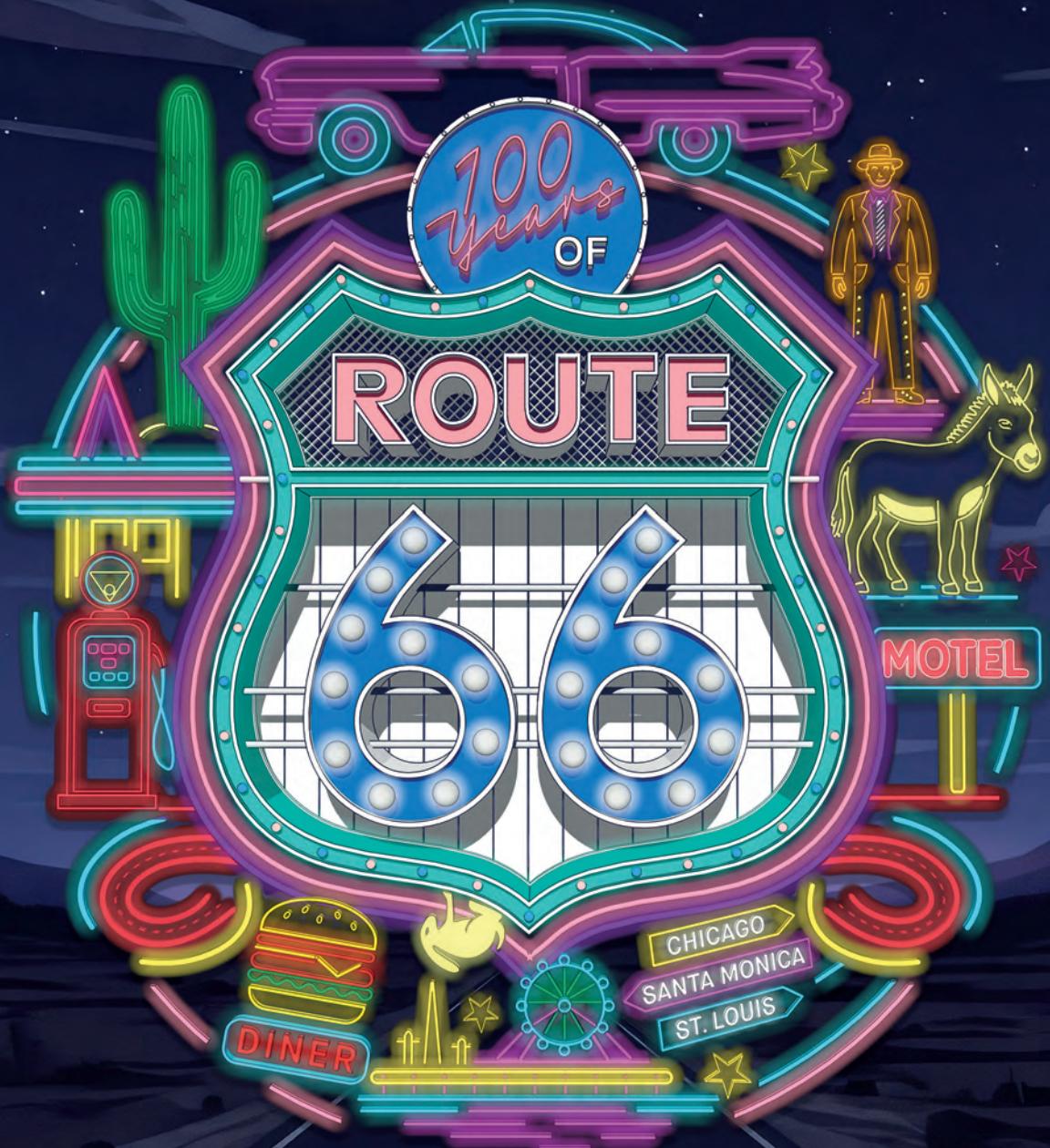


# AAA Explorer

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# Swiss Savvy

**A bucket list ski trip to Switzerland can be more affordable than you'd think**

BY CRAI S. BOWER

**A**s I rode the Crap Sogn Gion gondola above Laax, Switzerland, on a brisk winter day, I found myself awestruck—and not just because I was skiing in the Alps for the first time. Yes, the jagged peaks and exposed cliff bands were mesmerizing, but I was also astonished by the price I'd paid for my lift ticket: 65 Swiss francs, or about \$80. My partner, Patricia, and I would be skiing the Flims-Laax-Falera ("Laax"; pronounced "lox") resort in the storied Swiss Alps for a third to half of what a day pass costs at most U.S. ski areas.

It seemed counterintuitive. After all, between James Bond's sybaritic cinematic scenes, fabled Swiss bank accounts, and premier chocolate and timepieces, we romanticize "unattainable" Switzerland, and for good reason. You'd think you'd have to pay a premium to ski here. Fortunately, you don't. While prices are a little higher at famous resorts such as Zermatt or St. Moritz, at the low-key Laax resort, the price was downright reasonable compared with what you'd spend stateside at, say, Heavenly Mountain Resort in the Lake Tahoe region or even Crystal Mountain Resort, my local Washington state ski area.

I'd long fantasized about skiing in the Alps, drawn by tales of languorous alfresco midday

dining, Olympic champion skiers, and terrain so vast it is measured not in acres but in kilometers. This mystique intensified for me when, three springs ago, I soared in a hot air balloon high above Gstaad's seemingly infinite ski runs. As a ski writer who visits more than a dozen North American winter resorts annually, I hoped to experience all the nuances that distinguish a Swiss Alpine holiday on a venture where we'd also make a cultural visit to Lucerne and take in Basel's Fasnacht (Carnival) festival.

Getting to Laax was easy enough. We took a train from the Zurich airport to the Zurich HB central station, then hopped on another train for an 85-minute ride to Chur. From there, we boarded a bus for a 45-minute ride to Laax and checked into the hip Riders Hotel, where rooms can often be found for less than \$350 a night. We were greeted with West Coast-style IPAs at the lobby bar and a DJ playing surfer tunes.

The California vibes were intentional. In the 1970s, Laax owner Reto Gurtner spent time in the United States, where he grew smitten with surfing and snowboarding. He returned to his family's ski area determined to create a freestyle ski and snowboard destination without compromising key European elements, such as slope-side raclette and legendary après-ski.



SWITZERLAND TOURISM/NICHOLAS ILIANO



## Getting Around

**Designed for international visitors traveling throughout Switzerland, a three-day Swiss Travel Pass that covers trains, buses, and boats costs \$526. The Swiss Half Fare Card offers a 50% discount on limited travel over most routes. A Saver Day Pass provides discounted single-day travel, perfect for commuting from the airport to a ski area and back again.**

### Riding High

The next day, we headed to the adjacent ski base and boarded the Crap Sogn Gion gondola, ascending over a piebald snow-white and green valley dotted with wooden sheds. We then stepped through a book-lined corridor to board the Crap Masegn lift, heading toward the 8,225-foot summit. Clear skies greeted us as we clicked into our skis and launched our first descent, a run that reminded me of a downhill racecourse, a series of curves and rollers that stretched over 20 minutes to our first chairlift. We spent our morning above the tree line, following groomed trails cut as if by a palette knife across the vast white canvas.

At North American ski resorts, one generally eats more for sustenance than pleasure. But in the Alps, I'd argue that one skis in part to access incredible on-piste dining establishments like Stalla Alp Nagens, which is perched high above a snowfield. We set our skis aside and entered the converted cowshed, where raclette cheese, hung like dried edelweiss florets, dripped in concession to the background fire. We placed our order and settled in at a communal picnic table on the terrace. Across from us, a young couple fed each other fondue—a trust exercise, I cynically assumed, given the two-pronged tip of the skewer. Skiers traversed runs beside and below us, yet no one on this sunbaked terrace appeared eager to click back into their skis and join in.

After finishing my *Rösti Stalla*, a potato pancake smothered with cheese, I vowed to never

**Clockwise from left:** A gondola at Laax resort; historic Andermatt; the Rhine Gorge; the author enjoys fondue at *Gasthaus Ochsen*; alfresco slopeside dining is a Swiss skiing tradition.



depart this serene scene. That is, until I spied an unoccupied two-seated *Gartenstuhl*, an Adirondack-style chair. We settled on top of a sheepskin layer and gazed across the valley at jagged Alpine peaks. Perhaps it's my upbringing in the ancient soft hills of New York's Finger Lakes region, but "young" rugged mountains captivate me like a campfire's balletic flames. I could have stared for hours.

We ventured back onto the slopes for a few more runs, then paused on our last one for après at Tegia ("hut") Miez. At this slope-adjacent wine bar, we reviewed the day over a crisp gewürztraminer and soaked in the late-afternoon sun. After sharing yet another "only in the Alps" moment, we completed our mellow final descent to the base and called it a day.

That evening, we trod uphill on the same run to Tegia Larnags. By day, it offers the last on-mountain après-terrace; at night, it transitions into a warmly lit, elegant chalet—no skis required. We ordered *Capuns*—dried meat cubes in house-made spaetzle dough—and a vegetarian chanterelle ragù, accompanied by Chasselas, a Swiss white wine. I'm not sure if it was the 30-minute hike to the terrace or the romantic ambience of shared spaetzle far from civilization's din, but the evening turned out to be a highlight of the trip.

FROM TOP LEFT: ©LAAX/WEISSE ARENA GROUP/NICHOLAS ILANO; ©LAAX/WEISSE ARENA GROUP/PHILIPP RUGLI NICOLE ROTHEN; CRAIS BOWER (2); ©LAAX/WEISSE ARENA GROUP/PHILIPP RUGLI



### Change of Scenery

The next morning, we said goodbye to Laax and returned to Chur to board the Glacier Express for Andermatt. I've always loved trains, and the Glacier Express offers one of Earth's great rail journeys. We coursed through the corset-tight Rhine Gorge, beholding one outrageously gorgeous peak after another, then climbed the 6,669-foot Oberalp Pass, an ascent so formidable that the train engages a rack-and-pinion system, dependent upon a cogwheel, to surmount the summit.

After almost three hours, the Glacier Express snaked down into Andermatt. Set beneath three converging mountain ranges, Andermatt is bisected by the Unteralpreuss, a tributary that forms part of the Reuss River headwaters just outside of town. Though the Andermatt+Sedrun+Disentis ski area's gondola ascends a few steps from the depot, we opted to forgo skiing to explore this historical garrison town.

In the '90s, I'd collected Playmobil toys with my son Taliesin, mainly European village sets filled with gabled-roofed structures, faux wooden furniture, and guild signs. After strolling past facades dating back to the 17th century, I found that simply crossing a footbridge, with the river framed by the Adula Alps, made me pause to appreciate the timeless townscape and recall the pretend villages Taliesin and I had crafted more than three decades earlier.

Patricia and I ambled the remainder of the day among boutiques and galleries before settling beside the fire within the stone walls of *Gasthaus Ochsen* for cheese fondue. We finished the evening at a wine bar and bakery set beneath a gabled building constructed in 1620. The next day, we took the train to Lucerne, where we sampled (too many!) cheeses in the Saturday Weinmarkt and interpreted Old Town's medieval frescoes before pausing at a café terrace beside the river to bask in the late-winter sun.

I'd always considered budget skiing to be an oxymoron, yet, happily, our time in Switzerland made me reconsider that. Even more compelling, skiing culture here was less about vertical feet accumulations and speedy descents—typical North American obsessions—and more about a way of life focused on living and eating well in breathtaking Alpine settings.

**CRAIS BOWER** is a freelance writer based in Seattle.

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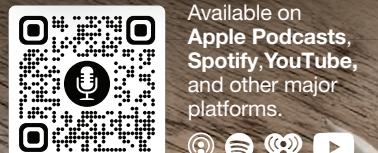
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