



Senior Traveller

FEBRUARY 2019

SWISS PATHS LESS TRODDEN

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Photo: www.swiss-image.ch/Sandra Mumprecht



**Step up
in Corsica**

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**Coastal paradise
wants your support**

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Hunger piques on paths less trodden

VISITORS with a head for heights and a love of cheese, chocolate and roasted chestnuts will be in heaven in Switzerland in autumn, SUE PRESTON reports.

WHEN autumn's sunny days and clear skies beckon, Swiss hikers, most in their 60s, 70s and 80s, are drawn to the Alps in droves. The lean and lithe seniors pack the cable-cars, cog railways and funiculars to the mountain stations, the starting point for arguably the most beautiful walks in the world.

I join them in the Valais region, after taking the superb Swiss rail system from Zurich Airport to Betten Talstation and then the 10-minute cable-car ride to the village of Bettmeralp, 1950 metres above sea level, in the Aletsch Arena region. In winter this village, peppered with traditional shingle-covered alpine huts and chalets, is a ski-in, ski out resort, but for now its green pastures and mountains are a walker's dream as the trees take on their rich palette of red and gold.

While the Valais region is not widely known outside Switzerland as a tourist destination, the Swiss certainly understand its appeal. It boasts 300 days of sunshine a year, similar to the south of France, and over the next few mid-October days, our small group is rewarded with such fine weather that jumpers and jackets remain unpacked.

In fact, the only time they are needed is on a walk the next day to the viewing point for Aletsch Glacier. The longest glacier in the Swiss Alps, its ice and rock masses stretch for a startling 23km and contain 27 billion tonnes of ice. Another cable car ride then delivers us to the Aletsch larch and pine forest where 900-year-old trees provide a haven for ibex, red deer and chamois. Our guide points out the animals in the distance when he hears their distinctive calls.

Over the next two days we use a brilliant network of cable cars that carry hikers and

visitors across the Aletsch Arena. The journeys are as breathtaking as the destinations as you travel up vertical metres, high above footpaths, mountain lakes and villages.

The steepness of the terrain makes it easy to see how hard life must have been for farming communities who had to walk up these mountains before the advent of the cable cars.

We got a taste of this one night as we sampled the traditional dish called The Cholera. It came about in the 1830s, when people stayed at home to prevent the illness spread-

in 1943 and opened to the public in 1949.

A further six-minute train ride brings us into Sion, the capital of Valais, for a wine and gastronomy tour of this old market town. Walking leisurely around with glasses in nifty pouches around our necks was a refreshing way to learn a little of the local cuisine. There's also the chance to sample five wines and a Valais platter of dried meat and cheese while stopping at locations you'd have difficulty finding on your own.

While Sion boasts apple and apricot orchards, it is the vineyards most people come to see. They are the pride of Sion, cascading



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UPLIFTING SIGHT: The church in the beautiful Alpine village of Bettmeralp, popular with hikers in the autumn.



PEAK EXPERIENCE: The writer hiking in the Aletschwald, a magnificent multi-hued forest studded with wildlife. **Photo: Roni Eran**



ing, only eating what they had at hand – generally a few potatoes, perhaps an onion, and some hard cheese. The dish has remained a tradition in the region and each family has their own recipe passed down. It is surprisingly tasty.

After a few days with our heads in the clouds, it was time to go to the other extreme. We leave our village on the cable-car and take the train to St-Leonard, home to the largest subterranean lake in Europe. In the cavern's dim light we board small boats for a surreal experience drifting through the 300 metre-long, 20 metre-wide lake, discovered down impossibly steep hills overlooking the Rhone River. Vines have been growing here for almost 2000 years supported by 3000km of protective dry-stone walls. It is in this region you'll find the highest continuously operating vineyard in Europe at an altitude of 1150 metres. Those who prune and harvest the grapes that hug the slope have the agility of mountain goats.

At Les Celliers de Sion, nestled below the vines, you can sample a range of local wines, learn a little of the history of the vineyards or go for a walk among the vines along old irrigation channels. Here you will find charming little rustic eateries fashioned from workers' huts, just the place to wile away a sunny autumn afternoon.

Sue Preston was a guest of Switzerland Tourism and travelled with assistance from Swiss International Airlines.

IF YOU GO...

- You can fly with Swiss International Airlines to Zurich, flying Singapore Airlines to Singapore and then Swiss to Zurich – swiss.com.
- Buy a Swiss Travel Pass, an all-in-one travel ticket that will enable you to experience Switzerland by train, bus and boat for three, four, eight or 15 days. The pass includes rides on panoramic trains, public transport in more than 90 towns and cities and a 50 per cent reduction on most mountain excursions – myswitzerland.com/rail
- If you prefer to take an organised tour by rail, Travelrite has an 18-night tour in September that takes in the most famous rail lines in the country. Journeys include the Glacier Express and Gornergrat railway, the highest open-air cog wheel railway in Europe. You can couple this with visits to railway museums and overnight stays in glorious locations and add on a pre-tour on the Orient Express from Venice to Paris – 1800-630-343, travelrite.com.au
- More information on Switzerland and the Valais – mvswitzerland.com, visitvalais.ch



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GRAPES OF SLOTH: Lunching in the vines at Sion is a popular pastime for the Swiss on sunny autumn days.



THE CHOLERA: An unsavoury name for a very savoury pie.