

Vanishing act's catch-22

Is it ethical to visit glaciers before they melt? Tara Wells weighs the issue



The Great Aletsch Glacier
viewed from Moosfluh
in the Swiss Alps.

Waves of sound would have hit first: a rumble, then a roar as the Birch glacier collapsed. Dirt clouds billowed into the sky; slides of ice and mud consumed evacuated chalets. The 300-strong Swiss alpine village of Blatten was flattened.

Three weeks later I'm standing a few valleys over, in the World Nature Forum's lobby. It showcases Switzerland's Jungfrau-Aletsch, an area World Heritage-listed as the most glaciated part of the European Alps. A scale model of the region created 100 years ago now has two errors. The most recent is Blatten's fate. The other is the glacier area around Riederalp – its ice has shrunk. Both are due to climate change.

Visiting vanishing glaciers is part of a trend called "last-chance tourism" – a push to see places at threat of being lost to the world. But in doing so – with all the burning of aviation and shipping fuel, resource consumption and rubbish creation that tourism entails – visitors could be contributing to their destruction.

In a country that still has 1400 or so glaciers, talk of climate change can feel like a lot of hot air. But Swiss glacier volume has reduced by almost 40 per cent in the past 25 years. At 2300m above sea level in the Riederalp area,

I'm dwarfed by the 4000m Jungfrau-Aletsch Alps. I'm at Moosfluh, one of the best vantage points of the Great Aletsch Glacier, the longest and deepest of the alps. I'm so high and the valley is so vast I see it as a river of ice flowing down from the Jungfrau.

The view is nearly unchanged since the glacier's formation 18,000 years ago in the last ice age. Except for one giveaway. The gorge is scarred by a distinct line about 260m above the glacier. It's like a dirty bathtub ring – bare rock below, green above – marking the glacier's depth less than 150 years ago. Glaciologists predict that within 80 years what I see today will be completely gone.

Glaciers, globally, are shrinking at alarming rates. In response, the UN declared 2025 the International Year of Glaciers' Preservation. It recognises that protecting the world's glaciers is not a local problem, but a global one.

Europe is bringing train travel back into vogue as a worthy way to combat climate change. In 2023, France banned some short domestic flights and a Dutch tourism academic is quoted as saying that destinations shouldn't encourage "visitors from faraway continents". That'd be us, Australians, who fly for five hours to find ourselves still in Australia.

By that logic, to appreciate climate change we should only see coral bleaching, Pacific Islanders only see their islands sinking, and Europeans, Africans, Asians, and North and South Americans only see glaciers melting (Australia is the only continent without glaciers).

Let's back up. Is tourism a threat to glaciers? Tasked with long-term study of glacier changes in the Swiss Alps, Matthias Huss is the head of Glacier Monitoring in Switzerland. "Tourism, as such, is no threat to glaciers," he says, noting that walking or skiing on them, for example, does no harm. But "travel's related CO2 emissions accelerate the wastage of glaciers worldwide."

So should we keep away?

"Glaciers are the ambassadors of climate change. The melting ice is a powerful sign of how fast current climate change is destroying this beauty of nature," Huss says. "Visiting glaciers can help visitors understand the urgency of acting to preserve our climate."

Seeing glacial change at lightning speed is tangible. It takes a thorny issue out of the news headlines and into a holiday photo. What visitors take from this picture is up to them. *The writer travelled as a guest of Switzerland Tourism.*