

# A is for Alps

More than just Heidi's back yard, Switzerland has something in store for nature lovers and thrill seekers alike

TEXT MILA CREWE-BROWN PHOTOGRAPHS RENE FEUZ, SCHILTHORNBahn AG, SUPPLIED

The revolving restaurant Piz Gloria, atop the Schilthorn in Switzerland, was a key location in the James Bond movie *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*.



It's 2°C outside and I can feel it as we depart Zürich airport building and head into the bitter cold – it makes your bones ache. Gazing out of the train window I look on as the Swiss city wanes amid grey skies. As time passes, I observe the landscape shifting – concrete and tar are replaced by vast open fields and farmland and the mountains feature only in the far distance. No sooner do the same fields begin to rise and fall, carving the landscape up into the numerous peaks we've come to associate this country with, than the ground is covered in a blanket of snow. Noses pressed against the glass, we drop our jaws at every turn of the tracks. Switzerland is truly a place of immense natural beauty.

Mention of Switzerland initially calls to mind the country's most famous associations – chocolate (not just any – Lindt), cheese, the St Bernard dog (complete with a barrel of brandy hanging from its neck) and the Swiss nation's reputation for punctuality – the Mayans might have refined the concept of time but the Swiss undeniably keep it. There's more to the birthplace of Heidi than meets the eye. We're headed south toward the Alps with an action-packed itinerary that includes three of the country's top holiday destinations, Wengen, Mürren and Engelberg.

## WENGEN

Four train trips and three hours later we've long since lost sight of the city and pull up at our first destination. The small, car-free town of Wengen is situated at an altitude of 1 274m above sea level and appears characteristically Swiss. Cradled on a ledge among intimidatingly high mountain ranges its quiet streets are lined with cookie-cutter guesthouses – all of them family run – that look as if they belong to the Gingerbread Man. Our home for the two-night stay is, however, not patronised by anything as quaint but rather local and international holiday makers wanting to stay as close to the slopes as possible. Hotel Silberhorn ([silberhorn.ch](http://silberhorn.ch)), only metres up the street from the train station, could not be better located for access to the region's legendary Kleine Scheidegg mountain pass.

A few thousand metres above Wengen is Jungfraujoch, 'the top of Europe', so called because it claims the highest railway station on the continent at 3 454m. Once (read: if) you catch your breath and acclimatise you can take Switzerland's fastest lift up to the terrace adjoining The Sphinx Observatory to enjoy the ▷

YOU CAN TAKE SWITZERLAND'S FASTEST LIFT UP TO THE TERRACE AJOINING THE SPHINX OBSERVATORY TO ENJOY THE UNPARALLELED VIEWS OF THE SPECTACULAR ALETSCHE GLACIER.

Throughout winter snow weighs heavy on the roofs. In the background the Hotel Regina and Jungfrau summit can be seen. OPPOSITE The Sphinx Observatory's viewing terrace is open to the public and offers magnificent views of the Aletsch Glacier.



unparalleled views of the spectacular Aletsch Glacier from the open air platform – but only for as long as your extremities will allow: on that particular day it was being battered by brutal winds at a temperature of -21°C.

Once back at Kleine Scheidegg your options are to take the train down to Wengen, ski there or sled. We did the latter. Picture a group of South Africans hurtling down the slopes atop rickety wooden sleighs in a blur, shrieking and giddy with laughter (and/or terror), with feet for brakes. Fun doesn't even begin to describe it.

## MÜRREN

Across the Lauterbrunnen Valley from Wengen, the speck-sized village of Mürren is the embodiment of what life inside a snow globe must be like. With a population of around 400, this winter sports Mecca, consisting of just one main road and a network of narrow back alleys, claims a spectacular address: cliffsides, suspended above the valley with the Mönch buttress looming overhead. Accessed by a succession of trains and a cable car, it comes as no surprise that Mürren is car free and the highest village in the district of Bern.

As I shuffle up the snow-covered street with a sheer drop that plunges down beside me, it's living up to its title. Regardless, I stop every few metres, trigger happy, to capture images of shingle-clad cabins and the intimidating yet awe-inspiring mountains that bear down upon this charming village. The walk from one end of town to the other, where the picture perfect Hotel Alpenruh ([alpenruh-muerren.ch](http://alpenruh-muerren.ch)) awaits, takes only 15 minutes.

Its back yard isn't too shabby either. Flanked by cable stations at each end of the road, a duo of cable cars (dangling above nail-bitingly precipitous slopes) takes you up to the Schilthorn. Aside from its impressive altitude, this destination is famed as the film location for James Bond's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. If that doesn't do it for you, the Schilthorn is also home to the world's first revolving restaurant, Piz Gloria, whose 360-degree view spanning the magnificent snow-capped Alps will imprint itself onto your memory for a lifetime – guaranteed.

Come evening, locals make their way down the street, pulling groceries and tiny, fur-swaddled babies behind them atop large wooden sleds. Skiers can ski right through the village streets, down the footpaths and up to their front doors, while après-skiers gather at Hotel Jungfrau's

Gondelbar – a relocated gondola jam-packed by late afternoon.

## ENGELBERG

Only an hour from Zurich in the heart of central Switzerland, this former monastery village is an easy weekend getaway for locals. The train journey from Mürren is unforgettable – with my camera doing overtime I'm snapping pics of Brienz, a pristine turquoise lake that reflects an impressive mountainscape in its glazed surface. From Meiringen we climb sharply up into the hills until Brünig-Hasliberg and descend once again into an almost monochromatic scene of snow-laden fields and quaint shuttered homes.

In addition to its proximity from Zürich, Engelberg's drawing card is the range of options available not only to advanced skiers but families too – most of whom stick to the warmer Brunni slopes. When visiting the latter, a stop at Familienrestaurant OX is a must. A slope-side cafeteria for the design conscious, its steeply pitched facade is clad in timber shingles and teamed with panels of gleaming copper. Inside, planes of blonde, knotted wood and sheer glass frontage err more on the side of alpine chic than cosy cabin.

Similarly, Hotel Waldegg Engelberg ([waldegg-engelberg.ch](http://waldegg-engelberg.ch)), located high up on the Brunni side above town, bears modern comforts in mind with clean lines and a futuristic approach. I'm handed an iPad for personal use during my stay, with which I'm asked to place my dinner order.

A lesser known treasure and one worth having a look at is the Kursaal Engelberg ([conferencecentre.ch](http://conferencecentre.ch)) of all places. Forget utilitarian austerity, this 112-year-old hall is an Art Nouveau relic, recently restored to its former glory.

In spite of its diminutive proportions this country will undoubtedly leave its mark. I'll never forget the snow-heavy scenes of wintry Swiss villages, nor the sound: a vacuum... that is, until my feet touch down with that powdery squeak. □

## GETTING THERE

Edelweiss Air ([edelweissair.ch](http://edelweissair.ch)) will fly you directly to Zürich from Cape Town twice weekly from October to May. If you prefer to fly from Johannesburg, you're in luck as it has partnered with Swiss Air. A host of recent upgrades to the fleet includes, among others, the introduction of an all new Economy Plus class for 15cm more leg room and increased back-rest recline.

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT  
The Piz Gloria is a revolving restaurant atop the Schilthorn that completes 360 degrees in 55 minutes; the front of Engelberg's Familienrestaurant OX is largely glazed and clad in copper; Hotel Waldegg Engelberg's swish rooms; looming beyond the quaint hamlet, where some of the homes date back to 1660, the Eiger peak makes its presence felt; Hotel Alpenruh in Mürren is a charming family-run chalet; the interior of Familienrestaurant OX is imbued with low-key warmth.

ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS: IRIS KUERSCHNER, GETTY IMAGES/GALLO IMAGES

