

IN SEARCH OF THE ALETSCHE

Switzerland has been synonymous with the Alps. However, it's time to look a little beyond, into the heart of the Aletsch, for there lies nestled a tiny village of delights – Riederalp.

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On a particularly snowy day in December, I hop out of the efficient Swiss rail system and into a glass-ensconced cable car to whoosh 1,200m up the Alpine mountainside. It's a rather unique way to reach my destination – the tiny mountaintop village of Riederalp in the Valais region of southern Switzerland.

Far below, solemn conifers poke out of great tracts of snow. Mist swirls, obscuring views of the formidable Alps that rise around the gondola. Italy lies just beyond these rugged peaks. The monochrome landscape is haunting, yet ethereal.

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Clockwise from above: Riederalp and the surrounding towns are a winter sports lover's delight; Enjoy spectacular views from Moosfluh viewpoint; Indulge in a serving of goulash at one of the local eateries.

Ears popping, slightly disoriented from the sudden gain in altitude, I arrive at the car-free village of Riederalp, and stumble with my first steps. Walking on a thick carpet of freshly fallen snow is no easy business. I suddenly have a new-found respect for the town's inhabitants who trudge up the snow-covered mountainside, carrying everything, from groceries to heavy skis.

Little-known Riederalp sits in the Aletsch Arena, along with the neighbouring mountain towns of Fiescheralp and Bettmeralp. The vast Aletsch is the Alps' longest glacier, extending 23 km, with ice weighing as much as 72.5 million jumbo jets. To put this in perspective, if the glacier thawed, every person in the world would have a litre of glacial water every day for six years!

While most visitors head to Jungfrau on the northern head of the glacier, the views from the southern edge are unparalleled. Cable cars lead further up to nearly 3,000m-high viewpoints such as Eggishorn and Moosfluh. At Moosfluh, even as snowy winds howl around my ears, the mist parts for a fleeting moment and I catch a glimpse of the mighty swathe of ice. It curves magnificently around the Aletschhorn mountain, a grand natural phenomenon and UNESCO World Heritage Site.

SIMPLE TREATS

Back in Riederalp, every breath of the crystalline air is sharp and pure. Starved of this simple luxury in fume-choked cities, I breathe in greedily. Devoid of cars, save for a handful of snowmobiles reserved for transporting heavy loads, the tiny town of less than 500 people is virtually pollution-free.

Stumbling around in the snow leads to a massive appetite, all day, every day. Luckily, hot stews and hearty Swiss fare is easily on offer at the rustic eateries perched on the edge of the mountain. Even before I check into my hotel, I stop for a piping hot goulash. This is followed



by a Valais specialty, Käseschnitten. Simply put, it is a basic, grilled bread and cheese item, but there's nothing simple about this indulgent, reviving dish. Traditionally eaten by farmers, old, hardened bread would be dipped in white wine and then baked, topped with local cheese and a choice of ham, fried egg, onions, or more cheese. My version arrives swimming in a sea of gooey, still-sizzling cheese. Cheese is, of course, a Swiss mainstay, consumed not merely as an accompaniment, but as a main. At dinner, I sample the region's specialty raclette. The chef puts in a gorgeous wheel of the cheese into a grill and shaves molten chunks onto our plates, which I devour with a tiny pickle.

Below: Visitors entering gondola station.

WINTER'S PLAYGROUND

To work off all this indulgence, I explore the countryside's glorious walking trails.

A handful of traditional-style wooden chalets dot the landscape, a fat blanket of white powder on their sloping roofs. Crystal clear needles of ice hang off the trees. A light snow begins to fall and brings with it an almost opaque fog.

My local companion David tells me that on a clear day, the Matterhorn – that eminent 4,500m-high mountain to grace the Toblerone packaging – dominates the view. It's hard to imagine at this point, where I can barely see my hand in front of my face. For me, however, the luxury lies in simply being in this ethereal landscape, where

the greatest pleasures are my feet sinking into pillowy snow, feeling fat flakes on my face, and retreating to the warmth of a cosy hotel room after braving sub-zero temperatures.

In this regard, the Art Furrer Hotel Royal is a lush treat, all pale wood interiors and floor-to-ceiling glass windows for fantastic views of a snow-covered golf course.

A great outdoor playground, Riederalp and the entire Aletsch region comes to life in the throes of winter. In the latter half of December, visitors of all ages pile off the gondola in hordes, clad in ski gear.

On the ride up to Eggishorn, a teenage boy hops in with his snowboard, ready to hit the slopes running straight off the cable car. Treacherous fog swirls, but he's confident when he says, "I live for the powder. There is no other way."

While skiing is second nature to those who grow up in these climes, the sport requires hours of training for newbies. Luckily, Riederalp has a beginners' ski zone and rental shops where



De Meester Johan / ArtTerra Picture Library / Dinodia

I'm fitted for bulky ski boots and gear. I imagine this is what astronauts feel like, bundled up in weighty paraphernalia and in utterly alien surrounds.

Bano, my instructor, teaches me how to start, stop, and navigate the gentle ski arena. My biggest achievement of the two-hour lesson is emerging without having fallen face-first in the snow.

Invigorated, I decide to go snowshoeing. Kitted out with rented snowshoes and walking sticks, I follow David, an experienced snowshoer. So far, we've skirted paths that are cleared for foot traffic, but now, we lunge into an expanse of waist-high snow. Forging a trail through the icy landscape, I sink into the soft powder with each step, cleaving my way forward.

Engaging with this magnificent outdoor expanse has been an entirely otherworldly experience, but I can't help feel a pang of wistfulness at missing the famed alpine views. Then magically, on the morning of my departure, the fog lifts. Massive snowy summits appear, as if from nowhere, backlit by the golden glow of a weak morning sun. I rush to my balcony to see it, and there it is – pristine, colossal, and just like on the Toblerone box, the Matterhorn. ■



Above: Ski down the snowy slopes of Riederalp.

Below: Matterhorn bathed in morning glory.



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QUICK FACTS

CURRENCY

1 Swiss franc = 70.87 Indian rupees (approx.)

UPCOMING EVENT

December 14–16: Ring in the winter in the Aletsch Arena at the Great Winter Opening Festival on Bettmeralp. Partake in a range of fun activities, live acts, children's races, skiing, and don't forget to wine and dine in the village square.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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