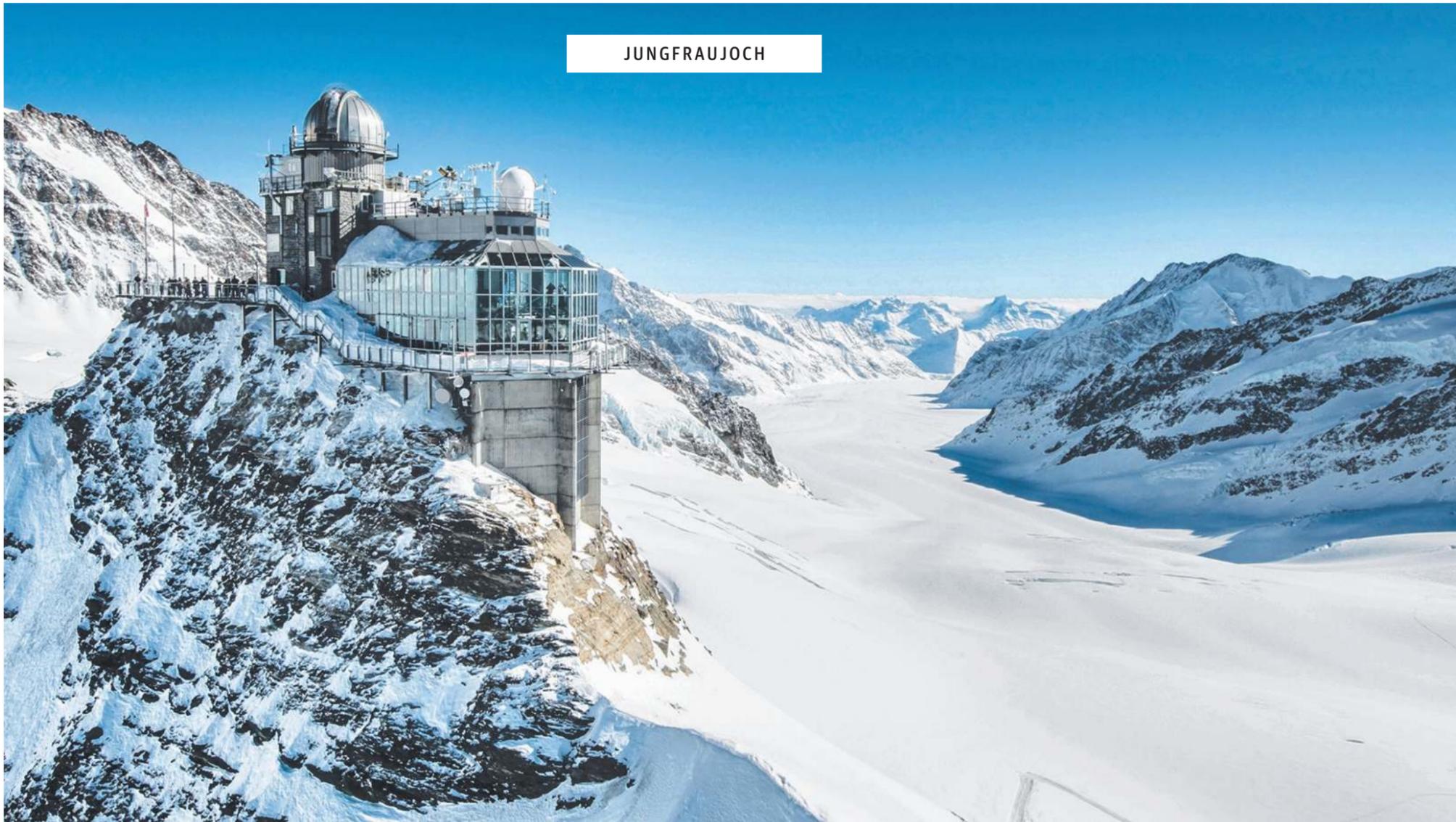


JUNGFRAUJOCH



# PEAKS OF PERFECTION

A visit to Lauterbrunnen sets a high holiday benchmark

ANDREW FENTON

**T**he Lauterbrunnen Valley in the Swiss Alps could ruin the rest of your vacation. One of the most idyllic and beautiful places on the planet, the views are so breathtaking that the remainder of your holiday – perhaps your next few holidays – will seem like an anticlimax.

It sounds like hyperbole, but I'm not the only one to feel this way. Lord Byron composed poems about its beauty and JRR Tolkien was so inspired he based *The Lord of the Rings'* elven kingdom of Rivendell on the landscape.

American travel writer Rick Steves barely stops raving about it and it's full of Steves' holidaying disciples, all clutching his guide books.

The name means "many fountains" and white water from 72 thundering waterfalls spills out over the sheer 300m-high cliff faces that overlook the lush green valley.

Chocolate box-style Swiss cows with bells graze in the meadows and,

if you look up, you'll see mountains peeking from above the cliff face. They're impressive enough until you spy even higher mountains towering 4200m above them – the Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau peaks.

The sheer cliffs, carved out eons ago by glaciers, make the Lauterbrunnen Valley a mecca for base jumpers. They flock here to take the cable car to the ridge before hurling themselves off numerous times a day – some with wingsuits to extend the journey.

I've hired a mountain bike to tackle the ridge around the valley on two wheels and get talking to a group of 12 base jumpers on the way up.

Mostly 20-something guys, they keep their parachutes in surprisingly small backpacks to take the express route back down. One Aussie tourist explains how he progressed from skydiving to base jumping and saved up all his money for the flight over. "It's my first day and this is jump No.4," he says with a grin.

As we reach the top, and they jump out to get the train to Murren, the cable car operator yells "Be careful" at them. Sage advice – dozens of people have been killed base jumping here.

Although it makes mountain biking seem tame (and sensible) by comparison, the ride is no less enjoyable for it. The awe-inspiring mountain scenery as seen from the ridge, the gnarly single track at the end of the valley back down to the valley floor, and the easy ride along the river to the town has to be one of my favourite rides in the world. I do it five more times during our brief visit. (I pass the base jumpers again on the way back, humping their packs along the road back into town before they rinse and repeat.)

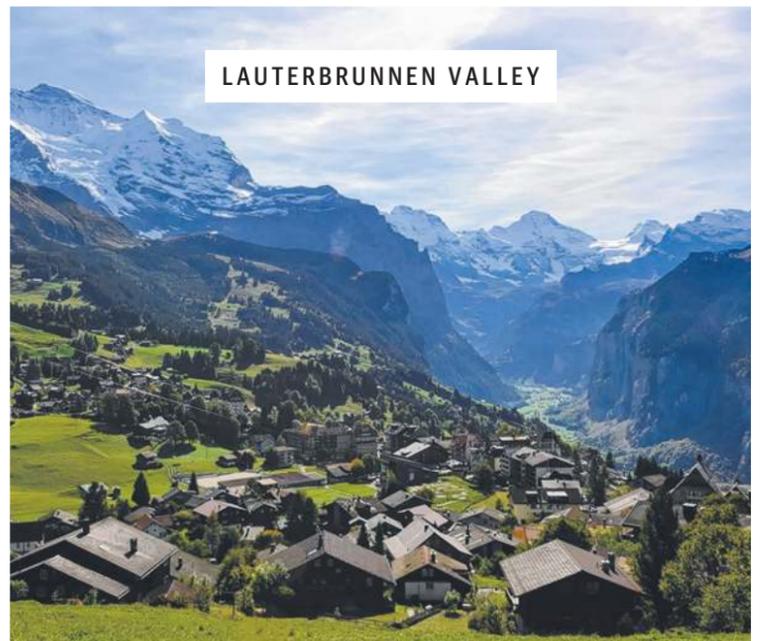
There are plenty of places to stay in the valley – the ski resort of Wengen on the ridge has plenty of amenities, its sister town Murren on the opposite side of the valley has better views and the tiny, car-free farming community of Gimmelwald is beloved by Steves.

I prefer Lauterbrunnen itself, with Staubbach Falls thundering above the town, good transport links and, best of all, it remains below the clouds during the inevitable bad weather.

And there's plenty of that – on our first visit three years ago, we arrived in the afternoon, had a beer in Murren, were struck dumb by the incredible view and then retired to bed, only to find that was the last time we could see anything except clouds for five days. This time, we arrived on a blue-sky day, chucked the bags at the hotel and immediately took the train up the mountain to Kleine Scheidegg, to wander back down an alpine path to Wengernalp, marvelling at the close views of the north face of the Eiger.

The next few days indeed pass by in a haze of bad weather so we variously trek to Interlaken (by chance a rock festival's on with *The Prodigy*, *The Hives* and *The Offspring*), and check out the shops and restaurants of the big nearby ski resort Grindelwald, including the cliff walk at First. If you

LAUTERBRUNNEN VALLEY



## IT CERTAINLY LOOKS INCREDIBLE - LIKE SOMEONE DROPPED AN ANTARCTIC LANDSCAPE ON THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN

can change your accommodation at the last minute head to Lucerne, about two hours on the train. (I took advantage of the free cancellation offered on booking.com and double booked to ensure this bad-weather option was available).

There are plenty of cinemas and restaurants and even a wonderful art gallery full of 50 Picassos (and very

few tourists looking at them). And when you get a break in the weather – you will, it changes fast – you can glide up to the top of the Stanserhorn in the new open-topped cable car or take the Golden Round Trip. There's a cable car up Mt Pilatus (try the summer luge on the way), lunch at the top enjoying the view over the lake, before a cog wheel train down the other side, and a paddle steamer back to town. Everyone does it, everyone has a great time. On Saturdays, take a guided tour of Fortress Furigen – a perfectly preserved Cold War defence base in the side of a mountain operating until the late-'80s.

But this is all just marking time until you can take one or both of the big trips in the Bernese Oberland: Piz Gloria – which was Blofeld's alpine lair in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* – and the Jungfrauoch, the Top of Europe. They're both extremely expensive, and not worth doing in bad weather, so choose wisely. With just one full day of sun forecast for our

Jungfrauoch, the Top of Europe (main); Lake Lucerne (right); and Lauterbrunnen Valley (below).

PICTURES: SUPPLIED



LAKE LUCERNE

visit, we embark on an ambitious plan to take the first cable car of the day 7km up to Piz Gloria for a buffet breakfast, before returning to take the 2-hour train ride up to Jungfrauoch.

I prefer Piz Gloria/Schilthorn – the 360-degree view is stunning. Endless snow-capped mountains stretch for hundreds of kilometres in every direction, and who doesn't enjoy a James Bond tie-in? (If you haven't seen the movie, don't worry, they play all the relevant bits).

At \$140 return, it's also about \$100 cheaper, and if you want to save even more, the \$90 return to Birg station

half way, has a similarly amazing view that's a little closer. I get chatting to a South African retiree who spends every summer in Switzerland and always goes to Piz Gloria and never Jungfrauoch. "You can't see anything up there except the glacier," she says.

But many people love it for that exact reason and count it a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It certainly looks incredible – like someone dropped an Antarctic landscape on the top of a mountain. There's a complex underneath it filled with restaurants, an ice cave with sculptures and various displays. You can hike out on

the glacier, go skiing or try the flying fox. Just remember to take sunglasses because once you've spent a couple of hours indoors (40 minutes inside a train tunnel, then the underground complex), you'll be blinded when you walk out into the dazzling sunshine, reflected by miles of white snow. It was a great feeling riding the train back down, having done both in a day, after missing out on our first trip.

And then I did my favourite mountain bike ride again. What can I say? It's awesome.

THE WRITER WAS ASSISTED BY SWITZERLAND TOURISM.

ESCAPE ROUTE

SWISS ALPS

GETTING THERE

Airlines including Swiss, Etihad, Cathay Pacific and Emirates fly from Australia to Zurich. Then it's an hour's journey by train. For information and bookings for the Swiss Travel Pass, visit [MySwitzerland.com/rail](http://MySwitzerland.com/rail)

STAYING THERE

Budget accommodation can be had at the pleasant Valley Hostel for \$100 a night; and there are plenty of nice guesthouses between \$150 and \$200.

DO

Piz Gloria cable car \$140 return  
Jungfrauoch trip \$240 return

MORE [MySwitzerland.com](http://MySwitzerland.com)



HAVE YOU BEEN TO THE SWISS ALPS? SHARE YOUR PICS WITH US ON INSTAGRAM @ESCAPESNAPS