a century ago, shortly after the valley got its first paved road connection with the outside world, some visionary must have swung the discussion in favour of opening

the door. With the population of the valley in steep decline, tourism was the only hope.

Gingerly they pulled back the sheet and climbed into bed with the tourism monster, offering a lukewarm embrace: we don't mind taking your money, but do not

wish to be corrupted, so no big hotel blocks thank you very much, no mass market, and no touching below the waist.

At risk of taking this metaphor too far, flirting with tourism is a dangerous game: the beast will usually have its way. When national legislation threatened to ban the

construction of new holiday homes, the rush for planning permits confirmed that the Grimentzards are quite happy to cash in.

Why not? Selling small bits of land for new chalets is easy money, building them is good work, and if the chalets are usually empty, so much the better: the impact on the quiet life of the village is minimal.

Grimentz would carry on like that, but Switzerland has decided that covering the mountains with oversized and under-occupied new housing is not a good model. Instead, the time-share version is preferred: quasi-hotels whose rooms or apartments may be sold, but must be managed and occupied. In trade jargon, beds must be hot, not cold.

Hot beds sound sensible enough, and Grimentz has them in the pipeline. But for the moment this model is not what the market wants, and these projects have failed to progress beyond the hole-in-the-ground stage.

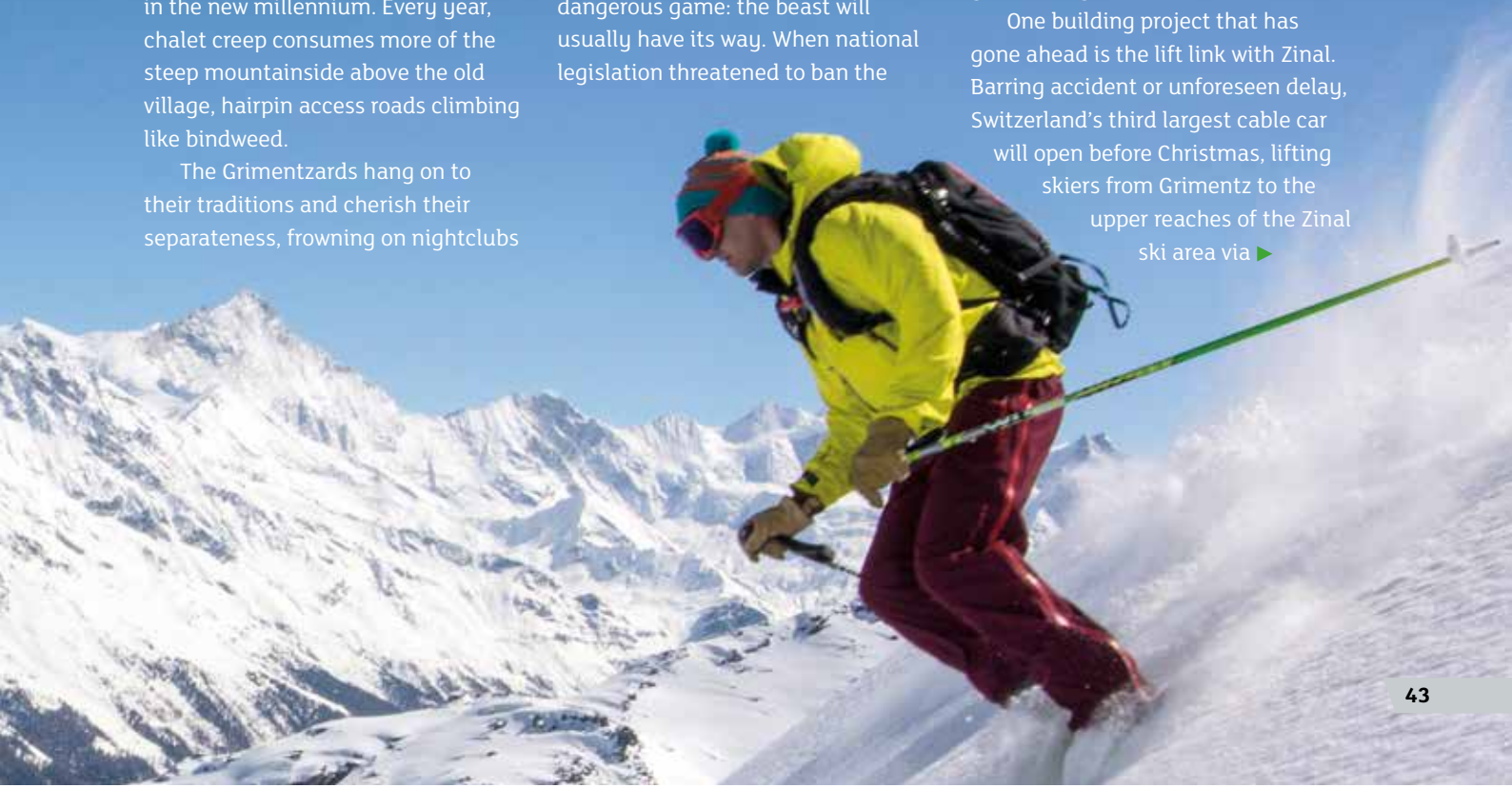
One building project that has gone ahead is the lift link with Zinal. Barring accident or unforeseen delay, Switzerland's third largest cable car will open before Christmas, lifting skiers from Grimentz to the upper reaches of the Zinal ski area via ►

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the Alps? That story has been told so many times, it must surely have dug its own grave. Tourism is a numbers game and there is no denying the growth imperative.

Grimentz has grown prodigiously in the new millennium. Every year, chalet creep consumes more of the steep mountainside above the old village, hairpin access roads climbing like bindweed.

The Grimentzards hang on to their traditions and cherish their separateness, frowning on nightclubs







► three kilometres of fresh air in seven minutes.

Two small ski areas of about 50 piste-km each will thus become one large area of 100 km, to rival St Luc and Chandolin on the other side of the valley. The talk is of critical mass - the new whole being better than the sum of its old parts - and low impact: only three pylons and no bulldozing of new pistes, since the Chamois run from the top of Zinal to Grimentz is already in place, albeit graded black and often closed.

Zinal/Grimentz may not be La Plagne/Les Arcs, but this is still a big project and of course it has its critics. The gist of their argument is this: cost of lift, £20 million (plus debt service); additional skiing, none; cost of lift pass, +15%. Why not spend less and achieve more by improving the

existing lifts? They are not exactly state-of-the-art.

The answer is, business. Replacing an old chair lift and a couple of Pomas might be worth a footnote in the 'what's new' section of websites and guide books. A £20 million cable-car link between resorts is the stuff of headlines.

They will attract new skiers - future occupants of the yet-to-be-built hotbed chalet-hotels - and fund further expansion and the improvements everyone wants to see, on a 15 year plan.

To those who like Grimentz the way it is, the 15-year plan sounds ominous. But at least the new link does not ruin any backcountry glory holes. The beautiful Chamois piste will lose some of its wilderness character, but that is hardly a game change.

Instead of complaining, we should thank the previous generation of objectors who had the good sense to block the proposed link between Grimentz and Vercorin, which would have been much more damaging; not to mention the original Super-Grimentz project, from the 1970s, for a purpose-built apartment resort at 2200m, with a multi storey car park, an altiport and a web of cable cars and pistes across all the high valleys. The game will change whether we like it or not, but as Grimentz confronts its second century of skiing, the future could look a lot worse. Will they still be baking in the *four banal* in 2113? I would not bet against it. ■



#### Arnie Wilson writes:

When a colleague, Simon Osborne, wrote a feature in the Independent extolling the virtues of this charming, traditional back-of-beyond community he could hardly have expected the broadside he'd get from a 'local' (edited) below.

"You really suck!" was her opening email gambit.

"Grimentz needs to be protected to keep its beauty... especially from people like you!!!" she typed, fingers on fire and hatred in her heart. "Soulless idiots/ journalists like you who need to write about it - just to deliver one more article! Ran out of ideas? You really ARE dumb!! You are spoiling your own paradise! I detest people like you! You are really ruining it for me. My family and I have been coming here for 35 years (owning our own place!) and find the changes caused by idiots like you unbearable!!! This beautiful village has really begun to suffer enough. Hope I never run into you on the slopes."

To his credit, Osborne answered in a pretty civilised manner.

"Wow, you're really angry!" he observed. "I'm very interested in the views of local people about the efforts by other local people to publicise destinations that are not well-known. But first, out of interest, do you often write to people you've never met and call them "idiots", "soulless" and tell them they "suck"?"

Kind Regards,

Simon

She quickly regretted her outburst. "Sorry Simon!" she wrote. "My sincere apologies... Your article just really hit one sore spot that really triggered a little anger attack!

"The pure fear of Grimentz becoming another crowded, crazy place full of random tourists is just a very painful thought! Our chalet was all over OK Magazine and then the next time I came to my loved home, the place was quite full of brand-flashing ladies and really long cues (sic)! I love sharing this unique jewel with friends and friends of friends... once again sorry for my angry outburst, but that only shows how much heart goes into being a Grimentzer!

"The whole idea of pushing this tranquil oasis into a helicopter skiing jet-set place for the riches just freaks many old school people out! ...This is our sacred hide away."

PS: Should I bump in to you, don't be scared - I have calmed down and am actually a bit embarrassed about my passionate anger attack! And actually quite a nice person!"

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