

Arolla

April 4, 2004

I have been coming to Villars-Chesieres¹ since 1962 (almost an eternity) virtually every year, a few times a year and this is, for all practical purposes, was only my first winter tour in Europe!

Well, better late than never....

For this first and very nice tour in Switzerland I thank my young friend Antoine M. who kindly took me on this excursion with his group of friends² and "initiated" me to ski touring in Europe.



Ski touring in Switzerland is, of course, a very different affair from what it is in Iran. The areas are well known, you are hardly ever alone, and there is almost always a shelter with heat and food not too far. What a luxury!

You miss the wilderness somewhat but you get the ease of organization, the feeling of security, etc.

I will not fall into the trap of saying which of the mountains are more beautiful, the Alps or our own two main chains³ since we all know that beauty is in the eye of the beholder but the Alps have got to be right there on top of the list not only because of the sheer beauty of the mountains themselves but also because of the history, the beautiful villages and the "whole package".



The Alps are, of course, also the birthplace of alpinism, most "Alpine" winter sports, skiing and ski touring.

The Valais is one of the best places to be in the Alps for hiking, mountaineering and skiing. It has plenty of other attractions not least its great, mainly sweet white, wines. And of course the very famous red Syrah wine. It derives its name from the Shiraz grape, originally from the city by the same name in the South of Iran.

I like this feeling of never being that far away from home.

In Europe you don't need directions. All you have to do is to look up Arolla (Valais⁴), or wherever else you want to go, on the map, web or best of all set your GPS to guide you straight there. Suffice it to say that Arolla is up from the town of Sion⁵, 205 km or about 3 hours drive from Geneva going east towards the Italo-Swiss border towns of Brig / Domodossola.

¹ Villars is the oldest ski resort in the French speaking part of Switzerland. St. Moritz being the absolute oldest.

² We were a party of 10.

³ Alborz and Zagross.

⁴ The third largest canton of Switzerland. In a way it is microcosm of Switzerland because it has a lot of mountains and both a French and German speaking part!

⁵ It is the capital of the canton with many points of interest to visit. In particular the castles of Valère and Tourbillon.

We started fairly late in the morning from **Arolla** to the “**Pas de Chèvre**” which is abt. 900 meters vertical higher. We split into 2 groups: The super sporty that were training for “La patrouille des glaciers”⁶ started to climb right from Arolla while the rest of us took the ski lift for about half of the way. In any case it is very difficult for me psychologically to climb where there is some kind of other easier means up.

It took us slightly over an hour from the top of the lift to the Pas de Chèvre. Most of the sportier ones didn't take that much longer to do the whole way on sealskins!



The way up was very easy and straight forward and so was the skiing down, although the snow late in the season was starting to melt and was treacherous in some parts.

We were back in Arolla at 2 p.m. We stopped for some excellent local sweet white wine on the way back and off home we were.

It was my last day in Europe so I did not want a tiring tour and so it turned out without any particular insistence from my part. Lucky me.



Photos:

Page 1 left:

- Pretty smiles of friend originally from Valais. Living in Geneva, she knew a lot about Iran. She had some Iranian friends that were as usual “relatives of the Shah” or at least of some king or prince!

Page 1 right, top to bottom:

- Antoine and Sebastien, in the background the Mattehorn is indicated by a red line.
- Sebastien and friend.
- Antoine and friend.

Page 2 left to right, top to bottom:

The group at the “Pas de Chèvre” with the Mattehorn in the far background.

- Picnic on rock that looked as it was specially made for it.

- Upon return In Arolla with the glacier in the background.

Links:

<http://www.arolla.com/english/index.htm>

<http://www.arolla.com/english/winter/index4f.htm>

<http://www.matterhornstate.com/>

http://wine.about.com/library/types/bl_sirah.htm

<http://1.1911encyclopedia.org/S/SH/SHIRAZ.htm>

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⁶ A very old and well known ski touring endurance race. See details in the appropriate link.