

TEXT AMRITA DAS

SMALL WONDERS

EXPLORE THE QUINTESSENTIAL SWISS CHARM IN THE SMALLER TOWNS OF SWITZERLAND.

The beauty of Switzerland lies in its hinterland. The cobblestone lanes, pastel houses at winding turns and quirky window displays, all add to the charm. Though very few people know that in these towns lie the diversity of the country. So next time you're in the Swiss country, ditch the tourist trail and warm up to these picturesque villages.

This page: The main market place in Gruyères, resplendent in the winter.

Roman Babakin / Shutterstock.com

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Above: The church and tower of St Martin in Chur.
Below: The Viamala Gorge is part of a 2000-year-old travelling trail.

CHUR

As the oldest town of Switzerland, Chur wears its distinct history with pride. The oldest house here dates back to 1454 and current inhabitants are not permitted to change anything.

The entire town can be seen from the Episcopal Courtyard and Castle, which stands tall atop a hill, opening up to a panorama of Chur. The fortification within the courtyard houses the Cathedral of St. Mary Assumption in the centre. This Romanesque cathedral dates back to 1272.

➤ **Experience Chur:** Chur is in the largest canton of Switzerland, Grisons. The traditional Grisons food was made for and by the farmers. *Maluns* or grated potato with flour, and *capuns* or spinach wraps with either vegetarian or meat fillings are necessary dishes in this cuisine. These are usually accompanied with apple sauce and cheese.

About 30 km from Chur is Viamala Gorge. As a part of the 2000-year-old travelling trail between Thusis via Splügen to Chiavenna in Italy, this canyon has now been carved into a gorgeous 300m-high gorge and around it is the Hohen Rätien fortress and Carschenna rock etchings. Adventure lovers can also try the different hiking trails here or indulge in canyoning.

➤ **Live local:** The oldest hotel in Chur is Romantik Hotel Stern. Situated discreetly in the centre of the town, the hotel with its light wood interiors,



traditional artefacts and warm hospitality is a perfect slice of the town's history.

MONTREUX

The idyllic riverside by Lake Geneva, in the western part of Switzerland, attracts many travellers through the year. The annual Montreux Jazz Festival in June–July welcomes music lovers from all over the world. Spring, autumn and winter seasons showcase distinctive colours of nature.

➤ **Experience Montreux:** Montreux has been home to poets and artistes such as Lord Byron and Freddie Mercury. Go on an experiential trail exploring their stories and lives.



Start with the imposing Chillon Castle which dates back to the 12th century when the Counts of Savoy conquered and lived in the region.

Walk on the promenade, towards the famous Montreux Casino and visit the exhibition Queen: the Studio Experience. This is the studio where Freddie Mercury recorded his last songs. It is now filled with memorabilia dedicated to the band and Mercury.

The Montreux promenade wears a completely different look in the winter months. This is the venue for the annual Christmas Market or Montreux Noël – drink some mulled wine, eat some warm fondue and walk around the market.

► **Live local:** There are plenty of B&Bs and hotels in Montreux. BnB Belalp and Résidence Castel les Chênes have character and the latter overlooks Lake Geneva.

GSTAAD AND SAANEN

As you step into Gstaad, be prepared for the old-world architecture to captivate you. This small town can be covered in an hour or two on foot. The mountain slopes, beyond the main town centre, has most of the wellness retreats and luxury hotels. The distinct wooden architecture



flanks the main street, Gstaad Promenade. These Swiss chalets were built as early as 1658. Saanen, about three kilometres away from Gstaad, is visually similar and is ideal for a quick stop while exploring Gstaad.

Experience Gstaad and Saanen: Gstaad has secured the 'Wellness Destination' quality seal by Swiss Tourist Association, presented to Swiss destinations who maintain high-quality of wellness services and infrastructure, among other criteria. Head to Ermitage Wellness & Spa Hotel or Golfhotel Les Hauts de Gstaad & Spa for an unparalleled experience.

Scherenschnitt or Swiss art of paper cutting is believed to have



Clockwise from extreme left: The Chillon Castle in Montreux dates back to the 12th century; Restaurant Stübli has an old-world Swiss charm; Old city centre of Gstaad.

originated in China, soon after the invention of paper. Buy cards, candles, cups, coasters, home decor and kitchen items, and a host of other products made by this handcraft. Look out for Beatrice Straubhaar's work, a popular artist from here.

► **Live local:** Experience the vibe of the oldest hotel in Gstaad. Dating back to 1823, Post Hotel Rössli is a family-run hotel on Gstaad Promenade. Their restaurant Stübli recreates its old world charm with traditional costumes and wooden interiors.

GRUYÈRES

In the canton of Fribourg, Gruyères is a perfect blend of history and scenic



beauty. Arrive at the low-lying train station and look up to see the Gruyères Castle perched on the top. A moderate hike of 1.5 km or scheduled buses from Gruyères train station take visitors up to the castle.

➤ **Experience Gruyères:** There is only one street that guides this town. At the end of this cobblestone street lies the castle built in 13th century. However, it was only in 1938 when the State of Fribourg bought it and opened it as a museum. This castle gives visitors an insight to the history of this medieval town.

After a visit to the castle, try the famous La Gruyère cheese from the plethora of restaurants here. The must-try and most tempting local delicacy is the *mûres à la crème* or blackberries with cream.

➤ **Live local:** Gruyères is a good fit for a day's visit. Expect to invest a maximum of six hours here and then head back to your hotel. However, if you'd like to stay, Hotel de Gruyères is a good option for a night's stay.

Above: The manicured French style gardens at Château de Gruyères is one of the highlights of a visit to Gruyères.

Courtesy of Château de Gruyères

ZERMATT

While Zermatt is one of the more popular ones in this list, it is the fact that it is a car-free mountain town that makes it a great escape. Lying at the foothills of the Matterhorn, Zermatt comes alive during the winters, as it is a one-stop destination for adventurers and travellers. Skiers and mountaineers from all over the world flock here to ski through the freshly powdered slopes.

➤ **Experience Zermatt:** Indulge in the mountain magic that this destination has to offer. Take the cable cars to either Schwarzsee or Trockener Steg (onwards to Matterhorn Glacier Paradise) to access the viewing platform which opens up to the magnificent Matterhorn, the protruding mountain of the Alps.

➤ **Live local:** There are plenty of hotels in this mountain town. Choose between Alpen Resort Hotel on Spisstrasse 52 or Hotel Dufour Alpin on Riedstrasse 35. Hotel Bella Vista on Riedstrasse 15 for a pet-friendly stay.



Above: Toboggan down the slopes of Zermatt.

Below: The village of Zermatt is as picturesque as the mighty Matterhorn.



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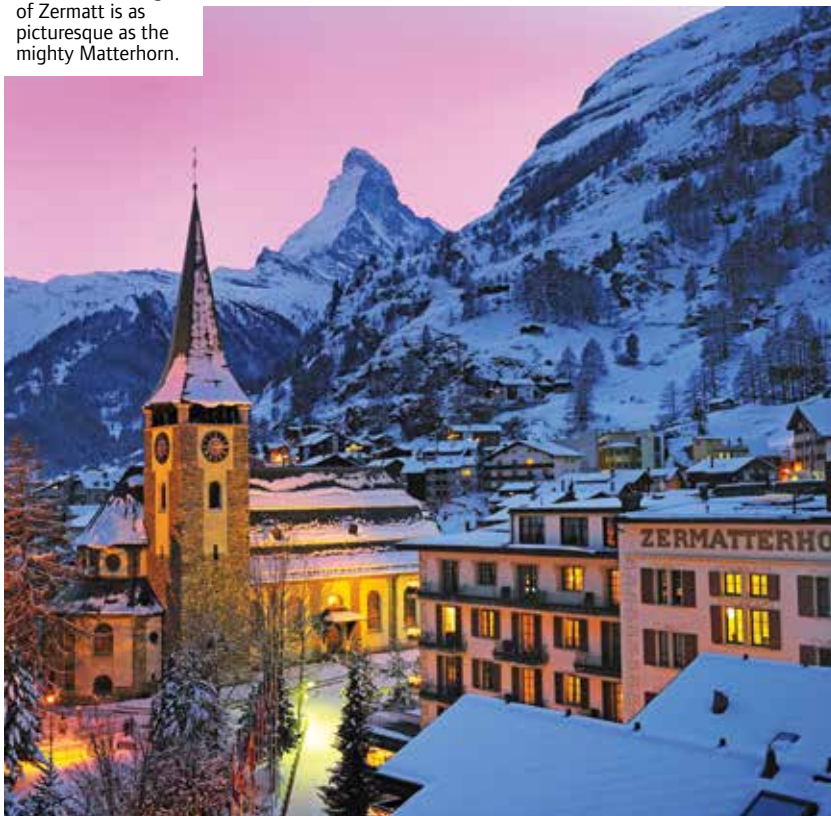
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Courtesy of Cornegrat Bahn; Leander Wenger