

Save our Cassons

Creeping up from the Swiss resort of Flims is an historic cable car that links skiers and boarders with Cassons. JIMMY PETTERSON was horrified to learn that this icon of a bygone era could disappear forever at the end of this season and has joined the battle to save it.



The Cassons cable car makes its way up the mountain

FLIMS, Laax and Falera are Swiss mountain villages nestled onto a wide, sunny plateau just north of the Rhine Valley and about 20kms west of the provincial capital of Chur.

Flims is dominated by the gigantic Flimsenstein, a seemingly endless limestone cliff that juts straight up into the heavens just north of the village. As in so many parts of Switzerland, these are towns where the old world and the modern world blend seamlessly together.

During the 20th century, they have transformed from traditional farming villages into a rather large and popular ski resort, but the local farmers still lead their livestock up a narrow and precipitous trail to the plateau atop the Flimsenstein each spring and bring them back down when the chill of autumn hits the air. Old churches and beautiful wooden houses are interspersed with modern banks and après-ski bars.

Among the 28 ski lifts here is a small cable car that is a remnant of a bygone era. Just west of the spectacular Flimsenstein, the iconic Cassons cable car, originally constructed in

1956, rises up the Cassonsgrat (2,765 m).

Most of the newer lifts access much easier terrain than the old Cassons cable car, and ever fewer customers take advantage of the lovely slopes of Cassons.

My friend Klaus Arpia and I were curious about this part of the ski area, and despite better snow on the north-facing pistes, we were mysteriously drawn to explore the sun-drenched slopes of Cassons.

To get to the old cable car, one must first ride up two chairlifts, from the village to Foppa (1,420 m) and then on to Narau (1,842 m). The chairs are also old and move slowly, but it was a lovely spring day, and the pace of the lifts seemed to mesh with the easy-going spring atmosphere. While the other parts of the ski area were relatively crowded with skiers, we rode almost alone on the chairlift.

The lower lift passed over a series of farms. Dozens of cows were out of the barns and the spring smell of the misthaufen wafted upward to our nostrils. The restaurant at Foppa has a huge terrace, and the sun was blazing, but only one family sat enjoying the veranda.

The cable car is one of the smallest ones still in use anywhere in the world, and yet the 27-person capacity seems superfluous. Even though the lift attendant waited 15 minutes to try to fill the cabin, it was of little use. We began our trip up with a couple of sightseers and five other skiers.

Cassons, with its lack of even one prepared piste, was relegated to 'freeride only' status, and despite the ever-increasing focus on freeriding among skiers, it still saw few customers.

As we rode to the top, a Swiss gentleman pointed to a beautiful long-horned Alpine ibex perched precariously on a narrow limestone ledge under the cable car. He remarked about how the spectacular cliffs and wildlife of the Cassons area were as much of an attraction for summer hikers as they were for winter skiers.

He added: "Sadly, this lovely old piece of history will probably creak to a halt for the last time in 2011. The stringent Swiss safety requirements mandate a minimum of a new cable at that time, a renovation with a price tag that the Weiss Arena lift company does not wish to incur, consider-

ing the limited number of people that nowadays make use of this lift."

I am a freerider and a historian. I have skied powder for more than 50 years and I have a Bachelor's Degree in history, so it is not strange that my reaction to this news was anger at the Swiss and their cold, calculating banker's instinct to revere black ink and the 'bottom line' above all sentimental and historical values.

"Why can't the authorities see the bigger picture," I lamented to my new compatriot. "They make enough money with the rest of the lift system to subsidise a non-profitable relic that has historical significance and still gives a lot of joy to a small number of people."

"Yes, you are right," he agreed with me, "And there are quite a number of people who feel as you do," he went on to explain. "There is a group called 'Pro Flims-Cassons', with more than 2,000 members, who are active in trying to save the lift and keep it running for future generations."

The small red rectangle carrying its load of nine guests and one lift attendant had now reached the top station. As we disembarked, the gentleman mentioned to me that besides the obvious routes down the sunny front side of the mountain, there was also a ski route down the back.

One of the few other skiers riding up the lift with us stopped to exchange words with the lift attendant. His dialect told me that he was a local, and his backpack and wide-bodied skis further informed us that he was a fellow freerider.

I couldn't help but ask if he knew this route down the back side of Cassons. Roman Dörig definitely knew the way and had been wondering what he should do that day. Now he had an answer - he would guide us down the north face to the cosy little mountain restaurant, Berghaus Bargis.

Roman led the way on his prototype Skizophren ski, a ski he hopes to produce commercially someday. We followed a gentle ridge for a few hundred metres, all the while staying vigilant to keep away from the edge, where a full season's wind cornice hung over the north and eastern rim of a gargantuan valley.

There was one lone ski track in the entire bowl entering from the east face. On the north face, the valley was lined by

News from Switzerland

ST MORITZ: Book a week's 'Sunshine Holiday' at the legendary Kulm Hotel St Moritz (www.kulmhotel-stmoritz.ch) from 27 March 27 to 2 April and rates start at CHF1,790 (approx £1,194) per person, a saving of more than 40% on the same holiday in the peak period of February.

The "Sunshine Holiday" includes seven nights half-board accommodation, a six-day regional ski pass for the entire Upper Engadine ski region, transfers to and from the train station, a sea salt bath and a relaxing head massage in the hotel's stunning Panorama SPA & Health Club.

GSTAAD: A new ski cross route opened this season on Mt. Rinderberg in the Zweisimmen. Ski and snowboard enthusiasts can display their daredevil skills across 500 metres of curves, snow waves, banks and jumps.

VERBIE: Mountain Radio Verbier is a new English-language radio station which has taken to the airwaves in the region.

vertical cliffs, reminiscent of the Dolomites. Roman leapt in off the cornice and Klaus followed suit, while I took a more conservative entry. We skied one by one, relishing each turn in the powder and solitude of this stupendous back valley.

The wide, open upper bowl was followed by a choice of long, steep couloirs and ridges. Now we needed to ski with a bit more precision and discipline. Eventually, the proper skiing was done, and we hunkered down for a long trail around the mountain and out of the valley.

Finally, we finished by skating along the local cross-country track until we reached the sunny veranda of the Berghaus Bargis. There we indulged in a few cold beers and a large portion of Capuns, a local specialty consisting of Spätzle with bacon bits wrapped in chard leaves and smothered in a cheese sauce.

Between mouthfuls of Capuns and long swigs of beer, Roman explained a bit more about the organisation hoping to save Cassons. To their satisfaction, it has now been decided that the municipal government would pay 100,000 Swiss Francs (approximately €70,000) to help carry the financial burden and the Weiss Arena would finance the rest of the deficit through the end of the 2011 summer season. After that point in time, the issue is completely up in the air.

Pro Flims-Cassons hopes to improve infrastructure to

The station broadcasts on 96.9 FM via the Sateldranse cabled network, and via their own www.mountainradioverbier.com website (to listen on your Iphone, go to iphone.mountainradioverbier.com).

Throughout the season between 7.30 and 10.30am, the Ski Breakfast show will give skiers and boarders the latest information on the conditions and a complete regional weather forecast. There is also an après-ski Show between 4.30 and 6.30pm to help visitors decide what to do after a day on the slopes.

LAAX: The Brits 2011 and the European Freeski Open 2011 will be taking place in the Swiss resort of Laax for the 7th year running between 20-27 March. There will also be numerous side events including live concerts, ski and snowboard test centres and an Airbag Competition.

AROSA: The Tschuggen Grand, Arosa 5-star hotel claims it has one of the best spas in the Swiss Alps. The Tschuggen Beroase, is designed in glass and white granite and provides relaxation and pampering after a hard day skiing.

bring more functionality and use to the area so that it can turn a profit. Alternatively, they are looking into the possibility of preserving the lift by purchasing it, if the Weiss Arena is not willing to continue its operation. Roman didn't have to elaborate any more. Our experience on the mountain had spoken volumes.

All in all, we skied for a week in Flims and Laax. In that time, we rode all the lifts and skied all the runs. We did as much off-piste skiing as we could find, and we encountered a fair amount.

We located some excellent powder up on the glacier and we enjoyed very much the freeriding from La Siala and the huge off-piste possibilities from the glacier down to Alp Ruschein.

Still, nothing in our visit topped the day when we had only one run from Cassons and a long lunch on the Bargis veranda. By the end of our stay, Pro Flims-Cassons had two new fans, and I wrote this article in the hope that I can do my small part in preserving the old relic for future generations.

► For more information on skiing in Laax, Flims, and Falera, see www.laax.com

► For more information on preserving the Cassons cable car, see www.flims-cassons.ch



book now
www.saas-fee.ch/snowfun

Snow & Fun

- It's snow much fun in the Saas Valley
- 7 nights in the Saas Valley
 - 5 days ski ticket Saas-Fee
 - 1 day ski ticket Zermatt - free of charge!
 - many further add-ons

from £ 505.- p. p. in a 2* hotel including breakfast

My winter. My Saas-Fee.

Saas-Fee/Saastal Tourism (CH)
to@saas-fee.com * T. +41 27 958 18 68

Saas-Fee
SAASTAL

stc switzerland travel centre
A Swiss Railway Company

swiss highs...

on the highest slopes
in the Swiss Alps!

Flexible ski packages

Enjoy skiing in the top Swiss resorts.

Spectacular scenic journeys

Combine skiing with a scenic journey visiting the most spectacular places.

Excellent flight and rail connections

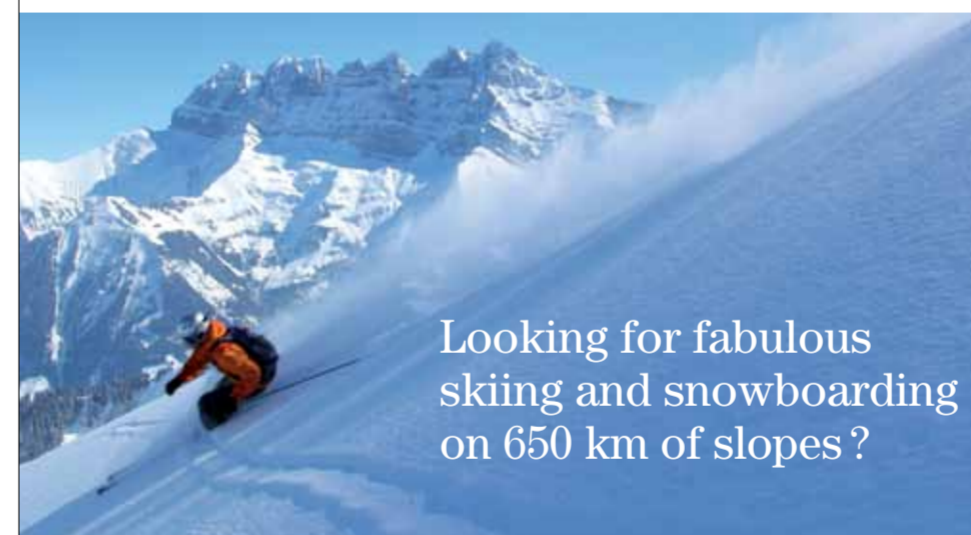
Choose travelling by rail or air to Switzerland.

Call the experts at STC on 0207 420 4936
or visit www.stc.co.uk to order our brochure

ABTA
The Travel Association



www.chablais.info



Looking for fabulous
skiing and snowboarding
on 650 km of slopes?

www.SNOWWEAR.co.uk
WINTER CLOTHING SPECIALISTS

Order online. See our full
range at www.snowear.co.uk

- * Fully trained staff
- * Large stockist of ski/snowboarding clothing and accessories
- * Special 1st time skier evenings
- * 1st time skier accessory packs

Snowear, 136 London Road, Southborough,
Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN4 0PL Tel: 01892 517 807

anzère
VALAIS SWITZERLAND

WINTER SEASON
from December 17th to April 25th
CAR-FREE VILLAGE SQUARE
52 KM SKI SLOPES
1 FREESTYLE PARK
SKI SLOPE FOR BEGINNERS IN THE VILLAGE
3 KM SLEDGING ROUTE
35 KM HIKING - SNOWSHOES TRAILS
5 KM CROSS COUNTRY SKIING SLOPE
SPORTS AND CULTURAL EVENTS

PACKAGES from € 285.- *

4 nights - 3* hotel - half-board + 4 day skipass
7 nights - apartment - 6 day ski pass

* Price is subject to the current rate of exchange
not available between 25.12 - 08.01 and 19.02 - 12.03.2011

INFORMATION and BOOKING
Anzère Tourism, 1972 Anzère
Valais, Switzerland
anzere@coeurduvalais.ch
+41 (0)27 399 28 00

WWW.ANZERE.CH

