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Hiking In The Swiss Alps Doesn't Have To Cost A Fortune

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Every travel writer has a few favorite trips that he or she would like to do again. Some of the places I've been over the last 30 or so years were one-shot deals. But hiking in the Swiss Alps is in a different category. It's an experience that never leaves you, but one you'd like to do again and again.

And despite Switzerland's reputation as a pricey destination, hut-to-hut hiking in the Alps can be a breathtaking (pun intended) bargain.

As many times as I've visited Switzerland's Alps, I still get goose bumps when contemplating their majesty. And I've discovered that, by far, the best -- not to mention the most economical -- way to experience their fresh Alpine air, snow-capped peaks and wildflower strewn paths is on two feet. In past years, I had stayed in moderately priced inns and hotels in the valleys and made day trips on foot to the mountains. On another occasion I took a guided tour with Butterfield and Robinson, the well-known organizers of luxury hiking and biking excursions.

On those outings, I'd noticed intriguing mountain huts and pensions high in the mountains -- and was amazed to learn how cheap they were. Other hikers I encountered explained that you could hike from hut to hut with ease in a day. So on my most recent trip, I decided to experience them firsthand. After a full day of trekking, I was gratified by the pleasant aerobic high and sense of accomplishment I felt -- and, after an evening of convivial chatter with fellow hikers from all around the world, pleased that I was sleeping like a rock. And even with the Swiss franc nudging historic highs, it was costing me little more than a similar trip anywhere else in the world.

The words "budget" and "Switzerland" sure aren't often used in the same sentence. Yet the Swiss are a notoriously thrifty people and they've actually managed to make their country's most memorable experience -- hiking in the justifiably famous *Alpen* -- surprisingly affordable.

The trick is an extensive network of inexpensive mountain huts and inns that offer basic room and board to hikers for decidedly un-Swiss prices. They range from rustic dorm-style accommodations

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(*hütte*, singular *hut*) high in the Alps to simple but pleasing mountain inns. Many of these are operated by the [Swiss Alpine Club](#), similar to the U.S.-based Appalachian Mountain Club; others are privately owned. All of them offer clean, if simple, accommodations along with spine-tingling views and solid, home-cooked meals.

Although most sleeping arrangements are in dorm-style rooms containing from eight to as many as 20 hikers, some huts and most inns offer a handful of smaller private rooms, ideal for a couple or family. You might even be able to grab a hot shower (generally, the higher the elevation, the less likelihood of finding such a luxury). Mountain inns offer a bit more pampering. They're usually found at lower altitudes but still can only be reached by hiking -- or, in some cases, by a mountain railway or cable car. Reservations are recommended in the peak summer months of July and August.

The Heights of Splendor

□ If you're reading this from the United States you might wonder, why cross the Atlantic all the way to Europe to go hiking, when we have amazing scenery stateside -- in the Rockies, for example? For starters, nowhere else but the Alps will you find so many soaring, awe-inspiring peaks in such a compact area. And in Switzerland, the world capital of tidiness and organization, hiking is especially pleasant thanks to a wealth of clearly marked and well-maintained trails, plus, even more important, an extensive system of ski lifts, cog railways, post buses and other means of conveyance to supplement your two feet or to give you a lift if you're feeling pooped. And finally, there's the cultural angle: the chance to mingle with fellow hikers from all around the world and experience the colorful culture of the towns and cities in a hospitable country where English is widely spoken.

Also, don't be discouraged by the Swiss senior citizens racing past you on the trails; after all, they live in a vertical world and have adapted to it (on one of my past trips, my guide must have been 75 years old if he was a day, and I could barely keep up with him. I dismissed him after the second day rather than continue the race.) Take the trails at your own pace, and rest when you need to. How much ground you'll cover depends on how fit you are (it's a good idea to get in shape with weekend hikes before you leave) and how much you want to see in a given day. If you need to take a breather, do what I do: stop and listen to a rushing waterfall mingled with the chirps of countless crickets; watch the multicolored butterflies and bees flit around the profuse and varied wildflowers. Pretend to take a picture (definitely bring a camera!), sip some water, slather on some sunscreen and chill for a bit.

Hiking routes are marked with yellow signs that show approximate walking times rather than distance. Most of the trails described below are fairly easy and don't require a guide or special hiking skills. In general, throughout Switzerland, trails with yellow markers are suitable for anyone wearing "sensible shoes" (such as running shoes), with no need for special equipment. Signs marked in white/red/white, however, do require weatherproof clothing, footwear with non-slip soles and a certain amount of caution.

Two areas worth considering as a base, both in the French-speaking Valais region, are [Saas-Fee](#) and [Zermatt](#), since both offer a high concentration of mountain inns and huts within an easy day's hike of each other. What follows is a suggested itinerary, with many options, for hiking from hut-to-hut or from hut-to-mountain-inn in these two areas.

Do You Know the Way to Saas-Fee? □

Reaching Saas-Fee from anywhere in Switzerland is easy, thanks to an efficient system of trains and [Post Buses](#). The trip takes about 4.5 hours from Zurich, including a final stretch by post bus.

Upon arrival in the town of Saas-Fee, your first hiking goal might be the [Britannia Hut](#) (tel. 27/957-2288), celebrating its 100th year in operation in 2012, with 134 beds. There are several ways to cover the approximately three miles from town, and you can supplement your leg power by using mountain gondolas such as the [Felskinn lift](#) followed by a fairly easy 40-minute walk across the Chessjen glacier.

You can also take the Plattjen route (a four-hour walk) or the Plattjen gondola, followed by a two-hour walk to the Britannia Hut, whose recent modernization has added to its appeal.

From here you can explore some of the higher elevations if you're game, or head off for the next-nearest accommodations, the privately-owned Berghotel Almagelleralp.

Sitting on the fieldstone sun terrace listening to accordion music, surrounded by snow-capped mountains on all sides, you'll find it an ideal place to feast on a heaping plate of pasta with tomato sauce. The rooms here are slightly more upscale than at the average SAC huts, and there's a double room available if communal sleeping isn't for you (reserve well in advance).

Your next goal might be the [SAC Almagell Hut](#), a climb of 3,000 feet (you'll probably want to overnight, but the hardy can make it there and back in a day with an early start from the Berghotel Almagelleralp). Or head for the [SAC Weissmies Hut](#) (tel. 27/957-2554), a walk that should take no more than three hours and traverses the Alpenblumen Promenade, with its bounty of delicate



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alpine flowers, many of which are identified with explanatory plaques. Originally dating from 1925, the Weissmies Hut, a well-kept stone building of three stories, sleeps 135 hikers in rooms mostly holding 6 to 12 people (there are smaller rooms for the use of families with children). It's kept spotless by the amiable hosts, Herr and Frau Anthamatten. From here, it's an easy hike down to Saas-Fee or the neighboring village of Saas Grund (to save time, you can take the Kreuzboden ski lift part of the way).

On to Zermatt □

From Saas-Fee it's possible to take a combination of post bus and [Swiss rail](#) to Zermatt (the trip takes about 2.5 hours and is so scenic you won't want it to end), where a half-dozen inviting mountain inns and SAC huts are strategically placed for your hiking pleasure. Once you arrive in Zermatt, a car-less ski village usually associated with the jet set, take the Metro Alpin ski lift to the top. From there, it's a bit of a hike up to the 45-bed, privately run Fluhalp Hut (tel. 27/967-2597) - about an hour and 15 minutes with frequent rests, because the climb is often steep; the inn's red shutters and dark timbers are indeed a sight for sore legs.

The sun terrace, overlooking the Matterhorn, bustles with hungry and thirsty hikers in summer, babbling in all languages and quaffing tall glasses of Cardinal beer to wash down entrees such as hash browns, ham, eggs and a bountiful salad bar. In good weather, you could happily sit here all day reading a book, sipping a cold drink and gazing at this priceless scenery. And you might feel sorry, as I did, for the poor staff running around serving lunch, seemingly oblivious to all this beauty.

Inside, the 35 rooms (10 of them private) are tidy and simple, and amazingly cheap for Switzerland (most of the huts described here won't set you back more than \$35 or \$40 per night, even with the Swiss franc reaching parity with the U.S. dollar -- though hot showers cost a bit extra).

You might decide that enough hiking is enough and overnight here. Or the fit and adventurous might opt for another 5.5 hour (or so) hike to the 78-bed SAC's [Täsch Hut](#) (tel. 27/967-3913) where time constraints would require you to spend the night, or, if you're tired of all this communal living, you might want to continue on to the 37-bed [Bärghüs Grünsee](#) (tel. 27/967-2553), a relatively easy hour-long walk. Dating from 1887 but completely renovated in 1985, its five private rooms with private bath are adorable and spotless, with lace curtains, radios and simple but new pine furnishings; the shared accommodations (21 beds) are similar. Like many of the inns described here, this one is open from mid-June through September (sometimes later if the weather's nice) and then again for ski season in December. Nearby, there's a small mountain lake for swimming.

Ready for more hiking?

From here, it's a 30- to 40-minute hike to the Riffelberg Station of the Gornergrat mountain railway, an easy way to reach yet another mountain lodge, the [Hotel Riffelberg](#) (tel. 27/966-6500), one stop up the mountain. It's also worthwhile to take the train to the top (or, for the hardy, to hike up), because the views are mesmerizing (from the summit there you can take a ski lift even farther up, or explore on foot). The hotel, dating from 1855, offers both regular hotel rooms and dormitory accommodations, along with a full-service restaurant and spectacular views of the surrounding peaks. Hotel rooms (but not dorms) have such luxuries as minibars and TV; there's also a sauna and Jacuzzi for guest use. But you can combine privacy and savings by choosing one of the three double-bed rooms in the dorm building, which go for the same price as the larger 10-bed room. The shared toilets and showers here, like the rooms themselves, could use some updating but are perfectly serviceable and clean.

After visiting the top of the mountain, you can take the train back down to Zermatt and then explore another area of the region that's teeming with huts and inns. Begin by hiking to the five-room [Hotel Edelweiss](#) (tel. 27/967-2236, about an hour's uphill walk from the town center. After five to 10 minutes of uphill climbing past wooden farm huts and chalets with red geraniums bursting from window boxes, you'll be beyond the settled part of Zermatt. The uphill climb is somewhat strenuous, but like the majority of hikes described here, it's not technically difficult. The view may be so enticing that you'll decide to overnight. Otherwise, from here you can hike up to the [Berggasthaus du Trift](#) (tel. 79/408-7020) with nine private rooms and a 30-bed dormitory), at the end of an ascent less steep than the one you've just made (it's a 1,300-foot climb and should take another hour). This historic mountain hotel is open from the end of June through September and the present owners, Fabienne Biner and her ski guide/instructor husband Hugo, rescued it from dereliction in 1994. The rooms are simply furnished in that knotty pine, Swiss-mountain sort of way.

From here, there are several options. For the fit and adventurous, it's a daylong (six hours, round-trip) hike up to the Mettelhorn (at just over 11,000 feet). Meanwhile, the SAC's 70-bed [Schonbiel Hut](#) (tel. 27/967-1354) is about three hours; you'll need to overnight. Finally, in two hours you can reach the SAC's 68-bed [Rothorn Hut](#) (tel. 27/967-2043).

These itineraries are just a small sampling of the possibilities in these regions; for others, here and elsewhere in the Swiss Alps, a useful guide is [100 Hut Walks in the Alps](#) by Kev Reynolds (January 2010 edition).

But wherever your wanderlust takes you, bring along comfortable and sturdy hiking shoes, UV protection, a pair of hiking poles, a compass and map and a sense of adventure. You're sure to return fitter, leaner (I lost a good 10 pounds on my last trek), and more relaxed -- and with more money in your pocket than you might have imagined.

If you go:

The best times of year for hiking in the Alps are from late June to early September. Prices vary with the ever-changing (and strengthening, it seems) Swiss franc, but most accommodations with meals are well under \$50-60 per night, far less than you'd spend in the typical Swiss hotel. There are sometimes substantial discounts for students and children as well as for members of the Swiss Alpine Club or the American Alpine Club (AAC).

For topographical hiking maps of the Alps (or anywhere else), a good source is [Omni Resources](#) in Burlington, North Carolina (800/742-2677).

[Switzerland Tourism](#) in New York can provide more details on hiking throughout the country, as well as the Swisspass from [RailEurope](#) which covers rail and postal bus travel throughout Switzerland and also offers discounts on most ski lifts. Contact the tourist office at 011-800/100-200-31 (international toll free), 212/757-5944, or at 608 Fifth Ave., New York NY 10020.

When calling the phone numbers in this article from the United States, first dial 011-41; from elsewhere in Switzerland, simply punch 0 first.

Getting there: Although airfares from the U.S. to Switzerland remain pricey, there are sometimes quite amazing sales if you hit it right. In addition to sites such as [TripAdvisor.com/Flights](#), [Airfarewatchdog.com](#) [lists fares](#) when there are unusually good sales, but these deals tend to come and go quickly so act fast when one appears. (Last year, for example, Delta had sale fares to Zurich for under \$500 round-trip including tax for summer travel). Also, sign up for email alerts from [Swiss International Airlines](#), whose website sometimes sells fares for less than you'll find anywhere else.

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