

ICONIC

\ TRAVEL \

Go Palatial on the Glacier Express

by DENA ROCHE



Photo by Stefan Schlumpf

Enjoy breathtaking scenery and world-class pampering on the Glacier Express.

In today's hectic world, time is becoming one of the greatest luxuries of all. For travelers who want to indulge, a journey on Switzerland's iconic **Glacier Express**, the slowest express train in the world, is a chance to tune out, be pampered and appreciate some of the finest scenery on the planet in style.

This March, the famous train launches its new Excellence Class, taking train travel to new levels of luxury. In development for more than four years, these two new coach cars will give 20 lucky people per coach the opportunity to roll through the Alps at a level of luxury never before seen.

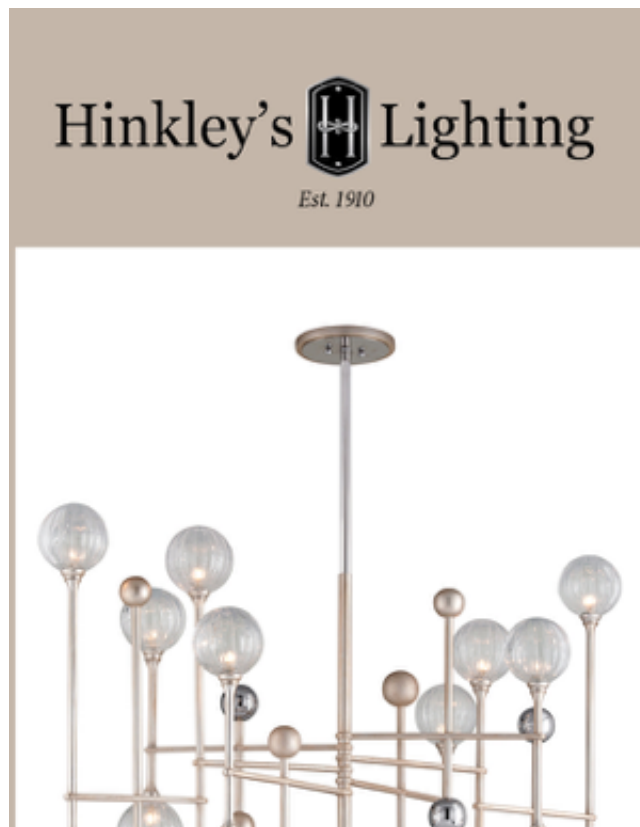




Photo by Stefan Schlumpf

I was one of a small group of media invited to experience Excellence Class before the official launch. I've always felt first class train travel in Switzerland was comfortable, but Excellence Class, which was like a decked out private jet, took it to another level.

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In Excellence Class everyone is in a row of one, meaning no fighting for the best view out the window. The seats are plusher, larger and more comfortable than in first class, and there are buttons to customize it to your liking. With an eight-hour journey from St. Moritz to Zermatt ahead, I quickly increase the lumbar support, recline and settle in.

The coach is outfitted in light airy colors complemented with wood and large panoramic windows. At the back there is a full-service bar, and soon the Excellence Class concierge is welcoming me onboard with a glass of Laurent Perrier bubbly. Sure it's only 9:30 am in St. Moritz, but it's five somewhere, and it's time to lift a glass to cheers the start of the journey.



Photo by Stefan Schlumpf

The first Glacier Express run was 89 years ago, and I'm sure those pioneering Alpine tourists would be amazed at the creature comforts aboard this new version. Today, stunning mountain views are paired with a seven-course meal that languidly stretches across nearly all eight hours of the journey. With each

dish matched with a wine, I wonder if I will simply stumble onto the platform in Zermatt in a culinary and vino-induced coma.

The Glacier Express runs either from St. Moritz to Zermatt, like I did, or in the reverse. In the summer there are eight trains, four in each direction, per day.

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As we blow the whistle to leave St. Moritz, we're each given iPads that contain information and an audio guide for the route. While there are several important sites along the way, I'm often just content to look out the window and enjoy the view. The steep mountains, snow peaks, sheer rock faces and meandering rivers don't need me to know their pedigree to know this is Mother Nature at her best.

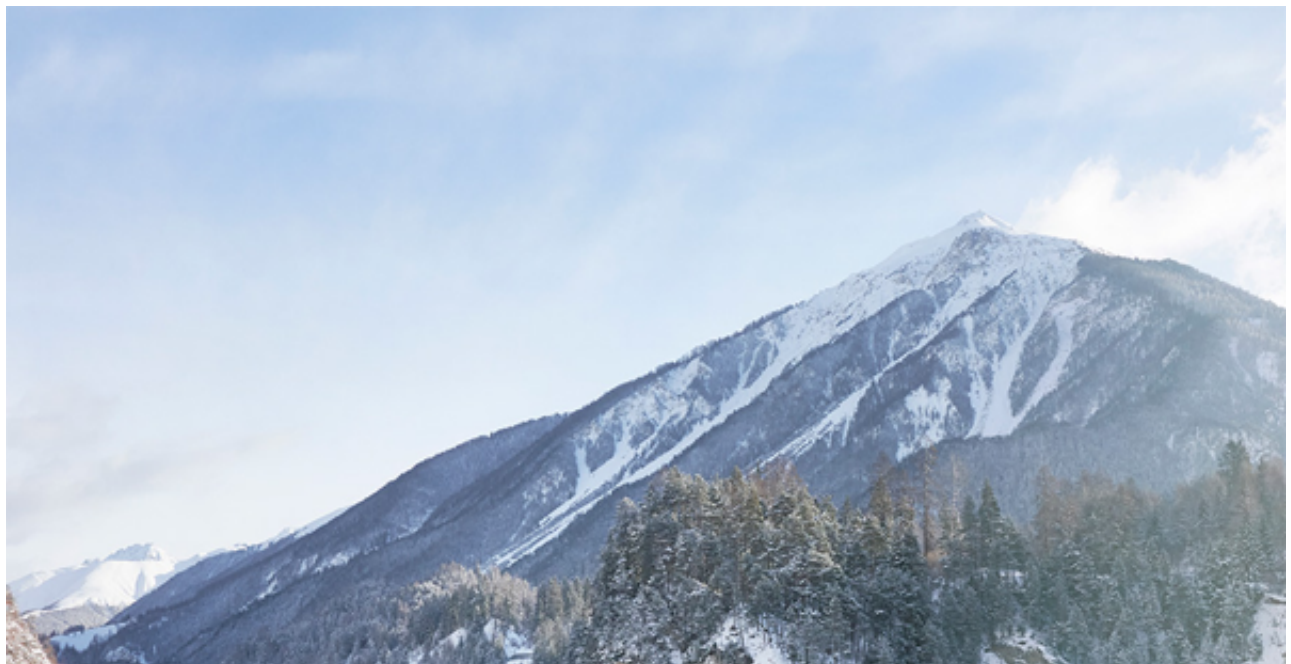




Photo by Stefan Schlumpf

That being said, shortly after leaving St. Moritz, we're on the Abula Railway. An engineering marvel featuring 55 bridges and 39 tunnels, it's one of the most impressive narrow gauge railways in the world and in 2008 was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Chugging over the 215-foot high Landwasser Viaduct I try to get a picture of the entire train as it snakes its way across.

But capturing what I see with a camera is a challenge throughout the trip. Because the Glacier Express crosses 291 bridges, plows through 91 tunnels and climbs to a peak elevation of more than 6,600 feet, building an outdoor viewing platform wasn't an option. What this means is that I have to fight the crowd by the two very small lowered windows in the entrance to lean out to get a shot, or press my camera lens directly to the window by my seat to avoid a nasty glare.

As we pass over the famous viaduct, we enter unspoiled countryside. The Parc Ela, Switzerland's largest natural park emerges with its sharp, rugged peaks, glaciers and mountain lakes before giving way to the land of Heidi, the area

glaciers and mountain lakes before giving way to the land of Heidi, the area made famous by the children's book author Johanna Spyri. It's during this stretch that if you're luckier than me, you'll see alpine animals, including the most majestic mountain roamer, the ibex.



Shortly before noon, the gourmet gluttony commences with a plate of appetizers and Swiss white wine to get the palette ready. The kitchen on the train is the size of a New York galley, and it's hard to imagine that the chefs turn out 200 multi-course meals, all made on the train, each day. My meal follows with a trout salad, pea soup, beef entrée, cheese course, chocolate cake and an afternoon tea with petit fours.

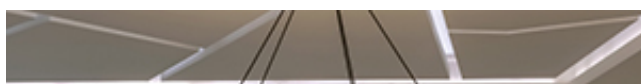
While food enhances the journey, it's the scenery out the window that is the focus of my attention. Soon the Rhine Gorge comes into view. Created by a rock fall in the Alps more than 10,000 years ago, the area is known as Switzerland's Grand Canyon with sandstone towers jutting nearly 1,150 feet high. Before the

town of Disentis, the Greina Plateau, an area with a unique biosphere, considered one of the most natural undiscovered parts of the country comes into view.



At this point, the Glacier Express begins its major ascent to the Oberalp pass, nearly 6,600 feet above sea level. Oddly, at the top is a lighthouse, which only makes sense when you read that it is a replica of one that stood at the end of the Rhine, and now marks this point, which is the beginning of Europe's famous river. High up in the Alps we also pass the Rhone Glacier, the source point for the Rhone River.

As we close in on the end point of the journey, we're in an area known as Glacier Land, which includes the Aletsch Glacier, the most impressive glacier in the Alps, containing 27 billion tons of water.





50 Years of
Design Excellence





Photo by Stefan Schlumpf

The Glacier Express journey culminates with one of the most impressive views of the trip, as the Matterhorn in Zermatt comes into view. The Matterhorn is more than 14,000 feet high and with its instantly recognizable sheer face, the most famous mountain in Switzerland. It's the perfect way to end a day filled with the splendor of Mother Nature.

Stay Longer

With the Glacier Express starting and ending in two amazing Swiss mountain towns, it makes sense to turn the day trip into a total vacation before and after the journey.



Kulm Hotel

Back in 1864, Johannes Badrutt, singlehandedly ushered in winter tourism in St. Moritz when he built the **Kulm Hotel** and offered wealthy British tourists a free stay if they didn't love the Alps in winter. Today you can still stay in this historic five-star property. Make sure to book one of 40 rooms that were just renovated by famous French designer, Pierre-Yves Rochon. Enjoy a day skiing at **Corviglia**, the site of two Winter Olympics and countless World



Klein Matterhorn

While St. Moritz is a see-and-be-seen town, Zermatt has a more laid-back ski village vibe. Stay at **Mont Cervin Palace**, the city's first luxury hotel in the heart of town. While trekking the Matterhorn should only be done by serious mountaineers, anyone who can stomach **Europe's highest gondola ride** can get a stunning view from Klein Matterhorn, which sits just slightly below the Matterhorn. The jaw-dropping scenery at the top is otherworldly. Don't miss the Glacier Paradise