



# THE BIG EMPTY

## PEAK-TO-VALLEY SKIING AT DISENTIS, SWITZERLAND

BY GEORGE KOCH

On the way to a 9,200 vertical foot run, via ferrata. Skier: Sven Brunso Photo: Martin Söderqvist

**“Most of the foreign** skiers, they ski only the terrain that you can see from the lifts,” said Swiss mountain guide and Disentis Lift Company Director Martin Kreiliger, after executing a steep kick turn. He watched me ogle the staggering terrain just a short skin, traverse, and scramble over a rocky ridge behind Disentis’ small collection of alpine chairlifts and T-bars. “But in Disentis, most of what is nice is hidden,” he added. “I think this is normal in life.”

With three huge lift-accessed peak-to-valley descents funneling back to the aerial tram more than 5,000 vertical feet below, plus a fourth dropping to neighboring Sedrun, most people stay busy without scrambling over ridgelines and climbing for turns. But you gotta ditch your turns-only obsession to bag one of the Alps’ true pinnacle descents: Staldenfirn. If you include the short approach run that is part of this epic—four lift rides, two climbs and two runs—Staldenfirn is a combined 9,200 vertical feet of turns, of which 5,500 are steep, directly north-facing slopes, each dropping into a different Swiss canton.

After an 8:15 a.m. tram ride and a stop in the upper terminal’s ski shop, photographer Martin Söderqvist, skiers Sven Brunso and Martin Webrant, and I skinned an easy half-hour from the highest T-bar. Kreiliger then led us on a traverse to a low point in the long rock

wall looming above, where we scrambled up a bent rebar ladder in the rock and topped out on a tiny but flat and protected notch.

To one side, the mile-wide slopes of Val Gronda rolled away invitingly in the March sun, and far below lay the ancient town of Disentis amid the Rhine River’s headwaters. To the north, the hidden side of Disentis, the part Kreiliger loves and most people never see: the Brunnifirn Glacier and the enormous, vaulting relief of the central Swiss Alps. We swooshed down an easy powderfield onto the Brunnifirn, where the real climb of about 90 minutes and 1,500 vertical feet commenced up a pillow-shaped glacier towards the 11,000-foot Oberalpstock, the region’s dominant peak.

Staldenfirn begins at a small plateau below the summit. The opener is flanked by smooth blue ice to the left, a crevasse below, and a wall of vertical ice to the right. Then it’s pitch after epic pitch of perfect powder. “Ah, another North American ski area’s vertical disposed of,” Sven said with a smirk, as we pulled up at the base of a huge bowl.

Below us, a rank of parallel mini-couloirs and noses sent our adrenaline surging, as we made those classic deep-sinking turns you only get on steeps in settled pow. Soon after, we approached tree line and our crux move: a shepherd’s hut signaling a rightward traverse

to avoid cliffs and frozen waterfalls. After skiing steep trees on brutal chickenheads, and open meadows of lovely corn snow, we finally headed down a long valley trail to the village of Bristen, where a dozen skiers lolled in the sun and a carved wooden troll disgorged a stream of ice-cold spring water. Most of what is nice is hidden.

### SOURCE

**DISENTIS:** [disentis3000.ch](http://disentis3000.ch)

Lift-serviced vertical is 5,300 feet. Mid-mountain base usually about 100 inches. Adult day ticket: 49 Swiss francs (about US \$45.50 at today’s exchange rate); single-ride ticket to do Staldenfirn about US \$28. Avy/weather conditions: [slf.ch](http://slf.ch).

**GUIDES:** Martin Kreiliger ([kreiliger@disentis3000.ch](mailto:kreiliger@disentis3000.ch)); David Berther (UIAGM); [info@freeride-disentis.ch](mailto:info@freeride-disentis.ch).

**GETTING THERE:** Fly to Zurich, then take a train via Chur; about 2.5 hours. Similar travel time by road. Can also do day-visits to/from Andermatt using train over Oberalp pass.

**LOCATION:** 46°42’0” N, 8°51’0” E in central Switzerland.

**FOOD/SUPPLIES:** Best hotels: Cacusna and Montana. Best restaurant: Casa Cruna. Best bar (with free wi-fi): Jangifaella. Gear Shop: Best ski shop is at Caischavedra upper tram terminal.

**STALDENFIRN TIPS:** Swiss federal topo map #1212/Amsteg (get at tram station or ski shop). Lift company provides honest avy advice. Take the earliest tram, because the ladder can be backed up weekends. Crux move is by a small hut just above tree line—head right. Return via bus (Bristen-Amsteg) and train (Amsteg-Andermatt-Disentis).