

Up and down in the Alps — who needs skis?

By Jerry Soverinsky
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

GRINDELWALD, Switzerland — I had the mountain to myself.

Well, not entirely. Sure, there were thousands of skiers. But they were hundreds of yards away, gliding in groups down well-worn paths, trying expertly to avoid bumping into one another.

I could hear their collective voices in the distance, too, but the cold air dampened much of the detail, and what reached my ears was far quieter than the sound of the gushing stream where I had stopped to eat a sandwich.

There was no one on the hiking trail, despite nearly perfect winter walking conditions. The rich, blue sky was streaked with light clouds, and the temperature, accompanied by a slight breeze, hovered just under 40 degrees.

While finishing my sandwich, I looked off into the distance at the Eiger, the north face of the mountain projecting a commanding presence over the Swiss valley before me. I gathered my things, grabbed the line that was tethering my wooden sled, and continued my walk.

I've never fared well skiing. I'm beyond unskilled and am attracted to the sport mainly on the odd chance that I'll ride a chairlift with someone generous who is willing to share candy.

After 15 years of stubborn persistence, my sweet tooth motive had reaped dividends only once. And I must say, two wintergreen mints from a British man humming Andrew Lloyd Webber songs were hardly worth the wait. As I disembarked from the lift and descended the mountain, still mad that I had eaten anything flavored with wintergreen, and madder still that I was unwittingly singing the overture to "Starlight Express," it is no wonder that I slammed into a tree and fractured my wrist.

You've got two options when you're traveling on a Swiss skiing vacation and you fracture your wrist: If you're Australian, you continue skiing; but if you're American, you find something else to do.

The next day, my wrist bandaged, I stopped at the local tourist office and told the quint-lingual teenage clerk that I was looking for something nonskiing that in no way involved a museum. She offered two words: winter walking (depending on the area of Switzerland, this is also referred to as winterwandern, winter randonnee, or Nordic walking).

Winter walking is the perfect active alternative for nonskiing visitors to Switzerland. Available in all of Switzerland's big ski resort areas, it provides travelers with various physical challenges recreation amid the most dramatic alpine scenery. This is not deep snow trekking (though shoeing is an option in many areas). Rather, each morning, Zamboni-like machines groom carefully marked trails, ensuring unencumbered routes for walkers. Reaching into the highest peaks that stretch far beyond the ski runs, these routes afford travelers dramatic views of snow-drenched mountain vistas.

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I was looking for something nonskiing that in no way involved a museum.*



CHRISTIAN PERRET/LUZERN TOURISM

In the Swiss Alps, where winter walkers coexist with skiers, chairlifts and sleds can get walkers up and down a mountain.

Hikers can take advantage of the same extensive network of chairlifts, gondolas, and cable cars that skiers use (at a considerable discount), eliminating the steep ascents that might otherwise deter a not-so-fit traveler.

Descents are just as easily managed, though I recommend another downhill option: sledding. With cheap rentals (\$8 per day on average) available in most tourist villages, gliding down to your starting point can be an invigorating reward for your uphill efforts.

I began my hike in Grindelwald, a village in Switzerland's Jungfrau region. Though better known for skiing, with more than 120 miles of runs, the area offers extensive winter walking options. More than 50 miles of groomed trails traverse the most remote areas, including my destination, the Faulhorn. I love this area, and this hike in particular. Ever since my accident a few years ago, I return every winter or two for a week of hiking. I also spend considerable time in central Switzerland based out of Luzern, from where several rewarding winter hikes are accessible, as well as a variety of cultural and night life options.

While chairlifts could take me up nearly 1,200 of my climb's 1,700 meters of altitude gain, I decided to tackle the entire hike independently. With unrealistically beautiful alpine scenery providing constant motivation, I reached the top in the early afternoon. The Faulhorn's mountain restaurant was closed, but I had brought food. I devoured a loaf of bread and two bricks of cheese and gazed out at the hundreds of mountain peaks visible from my



GRINDELWALD TOURISM

The trails for Switzerland's winter walkers — a pursuit also called winterwandern, winter randonnee, and Nordic walking — are groomed with machines and carefully marked.

GLIDE ON
Take a Swiss sledding tour at explorenewengland.com/ski.

360-degree vantage point.

A good friend was spending the week in Las Vegas with his wife, I remembered. They were excited, in particular, to sample their hotel's acclaimed buffet. I thought of them for just a moment as I wiped cheese bits from my snow pants. And then the moment was gone, as I spotted two ibex on a neighboring mountain.

After an hour, I was getting cold. I hopped on my sled and began the 5-mile descent to Grindelwald. The wind whipping at my face, I stopped halfway down the run at another mountain hut (this one open), where I enjoyed two double espressos before continuing my ride.

Including stops, my hike and sled outing lasted nine hours. Though I arrived back at my Grindelwald hotel exhausted, I had

ample energy to climb to the hotel's mezzanine level patio, where I drank European-strength beer while staring out yet again at the Eiger's north face. The sun had set, and Grindelwald was awash in holiday lights. Skiers were returning from the slopes. I looked at my watch, my eyes a bit blurry, and noticed that it was nearly 6 p.m. I headed to my room, changed into dry clothes, then returned to the train station, where I boarded a private bus equipped with what looked like barbed wire on its tires.

I paid \$50 and my one-way bus transfer up the mountainside dropped me at a rustic mountain cabin, where I was joined by hundreds of travelers. We feasted on fondue and other Swiss specialties, washing the meal down with bottomless glasses of wine. After several hours, we headed outside and rummaged for what we hoped were our own sleds before cruising down a moonlit sled trail.

Twenty minutes into the ride,

most of us detoured to a makeshift bar staffed by a few local men, where we downed shots of gluckwein and Schnapps. We stumbled back onto our sleds, and the remaining mile or two back to the village was filled with shrieks of laughter, as a mélange of nationalities converged down a slick, icy



GRINDELWALD TOURISM

Trekking options

Bike sledding

Another unique Swiss sledding option available in Grindelwald and its neighboring villages are "velogemels," or bike sleds (above). Prices for the upright riders average about \$8 per day. Going downhill on a velogemel can be rough (no gel seats on these babies) and the seeming lack of control — no brakes, you drag your feet to stop and turn — makes for an exhilarating way to experience the slopes.

Winter walking

Luzern is a city in central Switzerland with access to several easy to moderate hikes (luzern.org). Grindelwald is in Switzerland's Jungfrau region and is conveniently located near several dozen hikes of varying degrees of difficulty (grindelwald.com).

track.

Just before 11 p.m., I arrived back at my hotel. I showered and applied Bengay to my board-stiff thighs and calves. I limped into bed and gazed out my window into the night. The air was still, and the mountain quiet.

I was out there, I said to myself, the pride of physical accomplishment washing over me. I closed my eyes, cursed aloud as I realized that I was humming "I am the Starlight," and fell fast asleep.

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