

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



All aboard the Eiger express

From Grindelwald there is easy access to a snow covered mountain playground extending across three ski resorts, writes **Fiona Russell**

Riding a swift gondola that climbs from Grindelwald in Switzerland past the towering north face of Europe's iconic mountain, the Eiger, I can't help but exhale a stunned "wow".

I stand up, gaze upwards and then turn a slow full circle, looking out of the windows of the large aerial cabin at a spectacular landscape of snow-covered Alpine peaks in the wider Bernese Oberland. Beside the Eiger, with a summit of 3970m, there are other high tops with names that I recognise, including the Münch, reaching to 4099m, the Silberhorn at 3695m and the tallest, Jungfrau at 4158m.

Peering below, I see the smooth, pistoned slopes of the Lauterbrunnen valley, which is part of the wider Jungfrau Ski Region, snaking down through a forest of evergreen trees and linked by a network of chairlifts. A local, who has been sitting quietly

nearby looking at me, looking at the scenery, takes me by surprise as he starts to point out some of his favourite attractions.

"You should ski the Engi run, from the top station down to the Wixi lift, and also the red runs from the Wixi," he says. "Over there, you'll find the Lauberhorn World Cup run, too."

He explains that at 4.3km in length, the Lauberhorn is the world's longest downhill ski race, taking place every year before the opening of the winter season. It strikes me that this man must have ridden the Eiger Express gondola many times and I ask if he ever tires of the views. Without hesitation, he replies: "Never!"

After some thought, he adds: "I live in Grindelwald and every day I see these mountains, but the views

Fantastic ice sculptures offer another feast for the eyes



There are a great mix of runs, from easy greens, through blues, reds and more challenging blacks, main; Grindelwald terminal, above

are always changing because of the seasons and the weather. It is a very special place and the best place to live."

His home – and my destination for a ski holiday – is located in the Bernese Alps, between the northern Swiss canton of Bern and the southern canton of Valais, in western Switzerland. From Grindelwald, located at 1034m elevation – that's higher than many of Scotland's tallest mountains – there is easy access to a mountain playground extending across three resorts, Grindelwald-Wengen, Grindelwald-First and Mürren-Schilthorn and 211km of ski

runs.

In fact, the easy access started at Zurich Airport the day before, where a short walk from the arrivals area took me to a railway station and a very comprehensive timetable of connecting trains. Six of the daily train services are "new and faster", requiring only one station change (at Interlaken Ost) for the two hour, 45 minute journey.

If you know anything about Switzerland, you will be aware that they pride themselves on efficient and timely trains. During one journey during my stay, I'm amazed to hear an announcement apologising for the service being 30 seconds late. Grindelwald train station is also just one stop from a vast modern ski terminal building, where the Eiger Express and another recently upgraded gondola whizzes passengers high into the Grindelwald-Wengen ski area. The Männlichen gondola cableway takes just 19 minutes to travel 6239m in distance and gain some 1280 metres vertical. It is capable of transporting 1900 people per hour.

There is capacity to carry another

2200 passengers each hour by the Eiger Express, which is acclaimed as the world's longest tricable gondola at 6483m in length. Each of the 44 cabins has 26 heated seats and reaches a slightly higher point in the resort, Eigerletscher (Eiger Glacier) at 2320m elevation.

This glacier station is also the start point of an historic mountain railway, which, remarkably, was built between 1896 and 1912. The Jungfrau Railway – the highest in Europe – climbs 9km to the Jungfrauoch at 3454m elevation. As before, the vistas are breath-taking. It was worth braving the icy wind to walk on to a viewing platform to survey the panorama, with the Aletsch Glacier, the longest in the Alps at more than 20km, on one side and the many pointed peaks of the Swiss Mittelland on the other.

Still cold but away from the biting wind, I also enjoyed a walk through tunnels of mirror smooth ice walls inside the glacier. Fantastic ice sculptures offer another feast for the eyes. A Top of Europe Flagship Store is a treasure trove of many of the country's traditional souvenirs, including watches, chocolates and Swiss Army knives. But it's the skiing that is the main attraction of my trip and from the door of the glacier station a beautifully groomed slope beckons me downwards.

There's a delightful 1377m of elevation drop to return to Grindelwald base, although I accumulate far more ascent and descent over several days of exploring the resort on a great mix of runs, from easy greens, through blues, reds and more challenging blacks.

I also experience those ever-changing views that the man in the Eiger Express extolled. From morning as the sun rose, through sunshine and blue sky, drifting mist, heavy snow clouds, back to clear skies and to the setting sun, the mountainscape in the Jungfrau region is astonishingly beautiful. I learn later that the Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch is designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. It does not surprise me.



Plan your trip

Getting to Grindelwald

Fly direct from Edinburgh to Zurich Airport with Swiss International Air Lines. There are also regular flights from London Heathrow, London City and Manchester airports. See: www.swiss.com

Take a train from Zurich Airport to Interlaken Ost and on to Grindelwald. See <https://www.sbb.ch/en> If you have a Jungfrau Winter Sport Pass, trains from Interlaken Ost to Grindelwald are included. See www.jungfrau.ch/en-gb.

Where to stay

Romantik Hotel Schweizerhof, Grindelwald. See: hotel-schweizerhof.com

Where to eat

Romantik Hotel Schweizerhof Barry's Restaurant in the Hotel Eiger. See: <https://www.eiger-grindelwald.ch/en/>

Skiing in the Jungfrau Ski Region

Jungfrau Winter Sport Pass: Adult price, CHF 75 for one day and CHF 385 for 6 days. Young people aged 16 to 19, CHF 45 and CHF 247; children 6 to 15, CHF 38 and CHF 183; seniors aged over 62, CHF 68 and CHF 347. Connecting ticket to Jungfrauoch –Top of Europe is CHF 63 with the Skipass Jungfrau. See: www.jungfrau.ch/en-gb

Grindelwald Terminal doubles as a ski station and shopping centre and also has restaurants, a hospitality suite, ski rental at Intersport Rent-Netzwerk – and ski lockers for hire.



The Jungfrau Railway – the highest in Europe, above; an upgraded gondola, top

PORTUGAL PLEASE



Go with the

Sunny winter days in a revitalised Lisbon are a delight, says Neil Geraghty

I'm in the bustling central market, the Mercado de Ribeira, and after a busy morning's sightseeing I'm in need of a break. I join a queue at Manteigaria, an artisan bakery, where trays of pastéis de nata fresh from the oven lie glistening on the counter.

Order a galão, a long milky coffee and rather greedily two pastéis de nata, which I take across the street to a sunny esplanade that stretches along the river Tagus to Lisbon's palatial central square, the Praça de Comércio.

Until recently this district was a jumble of rundown warehouses intersected by roaring traffic, but following a recent redevelopment is now an attractive landscaped promenade with ergonomic park benches carefully positioned to capture the maximum sunshine. At Praça de Comércio I sit down on a newly built flight of steps that leads down to a beach where children are running around exploring rock pools and throwing seaweed at each other. Gazing out at the magnificent river estuary sparkling in the winter sunshine, it's hard to believe that I'm sitting in the centre of a major European capital city.

The redevelopment of Praça de Comércio is the latest in a long line

of projects that have transformed Lisbon's riverside from a workaday port to a world class leisure amenity. The centrepiece is the newly renovated Sul Sueste railway station, an elegant Art Deco building that is now home to bars, shops and companies offering boat trips on the Tagus. The cheapest and most flexible tour is Lisboa, a hop on, hop off ferry that stops at some of the most scenic points along the river.

It's only from the water that you can appreciate the full beauty of Lisbon's magnificent location. Before reaching the city the Tagus flows into the Straw Sea, a 20km wide shallow bay that gets its name from the rippling light effects that skim across its surface. It then flows past Lisbon's historic centre which is built on seven hills topped by castles, palaces and ornate Baroque churches.

A few miles further on it reaches the sea shortly beyond Belem where it's worth hopping ashore for a few hours to explore the town's wealth of historic attractions. These include the Torre de Belem, a romantic 16th century castle bristling with turrets and heraldic stone carvings which is located on a tiny offshore island. Lovers of pastéis de nata should make a beeline for Pastéis de Belem an olde worlde cafe covered in blue and



Lisbon flow

white tiles where the world famous egg tarts were invented and where the chefs are sworn to secrecy not to reveal the original recipe.

The following morning I head over to Lisbon's Oriente district to visit the Parque de Nações, a sprawling park built along the shore of the Straw Sea which was the site of Expo 98, the last world fair of the 20th century. The futuristic pavilions built for the Expo are now home to galleries and restaurants and are the backdrop to numerous art installations that include a colossal statue of an Iberian Lynx assembled from discarded plastics and electronics by Portuguese artist Bordalo II.

In autumn, eagle-eyed passengers might be able to spot flocks of flamingos

A scenic cable car runs along the seafront which has spectacular views over the Straw Sea. In autumn, eagle-eyed passengers might be able to spot flocks of flamingos wading in the Tagus Estuary Nature Reserve, the largest wetlands sanctuary in Portugal. The Tagus Estuary is one of the most important stopping off points for birds migrating between Europe and Africa and birding enthusiasts shouldn't miss the new visitor centre EVOA which runs fascinating guided tours and

A tram in the Praça de Comércio, main; coffee and a pastéis de nata, top; Cabo da Roca Lighthouse, above

photography workshops.

In the afternoon I head back to Cais de Sodre station and take a scenic train journey along the Tagus to Cascais, an ancient village of cobbled streets and fishermen's cottages which is now one of the most upmarket seaside resorts in the Lisbon region.

From the station regular buses leave for Cabo de Roca, mainland Europe's most westerly point, where footpaths lead down to secluded surfing beaches flanked by towering cliffs. It's a blustery sunny afternoon when I arrive at the Cape and below a pretty red and white lighthouse thunderous waves are crashing against the rocks sending plumes of spray high into the sky.

The Cabo da Roca was once known as the End of the World and listening to the roar of the ocean I can imagine the thrilling sense of adventure the great Portuguese explorers must have felt as they sailed out of the Tagus into the Atlantic and took one last look at their homeland.

For more holiday ideas in the Lisbon region visit www.visitlisboa.com Neil stayed at the 4 star Czar Hotel where rooms start at £77 per night including breakfast, www.czarlisbonhotel.com

STAYCATIONS

The weekend city breaks in the UK to take this year

New museums, exhibitions and concert halls make for attractive urban trips, says Sarah Marshall

Art exhibitions, historic museums and lively music concerts are all a lure for spending time in cities. But you don't have to hop over into Europe to enjoy a cultural, action-packed weekend. These urban centres in the UK have an excellent programme of events and openings planned for the year ahead.

Bristol

Celebrating its 650th birthday in 2023, this hip, offbeat city in the southwest has a programme of events planned throughout the year. During the annual International Balloon Fiesta (August 10-13), 100 hot air balloons will fill the sky, while back at sea level, the Harbour Festival (July 14-16) is a maritime spectacle with family-friendly on-water activities.

Later in the year, the newly-refurbished Bristol Beacon (formerly known as Colston Hall) will open as a state-of-the-art concert hall, with two international standard performance venues, a restaurant, and its cellars in use as education spaces.

Stay: Hotel du Vin has rooms from £89 per night (hotelduvin.com). Go to visitbristol.co.uk

Aberdeen

Not all city breaks feature a backdrop of concrete high rises. Few people realise Scotland's mini metropolis is one of the few urban spaces with a golden sandy beach on its doorstep. Washed by the North Sea, this is also one of the best places in the UK to spot bottlenose dolphins from land. Built using shipping containers and powered by alternative energies, a new not-for-profit eco facility,



The Museum of Liverpool from the Albert Dock

Greyhope Bay, opened last year overlooking Torry Battery. Check out the Nuart street art festival in June (dates still TBC), when walls are transformed into an outdoor gallery.

Stay: The Sandman Signature (sandmansignature.co.uk) has rooms from £60 per night. Go to visitabdn.com

Norwich

The course of British history hung in the balance 340 years ago when a ship carrying royalty ran aground off Great Yarmouth and sank on May 6, 1682. Last year's discovery of HMS Gloucester revived interest in the story, and for the first time, artefacts from Norfolk's Mary Rose will be on display at Norwich Castle Museum and Art Gallery (museums.norfolk.gov.uk) as part of The Last Voyage of the Gloucester: Norfolk's Royal Shipwreck 1682 (February 25 to September 10).

Stay: The Assembly House (assemblyhousenorwich.co.uk) has doubles from £170 per night with breakfast.

Liverpool

A cradle for musical talents, this Scouse city is set to score even higher notes when it hosts the Eurovision Song Contest in May. Get into the swing of things by attending one of nine shows taking place in the Eurovision Village. Starting with semi-finals on May 9, culminating with a grand final on May 13, the event also features an afternoon family show of artists' rehearsals. Although tickets are not yet on sale, keep an eye on the official website (eurovision.tv).

Delve into the city's pop past by downloading a self-guided walking tour from Free Tours By Foot (freetoursbyfoot.com).

Stay: The Pullman Liverpool (all accor.com), metres from the M&S Bank Arena, has doubles from £80 with breakfast