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Leukerbad: The Height of Wellness in the Swiss Alps

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By Athena Lucero

In all its hidden beauty and tranquility the alpine village of Leukerbad is Switzerland's nirvana. During my visit to the southwestern canton of Valais, this paradise of vineyards, sheer cliffs, glaciers and the source of the largest thermal springs in the Alps took my breath away.

The therapeutic waters lured the ancient Romans, too, when they made the arduous journey over the mountains to relax and heal in springs that are rich in calcium, gypsum and sulfur. Once word spread about Leukerbad's special waters, visitors have never stopped coming.

I had ventured to higher altitudes after traveling around the lower elevations of Lake Geneva in the canton of Vaud. Then the road less traveled led me to the extraordinary landscape of the Valais, home to some of the highest Alpine peaks at more than 12,000 feet above sea level.

On that picture-perfect day my guide, David Kesten, and I rode the cable car up to Gemmi Pass, the historic region that first connected southern and northern Switzerland. At the top (elevation 7,600 feet) a glorious natural world awaited – the Daubenhorn glacier, a peaceful lake, walking and hiking trails, stunning views of Leukerbad in the valley below and across the horizon the Matterhorn.

Today a state-of-the-art steel viewing platform built in July 2011 juts 33 feet off the terrace of the Wildstrubel Restaurant and invites visitors to experience the rare sensation of hovering in midair over the valley. If only the Romans - and the pilgrims, traders, Lenin, Pablo Picasso, Mark Twain and the fictional Sherlock Holmes who also made the trek to Gemmi Pass – could only see it now!

Back down at 4,600 feet, we took an invigorating stroll around the village.

"People here walk the streets every day, and there aren't many flat places in the village," Kesten said as I caught my breath walking beside him. "The quality of life in Leukerbad has everything to do with the thermal baths. If you have a healthy body, you have a healthy mind."

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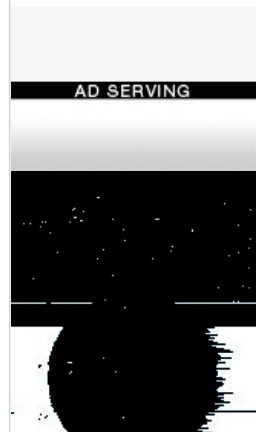
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The village, which dates back to the 13th century, was also full of charm and mystique. The maze of narrow pathways led me up, down and around its compact arrangement of slate and wood chalets darkened through the centuries.

The isolation of Leukerbad intrigued American writer James Baldwin when he stayed at a friend's chalet in 1951. Intending to visit just two weeks, he returned each winter for the next two years and wrote his essay, "A Stranger in the Village."

Guests from around the world come to the baths not only to relax and rejuvenate, but also to heal allergies, rheumatism, and bone or joint conditions. Athletes who come in search of altitude training and travelers who yearn for an active vacation can find a year-round playground at Leukerbad. Its modern sports center offers everything from tennis, squash and a gym to beach volleyball, an indoor football pitch and ice skating.

The range of outdoor sports is plentiful and surprising, too: running and walking, hiking, fishing, golf, mountaineering on Switzerland's longest and steepest via ferrata (roped course of steel cables along the face of the Daubenhorn cliffs) and catamaran sailing at Europe's highest catamaran school. In winter downhill and cross-country skiing, sledging and snowshoeing are also available.

At the end of the day there's a heavenly thermal soak for everyone. Of the 30 hotels in Leukerbad, only a handful have the distinction of being wellness hotels because they are built directly at a thermal spring source, allowing guests private access to the thermal baths.

Four outstanding public wellness centers around the village, however, offer locals and visitors year-round access to the thermal baths. Built in 1980, the Burgerbad spa complex, ideal for families, offers 10 indoor and outdoor thermal pools, a rock grotto, spa treatments and a children's pool with multiple water slides.

The Lindner Alpenherme wellness temple, built in 1993, has indoor and outdoor thermal pools as well as spa and beauty treatments, massage therapy, Roman-Irish Bath Ritual, and a Valais sauna village. It's also staffed with medical doctors specializing in sports medicine, osteopathy and physiotherapy. Pools at the Volksheibad Spa contain unfiltered thermal water, and the Leukerbad Rehabilitation Center (an accredited Swiss Olympic Medical Center) works with athletes or individuals recovering from injuries.

I learned more about Leukerbad's healing waters during an eye-opening walking tour along the Thermal Spring Path and Canyon Trek led by Brigitte Zun Ruffin (available June to October).

"Of the 64 registered thermal springs eight are in use" Zun Ruffin explained as she pointed out various thermal spring sources around the village.

Today more than a million gallons of thermal water at temperatures up to 124 degrees Fahrenheit flows daily from the springs - the largest reserve of thermal water in Europe - and feeds 30 thermal pools.

The thermal canyon trek was easy yet exhilarating on the steel walkway along the canyon wall and just a few feet above the flowing Dala River (it's also wheelchair accessible). It was worth every step when we crossed the suspension bridge over the river and reached the Dala Gorge, its roaring waters gushing down from the glacier.

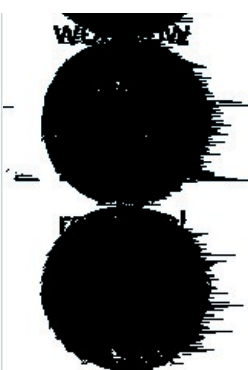
Kesten was right when he said Leukerbad is all about wellness - rest, fresh mountain air and strength from the mountains. I happily embraced this healthy concept the whole time I was there. One day he and I embarked on Leukerbad's newest excursion: cycling on e-bikes 10 miles down to the train station in Leuk (my luggage was delivered to the station). The chance to take in the full beauty of the Valais up-close became a reality with the village's new fleet of motorized bikes, the only way to cycle leisurely through the steep Alps.

Without breaking a sweat we cycled effortlessly on- and off-road through spectacular mountain scenery, overlooking the magnificent valley, passing Albinen - one of Switzerland's best-preserved mountain villages - and riding through the lush vineyards of Switzerland's largest wine-producing region. Of the 40-plus grape varieties grown in the area Chasselas and Johannisberg (white) and Pinot Noir (red) reign supreme.

A visit to the Valais is not complete without a stop at a wine cellar, so we detoured for a light lunch and wine-tasting at Keller zur Grotte in the village of Varen, where we met up with winemaker Cornelius Lauter. Not quite 30 years old, he started winemaking at 16 and continues the craft that has been his family's legacy for generations. Lauter offered a brief tour of the cellar and explained the region's high standards placed on viticulture, grape cultivation techniques and respect for the environment.

Before we hit the road on the last leg to the train station, we relaxed on the terrace overlooking the vineyards and savored a traditional Valais Plate - thin slices of dried meats, beef and pork sausage, rye bread and cheeses produced in the Alps paired with the cellar's award-winning wines - a good way to end a visit to the Shangri-la this part of the Alps has become.

WHEN YOU GO



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For more information about Leukerbad and the canton of Valais: www.leukerbad.ch, www.valais.ch, www.myswitzerland.com

The Swiss Pass (which must be purchased before leaving the United States) affords unlimited travel throughout Switzerland via train, trams, buses and boats: www.swiss-pass.ch.

My nonstop flight from Los Angeles to Zurich was on Swiss (voted Europe's best airline): www.swiss.com.

My hotel was the Mercure Bristol, which was built above a thermal spring source with a view of waterfalls cascading down cliffs that towered over the village: www.bristolhotel.ch

For additional hotel listings: www.leukerbad.ch


Athena Lucero is a freelance travel writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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