

VENTURE THROUGH THE VALAIS

Stone castles, local produce and striking scenery in the Swiss Alps

By Renee Brincks

» **Traces of snow still top many peaks in the canton of Valais,** the mountainous district along Switzerland's southwestern edge, but apricot, pear and apple orchards are thriving on the sun-soaked valley floor. Today, I'm traveling about 18 miles between the Swiss cities of Sion and Martigny on in-line skates, navigating a paved trail that follows the Rhône River.

The lofty Alps set a picturesque stage for this seven-day skating trip organized by Montana-based Zephyr Adventures, a journey that starts in Brig and passes through Sion, Martigny, Villeneuve and several surrounding communities on the way to our final stop in Gstaad. After skating 10 to 35 miles each day, I spend my Swiss nights enjoying activities such as riding a cable car to the mountaintop village of Bettmeralp and watching live acts at the Montreux Jazz Festival (July 3–18 in 2020).

The tour takes us through German- and French-speaking villages east of Geneva and past lush vegetable gardens and fields of golden rye. In Martigny, I board an open-air tourist train

that winds up the hills above town. Plank fences and tangled vines hug the steep switchbacks, each curve taking us closer to a stone castle crowned with a turret. Hopping off at the Château de la Bâtiatz, built in the 13th century, I cross an interior courtyard and climb more than 100 steps to the top of the tower. Hazy light illuminates terraced vineyards that line the nearby slopes and the milky rapids of the glacier-fed Dranse River below.

I take it all in before returning to the base of the castle, where a friend from the group hands me a small glass of eau-de-vie. The clear, cool spirit, made from locally grown Williams pears, has an intense aroma and smooth fruit flavor. In just this single day, I feel like I've experienced a lot of what the Valais region is all about: stunning scenery, culture that dates back centuries and a bounty of local food. As I toast to the region, which is famous for the 14,692-foot Matterhorn, the resort town of Zermatt and the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Aletsch Glacier, I'm eager to discover what still awaits.



DAN HERRICK / GETTY IMAGES; FACING PAGE FROM TOP: CÉDRIC WIDMER / FONDATION BARRY, CHRISTIAN PFAUMATTER / VALAIS WALLIS PROMOTION; ROMAN BABAKIN / GETTY IMAGES

Taste of Valais

Valais farmers produce 97% of Switzerland's apricots and nearly 75% of its Williams pears; area markets stock juice, jam, brandy and other products made from local fruit. More than 50 grape varieties also grow in Valais.

Towns host workshops that share recipes for the canton's traditional rye bread, and during the summer season, dairies located along alpine hiking trails sell cheese, butter and milk produced onsite.

A local delicacy is Raclette du Valais, an aged, semihard cheese made from untreated, full-fat cow's milk. When the milk is sourced from herds grazing in the mountains, the cows' diet of alpine plants lends subtle floral and fruity notes to the cheese.

» The canton of Valais features trails with views of the Matterhorn, bottom left; a storied legacy with Saint Bernards, top; products made with local apricots, right; and the Valère basilica and Tourbillon Castle in Sion.



Raclette is typically served sliced, or melted over boiled potatoes and onions. Find it at Au Vieux Valais in old-town Sion or at Cafe du Pont in Zermatt.

Steeped in history

Hiking options in Valais range from challenging treks with stunning views to more leisurely strolls on footpaths that parallel the region's *bisses*. These irrigation channels, dug hundreds of years ago, still deliver water from mountaintop glaciers to far-flung fields, orchards and vineyards. Cycling paths climb mountain

AT A GLANCE

Popular attractions

- The Foundation Pierre Gianadda in Martigny showcases fine art exhibits, plus a vintage automobile display, an outdoor sculpture garden and a Gallo-Roman wing built around the remains of a Celtic temple.
- The Matterhorn Museum—Zermatlantis in Zermatt tells the story of the famed mountain, including summit attempts.

Hidden gems

- The Bains de Saillon, a thermal park and resort between Martigny and Sion, features three steamy pools, a thermal river, a spa, swimming and fitness facilities, and a play zone for children.
- Cyclists, hikers and motorists can explore Valais-region villages and wineries along the Chemin du Vignobles vineyard trail that covers nearly 50 miles between Martigny and Leuk. Travelers can explore on their own, or book package trips that bundle accommodations, tastings and luggage transport.



passes and connect communities along well-traveled routes such as those I skate throughout my visit. The region's extensive rail system makes car-free exploring easy, as well.

The centrally located canton capital, Sion, serves as a convenient hub for exploring Valais. Twin hills topped with ancient stone structures anchor Sion's old-town neighborhood. The Valère basilica features Romanesque and Gothic architecture and a 15th century organ believed to be one of the world's oldest. Nearby, the ruins of the Tourbillon Castle trace back to the 1200s. Art, history and nature museums tucked between the basilica and the castle ruins provide additional context.

A restored Roman amphitheater is among the historical sites in neighboring Martigny. The 5,000-seat attraction, still used for special events, sits a stone's throw from the Musée et Chiens du Saint-Bernard. Commonly known as Barryland—named for an avalanche dog that saved more than 40 human lives in the early 1800s—this museum and training center tells the story of the Saint Bernard dogs that rescued travelers on the nearby Great Saint Bernard Pass, which is at 8,100 feet.

Martigny-based monks started breeding the dogs in the Middle Ages to assist people stranded by avalanches on the alpine route that connects Switzerland and Italy. These days, Barryland's fluffy four-legged ambassadors greet museum visitors, and the Saint Bernards trained at the facility go on to work as companion animals and hiking dogs.

The car-free village of Zermatt sits east of the Saint Bernard Pass. Wander Zermatt's chalet-lined streets for photo opportunities, or head out on hiking trails bordered by alpine



LAKESIDE LUCERNE

» In central Switzerland, an hour southwest of Zürich by train—and roughly 60 miles north of the Valais region's eastern edge—paddle-wheel boats, passenger ferries and sailboats zigzag across the brilliantly blue Lake Lucerne. Sharply angled inlets and slim passages framed by sheer cliffs branch off from stretches of open water, and vivid green fields and forests extend from the lake's shores. Like Valais, Lucerne is a destination showcasing the country's beauty and culture.

From a window seat in my room at the Bürgenstock Hotels & Resort, I'm snapping photographs of it all from 1,600 feet above Lake Lucerne and its namesake city. The property is part of a four-hotel resort with a glass-walled spa, a medical center and wellness retreat, restaurants, tennis and golf facilities, and a variety of hiking paths. My favorite, a forested trail called the Felsenweg, weaves along stone bluffs and offers panoramic Lake Lucerne views.

To reach the Bürgenstock Resort, I boarded a boat near the Lucerne train station, crossed the lake, and hopped on a cable car that chugged up 1,428 feet in elevation.

The journey is one of several unforgettable boat-to-rail adventures that visit the majestic peaks around Lake Lucerne. Another aerial cableway, CabriO, features cars topped by breathtaking open-air decks and summits the 6,200-plus-foot Stanserhorn, southwest of the Bürgenstock Resort. West of the resort, the world's steepest cogwheel railway pulls travelers up a 48%



» Clockwise from left: Chapel Bridge is an iconic Lucerne landmark; the cogwheel railway on Mount Pilatus ascends a 48% grade; the Swiss Museum of Transport features many interactive displays.

grade to reach an observation platform on Mount Pilatus.

Back down in Lucerne, travelers find a culturally rich community with memorable architecture. The city's iconic Chapel Bridge crosses the Reuss River, near the car-free old-town district. Constructed in the 1300s, the covered wooden structure was rebuilt in its original style after a 1993 fire. A local artist had added paintings—many of which depicted the accomplishments of the Old Swiss Confederacy that existed during the late Middle Ages—to the gables under the bridge's roof in the 17th century, and a few paintings survived the blaze. An eight-sided water tower that flanks the bridge actually predates the bridge itself, with work on it beginning in the late 1200s.

Guided walking tours organized by the Lucerne tourism office spotlight the bridge and tower, along with noteworthy buildings, fountains and shop-lined squares. On a two-hour outing, we passed a 17th century

» NEAR & FAR SWITZERLAND

stone clock tower that still stands outside the town hall, and we admired the frescoes on several of Lucerne's historic buildings.

To experience the city's contemporary side, head to the Culture and Congress Centre. The venue, designed by 2008 Pritzker Architecture Prize-winning French architect Jean Nouvel, sits along the waterfront next to the downtown train station. A copper-clad, cantilevered roof covers three convention center buildings, including a main concert hall that has four tiers of balcony seating and a roof terrace with lake and city panoramas.

Vintage vehicles, cable railway cabins, aircraft engines and a space-capsule simulator headline some of the interactive exhibits at the Swiss Museum of Transport. It also has a mounted tourism-themed pinball machine that takes up an entire wall, a planetarium, and a chocolate adventure—with tastings. Swiss chocolate is renowned

for many reasons, including because of a unique lengthy stirring process invented in 1879 by Rodolphe Lindt that gave chocolate a melt-in-your-mouth quality.

South of downtown, on the shores of Lake Lucerne, the former residence of composer Wagner houses a museum that spotlights his life and music. The Richard Wagner Museum and its outdoor cafe open for the season in early April, which is about when many of Lucerne's popular "summer bars" start serving customers. These casual lakeside gathering spots capitalize on mild weather and lingering evening light, drawing customers who eat, drink and listen to live music.

At Ufshötti, a waterfront park between the Wagner Museum and the convention center, families toss Frisbees, and friends chat on benches. It's a great place for travelers to sample local Lucerne life and enjoy a sunset walk by the water. —R.B.

violets, gentians and crocuses each spring. Visitors can get a closer look at the Matterhorn and surrounding mountains on flightseeing tours operated by Air Zermatt. Whether viewed by air or by land, the landscapes here are unforgettable. ✕

Renee Brincks writes from the San Francisco Bay Area.

Travel tip: Pick up a Swiss Travel Pass. The convenient, all-in-one ticket covers unlimited train, bus and boat travel across much of the country.

Earn or redeem Mileage Plan miles when visiting Switzerland on Alaska Global Partners such as Aer Lingus. For more information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go to alaskaair.com.

