

From hiking to cheese making, summer is fun in Switzerland

The reward for a robust hike up the mountain in Switzerland was not the promise of a long ski back down (after all, this was the height of summer) but a practical tutorial in an art that has changed little through the centuries – the production of farmhouse cheese.

While outside cows with bells tinkling round their necks grazed on the lush Alpine pasture, Dominik the farmer ushered us into his wooden chalet high above the town of Gstaad to demonstrate the process of turning milk into cheese, which he had first learned from his grandfather. The resulting roundels of this smooth, nutty cheese are left to cool before being taken down to Gstaad and sold in the co-operative.

When it's winter and the snow covers the pastures, Dominik uses his other great skill as an expert skier to help instruct the tourists who flock to Gstaad for their annual dose of Alpine sport.

Having been to Switzerland plenty of times in the winter, I was fascinated to see how Gstaad, which has long received a stellar list of visitors such as the Clooneys and Madonna, managed to adapt to a less frenetic pace in the summer, when its plutocratic patrons have decamped to Ibiza or Mykonos.

One of the reasons that Gstaad has retained its reputation as a bolthole for the stars is the relative difficulty in getting there, unless you have a private jet.

The flight to Zurich is easy, but the next part takes a bit of time – two and a half hours and three trains – but the journey is made easier by the punctuality of the Swiss railway system.

And boy is it worth it. Gstaad is an exquisite mountain village whose inhabitants have a rather languid air. The town centre is a



Swiss bliss

**Above: Magnificent mountains above Gstaad
Below: A deluxe room at Le Grand Bellevue**



Cows with tinkling bells graze near Le Grand Bellevue

Summer rates (June-October) at Le Grand Bellevue (bellevue-gstaad.ch) start at £312 per room based on double occupancy on a b&b basis. For more choices, see gstaad.ch or mySwitzerland.com. Swissair (swiss.com) flies from Heathrow, Gatwick, Manchester, Birmingham and Edinburgh to Zurich and Geneva from £51 return. A Swiss Travel Pass, from £171, offers unlimited travel by rail and bus, plus free entrance to 500 museums and exhibitions.

mix of the old – traditional wooden chalets – and the relatively brash (the boutiques of Hermès, Dior, Louis Vuitton) plus quirky touches such as vending machines that dispense Swiss cheeses.

It manages to be both down-to-earth (cows are driven through the streets after grazing in the mountains) and detached from reality (the grocery store has a caviar counter and a walk-in cigar humidor), while the locals genuinely seem to prefer the joys of animal husbandry to celebrity spotting.


While the oldest hotel in town is the Palace, a turreted fantasy that looms over the village, we opted to stay in a hotel within easy walking distance of the centre. Not that the Grand Bellevue is less luxurious, but it's smaller and cosier.

Recently renovated, the Bellevue is a cross between a grand schloss and Soho House, with eclectic furnishings (the first sight greeting you in the lobby is a life-size tweed camel called Leonard). The hotel car that collects guests from the station is a 1963 Bentley once owned by a noted Gstaad boulevardier, Roger Moore.

Despite its relatively small size, the hotel has a Michelin-starred restaurant, a magnificent subterranean spa, nightclub, cinema and a highly enticing Art Deco bar.

The area around Gstaad is perfect for walking in summer, a great way to offset all that chocolate, cheese and ham.

One of the loveliest walks is around the beautiful Lake Lauenensee, set amidst mountain peaks and fertile pastures. It takes just an hour to walk around, and there is a reward in the form of a rustic restaurant, where we enjoyed a marvellous feast of fondue, croûte au fromage and sausage with rösti and frites.

On another mountain walk we were encouraged by the hotel to take a backpack containing a mini stove and a preprepared fondue mix. There's no getting away from that cheese in Gstaad... 

Adam Helliker