

GROUP SHOTS

ELBOW ROOM IN SOUTH TYROL, ITALY

BY GEORGE KOCH



Slickin' it... to the sun. Skier: Sven Brunso Photo: Martin Söderqvist

Skiers in the Alps used to trade tips about obscure mountains where the powder was never skied out—where the sun or wind got to it long before you could track it up. Suldén, in South Tyrol, Italy, is exactly this kind of place, where the vertical drop is double that of most North American ski areas, the daily traffic rarely tops 2,000, and expansive backcountry terrain lies in all directions from virtually any lift.

Partway down Gamsleiten—a 3,500-vertical-foot north-facing cirque spilling in plain sight from the outskirts of Suldén—I realize just how expansive the backcountry here is. Gamsleiten plus the surrounding valley are deserted; we find powder (*elderly* powder, but still powder) even after two weeks without snow. And the background is stunning: tortuous glaciers, black rock walls and the towering, 12,800-foot triple peaks of the Ortler Group (Zebbru, Suldenferner, and Ortler). The terrain ripples and rolls, and we spread out to arc wide, vertical-consuming turns in the dazzling afternoon light. Eventually, a long face dribbles into larch woods and an easy valley trail winds back down into town.

Suldén lies in German-speaking South

Tyrol near the Swiss and Austrian borders, where skiable lines radiate in all directions. Most famous is the East Couloir, accessed via a six-10-hour alpine ridgewalk from the Suldenferner col that requires technical alpine climbing gear. It's a 50°-plus snowfield followed by an unbelievably exposed traverse; a long couloir leads into the runout. The day after our Gamsleiten tour, it's windblown horror, and none of us wants anything to do with it. Except perhaps our guide, Olaf Reinstadler, a local Suldener who skis on hand-made boards, and seems slightly deflated to ski any line not ending in a BASE jump.

Instead, Olaf leads us around a shoulder and onto a viciously exposed roll-away coated in a bizarre ratatouille of gradually melting chickenheads, hardshell, and depth hoar. We gaze at the long, tantalizing runs of the 45° Y-Couloir, the broader Cannonbarrel, and the mile-wide Schoenleiten, which, Olaf says, can go all winter without being skied.

High above, skiers tour up the Suldenferner (11,300 feet), beyond which lies the Casati Hut, the region's main backcountry hub. From there one can scale Monte Cevedale (12,365 feet), which offers descents on three aspects,

numerous glaciers, and the option to ski to Santa Caterina.

Yes, Suldén's truly a place where the wind and sun still get to the snow before the skiers. The proof is in the untracked powder everywhere we look.

SOURCE

LOCATION: South Tyrol, Italy (German-speaking) 46°31'N, 10°35'60" E

ACCESS: Nearest airport: Innsbruck, Austria (100 miles/two hours' drive)

OFF-BEAT CUISINE: The Yak and Yeti, owned by Reinhold Messner, serves Yak meat. Bar Ilse near the tram base is a freeride/touring hangout.

MOUNTAIN: An Ortler ski pass is good at 15 other ski areas. Vertical: 4,500 feet. Lift-accessed terrain: 7,000 acres (off-piste is uncontrolled/unpatrolled). Tourers can buy single-ride ticket.

GUIDE: Olaf Reinstadler (reinstadler@gmail.com) Tel: 011 39 335 730-2228

GEAR: A2 shop sells traditional touring gear.

TIPS: Before you book, ensure there've been southern storms—the Italian Alps can be a desert. Bring cash onto the mountain (hotels take credit cards, but not mountain huts)