



Ice lolly

Gstaad is known for luxury hotels and celebrity-spotting. Therefore it crossed Frank Baldwin's mind that someone was playing a practical joke when he found himself standing in the dark, outside a snow hole with a blanket over it, halfway up one of the mountains that surround the famous Swiss town

MY arrival in the chic resort of Gstaad started so well. After a train journey through spectacular Berner Oberland scenery, my companions and I were whisked off on a sleigh ride around the town and into the mountains for a picnic of glühwein and local delicacies.

From our vantage point, our guide pointed out some of Gstaad's 5* hotels, such as the historic Gstaad Palace, which opened in 1913, the Grand Hotel Bellevue, the Grand Hotel Park and the Ermitage Wellness & Spa Hotel.

As night fell, the horses drew our sleigh back to town and to the foot of the Saanenmöser gondola – which had stopped for the day.

"We have arrived too late to get the gondola," explained our guide.

As we stood at the bottom of the piste, we could see the mountains bathed in moonlight and they looked very inviting. Surely skiing at this time of night was out of the question?

Our guide, after several conversations on his mobile, said: "I have sorted you out a lift," and as if right on cue, four piste-bashers came trundling down the mountain towards us.

I was invited to sit next to the driver of one of the beasts and our fleet of 'taxis' transported us up the slopes in convoy, which gave me a chance to admire the long, sweeping pistes in the brilliant headlights.

The machines broke out onto a plateau, where we could see the top gondola station and the Saanerslochgrat restaurant - both in darkness and deserted due to the late hour.

We jumped down onto the snow and the piste-bashers clattered off back down the mountain, leaving us in the dark and surrounded by an eerie silence as our guide led us on a short walk away from the scene of relative civilisation.

And this is how I came to find myself standing in front of a hole in the snow with a blanket draped over the top.

But boy, was I in for a surprise! Because after pulling the blanket aside, we entered what can only be described as a snow Tardis – a hotel with

an icy reception.

Tunnels cut into the snow led along a slight downward incline to a vast lounge area, complete with an ice bar, a dining room with seats and tables made of snow and draped in skins, plus numerous bedrooms with beds made out of snow for one or two people, or for whole families.

And out the back was another surprise – a sauna and an outdoor Jacuzzi, where visitors were invited to relax and admire the views over the mountains.

I've stayed in ice hotels, and the experience of wrapping yourself up in a warm sleeping bag for the night is very similar. But ice hotels are built out of big slabs of ice, whereas this 'Tardis' could hardly be seen from outside.

Iglu-Dorf GmbH, which runs the operation in Gstaad and a handful of other resorts, make the igloos by inflating large balloons. These are positioned in whatever layout they choose and then piste-bashers push snow over the whole lot.

Once the snow has hardened, the balloons are deflated and interconnecting tunnels are dug to the various rooms. The bedrooms always have a theme, such as nursery rhymes, which are depicted by impressive ice carvings.

A Japanese couple who were staying there told me over our fondue dinner that the igloo was part of their round-the-world experience and they had booked a 'romantic' room, complete with double sleeping bag and champagne.

In the morning, after a good night's sleep on my ice bed, we walked to the nearby Saanerslochgrat restaurant for breakfast and then headed out skiing on Gstaad's legendary, open slopes.

Gstaad is an intermediate skier and snowboarder's dream. Long sweeping blue and red tree-lined runs make up almost 90% of the 280km area.

The area is divided up into five sectors, including the Glacier at les Diablerets (3,209m), which means there is plenty of skiing to keep everybody happy.

You'll also find many family-run restaurants serving traditional fodder dotted throughout all



Champagne on ice in one of the 'romantic' bedrooms.

the sectors, often housed in beautiful old wooden buildings. On a sunny day, you can sit outside and enjoy the views and on a cold day, warm yourself in front of the log fires inside.

But be careful, these places are so nice and cosy that after a good lunch, it's tempting to just sit in front of the fire with a couple of glühweins and snooze the afternoon away.

Gstaad, which featured in the Return of the Pink Panther film with Peter Sellers and David Niven, has been attracting royalty and celebrities for years.

There is no doubt that the place is a magnet for the super-rich and famous, which is why there are so many 5* luxury hotels, including the Alpina Gstaad, which opens this winter - the first new hotel in Gstaad for 100 years.

But the local tourist office is keen to point out that although Gstaad has a reputation for catering to the well-heeled, it is not exclusive to this type of visitor.

Us mere mortals can still enjoy the area and rub shoulders with the celebs, as the tourist office claims there are places for the budget-conscious to stay – or you could always build your own igloo!

TRAVEL FACTS

// Frank Baldwin stayed at Wellness & Spa Hotel Ermitage-Golf (www.ermitage-gstaad.ch) and Iglu-Dorf (www.iglu-dorf.com) while in Gstaad.

// Other useful websites:

Train service: www.goldenpass.ch

Skiing lesson with the Alpinzentrum GmbH:

www.alpinzentrum-snowsports.ch

Night Glow Show in Château-d'Oex:

www.festivaldeballons.ch

// For more information on activities, events, accommodation and restaurants in Gstaad:

www.gstaad.ch

// Swiss National Tourist Office:

www.myswitzerland.com



A skier freerides in the Parwengesattel Lengebrand area of the Gstaad ski area which also includes Saanenmöser, Zweisimmen, St. Stephan and Schönried.

SWISS NEWS

LEUKERBAD: The Gemmi cable car has been re-opened with new panoramic cabins designed to offer skiers and snowboarders the best views yet of the 4,000m peaks surrounding the resort and of the village itself. The lift provides winter access to ungroomed ski touring downhill runs.

ANDERMATT: The Swedish SkiStar Group, which already operates Are in Sweden and Salen and Norway's Hemsedal and Trysil, has agreed to take over operation of the Swiss ski resorts of Andermatt and Sedrun.

AROSA: The Tschuggen Grand Hotel, Arosa, is introducing a unique Private Mountain experience, which will enable guests to enjoy a winter weekend of private skiing and snowboarding. On 30 November, guests of the

five-star property will have exclusive access to the slopes of Arosa and be able to celebrate the start of the ski season before its official opening on 1 December.

LAAX: A three year plan has been drawn up to install six new lifts. The first was installed last winter, with two more are due to open this season. Laax has hired the Porsche Design studio to come up with some iconic seating for its latest new lift. The two new six-seater chairlifts this season will run from Treis Palas to Crap Masegn and from Plaun Lavadinas to Fuorcla da Sagogn.

BERN: SkyWork Airlines' has introduced larger 70-seat Bombardier Q400 quiet turboprop aircraft for its daily flights between London City Airport and Bern. There are more than 20 ski resorts with transfers of less than two hours from the airport.