



The tectonic plates that hold our continents, float on a sea of molten earth. About one hundred million years ago, the African plate began moving north and banged into the European plate. The collision took place along a three-hundred-mile ridge and billions of tons of rock were rammed together. The landscape was warped, folded and pushed skyward, and the mountains of the Swiss Alps were born. The most mountainous region in Switzerland is called the Valais, which is the Latin word for valley. It's L-shaped and runs for



eighty miles between mountain chains that have some of the highest peaks in Europe. World famous mountains like the Matterhorn are part of the Valais. Since the middle of the 1850s,

the blue sky, the mountains, the snow on the mountains and Swiss hospitality have attracted tourists to this area. Today it is a world epicenter for winter sports.

THE RED BULL XTREME

Each year, twenty-four of the world's best snowboarders are invited to take on the North Face of the Bec des Rosses, a mountain that rises over ten thousand feet into the sky. The event is known as the Red Bull Xtreme, and it starts with the participants climbing to the top of the mountain with their boards on their backs.

Snowboarding was invented in the United States, and our nation is well represented in the competition. Each rider picks his or her own path of descent and one after another they snowboard down the mountain, on slopes that angle down at forty-five to fifty-five degrees, with five-hundred-yard vertical drops.

The snowboarders are judged on the difficulty, originality and steepness of the path they have chosen, how they have navigated through the cliffs, their techniques and the control of the board. Any fall or loss of control incurs a penalty.

Five experienced snowboarders judge the event by viewing the action through binoculars. There's also a group



of twenty spectators, who have been chosen to watch the event alongside the professional judges and make their own award. The prize money at the Red Bull Xtreme ranges from \$4,000 to \$10,000.

VERBIER AND THE RESTAURANT ROSALP

During the event, the nearby town of Verbier holds a street fair. Verbier is located in the French speaking part of the Swiss Alps, at about five thousand feet above sea level. The village faces the southwest, so it gets lots of sun, and the slopes face the north, which helps to preserve the snow. Verbier is in the heart of a four-valley ski area with over 250 miles of slopes and a hundred chair lifts. The highest summit in the area, Mont Fort, is almost eleven thousand feet above sea level and offers a panoramic view of the Alps.

The first skiers arrived in Verbier during the winter of 1925. By 1944, the population had exploded with twenty-seven people in residence. It was also the year that Roger Pierroz, a baker from a nearby town took his wife Anita to Verbier for a holiday. She loved the place, and persuaded her husband to open a chalet and tearoom which she could manage. By 1961, the tearoom had been transformed into a hotel and a restaurant called the Rosalp. Today their son Roland is the owner and chef, and is considered to be one of the finest chefs in Europe. He is a master of food presentation and always starts the preparation of a dish by drawing it the way that he wants it to look when it arrives at the table of his guests.



THE RACE OF THE GLACIER PATROL

Every other year one thousand people show up to race from Zermatt to Verbier. They race across the glaciers that separate the two villages in a competition that began as part of a training program for Swiss mountain troops. Just before the start of the Second World War, two Swiss officers noticed that the Italian army had organized patrol races to upgrade the skill of their troops. The Swiss decided to do the same. The first race took place in 1943 and is still under the control of the Swiss military. These days the race is also open to an international



WHERE TO EAT

RESTAURANT DU CHÂTEAU DE BRIGNON

CH-1994 BRIGNON-NENDAZ
TEL: +41 (0) 27 288 21 09

ROSALP

HOTEL ROSALP
1936 VERBIER
TEL: +41 (0) 27 771 63 23

group of non-military personnel. Each team consists of three participants, who are roped together for much of the race. The total distance is fifty miles and the record time was set in 2000 by three members of the Swiss Border Patrol. Their time was seven hours, three minutes and forty-four seconds.

CRANS-MONTANA

Across the valley from Verbier is the town of Crans-Montana. When I first came to the area during the late 60's, there were two towns: Crans to the west and Montana to the east. During the 70's they merged to become a single town. Some people say it was just a marriage of convenience, but I think it was true love. They both loved shopping, they both loved eating and they both loved winter sports.

Today Crans-Montana has over one hundred miles of downhill slopes that are ideal for beginners and intermediate skiers. At an elevation of ten thousand feet, there is a three-mile long glacier that's been set up for skiing. It's dead flat and



called the *Plaine Morte*, which is French for, dead flat. There's also an excellent area for cross-country skiing, with thirty-one miles of loops.

And if stand up skiing is not your thing, you can sit down. The sport of snow-biking was originally developed in 1892 by an American who called the equipment an Ice Velocipede. The early models were bicycles fitted with skis instead of wheels. Snow biking became a sport during the 1940s, when two engineers combined their inventions to create a Skibob. George Gfaller, a German, invented a single-track steerable sledge, and Engelbert Brenter, an Austrian, patented the "Sit Ski".

CURLING

Right in the center of Montana is a curling rink. The sport goes back at least to the 1500s, when the Dutch and Germans played a similar game. On the surface it appears rather simple. Before the game begins, a pebbler sprinkles water on the ice, which freezes and produces a fine layer of slippery ice pebbles. A round, flat, polished granite stone that weighs forty-two to forty-four pounds, with a handle coming out of the top is slid down an alley of ice that's fourteen feet wide and 138 feet long. The target is a circle at the end of the alley. Teammates use brooms to sweep the ice in front of the stone, which helps control the distance that the stone will travel. The more you sweep, the farther the stone goes. Each player has four stones and the objective is to get your stone as close to the center of the circle as possible. Your opponent has the same objective, and tries to knock your stone away. There are four players on each team, and two teams. The game will usually take a little over two hours.



DOG SLEDDING

The native people of the Arctic have been using working dogs for over four thousand years and life at the top of the earth, especially in Alaska, northern Canada and Siberia still depends on the daily use of working dogs. The breeds originally domesticated for this purpose, the Alaskan

THINGS TO DO

PIERRE-ANTOINE HERITIER

ELEVAGE CRAZY SPEED KENNEL
CASE POSTALE 136
CH 1965 SAVIÈSE
TEL/FAX: +41 (0) 27 395 34 22

PATROUILLE DES GLACIERS (PDG)

THE RACE OF THE GLACIER PATROL
[HTTP://WWW.PDG.CH/](http://www.pdg.ch/)

RED BULL X'TREME

FREERIDE ASSOCIATION
PO Box 3
CH-1936 VERBIER
TEL: +41 (0) 27 771 50 83
FAX: +41 (0) 27 771 50 84
E-MAIL: INFO@XTREMEVERBIER.COM
WWW.XTREMEVERBIER.COM

HOW TO GO

THE GLACIER EXPRESS

One of the great trains of Europe is the Glacier Express. It got started in 1930 and runs for over 150 miles through some of Switzerland's most beautiful scenery.

Under the theory that there can never be too much window surface, the Glacier Express introduced the panoramic window that extends into the roof. They also have a guidebook that tells you what you're looking at.



A Swiss Pass entitles you to unrestricted travel by rail, bus and boat on the Swiss Travel System network for four, eight, fifteen or twenty-one days or a full month. Also included are trams and buses in thirty-six towns and cities as well as discount fares on many mountain railways and cable cars.

SWISS PASS

TEL: (877) 456-RAIL

WWW.RAILEUROPE.COM

THE POSTBUS (POSTAUTO)

This area is one of the most beautiful parts of Europe and I think the best way to see it is on one of the post buses that run throughout the country. Their organized routes take you through the most beautiful parts of the country. You don't have to worry about which roads to take, or keeping to a tight schedule. Just relax and enjoy the scenery. Information about the Postbus system is available in English at USA.MYSWITZERLAND.COM and in French, Italian and German at WWW.POST.CH.



Malamute, and the Siberian Husky, are still relied on by dog sled drivers throughout the world.

Pierre Antoine Heritier lives in Crans-Montana, and has been teaching people how to dogsled since 1992. Pierre told me that the dogs can run for about five hours and the lead dogs are usually females because they are smarter and better focused.

Dog sled racing as a sport was invented in North America. During the Alaskan gold rush of the 1800s, miners used dogs to move their supplies. Racing the dogs became a major pastime. The first all-Alaskan dog sled sweepstakes race took place in 1908. Dog sled racing was also a demonstration event in both the 1932 and 1952 Winter Olympics. Today it has a sizable and enthusiastic following and a full calendar of international events.

CHATEAU DE BRIGNON

At the crest of one of the nearby hills is the Chateau de Brignon. It was built in 1260 by the Count of Savoy so that he could set up a little kingdom for one of his pals. These days it's a charming secluded restaurant, decorated in the style of the Victorian period—a favorite place for an elegant dinner after a day of skiing. It's owned by Sandra Schnyder, who is Swiss, and responsible for the wines, and Abdallah Hamadouch, her husband, who is from Morocco and does the cooking. The dinner he made for me started with bass, stuffed with ratatouille, and garnished with fried leeks, followed by lamb surrounded by mustard-coated potatoes, roasted garlic and morel mushrooms.



My dessert was an improvisation of a chocolate castle filled with mousse and it was designed by Aude, the owners' three-year-old daughter, who I'm going to introduce to my three year old grandson. She loves to cook, and he loves to eat. This could be the start of something grand.

THE EXCELSIOR MILAHOTEL

While I was in the Valais, I stayed at the Excelsior MilaHotel. It was built in 1946 and recently restored and updated to meet the needs of international guests. The central lobby is where everybody hangs out in front of a wood-burning fireplace. There's also an afternoon tea during which the chef makes crepes. The second floor has a sauna room and a Jacuzzi room—you get the key from the front desk and it becomes your private space.

The restaurant has a Swiss French menu. On the day I arrived, the chef prepared a round of salmon steak on a bed of vegetables, with a drizzle of caviar sauce on top. The garnish was purple potato chips and toasted salmon skin.

The owner of the hotel is of Lebanese descent, which shows

WHERE TO STAY



EXCELSIOR MILA HOTEL

TEL: +41 (0) 27 486 21 00

WWW.EXCELSIOR-MILAHOTELS.CH

up on the menu in a series of excellent Lebanese dishes—hummus, baba ganoush, tabouli, spinach and meat pies, spicy Moroccan sausages and lamb patties.

The hotel rooms have a feature that connects each room to the next with a set of double doors—when you are traveling with friends or children or children who are your friends, you can connect everyone in a long train, or not, as you see fit.

WINES OF THE VALAIS

The Valais is famous for its hospitality and winter sports, but it's also well known for its vineyards. The Valais produces more wine than any other area in Switzerland, and the quality is excellent. The medieval castle town of Saillon has been in the



wine business for over one thousand years. They produce Syrah, Petite Arvine, Dôle and one of the finest examples of a blend called Fendant. It's considered to be an elegant wine; typical of

Swiss wines in general, with a smoky bouquet, a fruity taste and a light spritz that gives it a refreshing character.

THE LEGEND OF FARINET

The Valais is also the land of the legend of Farinet. Farinet was born in northern Italy in 1845, and soon realized that he was a gifted artist, able to work in extraordinary detail. His favorite subject was the Swiss twenty centime coin, and he reproduced it as often as possible. He would take his work down to the local casino and exchange it for other works of art, quite similar, perhaps less artistic, but definitely more valuable. All right, he was a counterfeiter. But he distributed much of his work among the poor, which made him a local Robin Hood. Eventually the authorities caught him, executed him and buried him in the Valais, but he lives on as a local folk hero.

In 1980, in honor of the one-hundredth anniversary of Farinet's death, the local government created the world's smallest vineyard, and gave it to the actor who played Farinet in a major movie. The vineyard only has three vines, and it takes up about three square yards of land, but it has become more famous than Farinet. Since the year 2000, it has been owned by the Dalai Lama, and each year world-famous personalities come here to harvest the grapes on these three vines. Their names have been marked in the nearby vineyards, and they include James Bond, Peter Ustinov, Hans Erni, Crazy Horse and Gina Lollobrigida. The wines made from these vines are added to a thousand bottles of the best wines of the Valais, and sold at a charity auction. The vineyard is covered with stones from the most important historic sites in the world: the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, the Grand Canyon—and in their quest for worldwide representation, no stone has been left unturned.



THE ALETSCHE GLACIER

The Valais is also home to the Aletsch Glacier area, which has been included on the UNESCO World Natural Heritage List. You can enjoy the natural environment by hiking alongside the glacier, or taking a guided tour across the top. It's over one thousand feet thick, and has the longest ice flow in Europe. They tell me that when a snowflake falls at the top of the glacier, it must wait four hundred years to get to the front edge.

TO LEARN MORE

SWITZERLAND TOURISM

TOLLFREE TEL: (877) 794-8037

WWW.MYSWITZERLAND.COM

SWISS INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES LTD.

TOLLFREE TEL: (877) 359-7947

WWW.SWISS.COM

