The Romansch Way

The most beautiful ski-ramble in the Engadine

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For some 150 years Brits have climbed, ski'd and charted the Alps. In 1861 members of the Alpine Club established the 'High Level Route' known today as the Haute Route – the classic crossing from Chamonix to Zermatt and Saas Fee. Early this century Arnold Lunn introduced the world to downhill racing and ski slalom, landmarks indeed.

Over the past 20 years the Nordic ski has infiltrated the Alps, Brits being notable by their absence. *Ski de randonnée* to the French, *Skiwandern* and *Langlauf* to the German-speaking people and cross-country skiing to the English-speaking world, has brought a third dimension to the world of skiing: independence from the clutter and queues of mechanical transport and access to fairy-tale lands away from the crowds. But, most important of all, ski-rambling gives a sense of physical well-being and achievement known so well to sailors and mountaineers. The choice of terrain is endless and the cost low.

After more than half a century of ski-mountaineering and downhill skiing, with an occasional excursion on Nordic skis, I decided to explore this new, yet ancient mode of snow travel over true alpine territory.

The Engadine appealed most and, finally, two factors decided my choice: firstly, the Engadine is different from the rest of Switzerland. So is the language. So are the people. So is the weather. While the sun shines in Sils and Scuol, the rest of Switzerland may be covered in mist. The route leads along the River Inn, across frozen lakes, flanked by the panorama of the Engadine giants, loved by every skier. The adjoining valleys add to the scope. These were my first criteria.

In the Upper Engadine, marked loipes and good route-maps exist. In the Lower Engadine, similar conditions apply between S-chanf and Giarsun and again between Scuol and Martina. However, I could find no marked or recognized route connecting Giarsun with Scuol – a gap of some 14km. My enquiries with local guides and ski schools resulted in one categorial statement: 'Impossible to do it on cross-country skis; take the bus'. This challenge was my second reason to explore the Engadine and put The Romansch Way on the map.

The Romansch Way starts at Maloja (1810m) and finishes at Martina (1050m) at the Austrian border, a distance of 145km. The profile and terrain are ideal for rapid progress in superb landscape, with ancient villages of real beauty and inspiring 16–17th century architecture.

THE ROUTE

Maloja-Sils

The River Inn springs from Lake Lunghin, above Maloja, runs along The Romansch Way and through Austria into the Danube, which finally decants into the Black Sea. Hence the name *ENGADIN*, Romansch for the Inn Valley. Maloja is the starting point of The Romansch Way and of the famous Engadine Marathon. We ski through woodland or on the snow-covered lakes, reminiscent of glacier skiing. Isola is an ancient alp and a good stop for refreshments, halfway to Sils.

Val Fex – Plaun Vadrett

From the Sleigh Park in beautiful Sils Maria the route climbs steeply towards Platta. Piz Chapütschin (3386m) and Piz Grialetsch (2694m) overlook the village and there is a good view of the downhill skiers from Furtschellas. The picturesque village of Crasta with Pensiøn Crasta and Hotel Sonne offer a good overnight or refreshment stop. Val Fex is a sunny, open valley with high altitude treeland and almost vertical rock formations. Plaun Vadrett is above the tree-line: a mound encircled by a moat and one could well imagine a castle on top. The 'moat' is created by fast glacier streams.

The return route parallels the outward route. From Platta the loipe veers E in the direction of the Furtschellas cable car, coinciding in part with the downhill pistes to Sils Maria. Val Fex has a tranquillity and detached beauty rarely found outside the realm of the giants.

Sils-Pontresina

Sils consists of three parts. Sils Baselgia adjoining the church, Sils Maria, the main village, and Sils Furtschellas – near the Furtschellas cable car. Passing Silvaplana a winding track leads up steeply into the fairytale forest where the panorama of Corvatsch appears through the trees. The loipe then descends towards St Moritz. The track passes underneath the Olympiaschanze.

Climb from St Moritz Bad to a plateau and then descend in a superb langlauf schuss on to Lej da Staz. The lake restaurant makes a welcome break. The loipe winds down towards Pontresina. A major trading village on the approach to the Bernina Pass, Pontresina has imported wines from the Valtellina region in Italy since the Middle Ages. Veltliner is the wine of The Romansch Way. A stay of two or three days enables us to explore the Roseg and Morteratsch valleys and the Diavolezza region. Today's 'Wanderski' offers the flexibility vital for soft or trackless snow coupled with firm grip on ice and steep descents. Incredibly light, it offers totally new possibilities of alpine snow travel and adventure.

Pontresina – Zuoz

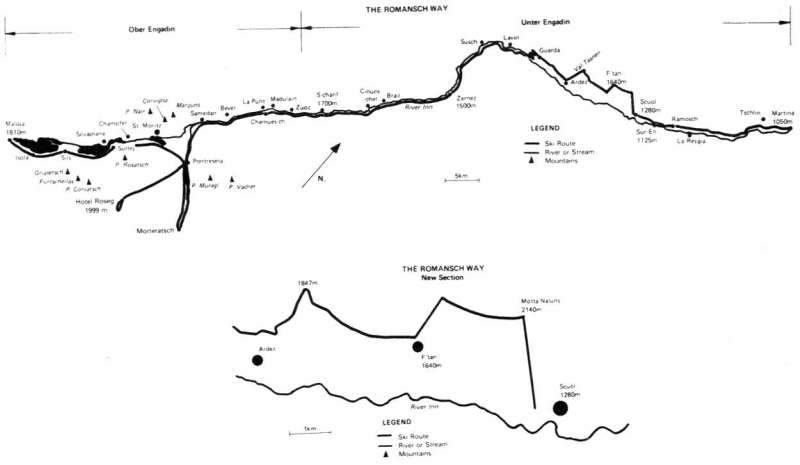
This part of The Romansch Way leads over the most exciting sections of the



37. Punt Ota, on route S-chanf – Zernez.



38. Arrival at F'tan.



Engadine Marathon race. Passing Punt Muragl, the rack-and-pinion railway to Muottas Muragl being the oldest in Europe, the loipe then leads over wide meadowland, past Bever and La Punt, through Chamues-Ch, a charming village with Restaurant Adler as an ideal refreshment stop. Descending towards Madulain, we observe the significant landmark of Hotel Castell with Zuoz below. First mentioned in the ninth century as a place with a Royal tavern, Zuoz became the administrative centre of the Upper Engadine. The village square with its medieval tower and fountain is surrounded by patrician houses of typical Engadinia style.

Zuoz – Zernez

From Zuoz to S-chanf – some 3km – there is a wide choice of loipes: there is the actual Marathon route; a loipe through the valley close to the Inn and two tracks along the edge of the forest. Midway between Zuoz and S-chanf is the finish of the Marathon race – 42km from Maloja, with a record time of 1hr 32min, an average of almost 30km per hour. A horse couldn't do it. This point is also the division between the *Ober* and *Unter Engadin*.

In most conditions the loipe to Zernez is maintained. The route passes through scrubwood into wide open space, surrounded by sparse woodland, known locally as the golf course. We pass Val Flin, Val Torta, Val Mela and Val Verda. Crossing the Ova da Tantermozza, the route goes up more steeply with rock formations on the right-hand side. On the left the village of Cinuos-Chel appears with its significant onion-top church and railway arch of the Rhätische Railway.

From the top the loipe snakes into the valley, flattening out parallel with the railway line in an ideal schuss. On the left bank of the Inn, high up, is Sur Crusch. From this point the loipe leads again through woodland, descending all the way to the last major incline before Zernez, to a bridge over the Spöl Valley. A bendy track leads across the Inn over a covered bridge to Zernez.

The remains of an Iron Age settlement were discovered here, but sadly a fire destroyed the Engadinia houses in 1872. They were replaced with nondescript buildings leaving a dull untypical town.

Zernez – Guarda

Changing to the right bank of the River Inn through meadowland and gently undulating forest, we pass the remains of a medieval punishment centre. In common with the woodlands of the *Ober Engadin*, the forest is full of wildlife, particularly red deer. Susch comes into view where the Flüela Pass meets the Engadine. This ancient village can boast of two defence towers, one to hold a population of 140 and one with the onion top for the Lords of Susch. The fortress of Chaninas dominates the village and the highest peak in the *Unter Engadin* – Piz Linard – comes into view. After a further descent Lavin appears. The name is first recorded in a chronicle of the 12th century and is derived from the Latin *labina* (avalanche). Indeed avalanches were the scourge of the region between Lavin and Giarsun. Today they are rendered harmless by the combination of avalanche barriers and early release of massed snow by detonation.

From Giarsun a steep road leads to Guarda. The name is derived from '*guardar*' meaning lookout. Guarda is unique in being first documented in 1160. During the Thirty Year's War, 1618–1648, the village was razed to the ground by Austrian troops and rebuilt. All houses date from the 17th century, and the village was never disturbed again.

Local people and guides ruled out a crossing along the right bank of the Inn because of avalanche and rockfall danger, though there exists a summer path along this very stretch. I discussed my plan with Chasper Planta, a young ski teacher and guide and the route shown in large scale was chosen leading to Scuol via Bos-cha, Chanova, through the Tasnan valley and Ftan.

Guarda – Scuol

The loipe leads to the centre of Bos-cha, a hamlet on the same sunny shelf as Guarda, with an uninterrupted view of the Engadine's Dolomites. Cross the Valde in the direction of Chanova to an impressive, high-level path where the exciting panorama of the *Unter Engadin* unfolds with Piz Lad, Piz Lischana, Piz San Jon, Piz Pisoc and Piz Zuort (a square stone tower like a chimney). We ascend through woodland into the Tasnan valley and cross the Tasnan descending to the loipe leading to Ftan church. Ftan is situated on the old coach road between Giarsun and Scuol. The double onion-shaped church tower leans further to one side as the years go by, similar to the better known examples in Pisa and St Moritz. From here a chair-lift ascends to Prui (2058m, top of the sleigh run), or the purists and those untiring enthusiasts climbing to the same spot can continue east to Motta Naluns where the descent to Scuol begins. Scuol has nothing to offer. The old village has been overwhelmed by a concrete jungle. A marked loipe, parallel with the Inn, leads to Sur En, where Hotel Val d'Uina offers the ideal overnight stop, right on the loipe.



39. Maloja with Piz Lunghin (source of the Inn).



40. Susch.

Sur En – Martina

The wide open terrain of the left bank is reached through a covered bridge and up on the left Ramosch appears with its square, early Gothic church tower. The loipe leads through scrubwood following a trout stream to join the Inn, now a much wider and quieter river, after its rather steep and noisy descent. For some distance we rejoin the river with its charming snow-covered rocks, looking like giant polar bears. The Inn has now become a torrent, descending noisily over the rocks. Opposite, over the steep rock-formations, a dust avalanche has descended and I note that a path has been carved through it to provide access to a small settlement – Raschvella. Once more a short and sharp descent meets our old friend the Inn. I felt like skiing along a towpath with snow-covered bollards. Gradually the rock-formations recede to less steep pasture land. Passing Strada, known as Feradastrada in former times and used by cattle dealers from as far away as the Austrian Tyrol, the village of Tschlin (1533m) comes into sight. Again and again Tschlin was destroyed by fire, enemy action or avalanches, but the tough villagers rebuilt their homes as though the danger did not exist. In front of the church stands the monument to Duonna Lupa, heroine of the 1499 Swabian War. She saved the village from the marauding Austrian troops. Everyone had taken refuge in the church except Duonna Lupa, who continued stirring a vast pot of polenta in her kitchen. When the enemy troops asked for whom she was cooking, she laughed: 'For the Swiss troops of course, who will be here any moment now'. The Austrians ran as fast as their legs would carry them.

Looking back, an impressive last view of The Romansch Way is ours and we arrive at Martina, the frontier between Switzerland and Austria.

Finale

The Romansch Way is unique. It caters for every taste. Seclusion for those who seek it. Entertainment – certainly: there is the Marathon on the second Sunday in March with almost 12,000 competitors. The nightlife of St Moritz is yours for the asking. Sils-Maria – beautiful and sophisticated for gourmet tastes. Or make your HQ in Pontresina to experience the real scope of alpine ski-rambling. But inn-to-inn touring is best: nothing to carry – the *postbus* takes your luggage to the next stop (yes, it will be there before you). Ski The Romansch Way – a day-dream of reality.

SECTIONS OF THE ROMANSCH WAY

	km	*Time*
Maloja – Sils	8	1hr 20min
Sils – Crasta – Plaun Vadrett	16.5	3–3½hr
Sils – Surlej – St Moritz – Pontresina	16	3hr
Pontresina – Roseg Glacier	17	2hr 40min
Pontresina – Morteratsch Glacier	17	2½hr
Diavolezza Station – Bernina Pass (Ospizio)	15	2½hr
Pontresina – Punt Muragl – Samedan – Zuoz	18	3–3½hr
Zuoz – S-chanf – Zernez	18	3½–4hr
Zernez – Susch – Lavin – Giarsun – Guarda	15.5	2¾–3hr
Guarda – Val Tasnan – Ftan	15	3½hr
Scuol – Sur En	6	50min
Sur En – Ramosch – Martina	23	3½–4hr

MAPS

Engadin Loipenkarte, parts 1 and 2.
Landeskarte Schweiz (1:50,000), 5013 and 5017.