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TRAVEL

The Alps just sort of washed over me. They felt different. They were different. The culture, the history, the traditions, the food, the wine, how alpine sport is woven into the very fabric of Swiss life — all of it felt special. **Daniel Austin**



Skiing at Caischavedra in Andermatt-Sedrun-Disentis in the Swiss Alps includes breathtaking views and adventurous runs. **HAWSWORTH COMMUNICATIONS**

DANIEL AUSTIN

The Swiss Alps just hit differently. You wouldn't want it any other way, right?

As someone who has spent their entire life skiing in the Canadian Rockies and the Western U.S. and adores the resorts on this side of the Atlantic, I wanted my first ski trip to Switzerland to feel unique to what I can get close to home.

Fortunately, there was never any reason to worry.

On a weeklong trip to Andermatt-Sedrun-Disentis and Crans-Montana last month, the Alps just sort of washed over me. They felt different. The culture, the history, the traditions, the food, the wine, how alpine sport is woven into the very fabric of Swiss life — all of it felt special.

And that's important because authentic Swiss culture is part of why any skier or rider would pack their bags and travel a considerable distance to explore the Alps when, technically speaking, they could do something that is at least surface-level similar and be back home in time for dinner for considerably less money.

Fortunately, nothing about sitting in the sun on the patio of a Michelin-star restaurant just steps from the top of the gondola at Andermatt-Sedrun-Disentis feels like home. It doesn't feel like a normal day in the mountains when you're sipping an Aperol Spritz while hundreds of Europeans are dancing on tables to an ABBA remix in the middle of the afternoon at Crans-Montana. And the long, wide, steep runs that traverse the Swiss Alps? There's nothing ordinary about them.

To go into detail, it's probably best to break my trip into a couple of different sections. Andermatt and Crans-Montana are two very different places, despite being remarkably easy to connect the two via Switzerland's world-class train system.

Crans-Montana sits on an alpine plateau high above the Rhone Valley. The resort that rises from the town up to a glacial plain has a history dating back to the 1800s. Its après scene redefines what this Canadian writer understood a post-ski day party to be. The food is magnificent and the French-Swiss town has all the charm you'd expect from an idyllic mountain community that has long attracted skiers and riders from all over the world.

Andermatt, meanwhile, is a destination that was little-known outside of Switzerland 20 years ago. The past couple of decades have seen a massive amount of

NOTHING REMOTELY SIMILAR ABOUT SWISS SKIING

Epic Pass makes a holiday in the Alps an affordable destination for a unique mountain experience



Crans-Montana ski resort above the Rhone Valley in Switzerland has a history dating to the 1800s. **PAT GULLER**

development spearheaded by Egyptian-Montenegrin financier Samih Sawiris. While the village centre maintains its Swiss-German charm and local businesses are thriving, that investment has also brought new hotels, restaurants, a golf course and real estate opportunities.

There's been a huge amount invested in ski infrastructure, as well, and the link between the various sections of Andermatt-Sedrun-Disentis makes it one of Europe's most vast and sprawling ski areas.

So what's the connection between Andermatt and Crans-Montana? Well, it is easy to travel between the two by train and a Swiss Travel Pass makes any trip to the Alps easier and more relaxing. But it's largely about Vail Resorts, the American company that owns Whistler-Blackcomb here in Canada.

Vail Resorts acquired 55 per cent ownership in Andermatt-Sedrun-Disentis in 2022 and is in the process of acquiring an 84 per cent stake in Crans-Montana.

While corporate acquisitions don't always affect consumers, those moves are making the Swiss Alps feel a lot more accessible for North American skiers. How? Well, it all comes back to the Epic Pass, which already includes Kicking Horse, Fernie, Kimberley, Nakiska and Whistler closer to home. Anyone with an Epic Pass already has access to the slopes at Andermatt-Sedrun-Disentis and as of next year, the pass will include Crans-Montana, as well.

Switzerland can be expensive, but cutting out the price of lift tickets with an Epic Pass makes it a lot more affordable, especially when the pass includes the ski

and snowboard areas owned by Resorts of the Canadian Rockies as partner resorts and gets you lift access to Whistler-Blackcomb and more than 30 destinations in the U.S. Now, Switzerland's an option, too.

Here's what to know about the two destinations:

ANDERMATT-SEDRUN-DISENTIS
Getting there: There's easy access from the Zurich airport. I took a train into Central Zurich and then quickly transferred to another train that took me right to Andermatt. From there, everything is within walking distance, both the historic village centre and the newer neighbourhood featuring chic restaurants, hotels and vacation apartments.
Can't miss run for experts: For big, steep off-piste skiing and riding, head to Gemstock. It's separate from the rest of the

sprawling resort and there are no beginner runs, but what you do get is incredible expert terrain filled with what we'd call blacks and double-blacks in Canada. If you're looking for a challenge, Gemstock is going to provide it; a Swiss national alpine skier was putting in work while I was there, so this is no exaggeration.

Where to eat at the resort: The Michelin star kind of tells the story, but you won't find a better meal at the top of any mountain than at Gutsch by Markus Neff. This is real-deal gourmet at 2,344 metres above sea level and mixes "French haute cuisine" with more regionally influenced fare. The beef tartare was legitimately out of this world and the braised pork cheek with potato mousseline and Perigord truffles was heaven on a plate.

Where to stay: The Radisson Blu opened in 2018 and gave Andermatt a four-star hotel. Its spa features multiple options for steam rooms and saunas, as well as a pool — which is perfect for taking a quick swim while you adjust to the time change. The rooms are spacious, the service is great and the breakfast is fantastic. I only spent a short time at The Chedi, a five-star hotel where I'd strongly recommend grabbing a cocktail.

CRANS-MONTANA
Getting there: It's extremely easy to get to Crans-Montana by train from either Geneva or Zurich. You get off at Sierre Station, follow a red line on the ground and you'll wind up at a funicular railway that takes you right up the mountain. It would be hard to mess up the voyage, honestly.
Can't miss run for experts: Take the gondola up to Grotte Glacier and you really can't go wrong. Kandahar and everything around it is big and steep, and while conditions weren't great for going off-piste while I was in Crans-Montana, there was more than enough challenging terrain to exhaust me by day's end.
Where to eat at the resort: Located mid-mountain, Les Violettes has a massive patio for sunny days and a classy interior section, as well. The views are stunning and the menu is full of local specialties and Italian cuisine.
Where to stay: There are lots of options. Crans-Montana is a popular place attracting visitors from all over the world. I stayed at La Prairie, a chalet-style hotel with easy access to the mountain and a great restaurant and bar. It's quiet, comfortable, and within reach of everything the area offers.
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