

How to fly from Fiesch to Chur

ROBERT SMITH HAS BEEN FLYING XC FROM FIESCH FOR 20 YEARS. HERE HE OFFERS A DO-IT-YOURSELF GUIDE TO A 120KM ROUTE THROUGH THE SWISS ALPS

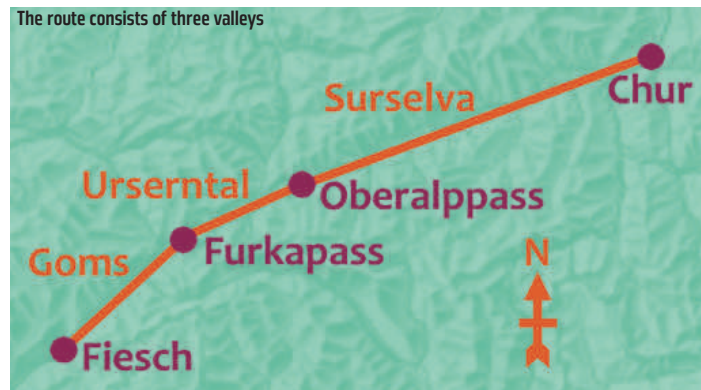
THE SPECTACULAR 120KM TRIP FROM FIESCH TO CHUR, STRAIGHT ALONG THE MAIN RIDGE THROUGH THE HEART OF THE SWISS ALPS, IS ONE OF THE CLASSIC XC ROUTES.

The best flying conditions here are associated with a weak high pressure system, with no fronts or troughs nearby. For this flight, it may be helpful to have a light meteo wind between south and west, but the north-south difference in atmospheric pressure across the Swiss Alps should be low, ideally no more than 2hPa.



Overview

The route consists of three valleys – the Goms, Urserntal, and Surselva – separated by the Furka and Oberalp passes, and presents no significant navigational challenge.



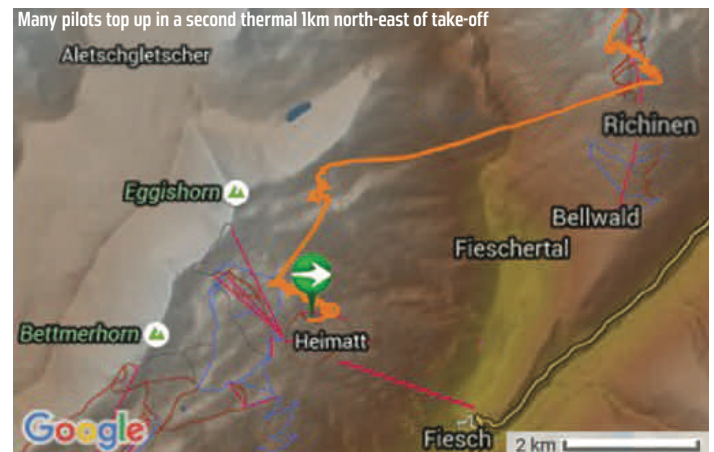
Simple landing-out options in large flat grassy fields are available throughout, apart from the area around the Furkapass where the terrain is uneven. Retrieves are simple using trains running along the valley floor every hour, with stations a few kilometres apart. If your style is to get high and stay high you can expect to spend much of the flight over 3,000m ASL, thermalling or gliding well above terrain, only ever slope soaring if something has gone wrong. Staying below 3,950m avoids airspace.

Getting started

A cable car, large enough to take even rigid wings, runs regularly from Fiesch (just above 1,000m) to the Fiescheralp station at 2,200m. There's a hang glider ramp next to the building itself, or it's a five-minute walk to grassy take-offs for paragliders and hangies at Heimatt. The slope faces east-south-east, so in early summer it often starts working early enough for pilots to get up and away before 10am.

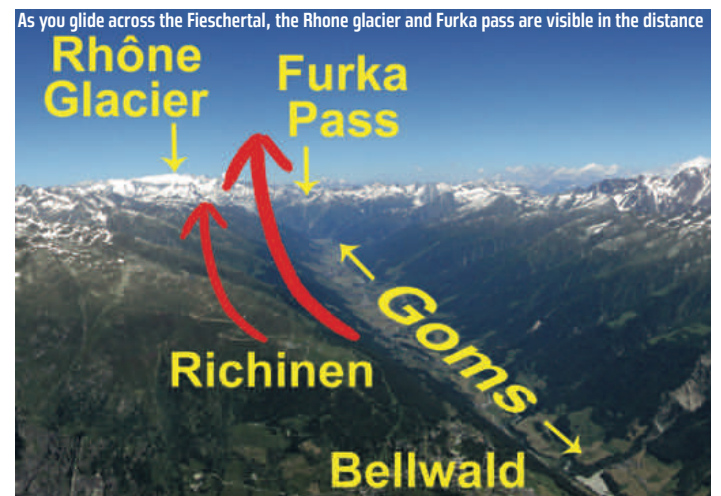
Unless cloudbase is too low to get above Eggishorn, the 2,900m peak directly behind take-off, don't miss the opportunity to enjoy one of the classic views of free flight – the Aletsch glacier (at 23km, the longest in the Alps). The 4,000m peaks of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau can be seen 16km to the north, above this spectacular river of ice.

If you reach 3,000m in the house thermal from launch, you could start your glide across the Fieschertal valley towards the terrain above the village of Bellwald, about 5km to the east. However, in order to shorten the crossing, many pilots top up in a second thermal 1km north-east of take-off. 2,800m is usually sufficient if you set off from here.



The Goms

As you glide across the Fieschertal, the Rhône glacier and Furka pass are visible in the distance. You can expect smooth air and relatively gentle sink as you head towards the shoulder above Bellwald. I've never encountered significant turbulence or seen anyone take a hit on this transition; it can be a good opportunity to make minor equipment adjustments or take pictures. The location of lift ahead is often well marked by climbing gliders, but you should check the flags by the lake at Richinen as they sometimes show a significant local side wind disturbing the thermals here.



Once you've got up at Bellwald, it's likely to be easy to find thermals on the way to the Sidelhorn, the last peak in the Goms. As you approach, it's essential to avoid a notorious wind, nicknamed the Grimselschlange, which blows through the Grimselpass from the north-west. Nearly always present to some degree on flyable days, and strengthened in northerly conditions, it's evaded by maintaining good ground clearance and edging away

Photos: Rebecca Hediges



Above: Don't miss the opportunity to enjoy one of the classic views of free flight – the Aletsch glacier. Below: The start of the Goms. Once you've got up at Bellwald finding lift on the way to the Sidelhorn is usually easy



from the valley towards the higher terrain as you progress up the Goms. Once you've reached its zone of influence you'll often find a blue gap, or rapidly-evaporating clouds where thermals are suppressed by the general sink which it causes.

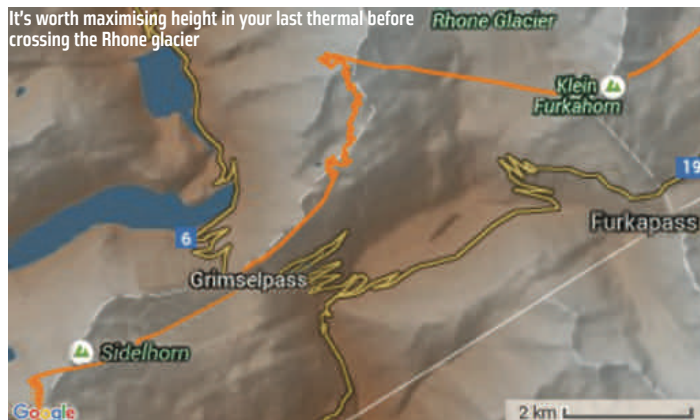


The Grimsel and Furka passes

The standard tactic here involves getting to base near the Sidelhorn, gliding over the saddle of the Grimselpass to connect with a thermal on the other side, climbing high again, then heading over the Rhône glacier towards the ridge leading up from the col of the Furkapass (2,400m), for a final top-up at the Klein Furkahorn (3,000m) before crossing into the Urserental. With cumulus development at the Sidelhorn I'm reluctant to start my transition unless I'm either at base or keen to stick with a competent gaggle; when on my own in blue conditions I like to have at least 3,300m.



It's worth maximising height in your last thermal before crossing the Rhône glacier, or achieving at least 3,200m, unless you're really struggling and have good reason to believe that the south-westerly slope above the road leading to the Furkapass should work well (e.g. a soarable breeze or gliders climbing there).



The Urserental

The high alpine terrain immediately after the Furkapass slopes gently, with a high valley floor for the first 5km, so the altitude with which you've crossed the ridge separating the Goms and the Urserental will be absolutely crucial to your progress here. It's a bad idea to scrape over near the col well below 3,000m, as you're then likely to need both luck and skill to avoid landing out in this rugged area. Even with more altitude, reaching the nearest easy landing field in Realp, at the head of the valley, can't be guaranteed.

Three fairly reliable (and obvious!) thermal triggers can be identified after you've entered the Urserental. The nearest is the sheer south-facing cliff of the Chli Bielenhorn, a small 2,940m peak about 2.5km to the east, which nearly always works well. If you don't find a thermal there, the Schafberg, 3km further on and 2,590m, is a second opportunity for a good climb. Should that fail to deliver too, your last chance of finding lift is likely to be the 1,900m edge of the forest above Realp, directly behind and below the Schafberg. Next, visible in the distance, 7km from the Furka - whether you've been able to glide there directly as you came over with massive height or needed a climb or two on the way - the Blaubergstock seems to be a good place to connect with a robust thermal to hoof you up to base.



After the Blaubergstock, the best line is along the spine of the main ridge, which should provide plenty of lift and fantastic views. I always try hard to maintain good height here - at least 3,000m - because a lower line further to the right above the south-facing slopes tends to be less buoyant than a higher route. A lower line also brings the risk that you may suddenly find your progress impeded by a strong headwind; the usual northerly valley breeze in Andermatt turns into an easterly which can extend to considerable height. The slightest sniff of this headwind spells trouble and should motivate you to find a climb to get above it, as there are no windward faces available which can be used to turn this valley breeze to your advantage. If you simply accelerate in the hope of lift ahead you may well get decked; this wind usually strengthens inexorably as you get lower and inhibits the thermal development which you might otherwise expect off the south-facing slope below.



Photos: Robert Smith

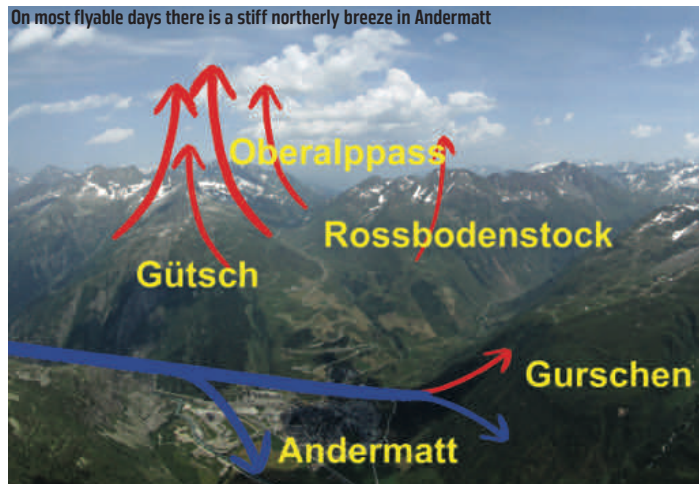


Above: After entering the Urserental, the Schafberg at around 33km offers a second opportunity for a good climb. Below: High alpine terrain - the Damma glacier in the Urserental at 35km

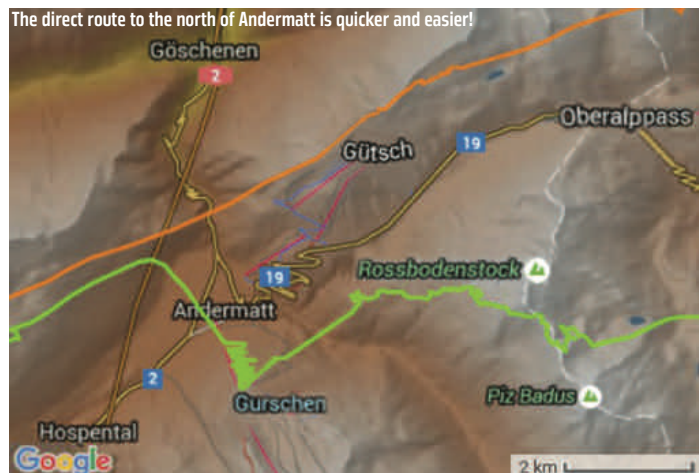


Andermatt and Oberalppass

On most flyable days there's a stiff northerly breeze at ground level (1,444m) in Andermatt, easily avoided if you stay high. Four wind turbines at Gütisch, north of the village at 2,300m, show the wind speed and direction at that point, enabling you to identify windward and lee sides in this region. Clockwise (from your point of view) indicates safety (i.e. you are on the windward side), and the speed of rotation in RPM corresponds roughly to the wind speed in km/h. With reasonable altitude you can simply glide over any valley winds towards the Oberalppass via a thermal at Gütisch; otherwise, you must plan your route carefully and be prepared to adapt to circumstances. These may be favourable, typically some convergence lift, or hazardous, such as wind shears.



If you lose so much height that you get into the valley wind, you may be able to use it for a low save. It's often possible to slope soar from less than 50m above the valley floor up to Gurschen (taking care to avoid the gondola cables). From the crest of the ridge you can glide over to the lower slopes of Rossbodenstock to pick up a thermal from there up to the peak, and over the top into the Surselva. However the direct route to the north of Andermatt is much quicker and easier!



The Surselva

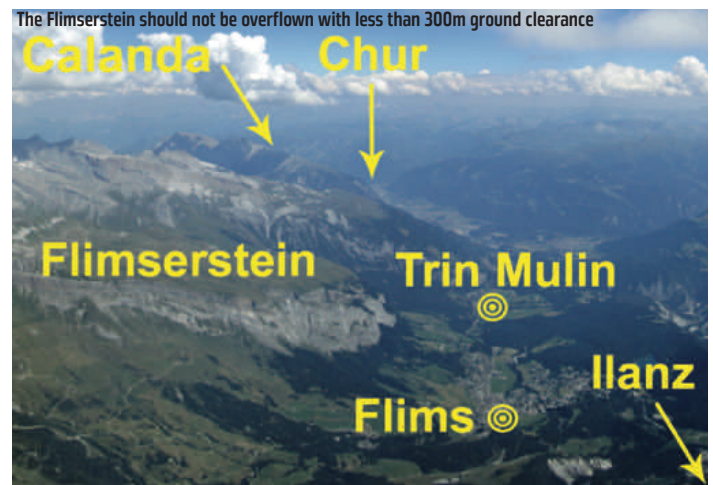
Once you're over the Oberalppass you've surmounted the two major hurdles on the way to Chur, though you're still not quite halfway there in terms of distance. If I've scraped over the Oberalppass without much ground clearance I've usually found it beneficial to regain plenty of altitude as soon as possible. Once again the best line is usually over the higher terrain.

One of the characteristics of the Surselva, in contrast to the Goms and Urserntal, is the way that some mountains jut out into the valley. This feature provides the potential for windward faces on which you may be able to survive in between thermals, or even soar up from low down (though of course there are then leeside areas to reckon with).

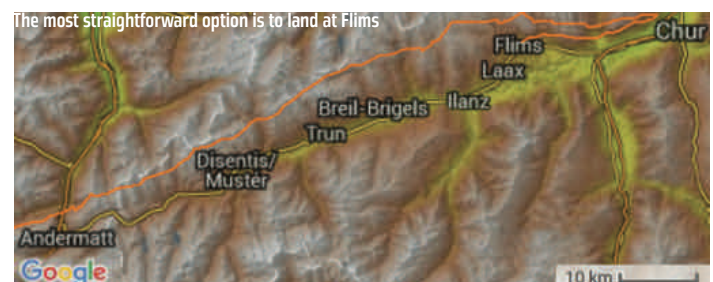
Around Brigels, 30km beyond the Oberalppass, the height of the

mountains to the north declines. When these have been blocking a northerly airflow, you may notice a sudden decline in the number, size, and duration of cumulus ahead, heralding generally sinky air and a dramatic deterioration in thermic activity. If cloud development on the south side of the valley is favourable, you should consider crossing over immediately.

20km past Brigels, as Chur comes within range, the Flims landing field is just over 100km from the Heimatt take-off. The Flimserstein, a large rocky face, is an obvious thermal location, but (unfortunately for us!) also a wildlife protection zone which should not be overflown with less than 300m ground clearance.



As you approach Chur, you must stay high to avoid the usual vigorous north-easterly valley breeze there, likely to be present even if you've been enjoying the assistance of a south-westerly tailwind from the meteo flow. This would not only block further progress, but also lead to the likelihood of a landing in robust conditions. You should plan to land well away from Chur itself; the most straightforward option is to turn around once you've reached the Calanda (the mountain overlooking the town from the north-west) and fly back to land at Flims, which is well above the main valley flow, Trin Mulin, or even Ilanz, around 20km back.



Thanks to the excellent Swiss public transport system, you can expect to enjoy not only your flight but also a comfortable retrieve!

Photos: Robert Smith



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Above: Approaching the Oberalppass at 50km. Below: The end in sight - past Flims at 105km with Chur in the distance

