





Dédé's Dancers

By George Koch
Photos by Martin Soderqvist

Sven Brunso enjoying crystal immersion beneath the massive Mont Collon

“MADAM, I’M STOPPED UNDER A SNOWSHED, um, you know, *tunnel*. The car was skidding around in all the new snow, and I would have gotten stuck.”

“You are *stuck*? In zee *toonelle*? How is zis possible!?”

“No, Madam, I’m not stuck, I stopped in the tunnel before anything happened. But I need some help. A snowplough, or a big vehicle to beat down some tracks.”

“Pascal! Monsieur from America ees stuck. In the *toonelle*! Voila, Monsieur, we send our tractor down. Later, *biensur*, you can tell us and your American friends how you could be stuck in the *toonelle*.”

“But I’m not...”

By now you’re picturing a raging snowstorm, crackling cell reception and no-longer-completely-charming language barriers. The backstory is my stalled ascent in a two-wheel-drive rental car without snow chains from the green fields and vineyards of Switzerland’s Rhône River valley in French-speaking Valais, at 1,500 feet elevation, up one vertical mile of more-than-merely-tortuous pockmarked local roads to remote, end-of-the-line Arolla. Cloudy skies had become lashing rain, wet snow melting on wet roads and then, very suddenly, a three-dimensional curtain of inch-sized flakes quickly burying the road. The most recent additions had been small sluffs sliding onto the road. Traffic was nonexistent.

My crew – photographer Martin Soderqvist, pro skier and fellow writer Sven Brunso, and aspiring photo skier Sofi Bondeson – were up in the Hôtel du Pigne d’Arolla, smacking their lips from dinner and giggling at my predicament. Madam never did send the tractor, but after much waiting a snowplough materialized and roared up the road. I still barely made it around a couple of the steepest glazed switchbacks. At the hotel entrance Madam greeted me warmly, then cried, “Everyone! It is *Driver Georges!*”

The storm continued into the morning and while we all were vibrating with excitement we faced an avy hazard that was nudging 5 and also, probably, stationary lifts. It being mid-March, the nearly two feet that had fallen in the village was already best-suited to producing an assembly line of snowmen, ruling out touring in the lower forests. So we dawdled over breakfast, organized gear, ambled around the tiny village of stone-and-timber heritage buildings and met our mountain guide, Arnaud.

Calm, quietly self-assured, with a ready smile and a twinkle in his eye, Arnaud was someone we warmed to instantly. Arolla’s lowest lift might open around 11, he mentioned, but there was no rush, as the village was deserted. At last we were geared up and skiing down the main street, gliding past that terrifying glazed hairpin to Arolla’s first lift. If you know the Alps, you’re probably expecting a huge terminal complex – with ticket office, ski shop, guides’ bureau and a café or restaurant – housing a hulking aerial tram or high-capacity gondola. Not here. Arolla’s base lift is still a 1960s vintage steel-stick platter lift – a Poma. So is its peak lift. And so are its middle lifts. Five in total.

When in doubt, go higher.







We didn't care. Our group of five formed half the day's total crowd. If your main memories of the Alps are standing in line in Verbier, Chamonix or Zermatt on a powder day (whether to ski the slopes or launch a tour), or you won't go to the Alps at all because you've heard of the crowds, purge those clichés from your mind. Arolla is only a couple of valleys from Verbier and Zermatt. Yet it's like stepping back in time, back beyond even the busy 80's before high-speed lifts, to the early days of mechanized skiing.

The first poma rose barely 600 vertical feet. With a heavy blanket of fog above our heads, this would be our world for the day. Probably 18 inches of fresh lay on the two cut runs. A little corridor had been groomed down the middle of each, daring one to actually *carve* turns. Flanking these *pistes*, more powder was blown in among several small gullies, their rounded shoulders dotted with the local *arolle* pine, a lovely tree that grows gnarled and tall and, as if designed for skiers, loses its lower branches. It wasn't steep or long, but it was a ridiculous amount of fun. Martin and Sofi had just come from two months of no skiing in cold, dark Sweden, while Sven's normally powder-pounded homeland of southwest Colorado had been a skiing desert. Feeling slightly ridiculous in our touring and avy gear, but giddy with the joy of powder, we jostled good-naturedly to be first back onto the poma after each lap.

Why didn't we just slap on skins and head up into the murk? On one level, it would have been that simple. Perhaps also deadly. The Swiss, in my experience, don't sandbag their avy forecasts. Four means 4, and today, we were between 4 and 5. Another 6,000-7,000 vertical feet of relief loomed overhead, unseen. Several massive 12,000+ foot peaks, including the Pigne d'Arolla, rose directly up thousands of feet of cliff wall, hanging snowfield, steep glacier and avalanche chute. Just behind them ran the main spine of the Alps. Arolla's a gateway to an essentially endless touring wonderland that features dozens of 10,000-13,000 foot-high peaks and the classic Haute Route. Today, it was all a gigantic death trap. For now, we'd be waiting – as were the touring parties up in the many huts, like the Cabane de Bertol, where we hoped to go. They, however, weren't skiing at all.

After we pushed the steel poles out from between our legs one last time, Arnaud led us along a path through *arolles*, over a few rollers of waist deep but, now, ridiculously heavy snow, and into a clearing occupied by an almost impossibly classic, stone-and-timber Swiss mountain edifice: the Grand Hôtel & Kurhaus. Built in 1896, the Kurhaus was everything one imagines: creaking wood plank floors, faded Persian carpets, overstuffed leather chairs, old photos and maps, mounted heads of chamois and ibex, a cozy bar of simple wood furnishings, locals with their heads together. I could almost feel the spirits of the uncounted skiers and climbers who'd come and gone. I was filled with a sense of wonder, respect and gratitude for being here. And soon I was becoming filled with beer as well.

That evening we dined in our hotel, enjoying a European set "menu" home-cooked by the owner, a delicious venison ragout over pasta, washed down by a lovely Cornalin red wine grown just a couple of dozen miles away in the Rhône Valley. I heard *madam* asking Arnaud in French how *Driver Georges* had performed when actually placed on skis. "I pick you up tomorrow at 9," said Arnaud in closing, and left for his chalet and his family.

The next morning. Night and day, indeed. A brilliant sun is cresting the mile-high wall opposite Arolla, glaciers and peaks gleam in snow-blasted glory and there's no lingering. Arnaud predicts that today, as many as *several hundred* people might visit Arolla. We're carefree and excited, and during the poma rides heads swivel and necks crane.

The Alps are famously gorgeous, but Arolla is on another level. Simply being here is stupefying. The gigantism, the tantalizing ascent routes in all directions and the knowledge of huts perched just beyond view create an uplifting sense of unlimited possibilities. We feel like masters of a menu of massiveness. As we ascend, it's gradually replaced by nearly the opposite: a feeling of smallness. Not merely that we're ants in this landscape of impossible scale, but that the ski area itself is tiny. We feel surrounded by hugeness, but not part of it. Will the skiing even be fun? But we still can't just start touring indiscriminately. The avy danger remains between a dark orange and a light red. Not only are the chances of an avalanche high, the consequences would be catastrophic.

From the top poma Martin eyes a possible photo slope. "It's probably just a turn or two, Sven, but the background is great," he says. Sven, Sofi and I start booting. The "one-turner" is a good-sized slope of multiple turns in thigh-deep cold powder. Instead of looming in the lens, the skier is swallowed by the terrain. We're all laughing. We get it. Arolla isn't small – it's just surrounded by terrain on a different scale.

Arnaud is fidgety. "We must go," he says. "The sun is warming the slopes." We're on a north face, but our route leads eastward. We begin traversing across what looks relatively short but proves a nearly mile-wide slope beneath who-knows-how-high cliffs and couloirs. The entire thing has been scoured by slides. The ant-like feeling returns. The slides started unseen and ran over 2,000 vertical feet, turning, banking, rolling and cresting like cold lava flows. The debris fields are prodigious. What else remains overhead?

Safely past, we contemplate the short-ish slopes rolling away. Arnaud leads off in the foot-deep settling powder and is soon a dot. Not so short-ish after all. "This is called *Pragra*," he explains as I pull up. "It means something like 'good grass.' It's excellent pasture for the cows in summer, to make our cheese." Good grass in summer, really good snow right now, nice slopes and great turns. We're all smiling. Although it feels like we've skied the equivalent of a quarter of one of the big surrounding peaks, our descent is 3,000 vertical feet.

Back at the top we stop in at La Buvette 3000, a rustic slopeside hut with great views. We grab drinks, charcuterie and sandwiches and contemplate our options. Martin wants to shoot more photos. The avy danger is receding and now the first groups are pushing the first new skin tracks here and there.

I really want to work my legs, so I peel off from the shooting crew and make for a manageable, conservative ascent up a valley to Pas de Chèvres. The "Pass of Goats" leads to more glaciers and one of the area's huts. The gentle U-shaped valley is flanked by towering relief. The south-facing slopes are steep and baking in the sun, while the north faces haven't slid, so I stay just to the shady side of the valley bottom. It's wonderful to be on skins, and I again contemplate how much one could do here. Already it's day two of a three-day visit, which seems criminally short.

I gradually overtake another solo tourer, who in English-accented French politely lectures me on which way to ascend and where not to ski down. I agree with what he says and keep going. He catches up at the col, and at last we recognize that each is an English-speaker. And so begins a new friendship. Edmund Truell – Edi as he introduces himself – is an English businessman and passionate skier who with his wife, Cédriane, has just purchased the Kurhaus. We decide to ski down together. The vast open slopes down from Pas de Chèvres are excellent settled powder. Back in the ski area, we cruise down marked runs to the Kurhaus, where we meet Cédriane, also a passionate skier.

Over wine and beer, the two share their big plans for Arolla – if the locals play ball. Enlarging and modernizing the Kurhaus's tiny rooms and aging plumbing, and restoring it to its former splendour while keeping it authentic, are just the start. On the mountain, the couple envision installing a full-length gondola and emphasizing freeriding and touring, with only minimal groomed slopes. Kind of the way it is now, only without the Poma sticks. "Arolla should be developed to stay rather wild, for people who want to ski in a natural environment with few other people," commented Cédriane. Not like Verbier or Zermatt, in other words. She and Edi are also looking into launching a snowcat skiing operation on an adjoining mountain – which would be a first for the Alps. Still you needn't worry Arolla's rustic days are numbered. In the Alps, doing anything new takes time and more time.

That evening we pile into a minivan and drive down to Evolène. The charming little town has a quirky ski area with a few old lifts that, in mid-winter, would provide the sheltered below-treeline storm skiing Arolla lacks. Right now, sadly, it's hardly skiable, having all-but disintegrated in an early thaw. So this evening, we've descended to fill our bellies.



We troop into the Café-Restaurant au Vieux Mazot, an earthy old building with low timbered doorways from an era when people were smaller. “You will see, the meat is magnificent,” Arnaud promises, his face lit with excitement. “Everything is made from our local cows, the best in Switzerland.” This evening’s also our chance to meet a man who’s both legend and myth: the great André “Dédé” Anzévui. I’d heard tales of this, among the most famous mountain guides in the Alps. Now we’re face-to-face. Tall, with a deeply lined face, but ever-smiling and courteous, Dédé is the centre of things in Arolla. He’s Arnaud’s boss, he’s our group’s official host, he flies around in a helicopter, runs the local heli-skiing company, helps execute the area’s huge ski-mountaineering competitions, and continues to guide guests.

Forty and more years back, Dédé not only pioneered many of the area’s extreme descents, he became the first and still the only person ever to ski the north face of Europe’s iconic peak, the Matterhorn at Zermatt. He doesn’t brag about it but, if asked, mentions, “It required 190 vertical meters of rappelling.” Dédé remains something of a charming rogue. Switzerland strictly regulates its heli-skiing, with just 48 precisely defined landing spots throughout the country. It is whispered, however, that the clients of Dédé occasionally stumble upon very special landing spots.

Our evening in Evolène is enchanting, the conversation flowing across topics, and we feel at home. Arnaud is true to his word. A stately lady in heritage clothing slices thick steaks from huge loins on a slab and lays them

over a roaring indoor charcoal-fired grill. Rounds of beers, carafes of wine and baskets of bread arrive, followed by the sizzling meat, huge bowls of hand-cut *patates frites* and salads. We all chow down, but the slightly built Arnaud eats like a man just back from two weeks of freeze-dried climbing food. He asks for a second 2” thick steak and casts his eyes about for leftovers, hoovering fries, salad and still more meat from our plates. I smile: I’m usually any group’s biggest eater.

Our last morning in Arolla. Show time? Or ignominious retreat? The day is again stunning and on the pomas we yell back and forth about what to do. Several of us had noticed a ramp-like face across from the upper poma. It’s shaded, a consistent 40 degrees and entirely untracked. On my previous day’s tour, I had scoped the ascent route up its reverse side. I like it. Sven likes it. Sofi likes it.

“*Pah!* Forget it!” Dédé scoffs. “We call this thing *l’Exhibitioniste*. Everyone will see you. If you go there, you are the skiing equivalent of a pole dancer.”

Sofi grins as if to say, “So what’s not to like?” I say to her: “That’s the closest I’ll ever get to being even a metaphorical pole dancer, so I’m in.” So is Sven.

A couple hours of skinning later we’re huddled in a tiny notch, a south-westerly gale howling through the gap and threatening to tear away our skis. The slope is sheltered, however. One by one we push tips forward and drop in. The pitch, the light, the snow are all as hoped for. It’s a run dreams are made of and oceans are crossed for. Even coming near the tail end of a 70-day, powder-choked winter, they’re my season’s finest turns. The whoops and grins are beyond cliché.

“OK, we go now,” says Arnaud, knocking us out of our reverie. “There’s one other thing we can do before it’s too dangerous.”

Once again we traverse the huge avalanche slope from the previous day.

THIS PAGE The crew toasting an epic tour with local Barley pops at Pension du Lac Bleu
OPPOSITE PAGE The mighty Dent Blanche bids a good evening to the village of Evolène



“It’s OK,” Arnaud says. “Go at least 100 metres apart, and don’t stop. But it’s OK.” Safely across, we skin up a rolling shoulder that, bizarrely for Arolla, isn’t exposed to any hazards. Rounding the crest we gaze into a massive north-facing bowl, filled with powder, almost untracked. Overhead a large mountain wall is punctuated by several steep couloirs. I begin to drool. Arnaud notices and says, “That is the Couloir de la Roussette. It’s excellent.”

“Couloirs are my favourite!” I exclaim. “Why didn’t we go there?”

“Well, because you and the other pole dancers wasted over two hours on *l’Exhibioniste*. Now the ascent is too dangerous.”

We slide easily into the vast bowl’s welcoming duvet of settled powder, accelerating into big, vertical-devouring turns and being lifted into exhilaration. A smaller, steeper bowl follows. Then a choice of three steep, narrow couloirs spilling into aprons fanning into a sunlit alpine valley, its bottom just steep enough to continue turning. At treeline the powder turns to schmoo and we slurp through glades and along a forest trail to La Gouille, a handful of houses along the access road below Arolla. Over 4,000 vertical feet of incredible skiing. A few steps away sits a charming little restaurant and bar, the Pension du Lac Bleu.

As we clink beer mugs and tuck into charcuterie and sandwiches, I reflect on our whirlwind visit. It began with more challenges than skiing. With the avy hazard nudging extreme and only settling to 2+ on our last afternoon, six-hour ascents, bagging peaks and technical descents were simply out. Still, it was an incredible time for all. The unscaled tours and unskied couloirs simply became reasons to return. Arolla just isn’t a bucket-list kind of place, to be crossed off after one quick visit. Once you understand what’s there, and its people grab a little piece of your heart, you are bound to be drawn back. ▼

Beta, or Makin’ it Easier

Switzerland online topo map, zoomable
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