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Lost in Graubünden & Ticino

This is a circular route that can be picked up at any point. From Chur, head north for a detour to pretty Maienfeld and its vineyards. Spin east to ski queens Klosters and Davos, then surge into the Engadine Valley, with pretty towns like Guarda and Scuol (with tempting thermal baths). The road then ribbons southeast to the Austrian border, which you cross to head south through a slice of Austria and Italy, before veering back into Switzerland to contemplate frescoes at Müstair. Continue southwest through picture-postcard Zuoz to chic St Moritz. Climb the Julier Pass mountain road and drop down the Via Mala gorges to art stop Zillis.

The southbound road crosses into Ticino and Bellinzona. Steam on past lakeside Locarno and up the enchanting Valle Maggia. Backtracking to Bellinzona, the main route takes you along the Valle Leventina, with a stop in Giornico, before crossing the St Gotthard Pass to Andermatt. Nip into the monastery of Disentis/Mustér before plunging into designer spa waters in highly recommended Vals, the last stop before Chur.
This mythical, 290km train journey has been a traveller must since 1930 and the birth of winter tourism in the Swiss Alps. Do it any time of the year – in one relentless eight-hour stretch or, perhaps more palatably, as several sweet nuggets interspersed with overnight stays in some of Switzerland’s most glamorous Alpine mountain resorts.

This trip is spectacular in either direction, but boarding the cherry-red train in St Moritz (grab a seat on the left/southern side of the carriage) in the Upper Engadine Valley makes for a gradual build-up to the journey’s inevitable climax: the iconic Matterhorn. About an hour from St Moritz, just after Filisur, the train plunges dramatically out of a tunnel onto the six dark limestone arches of the Landwasser Viaduct (1901-02), built 65m above the Landwasser River in a considerate, photographer-friendly curve. Switzerland’s oldest city and Graubünden capital, Chur, about 2½ hours from St Moritz, makes a lovely overnight stop with its quaint old town, historic hotels and busy cafe/bar scene.

From Chur the track snakes along the Rhine Valley, through the spectacular Rhine Gorge (Ruinaulta in Romansch) with its bizarre limestone rock formations, dubbed Switzerland’s Grand Canyon. Next it’s a stiff climb up to Disentis/Mustér, home to an 18th-century Benedictine monastery, and up still further to the Oberalp Pass (2033m) – the literal high point of the journey, snow-covered November to April. Next stop is ski resort Andermatt, another perfect place to stretch legs and overnight. The rollercoaster journey continues with a descent then steady climb up to the Furka Pass, circumvented by Switzerland’s highest Alpine tunnel (and, at 15.4km, the longest of the 91 tunnels on this journey). Next port of call is Betten, cable-car station for the drop-dead-gorgeous, car-free village and ski resort of Bettmeralp. Hop off here or in neighbouring Fiesch and spend a day hiking or skiing and staring wide-mouthed at the gargantuan icy tongue of the Aletsch Glacier.

From here the Glacier Express swings southwest along the Rhône Valley into the Valais, stopping at Brig with its eclectic schloss (castle) topped with exotic onion domes, wine-producing Visp and – drumroll – its final destination, Zermatt, where that first glimpse of the Matterhorn makes a fitting finale.
This circular ‘best of Switzerland’ tour starts in Geneva with its vibrant museums and signature pencil fountain, from where a slow road leads east along the southern shore of the lake in France – stop for lunch in Yvoire – and a fast road (the A1) shadows the Swiss northern shore (lunch stops Lausanne, Vevey or Montreux). The next port of call is art-rich Martigny and châteaux-crowned Sion, worth lingering in for its wealth of vineyards, wines and memorable Valaisian dining. Continue east along the Rhône Valley, nipping up to Leukerbad to drift in thermal waters beneath soaring mountain peaks. In Visp, head south to obsessively stare at iconic Matterhorn from the hip streets, slopes and trails of stylish, car-free Zermatt.

Second week, get a taste of the Glacier Express with a train trip to Oberwald. Stop off in Betten for a cable-car side trip up to picturebook Bettmeralp with its car-free streets and amazing vistas of the 23km-long Aletsch Glacier from atop Bettmerhorn. From Oberwald, drive north over the Grimsel Pass (2165m) to Meiringen (eat meringues!) and west into the magnificent Jungfrau Region with its once-in-a-lifetime train journey up to Europe’s highest station; base yourself in Interlaken or Grindelwald. If you have a penchant for Italian passion rather than hardcore Alpine extremes, stay on the Glacier Express as far as Andermatt instead, then motor south into Italianate Ticino for shimmering lake life in the glitzy and gorgeous towns of Lugano and Locarno.

The third week unveils a trip north to Lucerne where you can cruise on a boat to lovely Lake Lucerne resorts like Weggis and Brunnen. Feast on Kirschtorte (cherry cake) in rich old medieval Zug, then hit big-city Zürich to the north to taste urban Switzerland at its best (five days in all). Should you fancy some border-hopping, Vaduz, the tiny capital of tiny Liechtenstein, is very close by. Unesco-listed St Gallen is the next stop from where you can spend a week lapping up Switzerland’s north – see the Northern Treasures itinerary.

Ending up in the Jura, it’s a quick and easy flit south to Neuchâtel on the northern shore of Lac de Neuchâtel, from where the motorway speeds to Lausanne on Lake Geneva and, eventually, Geneva.
In spite of all its natural wonders, Switzerland boasts overwhelming man-made beauty too, and there is no finer spot to appreciate this than in St Gallen, the seat of a grand abbey and church complex safeguarding one of the world’s oldest libraries (hence its privileged Unesco World Heritage Site status). Say cheese in Appenzell, a 50-minute journey from St Gallen on a narrow-gauge railway, then bear west along the southern shore of Lake Constance (great summer outdoor action) or to Winterthur (art museums and a kid-friendly science centre). Both routes end up in Schaffhausen, a quaint medieval town that could easily be German. Don’t miss standing in the middle of Rheinfall, Europe’s largest waterfall.

Next up, continue further west to art-rich Basel, either direct or via a pretty southwest detour through Baden and Aarau, two picture-postcard addresses to get lost in cobbled old-town streets. From Basel, it is an easy drive west again into the deepest depths of Switzerland’s unexplored Jura. Push west to La Chaux-de-Fonds to discover several early works by architect Le Corbusier, who was born here.
Nicola Williams
Coordinating Author; Geneva; Fribourg, Neuchâtel & Jura; Valais
Ever since Nicola moved to a village on the southern side of Lake Geneva, she has never quite been able to shake off that uncanny feeling that she is on holiday – a garden tumbling down the hillside towards that same glittering lake and Switzerland’s mysterious Jura mountains beyond is her wake-up call. When not flitting to Geneva, paddle-boarding or kayaking on the lake, skiing, hiking or dipping into a Swiss mountain (or fondue), Nicola can be found at her desk writing. She has worked on numerous titles for Lonely Planet. She blogs at tripalong.wordpress.com and tweets @Tripalong. Nicola also wrote the Plan Your Trip and Survival Guide sections.

Kerry Christiani
Bernese Oberland; Ticino; Northeastern Switzerland; Graubünden; Liechtenstein
A huge fan of big mountains, long hikes and snowbound chalets, Switzerland was love at first sight for Kerry. She spent stints working in the Bernese Alps post-graduation and used to live just across the border in Germany’s Black Forest. Hiking in the remote wilds of the Swiss National Park and lounging on the shores of Lago Maggiore were among her favourite moments researching this edition. Besides Switzerland, Kerry authors/co-authors around a dozen Lonely Planet titles. She tweets @kerrychristiani. Kerry also wrote the Switzerland Outdoors chapter.

Gregor Clark
Mittelland; Central Switzerland; Basel & Aargau; Zürich
Gregor is a 15-year Lonely Planet veteran whose love of the Alps has led to previous gigs writing Alpine sections of Lonely Planet’s Cycling Italy and France’s Best Trips. A lifelong polyglot with distant Swiss ancestry, he was thrilled to dust off his Schwyzerdütsch and return to Switzerland. Memorable research moments this time around included reaching the summit of Titlis on one of the summer’s few clear days and mingling with Zürich residents on a warm evening at Frau Gerolds Garten.

Sally O’Brien
Lake Geneva & Vaud
Sally has authored numerous guidebooks for Lonely Planet and has called Switzerland home since she moved to Lausanne in 2007. She lives in the city with her husband and their sons, and makes sure she refers to the large body of water at the bottom of the hill as Lac Leman (never Lake Geneva!) whenever locals are in earshot. Sally also wrote the Understand section.