

LIFESTYLE // LUXE LIFE

Swiss it up: Your guide to exchanging Rockies repose for Alpen splendor

By BECCA HENSLEY | Oct. 29, 2018 | Updated: Nov. 29, 2018 1:12 p.m.



1 of 17

The apres ski scene in Zermatt, Switzerland

Photos: Andre Meier / Switzerland Tourism

We were feeling underdressed.

Everyone else at the ne plus ultra, midmountain eatery at Corviglia in St. Moritz, donned a full regalia ensemble of Bogner, Chanel or Moncler. My son, Nick, and I, utilitarian in our well-worn Helly Hansen apparel, nevertheless removed our gloves and took a starched, white-clothed table with a view of the lift that moves skiers to the top of Piz Nair, which glistened in the winter sun. We settled in to study the menu, the voices of Italian, German and French jet-setters like a moody symphony around us.

We had skied hard that morning, exploring some of the 250 miles of long, steep, treeless, Swiss-style slopes that compose this glamorous ski resort, located just a few hours by train from Zurich. Famished, we ordered the house speciality, the decadent truffle flammekueche, essentially a pizza blanketed with stringy mountain cheese and bestrewn with mammoth slices of umami-rich fungi. Everyone else at the tony restaurant — is that Princess Eugenie behind me? — gobbles it down, too. My son, a budding gourmand, his ski boots still buckled, also wants the herb-crustened venison and some mashed potatoes, capped with caviar. Me, I'm thinking about some champagne. That's the St. Moritz way.

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In St. Moritz, as in all of diminutive Switzerland, stopping for real sustenance on a ski day proves as crucial as seizing that extra run. Most people scheme and wheedle for hard-to-procure, mountainside restaurant reservations, planning their schussing around what they'll eat and where. And they don't limit themselves to a late lunch. There's often a pre-lunch at a hut joint somewhere amid the snowy expanses, perhaps some local pea soup, hot chocolate or schnapps to warm the blood. The day's grand finale, apres ski, takes chi-chi gourmandizing to the mountaintop, inside village bars, on trains and amid elegant hotel lobbies.

But despite the culinary enticement of hearty (and haute-y) ski fare, from fondue to foie gras, the advantages of winter sports vacations in Switzerland go beyond food and drink.

About the size of Maryland, home to Alpine peaks and lakes galore, Switzerland has more than 250 ski areas, big and small, tucked into its mountainous, varied terrain. Though Norway takes credit as the birthplace of skiing, Switzerland adopted the sport in the late 19th century, both as a practical means of traveling across the landscape and as a wintertime recreational offering to British tourists who'd started to spend entire seasons in places like St. Moritz for health reasons.

Today, the tiny nation's rich ski industry, with its unique resorts, characteristic historic villages and stunning natural scenery, provides an exciting alternative to winter playgrounds in the United States. Besides skiing, winter visitors can sled, skijor (a sport in which a horse pulls a person on skis), skate, ride in horse-drawn carriages, play snow polo, snowshoe and more.

Easy to access by train in all types of weather, the resort areas, from swanky Gstaad to newly reborn Andermatt, charge less for ski tickets, have longer runs with more intense vertical drops and encompass broad swathes of tree-free topography, configured so that riders can experience multiple mountains and/or ski from village to village — all in the same day. Add in technologically forward lift equipment, miles of well-maintained cross-country trails, abundant opportunities for off-piste and glacier skiing, villageside lakes for skating and curling, and a boisterous proclivity for celebratory apres ski, and Switzerland stands out as a destination every ski (and snowboard) lover should experience.

Don't know how to ski? They've got that covered, too. This year, [the Swiss Ski Schools](#) offers a program at 43 locations, which guarantee enrolled students will learn to ski with ease down a blue slope (their easiest marker) in three days — or they'll receive a repeat course free of charge.

Don't know where to start? Here's our Swiss bliss compendium.

GLITZY GSTAAD

In southwest Switzerland, Gstaad has attracted the likes of Madonna, Valentin and George Clooney. As home to some of the most posh boarding schools on Earth, the village and its environs, known as Saanenland draws the sons and daughters of princes, presidents and parvenus, whose parents, also, join their offspring S-turning down more than 150 miles (plus a glacier) of clean, ample sheers, a swathe that connects 10 historic villages for extended mileage on skis. Stay at [Alpina Gstaad](#), a modern fantasia of a classic chalet, which incorporates regional antiques with contemporary elements. Activities include dogsledding and yodeling; Michelin-starred Megu restaurant and a Six Senses spa add to the adventure.

OFF-PISTE ANDERMATT

At the foot of famous Gotthard Pass, unpretentious Andermatt boasts some of Switzerland's most dynamic nature. That fact always assured it stood as a terminus for thrill-seeking advanced skiers and freeriders, who reveled in Gemstock Mountain, a mecca of high altitude, off-piste hinterlands, always packed with a plethora of snow. This year, the scene grows larger and more accessible in a merger with the village of Sedrun, linked by lift and train. Now, with more family-friendly options and less-challenging trails in the mix, the result, newly named SkiArena, appeals to snow birds of all levels. After a day on the slopes, board the designated Apres Ski train in Sedrun, a mobile party, to return to your home base, the ritzy [Chedi Andermatt](#), where a ski butler and stellar spa await.

LAVISH ST. MORTIZ

Credited with jump-starting winter tourism in Switzerland when a local hotelier dared a group of British tourists to stay the winter, telling them they'd be reimbursed if displeased, St. Moritz firmly took its peerless place among ski retreats when it hosted the Winter Olympics, not once, but twice. Meanwhile, newsmakers flocked to its hotels and ski slopes. With bygone and current regular guests from Sophia Loren to the Duke of Windsor, Greta Garbo to Liz Taylor, [Badrutt's Palace](#) — a castelike hotel clinging to the mountain — continues to excel in extravagance. Though it no longer offers a live-animal treasure hunt for apres-ski amusement (as in halcyon days), the hotel features Rolls-Royce transfers to the ski mountain and butler service in the suites.

LIVELY ZERMATT

St. Bernard dogs, fur coats and the Matterhorn (yes, the real one) can all be seen from the little car-free town's vibrant streets. As idyllic as you imagine, this ski resort reigns as the highest in Switzerland. With nearly 200 miles of marked trails, surrounded by 38 summits and riveting views (even on the beginner slopes), the snow falls so deeply here that winter buffs can traverse snowy mountains year-round. Ski to Italy if you like — it's just a lift away. Many tourists arrive on Switzerland's iconic Glacier Express, a luxury train that parades across 291 bridges and through 91 tunnels en route. With panoramic railcars, replete with glass ceilings, it promises jaw-dropping views. Stay at a classic [Mont Cervin Palace](#), which lies at the foot of the Matterhorn.

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