

# The Best Way To Travel Through Switzerland



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## Story and photos by Carol Canter

We looped through Switzerland on a 15-day Swiss Travel Pass one glorious May, taking panoramic train journeys through legendary mountain passes, boat rides across shimmering silver lakes and cable car rides to postcard-perfect Alpine villages and peaks.

With almost everything included in the Swiss Travel Pass — even museums and heritage sites — travel through Switzerland was seamless and easy to plan. Service was friendly,



helpful and multilingual.

## What to Expect

Swiss trains are punctual, efficient, immaculate and modern, as their reach extends throughout the nation. And the remarkable Swiss rail network, with its winding switchback tunnels and circular viaducts, has been engineered to navigate the treacherous mountain landscape like Swiss clockwork.



All Aboard the Bernina Express

Our own rail system in the U.S. lags shamefully far behind on every one of these points.

Our journey aboard Swiss rail was train travel for dreamers. Landscapes unfurled like brilliant canvases of chalet-studded emerald slopes where robust Brown Swiss cows graze in seeming ecstasy, snow-streaked mountains whose saw-toothed peaks reach to



the heavens, hillsides with vineyards so steep one is incredulous that workers get their footing to plant, cultivate and harvest the grapes.



Vineyards rise from Lac Leman

Why did I think I'd read books when such cinematic splendor was taking place just beyond my seat? Waterfalls thundered, rivers raged, and wildflowers splashed moors and meadows with exuberant colors.





Snowy peak with flowers

Chateaux stood stately atop cliffs, weathered wood houses were framed in purple wisteria, and the clean lines of church steeples emerged from the center of every pristine Swiss village.





Garden of Friendship, Interlaken, Switzerland's first Japanese garden

Our trip was bookmarked by two of Switzerland's standout panorama rail journeys, the Gotthard Panorama Express (formerly known as the Wilhelm Tell Express) and the Bernina Express.





Snowy Swiss peaks



The first, which connects the north and south of Switzerland including such lovely lakefront cities as Locarno, Lugano and Lucerne, has been named one of six best new train journeys in Europe for 2021 by *The Guardian*. One travels via both train and boat. On the rail portion, the train spirals into a dramatic double horseshoe curve, offering a three-in-one perspective on a strategically placed church in the mountain village of Wassen.

Coached by a multilingual personal travel guide who accompanies passengers in the first class carriage, we knew the right moment to look for the church from above, from below, and when it was immediately alongside us. The guide also made sure we had each picked up our Welcome Package before boarding the train, with its cool miniature Swiss Army Knife, food voucher worth almost \$20 and a souvenir travel guide.

The knife and scissors served us well on our picnics while hiking in Switzerland, and the food vouchers paid for most of our lunch aboard the vintage paddlewheel steamer. We ordered the Swiss- German specialty spätzle and cheese and a light asparagus mousse served with a salad of fresh greens with white asparagus and ham in the first class dining room, savoring our meal as we traversed Lake Lucerne in all its magnificence.



The trip from Flüelen, where the train delivered us, to Lucerne takes almost 3 hours, and in full sunshine under blue skies, we relished every nautical mile. Our paddlewheeler ferried passengers between small villages, towns and holiday resorts with splendid old world hotels, passing windsurfers and sailors of every stripe enjoying the Lake Lucerne good life.

The Bernina Express, our panoramic finale, lives up to its “Palms to Glaciers” moniker as it transitions from the sensuous Mediterranean landscape of Ticino near the Italian border past the posh 6,000-foot high ski resort of St. Moritz to the terminus at Chur, Switzerland’s oldest city with its picturesque Old Town.





Chur, Switzerland's oldest city

The express bus between Lugano and Tirano offers up a scenic feast of olive trees, a brilliant blush of exotic flowers and palm-fringed lakes — Lugano, Como and Menaggio — while the epic rail portion between Tirano and Chur is a jaw-dropping high altitude ride through countless bridges and tunnels.





Wilhelm Tell, Swiss national hero on Lake Lugano

The stunning Landwasser Viaduct, a triumph of engineering, is considered the railway's scenic highlight, yet we jockeyed for position with fellow passengers throughout the entire trip.

All were eager to document our sleek red train with its seat-to-ceiling observation car windows as we skimmed past unparalleled vistas, from a trio of Alpine lakes to the mist-shrouded Morterastch Glacier.





Panoramic windows on the Bernina Express

**A Few Tips:** Here are some tips for seamless travel with the Swiss Travel Pass:

Whenever possible, find out in advance the time required to make a connection, and verify the track number of your next train.

When you're waiting on the track, locate your car number, and where first or second class is located — i.e., in Section A, B or C — to avoid a last minute walk or run.

Find out which trains have dining cars or pack food. Migros is a popular Swiss chain. The one on Marketgasse, the main shopping street in Bern near the railway station, offers a lavish selection of goodies for a nice meal on board: open-faced sandwiches of lachs — “lox” with capers and onions, small shrimp with rosemary and mayo, long baguette sandwiches of tuna, chicken, hams and cheeses.

Bring binoculars to trace the funicular ascending the mountain, the waterfall coursing

down, and to view the distant snowy peaks — perhaps the magnificent Matterhorn!



Aerial sightseeing

Swiss trams are a model of what a peak urban transit experience can be. They're quiet and efficient and run every few minutes wherever you need to go. With pass in hand, you get on and off without a care.

On most— if not all— the trams we took in Switzerland, nobody checked our pass. That makes it easy and tempting for those hopping on and off trams and buses without a pass to avoid paying the fare, especially foreigners who don't intend to cheat, but don't understand the system and where and how to pay. It's not a good idea. Ethical questions aside, the fine is a very stiff 90 CHF (Swiss francs), which is about \$90 for those caught



traveling without a valid ticket.



Don't forget the binoculars... and camera!

We based our sightseeing around what was included in the Swiss Travel Pass, so in

Zurich we made the train to the winter resort of Uri, where we hiked in a forest with hiking trails, Switzerland Travel Rail Travel Swiss Travel Pass Gotthard Panorama Express European Stories, and later cruised Lake Zurich by boat. In Lugano, a boat trip skimmed us along the lake to lovely Gandria. There we followed the gorgeous flower-lined Olive Trail for a memorable hike back to town.

From Lucerne we chose the day trip to Mt. Rigi because it was free, rather than to Mt.

Pilatus where the discount was only 50 percent.

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Red cog rail at Mt. Rigi

It was a magical day, combining a charming red cog rail that chugged us up to the summit, a snowy walk to a panorama that swept in Switzerland, Germany and France, and a hike several miles down the mountain to the cable car station at Rigi Kaltbad. There, people soaked in cliffside mineral pools, part of the new spa designed by Swiss architect Mario Botta, who designed the landmark San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that opened in 1995.





Blue rail at Mt. Rigi

The descent by cable car, gelato by the lake and boat trip back to Lucerne completed another perfect Swiss day.

The pass gave us the flexibility to change our plans at the last minute, so we chose to forego a much-anticipated scenic train ride from the Domodossala to Locarno via the Centovalli Railw due to heavy rains. We headed instead to Bern, a lovely city where the portals kept us dry and Einstein Museum kept us engaged.

### **What You Get**

Contact Rail Europe for details on the various travel passes that access Switzerland's 16,000 r public transport network.

<https://www.raileurope.com/en-us/destinations/passes/swiss-travel-pass>

Here's what you get:

- Unlimited travel on the Swiss Travel system including trains, buses and boats.
- The Swiss Travel Pass is available for 3, 4, 8 or 15 days of consecutive travel.

- The Swiss Travel Pass Flex is available for 3, 4, 8 or 15 days of consecutive or non-consecutive travel within a 1 month period.
- Free access to over 500 Swiss museums.
- Travel bonuses including free or discounted access to various mountain excursions.

For everything about Switzerland travel, including the Swiss Travel Pass, visit <http://www.myswitzerland.com/en-us/home.html>