



# DESTINATION *Engel*

Kari Eisenhut leads a group of six on a high-mountain ski-and-fly in the Bernese Oberland  
By Bruno Petroni





▲ **HIGH ALTITUDE SOARING**

The Mönchsloch Hut is one of the highest in the Swiss Alps

► **SKINNING UP**

The idea for the ski-and-fly involved linking together a well-known former ski-tour, using paragliders to fly over the now non-skiable terrain

◀ **PEAK PERFORMANCE**

Three professional tandem pilots and three mountain guides made the trip in midsummer 2017

All photos: Bruno Petroni

**K**ari Eisenhut came up with the idea of a tandem alpine ski-and-fly in the big mountains above Grindelwald, Switzerland three years ago. Kari is a former Paragliding World Cup champion and Interlaken local, who runs Chillout Paragliding in the Swiss resort. His plan was to connect the Mönchsloch hut at 3,658m with Grindelwald 20km away and 2,600m in the valley below. The Mönchsloch sits below the summit of the Mönch (4,107m), close to the Eiger (3,970m) at the head of the Aletsch Glacier, the longest in the Alps. But their planned route would take them north, following an old off-piste ski-route along the Grindelwald Glacier. However, that route hasn't been skied for 20 years or more, because glacial retreat has made it unsafe. "My idea was to bridge the part that's not skiable anymore with the paraglider," Kari said, "but to tackle the first part on skis."

The safest way to travel in the high Alps is with a mountain guide. And so the tandem idea was born. Kari Eisenhut, Beni Kälin and Lucien Cawiezal would pilot the gliders, while Michael Wicky, Stefan Naef and Martin Sägesser were the mountain guides.

The adventure started at the Jungfrauoch. At 3,460m this is Europe's highest railway station where a million tourists a year arrive via the Jungfrau railway. They rarely go beyond the sun terrace, but Kari's crew did just that, putting on their skins and skiing their own path under the mighty south face of the Mönch to reach the Mönchsloch Hut by evening.

A steady east wind proved too tempting, and soon the three gliders were in the air for a test flight, soaring the mountain face below the hut. For two of the mountain guides it was their first time in a paraglider.



The hut guardian Christian Almer was impressed. "No-one has launched a paraglider here all year, and certainly not a tandem," he said. Enthusiastic about the group's plan he explained that a solo pilot had once insisted he could "easily fly over the Lower Mönchsloch" but was instead forced to land on the plateau down below.

The route down is complex, and even when it was skiable was the preserve of the best skiers who dared to make the long and difficult route. The upper part of the glacier is heavily crevassed, and has never been a walk in the park.

"I remember a tour I did in 1983, when I was 18 and only scarcely able to pass a certain part," said Kari. "I had to crawl past the key passage, a frozen serac bridge, on my belly. That was exciting!"

The next day, the longest day of the summer, started at 4.30am. A short descent by ski and a long ascent with crampons saw them standing on the nameless Mönchsloch (3,561m) before breakfast time.

From there, it was a long, hard descent on solid ice – a fall or slip would almost certainly mean tumbling into a crevasse. The further they

progressed, the longer and deeper the crevasses got. Eventually forced to rope up and ski, after passing a final, fragile snow bridge the men realised they had come to the end of the line.

"From here we could not see if we could go on or if a crevasse blocked the descent. We were also approaching the infamous rockfall terrain below the Eigerjocher, and single rockfalls are becoming more and more frequent," explained guide Michael Wicky. It was time to fly.

Some 150m back up, across another fragile snow bridge, and, with heart rates increasing and sweat running, at 3,300m they found a place to lay out the wings.

The big moment had arrived. A light katabatic wind and very little space before a crevasse didn't make things easy, and there was certainly no room for mistakes. But these are pros, and after a perfect launch the three tandems flew along the mountain, even finding a little lift, before flying back down the lower sea of ice. After half an hour the six landed safely on lush, freshly mown grass in Grindelwald – their skis still on their feet. ☒

▲ MOUNTAIN NAVIGATION

After skiing as far as they could, the group found a take-off and launched. Backwind behind and a crevasse out front made for a technical take-off