

Double-dipping in

Andermatt and Engelberg are a perfect powder-laden combo for a Swiss Alps adventure. BY LESLIE WOIT

Once upon a time there was a little village in a lost valley called Userntal, nuzzled at the crossroads of three snow-blanketed Alpine passes—the Furka, Gotthard and Oberalp. For much of the 20th century and parts of the 21st, its frosty contours had been passed by unexplored by countless tourists aboard the Glacier Express train, bound for the more glamorous St. Moritz or legendary Zermatt. Too bad. With an elevation that exceeds its population (1,300), the cozy Swiss hamlet of Andermatt is virtually made of cheese.

In a tiny bar on the main street, I meet a local boy with Canadian connections. Rolfi Regli exchanges the familiar greeting of “Gruenzi!” with the patrons and orders an après-ski beer for himself and cream-topped schlumi pflumi for me. An experienced mountain guide who’s spent more than a decade in Canada heli-guiding with CMH, Rolfi has recently moved back to Andermatt, the place of his birth—a world away from the buzz of helicopters and the stress of captains-of-industry clients. He’s been lured back by small-town life—and the deserted off-piste in Andermatt.

“Hang on, dinner must be ready,” Rolfi says. I turn to see his mother standing smiling in the middle of the tranquil snow-packed street. Yes, Andermatt is so bijou, so traditional, it’s easier to tap on the window than to call on the cell.

Not for long. Enter Samih Sawiris, billionaire Egyptian property developer who is about to change Rolfi’s village in a way that

hasn’t occurred since the railway first rolled over the pass. Breaking ground this summer at the town’s edge, his property-development master plan entails seven “five- and six-star” luxury hotels comprising 800 guestrooms, plus 40 private villas, 400 apartment units, a sports centre, an 18-hole golf course, a sandy beach to be heated in winter and—it’s safe to assume—a complete transformation of the fabric of Andermatt.

In 2005, the Coptic Christian from one of

Egypt’s richest families charmed the locals at a town hall meeting, making big promises—including offering to share the golf course with the farmers’ beloved cows. Long a garrison town, the Swiss Army recently pulled out most of its 1,400 soldiers, denting the local economy and leaving villagers facing an uncertain future. Predictably, there are hopes and fears about the new development, though many of the reports suggest townspeople support the project, appreciating the potential for jobs.

On our first morning, we squash into the gondola sliding slowly up Gemsstock, Andermatt’s main area. A modest 25 lifts serve 130 km of groomers—and whole swaths of north-facing off-piste are accessible directly off the lifts. A horde of Swedish



Andermatt, Photo: CHRISTOF SONDEREGGER

SWITZERLAND



Engelberg, Skier: Sven Brunso. Photo: SCOTT DW SMITH



FACTS & STATS

ENGELBERG: Engelberg-Titlis has new offerings this season: a new cable lift on Brunnli, the Speed Slope and Wave Run on Jochpass, and the world's longest downhill descent by torchlight. Ski between 1,000 and 3,000 metres on 82 km of runs and 24 lifts. We stayed at the Hotel Schweizerhof, www.schweizerhof-engelberg.ch. Engelberg-Titlis Tourism: www.engelberg.ch

ANDERMATT: Andermatt offers 25 lifts and 130 km of pistes. Atop the nearly 3,000-metre-high Gemsstock, a spectacular panorama of more than 600 summits sprawls before you. Check out the Hotel Sonne at www.hotelsonneanderematt.ch. Andermatt Tourism: www.anderematt.ch

GETTING THERE: Swiss (the airline) flies daily to Zurich from Montreal and has Star Alliance codeshare flights across Canada: www.swiss.com. Tour operators in Canada specializing in Europe: www.skican.com and www.thevacationstation.com

MORE INFO: www.myswitzerland.com

helmet heads steam up the windows, yet as soon as we reach the top—poof!—the entire stockpile of fat-ski-clutching Scandinavians disperses, disappearing mysteriously the moment we emerge at the powder's edge. Poof, poof, the powder is in our hair and the sun is in our eyes. With the Eiger in the distance and no one in sight, we ski from the top of Gemsstock down the lovely,

lonely length of the Felsental.

You could go weeks, possibly months, in the Alps without happening upon such flawless untracked happiness. Left and right under the Gemsstock gondola, these hero bowls and meadows typically remain untracked for hours and sometimes days; almost anywhere else in Europe, it would be shredded in a Whistler-weekend moment.

A few scenic mountain passes and three-and-a-half hours on civilized Swiss Rail later, we snaked high up to the Belle Epoque resort town of Engelberg—or Angel Mountain—famous for its still-operating Benedictine monastery. Even more celebrated among skiers, who all want a good view on the way up, is its revolving cable car up to Klein Titlis and one of the most beloved off-piste descents in Switzerland.

Unlike the bulk of little-known Andermatt, Engelberg's Laub run is an Alpine classic, its wide, north-facing consistent fall line pitches straight down for more than 1,000 vertical metres, an in-your-face avalanche hazard unless conditions are right. Our day there was better than right.

Freshly opened after a big snowfall, we headed up to Trubsee with our local guide Sammi. Along a high traverse, we reach the top and fan out over the steep, even slope. Turn after turn after turn with not a tree in sight, and only a church steeple visible far, far below, you feel close to the angel that is the mountain's namesake—and perhaps even closer to Engelberg's patron saint, a wandering monk who had a vision, stopped dead in his tracks and never left the valley again. With skiing like this, why would he? ❄️

BRITS ON TOUR

You won't make it far up a chair-ride with a Brit before he'll happily remind you just which nation invented skiing. Yes, as with so many sports (cricket or tennis, anyone?), the Brits were perfect gentlemen about discovering skiing, then letting everyone else win at it.

Since 1903, Ski Club of Great Britain members have slid up and down pretty much every mountain in the Alps and beyond. Today more than 33,000 members—including Canadians—benefit from discounts on hotels, packages, rentals and ski schools. In 37 resorts worldwide, a Ski Club Rep is stationed for the season to lead members around the slopes and always know where to find a vin chaud or a good pint. (Unlike North American resorts, mountain-run "Free Guided Tours" have yet to catch on in Europe, and massive linked areas can make navigation a full-time job.)

Want to ski Europe with English-speakers? Land-only packages are available so Canadians can meet the group at each resort. Every Ski Freshtracks holiday is designed to suit a specific ski standard either on-piste or off-piste. Depending on the type of holiday you choose, you'll be accompanied by Ski Club leaders, instructors or mountain guides. Trips are adventurous and it's never dull trying to figure out what's being said. www.skiclub.co.uk and www.skifreshtracks.co.uk