

The easiest 100k in the Alps

ROBERT SMITH'S GUIDE TO A CLASSIC ROUTE IN A RENOWNED ALPINE SETTING

It's always an achievement to fly 100km on a paraglider or hang glider. This section of what many pilots call the 'XC superhighway', around Fiesch in the Swiss Alps, provides a straightforward opportunity for pilots who are competent in mountain conditions to accomplish the feat. The flight consists of a 90km out-and-return in spectacular high Alpine terrain, followed by a 10km glide to a large grassy landing field to bring up the magic number.

Introduction

To fly legally in Switzerland as a non-resident, you require third-party insurance cover of at least CHF 1m, and a level 4 or 5 IPPI card (obtainable from the BHPA provided you are P or AP rated). You must stay below FL130 on weekdays and FL150 at weekends (3950m and 4550m at standard QNH) to avoid airspace. You're most likely to find suitable weather conditions here in July and August – generally a weak anticyclone with no fronts or troughs nearby, low pressure differences across the Alps, and light winds at altitude. You must be capable of flying safely on an independent basis in mountains before you come to Fiesch. You won't enjoy yourself here unless you are comfortable in thermals up to 5 m/s, which are standard throughout the summer.

My suggested route, as shown on the diagram (page 32), starts to the north-east, into the Goms valley, to turn around at the Sidelhorn, the last peak before the Grimsel Pass. It continues back past take-off and then into the main Rhône valley, to head west before doubling back again at the Schwarzhorn, just before the Sion TMA airspace. The third leg returns to take-off to close the out-and-return element, and the flight concludes with a final glide back into the Goms (burning off your height to land at Fiesch would leave you well short of your 100km). The turnpoint coordinates appear at the end of this article.

The standard strategy is to remain high and well clear of terrain throughout, without any slope soaring in dynamic lift, and there's no need to allow yourself to get cut off from simple landing options in the valley. On good days there will be plenty of

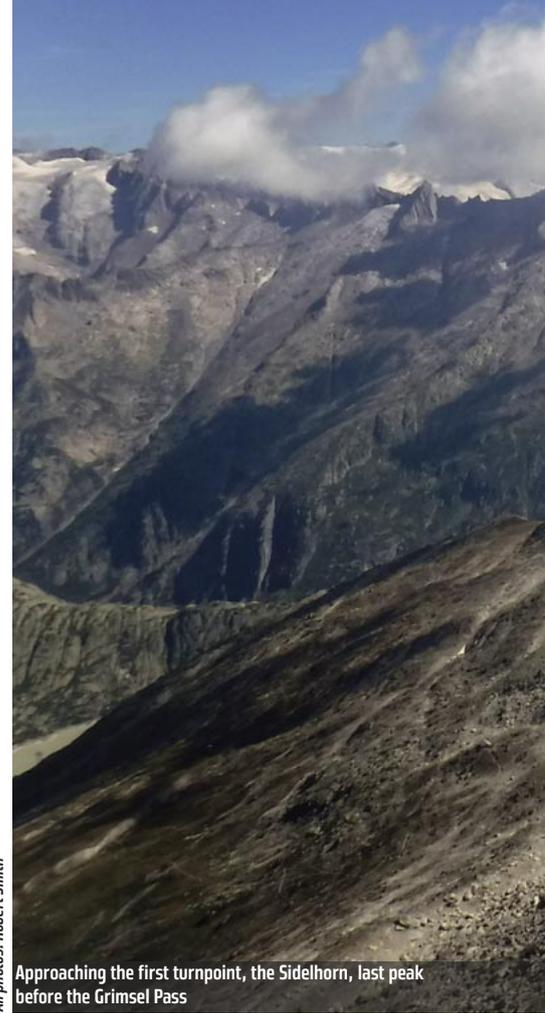
other pilots spread out along the route, helping to show you the way.

First leg

The take-off area at Fiescheralp, around 2,200m ASL, is reached by a gondola which has facilities to take hang gliders. On decent flyable days there are likely to be plenty of pilots around who are familiar with the area and happy to discuss the weather conditions and route options – in English – if you ask. As the terrain here faces east, it's often working before 10am in spring and summer, with the benefit of local tandems and XC cracks keen to launch early, enabling you to see where to find lift before you commit to the air.

There may well be thermals near the take-off in which you can climb directly to get up above the level of the 2,900m Eggishorn, the peak behind the launch area, bringing the reward of your first sighting of the Aletsch Glacier, one of the classic views of free flying. Otherwise, you can head 1km north to a reliable house thermal running up a prominent shoulder, where you may already have noticed gliders climbing. I recommend maximising altitude here before starting your first transition, 5km across the Fieschertal valley to the Goms valley, but 2,800m is usually enough to arrive on the far side with sufficient height.

You can expect smooth air and relatively gentle sink as you head towards the shoulder above the village of Bellwald. I've never encountered significant turbulence or seen anyone take a hit on this transition, so 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 I



All photos: Robert Smith

Approaching the first turnpoint, the Sidelhorn, last peak before the Grimsel Pass

always try to anticipate the wind speed and direction there in advance by observing my ground speed and any flags by the lake at Richinen. There is sometimes a significant local side wind disturbing the thermals here, in which case you should choose the aspect of the shoulder which faces the airflow more directly.

Once you've got up there, it's likely to be easy to find thermals on the way up the Goms. As you get closer to the Sidelhorn, it's essential to avoid the Grimseler, a notorious wind which blows through the Grimsel Pass 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 from the valley towards the higher terrain as you progress up the Goms, ideally getting above the spine of the ridge before the approach to the turnpoint. Only when this wind is weak or not extending too high, you may be able to top up in a thermal on the south-facing side of the peak, but the safest tactic is to turn around as soon as

First view of the Aletsch Glacier from above the Fiescheralp launch





you've tagged the turnpoint to avoid the risk of getting low here and then flushed down in lee rotor.

Second leg

On your return down the Goms, you're likely to be able to take a higher line than on your outward leg, with stunning views of harsh Alpine terrain. When you get back to Bellwald, both flanks of the shoulder above the village will have been baking in the sun, with the potential to generate the strongest conditions of the flight so far, so I generally take full advantage of the lift here to max out before setting off back across the Fieschertal towards the launch area.

The house thermal 1km north of the Heimat take-off may still be working; otherwise there are usually plenty of gliders in the general area marking the lift. However, if you arrive above Eggishorn you'll be in an excellent position to pick up lift off the spine of the ridge leading to the Riederhorn. Alternatively, if you enjoy committed lines in big mountains, and base is high, you

may consider crossing the Aletsch Glacier towards the peaks beyond (as shown in the route diagram, though this is the less frequently taken line).

Assuming that you take the more popular Riederhorn route, staying above the spine works much better than taking a lower line over the shoulder. I'm always keen to maximise my altitude at the peak before setting off on the 5km transition to the south-facing side of the main Rhône valley, in which there is normally a brisk westerly breeze. The lower you arrive, the stronger the headwind, and the more tricky and turbulent your first climb after the crossing is likely to be. If you start with less than 3000m you may find that you have insufficient height to glide over the crest of the first spine to reach the windward terrain beyond, but there's often a usable lee thermal on the face which you are approaching. However, you should be prepared for some turbulence due to mixing airflows in this location, i.e. the lee and windward side thermals and the valley breeze.

The next section has the potential to be quite challenging if base is lower and/or the valley breeze is stronger than usual. The ground features here are much larger and more widely spaced than the spines and gullies in the Goms, so you can expect longer glides between thermals. It's vital to remain high enough to minimise exposure to the normal valley breeze, which can extend several hundred metres above the valley floor, as this can make westerly progress very difficult, and you don't want to be landing in a wind which may be approaching paraglider trim speed at ground level.

I've selected the Schwarzhorn as the second turnpoint so that you don't need to be concerned about the restrictions of the Sion TMA, which are beyond the scope of this article. If you want to try to extend this leg of the route further, you'll need to research the details and status of this airspace yourself. This peak is also the location of a frequently used thermal in which to top up before turning around here.



Heading for the second turnpoint, the Schwarzhorn – the dark peak in line with the two gliders ahead

Third leg

Whether you choose a high or conservative route back towards Fiesch depends on the conditions and your preferences. The tendency for base to rise during the day may open up a spectacular detour to the high peaks to the north (shown as an outward leg in the route diagram), but most pilots opt to take assistance from the usual westerly breeze as a tailwind and take a direct line. If there's good cloud development on the other side of the valley, which normally starts working during the afternoon, you could consider crossing over, but you'll

then have to either cross back or forego closing the out-and-return element of the flight.

When you take the conventional route back along the south-facing side of the Rhône valley, the crossing from there to the Riederhorn is likely to be a more relaxed affair than your previous transition in the opposite direction, as you are now heading for a windward slope in the sun with the breeze behind you. Having got up there, you should then find the liftiest line along the spine leading to the Eggishorn, and once again enjoy a great view of the Aletsch Glacier.

Once you've tagged the take-off area to close your out-and-return, 3,000m ASL would enable you to reach my suggested landing field, at Ritzingen in the Goms, with a glide ratio of less than 7:1. However, bear in mind that by mid-afternoon the Grimseler wind may well have penetrated as far down as this, sometimes extending upwards to a few hundred metres above ground level. This will lead to a headwind replacing the tailwind which has probably been assisting you on this final leg of the route. So unless you have plenty of height in reserve when you reach Bellwald, it may be a good idea to work the lift that you can expect to encounter there to avoid getting thwarted at the last moment from clocking up your 100k.

The landing field is very easy to identify from a considerable distance, from the little white church in the middle with no other buildings nearby, as well as a windsock. Occasionally you may find that the two valley breezes are fighting for supremacy here, in which case landing further west is the safer option to avoid ground level turbulence. But if you're motivated to prolong your flight, it may well be possible to use the convergence to get up again and then return to Fiesch!



Turnpoints

Take-off	Fiesch Heimat	46.41456 N	8.10870 E	2140m
Turnpoint 1	Sidelhorn	46.55253 N	8.31272 E	2764m
Turnpoint 2	Schwarzhorn	46.34723 N	7.81527 E	2658m
Landing	Ritzingen	46.46137 N	8.22823 E	1357m

Robert's website about flying in the Fiesch area is at www.flyfiesch.com