

## Engadin, Switzerland.

Earlier this summer, Mary and I spent two weeks in the Engadin valley of South East Switzerland. We did a mixture of walking, cycling, train trips and, in my case, wind surfing.

First the bad news: Switzerland, never cheap too start with, has become even dearer for visitors from Euro-land, because of the weakness of the Euro against the Swiss Franc. The fact that we were near the glitzy resort of St Moritz did not help matters either.

The Engadin valley is a 1 km wide U-shaped valley that is almost horizontal and straight for over 40 km. Imagine Glendalough, only many times longer, with a few extra lakes.



Left: Looking down on the Engadin valley from a height of about 2,400m. The valley floor is at about 1800m and the peaks you can see are about 3200m. Somewhat higher mountains are located within an hour of here. To the left is a side valley that goes up to the Bernina pass.

The rich are not stupid: there are good reasons why St Moritz has become one of their favourite destinations, namely excellent weather and beautiful scenery. This is combined with a very comprehensive and highly efficient train, bus and cable car system together with a dense network of (usually) very good quality and well sign-posted cycle and walking paths. Within a couple of hundred metres of our apartment, in the village of Silvaplana, there was a choice of several nearly flat cycle paths on which it was possible to travel for miles without coming close to traffic. The nearest walking routes were even closer. As busses, trains and some cable cars and funiculars took bicycles, it was possible to do a one-way cycle including being carried uphill and cycling down.



Left: Flat lakeside cycle and pedestrian path along the floor of the Engadin valley. It is traffic free - all the cars are confined to the opposite side of the lake.

The area claims to have over 320 days of sunshine a year. . I think this means days on which the sun shines at least some of the time. This because it is sheltered from bad weather by higher mountain ranges on all sides. Our experience suggests that it does seem to have better weather than much of the Alps. In our two week stay, almost all mornings started out sunny, but it often clouded up over course of the day, sometimes ending up with a short late afternoon bout of rain or thunder. The floor of the valley was at just under 1,900metres with the immediately adjoining peaks typically reaching to about 3,200m The relatively high altitude, meant that it was never too hot during our late June/early July visit.

It is a ski area, which gives the advantage of cable cars, but means that some walks are marred by extensive pylons, bulldozed pistes etc. It is possible with careful study of the map to avail of the cable cars while avoiding most of the ski pistes. . There are also some very nice walks at valley floor level, which avoid both the unsightly pistes and the cost of cable cars.

We did what most other walkers seemed to do, namely the valley floor walks and some horizontal traverses from cable car to cable car. Walking up to a hut for lunch was also popular.



The hills really were covered in carpets of wildflowers



The nearby Bernina massif, reaching to just over 4,000 metres, appears to offer opportunities for easy glacier ascents and traverses and I think some serious snow and ice climbing. It is accessible via the Bernina Express.



Left: Open carriages on the Bernina “express”. These carriages are actually a very pleasant way to travel in good weather, as the “express” often only does about 20mph. It is great for taking photos: no obstructions and no widow reflection. In the picture above the train is at its high point of about 2200m and is about to descend 1800 metres on its way to Tirano, just across the Italian border. It is almost non-stop hairpin beds, tunnels and viaducts. A truly spectacular trip and one I would heartily recommend.

The Bregaglia (Bergell) group is also less than an hour away by public transport. In this case by taking a bus over the Maloja pass, which is also stunning, but not quite on a par with the Bernina express. While the Bregaglia also has glaciers, the main attraction is rock climbing on granite peaks. It also provides some fabulous high tough walking and some easier but attractive walking well below 2,000m, which could be handy in the case of bad weather high up. When I visited it many years ago I really liked the beautiful but unusual Val Codera valley. It had a lovely old stone village which was quite well inhabited despite having no road access.

The stereotypes are accurate. The place is spotlessly clean, appears crime free and does run like clockwork. The bus timetable shows the time of departure from each and every stop. They consistently left our local stop on time to the exact minute. The landlord was quite happy to leave our keys sitting waiting for us at an unmanned reception desk in the apartment complex. The envelope containing them was in full view of anyone passing by. We did however suffer from a broken down train on a single line stretch of track which meant no train could go up or down.

There is one very interesting service which in the end we did not use, but which others may find useful and which I think epitomises Swiss efficiency and convenience. You can bring your luggage to the train station, send it on ahead, get off the train at intermediate stops, change to a boat, walk to a different train line etc and still collect your luggage at your final train station of the day. When I asked the enquiry desk whether the luggage would always arrive in time, he looked at me in astonishment, before indicating that of course it would, but you had to get it there before 8.00AM

After 2 weeks we took the Glacier Express from St Moritz to Zermatt. Great scenery and an incredible piece of engineering, but definitely not an express in terms of speed. We passed though one tunnel and they told us that before the tunnel was built, the train had to

go over the pass above and in winter could not run at all. The avalanches were so bad that they had to dismantle some of the bridges every autumn and rebuild them in the spring. Despite their already spectacular system of viaducts and tunnels, the Swiss are not resting on their laurels. We saw part of the works related to a 57km long tunnel they are building on the Milan Zurich train route. It is not the only new tunnel on the route. When they are all finished trains will travel deep below the Alps at speeds of about 250km per hour. That would get you to Belfast in about 45 minutes rather than the 2hours 10 minutes taken by our so-called expresses.

In Zermatt we did some easy walking and saw the Matterhorn.



Walking above Zermatt. This was one of our least cloudy views of the Matterhorn. Zermatt's weather did not seem as good as in the Engadin.

Zermatt is a spectacular area but quite crowded, with a lot more English on menus, signposts and being spoken on the streets. In contrast in the Engadin the three main languages on signposts, menus etc are German, Romansch and Italian and you overhear relatively little English, except in St Moritz itself. In contrast to Zermatt, the village of Silvaplana was anything but crowded, in fact it was but dull. The neighbouring Sils/Maria seems more attractive. Mind you, the quietness may be due to the fact that we did leave just before the main summer season started in mid-July.

Best source of info is probably [www.engadin.stmoritz.ch/sommer/en/](http://www.engadin.stmoritz.ch/sommer/en/)

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