

Weekend Travel

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PICTURES: GLACIER EXPRESS/STEFAN SCHLUMPF

Slow travel in Switzerland

The Glacier Express takes seven and a half hours to journey from St Moritz to Zermatt, and it's the perfect opportunity to watch the world go by...

Words by
Yvonne Gordon

As the train curves around the tracks, the mountains grow higher and closer. The valley narrows, with steep limestone rocks on both sides, clusters of pine trees and a rushing river below, which the train runs alongside.

We've just left the historic town of Chur and are entering the Rhine Gorge. I've only been on the train for 10 minutes, but am already glued to the window.

Some people have trains like the Orient Express on their wish list, but my dream was always to take the Glacier Express across Switzerland. The route runs from the alpine resort of St Moritz in the southeast to the ski resort Zermatt at the foot of the Matterhorn in the southwest. All along the way, it passes Alpine villages, green pastures, rivers and lakes — as well as snow-filled mountain passes and glaciers for which the train is named.

Taking seven-and-a-half hours to travel 291km, the word 'express' is not to be taken literally — this is the world's slowest express train — but it's the perfect day of slow travel, soaking up the views as the train cuts through the Alps, winds its way along the gorge of the River Rhine and ascends over the snowy mountain pass at Oberalp.

The Glacier Express has been running since 1930, and the route takes in 291 bridges and 91 tunnels. After two years of postponing my trip (for pandemic reasons), I am

thrilled to fly into Zürich Airport, take a train to the central station and then a train to Chur for an overnight before joining the Glacier Express the following morning.

This is my first leg of a week travelling across Switzerland by rail, so no need for car hire or tour buses. I am going to see everything in comfort.

In the Rhine Gorge, light green-coloured water rushes along a rough riverbed of grey stones and rocks, white caps on the water hinting at the rapids beneath. At one stage, I can see people rafting in the distance.

Inside the train, all is calm; the Glacier Express is smooth and surprisingly quiet. My small wooden table is set with a napkin, cutlery and proper glasses — a change from the usual flask and squashed sandwich I have on train journeys. My ticket in Excellence Class includes a seven-course dining experience. The menu lists smoked trout, pea mint soup and Swiss beef tenderloin. There's a row of wine glasses and the waiter is already filling a champagne glass. I wonder if anyone ever manages the full cheese plate and chocolate cake.

Each table in my carriage has just two seats, so every seat has a window (with windows above, too), plus an iPad with headphones and an app giving text and audio information about what we are passing. The River Rhine flows from here 1,200km through six countries to the North Sea in the Netherlands. Cars are banned from the gorge area, so there are lots of rare animals and plants — the ibex, golden eagle and wolf, according to the app.

Travel-sized



The Bernina Express

The Alps' highest railway runs from Chur via St Moritz to the Italian town of Tirano, taking in the Lago di Poschiavo and famous Landwasser Viaduct. berninaexpress.ch



GoldenPass

This line from Montreux to Lucerne includes three trains, three mountain passes and eight lakes. Some of the trains are retro-style Belle-Époque reconstructions. goldenpassline.ch



Grand Train Tour

The Grand Train Tour takes eight days and seven nights, covering all the panoramic trains and top sights. You can book a full tour package. myswitzerland.com/grandtraintour



Along the way, we stop at tiny stations — at Valendas-Sagogn, the stations are in pretty wooden chalets with red shutters on the windows; another station has window boxes of daffodils. As we emerge from the gorge, the valley widens out into green pastures, some with grazing cows, and houses high on green slopes. There is snow on the mountain tops in the distance.

Things start to get exciting as the train ascends and the snow on the peaks gets lower and lower until it covers full mountainsides. We enter a tunnel, and when we emerge on the other side, the whole landscape is suddenly all white with snow.

A Glacier Express train going in the other direction passes us. There's nothing else here, apart from an empty road — just these two red trains crossing each other in this vast, white, snowy valley. It feels like something from a Bond movie.

The route's highest point, Oberalp Pass, is 2033m above sea level, and we stop here for fresh mountain air and photos (it's a good idea to wear layers for the different temperatures inside and outside the train). On this part of the route, the tracks often have to be cleared of snow.

When we get moving again, I take a stroll along the train and pass an American couple, Katie and Justin, who are about to tuck into some chocolate cake.

They're based in Paris and tell me they were in Switzerland once before and have come back this time just to do the train.

"We are loving the views. We are also quite lazy, so we can see it all without hiking it," laughs Katie.

I alight from the train at Brig and take another train in the direction of Geneva, to the resorts of Montreux and Lausanne on Lac Léman (often called Lake Geneva).

This is a different world from snowy mountains. Here, rows of grand 19th-century hotels line the riviera, with terraces and balconies looking across the lake to Évian-les-Bains in France. Chic guests with tiny dogs and oversized sunglasses sip champagne on the terrace and stroll the promenade at Montreux, home of the legendary jazz festival.

From Montreux, I take the GoldenPass train to Château-d'Oex, leaving the lake for a world of lush green mountain pastures, lined with traditional wooden chalets. I spend the days hiking and e-biking, along riverside paths and through wildflower meadows, taking trains and day trips here and there to Rougemont and to Gstaad.

At night, local restaurants in traditional wooden buildings serve rosti (a potato dish), raclette (cheese), ragout and, of course, Swiss wine.

It's a relaxing week. Trains are frequent, punctual, never packed, and you don't have to book a seat (except on the Glacier Express), which makes it all very easy when you have a rail pass. Everything connects, and trains run all the way to the airports, too.

On my last day, I take the train back around the lake to Geneva Airport, and I am glued to the windows, right to the end.



From far left: The Glacier Express in Andermatt, Switzerland; animals along the way; and the train passing the breathtaking Matterhorn

Do it

A Swiss Travel Pass with train, bus and boat travel costs €228/€362 (second/first class) for three days, and up to €421/€662 (second/first class) for 15 days. [rail.myswitzerland.com](https://myswitzerland.com)

Glacier Express fares range from €92 to €289, depending on journey length and class — add €458 for Excellence Class. glacierexpress.ch

Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to Geneva and Zurich. Yvonne was a guest of the airline and Switzerland Tourism. aerlingus.com; myswitzerland.com

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