

TRAVEL

Swiss Alpstein offers spectacular views, comfortable inns

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region, for those who want to skip the climbs.

Each trail intersection is well-marked with bright yellow directional signs pointing the way to various peaks, passes, trail intersections and inns, with hiking time estimates supplied (though the estimates seem to be figured for mountain goats; multiply the time given by 1.5 for more accurate estimates). A goblet icon next to the destination name indicates that the sign points to a mountain inn, where food and drink and a puffy down comforter await you.

The 28 mountain inns of the Alpstein (called "Berggasthäuser," meaning "mountain guest houses") each are spaced less than a two-hour hike apart, which means you won't need to carry more than a day pack with you in whichever direction you head, leaving you free to scramble about like Frodo and Sam without being weighed down by a big pack. These mountain inns serve gourmet lunches and dinners, ice creams and Appenzeller biber (spiced honey cakes), and the beers of the renowned Brauerei Locher Appenzeller brewery. Accommodations are either in private rooms or "Matratzenlager," inexpensive dormitories with down comforters, complete with delicious breakfasts. The Matratzenlager rooms, in particular, at about half the price of the already inexpensive private rooms, make the Alpstein an especially affordable vacation destination for families with kids.

One can either base one's Alpstein adventure out of one of the inns (We recommend Berggasthaus Meglisalp for this. See sidebar.) or choose a circular inn-to-inn hiking route. Here's a sample itinerary:

Take the Appenzeller Bahnen train to Weissbad and take the connecting Postbus to Brülisau. From here, you can catch a cable car that will whisk you to Hoher Kasten (5,886 feet, www.hoherkasten.ch). Savor lunch while enjoying a stunning panoramic introduction to the entire Alpstein region, the Rhine Valley and the Alps of Liechtenstein and Austria. From Hoher Kasten, a four-hour hike along the mountain ridge (with Stauber, another cable-car-equipped mountain peak restaurant, at its midpoint) leads you to Berggasthaus Bollenwees (4,823 feet, www.bollenwees.ch).

Bollenwees sits high above the head of the Fählensee, a glacial lake surrounded by jagged "Lord of the Rings"-style peaks that look as though they were painted there by some Hollywood scenic artist with a hyperactive imagination. Hike to the end of the lake to explore the tiny scenic settlement of Fählenalp, an active little summer farm with sheep, pigs, cows and cheese-making that, again, is so perfect, it looks like a movie set.

The next morning, hike to Berggasthaus Meglisalp (4,977 feet, www.meglisalp.ch), via Winderalp and Bötzel (about three hours), through towering landscapes with breathtaking mountains soaring overhead that will make you feel more like Frodo with each passing minute. As the most personal (and personable) of all the Alpstein's mountain inns, Meglisalp charms with its location high above the cloudline in an alpine saddle at the heart of the Alpstein.

After overnighting at Meglisalp, hike up to Berggasthaus Schäfler (6,312 feet, www.schaeffler.ch), about four to five hours), enjoying lunch at Mesmer (www.mesmer.ch) along the way. Schäfler sits at the very summit of one of the area's peaks, commanding amazing 360-degree views. Overnight either here (if you want a private room) or at Berggasthaus Aescher-Wildkirchli, an hour down the mountain (4,770 feet, Matratzenlager only, www.aescher-ai.ch). The oldest mountain inn in the Alpstein (c. 1805), Aescher was built right into the side of the mountain's rock face; the back wall of the inn is actually all rock. From Aescher, either take the Ebenalp cable car (www.ebenalp.ch) back down to Wasserstein or hike down via the mirror-still, turquoise Seelapsee (www.seelapsee.com and www.gasthausforelle.ch), where you may want to enjoy another night of peace in the Alpstein before heading home.

While Frodo and Sam faced countless dangers along their path, you can experience in the Alpstein all the scenic beauty they did, without the threats. No ominous soundtrack here; the Alpstein serenades you instead with majestic stillness, tinkling cowbells, the flow of waterfalls, your individual footsteps and an occasional alphorn being played by a mountain herdsman echoing over Alpstein valleys. As the most traditional of all Swiss cantons, you'll find more authentic Swiss



CHRIS NORDEN/STAFF

All Alpstein hiking trails are well-marked. The small alpine farming settlement of Fählenalp is at the end of the lake.

folklore in Appenzell than in any other part of Switzerland, an added bonus in an already perfect adventure vacation region.

Finally, while Frodo and Sam's journey brought them far from the comforts of the Shire, you'll be comforted by the fact that, no matter how fantastical the landscape around you gets, in the Alpstein, you're never more than a two hours' walk from a mountain inn, where a down comforter and gourmet meal await you. The rock parapets and soaring heights of the "Rings" remain, but this is a ruggedness that's hospitable, and for this reason, the Alpstein is unlike any other place you'll find on Earth.

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GASTHAUS MEGLISALP

This (www.meglisalp.ch) is the quintessential mountain guesthouse. The most centrally located, it's the ideal base for a single-inn-based Alpstein holiday. Bergwege (mountain hiking trails tagged with white-red-white striped markings painted on trail-side rocks) head off in six different directions from this tiny shepherd's hamlet nestled in a quiet alpine saddle, accessible only by foot from the Wasserstein train station in the valley 2,000 feet (a two-hour hike) below.

Owners Sepp and Gaby Manser-Neff are the perfect hosts — friendly, warm, inviting and generous — and their staff match their loving personality. The 39-year-old Sepp's ancestors built the little community of Meglisalp in 1861, and the inn has remained in his family ever since. All materials to build Meglisalp were brought up on men's backs.

The idyllic settlement even has its own tiny Catholic chapel, Maria zum Schnee, where Mass actually is yodeled once a year. The entire downstairs of the lodge is paneled in a lovely white fir, with the upstairs done in red spruce. All beds — the singles in the private rooms and the floor mattresses in the Matratzenlager — come with double-sized feather pillows and huge featherbed down comforters for snuggling down in heavenly comfort. At night, looking out your bedroom window as a full moon bathes the otherworldly mountain peaks around you in blue light is an unforgettable experience.

Restrooms are down the hall, with automated showers on the lower level (three minutes per token — tokens may be purchased for two Swiss francs each at the inn's register). Private rooms have old-fashioned porcelain bowls with pitchers of fresh water. Remove your hiking boots upon entering the inn to protect the floors (pad around the inn in your stocking feet), and dry out your boots (and clothes) in the Trockenraum (drying room) next to the showers on the lower level. You'll be amazed by the spotlessness of the place; every surface at Meglisalp is kept sparkling clean, and everything is in perfect working order.

Breakfast is a welcoming spread of Müsli and other healthy cereals, Appenzeller cheese, fresh Appenzeller bread, fresh plain local yogurt, assorted fruit preserves, orange juice and strong, hot coffee with fresh steamed local milk. The lunch menu starts off with

homemade soups and delicious salads. The culinary delights continue with local specialties such as Chäsmaegerone, a gourmet mac'n'cheese featuring fragrant Appenzeller cheese stirred into a bowl of steaming hot macaroni, then topped with caramelized onions and served with cinnamon applesauce on the side. Dinner entrees run from 12 to 29 Swiss francs. The extensive beverage menu includes specialty coffees, Appenzeller beers, liquors and spirits, the delicious local Goba mineral waters and a selection of Swiss, Austrian and Italian wines. Desserts include elegant ice cream preparations one would expect to find in a Parisian sidewalk cafe, not a remote mountain retreat. Pastries also are available. In the evenings, the firelit dining room of Meglisalp comes alive as the local gathering spot for this small herdsman's community. A worker may whip out his accordion and start yodeling Swiss folk songs while people start dancing polkas around the room. Children gather and laugh and draw and play games, while other people read the wonderful collection of books on the Alpstein and Switzerland that line the shelves of the room. Toward the end of the evening, people toast one another with Meglisalp's exclusive signature cordial, "Alpsteinhüpfer" (Alpstein Hopper) — kiwi liqueur and grapefruit juice with a little bright green marshmallow gummy frog dropped in for good luck.

Because the process of transporting food up there is so involved, meals and drinks at Meglisalp are a bit pricey, but thankfully the inn's delightful accommodations are not. Private double rooms run only 52 Swiss francs per person (includes breakfast), 37 for children. The Matratzenlager are even more reasonable: only 31 per person (includes breakfast), 19 for children up to 14 years old. A good way of controlling your expense is to choose Meglisalp's "Halbpension" plan, which gives you your accommodations, breakfast and your dinner all for one price (inquire for the current rate; beverages are charged separately).

Meglisalp is one of the few Alpstein inns that will take a credit card (Visa only); most of the other inns are on a cash-only (Swiss francs) basis. ATMs just outside of customs at the Zürich airport make it easy for you to withdraw cash in Swiss francs from your American bank account before heading downstairs to board your train to magical Appenzellerland.

IF YOU GO

PLANNING INFORMATION: Appenzell Innerrhoden's excellent tourism Web site, www.appenzell.ch, is an invaluable resource for the traveler. The "Mountain Inns" link under "Accommodation" will take you to a page listing Web sites of all the mountain inns. At "Contact/Downloads" you can access downloadable PDFs of Appenzell's tourism brochures, or there's a form you can fill out and submit if you prefer to have them mailed to you.

The best map of the area is the "Alpsteingebiet Panorama-Wanderkarte/Dorfplan Appenzell" (Panoramic Hiking Map of the Alpstein Region with a detailed map of the village of Appenzell) published by Appenzellerland Tourism. It is a MUST (purchase beforehand for 8.20 Swiss Francs by calling 011 41 71 788 96 42, al-

lowing enough time for the map to be mailed to you before your trip). Not only does this map show all Alpstein area hiking and walking trails with time estimates set against a topographical painting of the region, but it also lists all Appenzell Innerrhoden hotels, inns, restaurants, cable cars and attractions. Your best investment, you will refer to this map again and again as you explore the fascinating trails of the Alpstein.

The book "Switzerland's Mountain Inns: A Walking Vacation in A World Apart" by Marcia & Philip Lieberman (available at www.amazon.com) also can help you plan, providing you with accurate reviews of 11 of Appenzell Innerrhoden's 28 mountain inns and giving you valuable background on Berggasthaus culture.

GETTING THERE: Delta (www.delta.com) has daily non-stops from Atlanta to Zürich's Kloten airport (Zürich Flughafen). Clear customs. Walk downstairs following the signs with the train icon to the airport's train station. Buy a ticket to Wasserstein via Gossau (about \$12). At Gossau, you'll transfer to the bright red Appenzeller Bahnen — with its toy train whistle and windows that open all the way to let the fresh air of Appenzell's pristine meadows pour into your rocking train car — and within 30 minutes, you'll be in Wasserstein, at the base of the Alpstein. Train schedules can be found at fahrplan.sbb.ch/bin/query.exe/en.

WHEN TO GO: The Alpstein hiking season is from June through October, with July and August being prime. Some snow possibly could close the higher trails in early June and mid- to late October. Each mountain inn has its own operational schedule, though, primarily based on elevation.

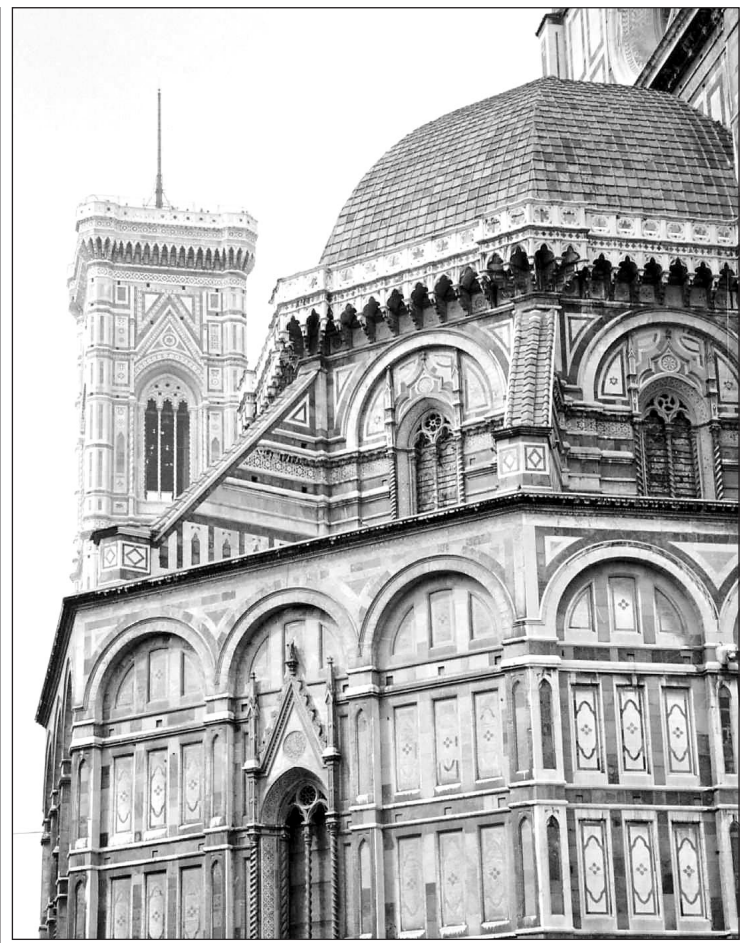
RESERVATIONS: The mountain inns of the Alpstein are popular weekend getaways for people from Zürich. Hence, Saturday night stays at the inns are booked well in advance. For Saturday night stays, follow this booking schedule: June, one to two weeks in advance; July/August, one month in advance; September, two months in advance. For other nights of the week, you should have no trouble getting a room — especially if you're staying in the Matratzenlager — but the innkeepers prefer you make reservations for other nights of the week as well.

PHYSICAL PREPARATION/SAFETY: To prepare for your trip, make sure you're aerobically fit. Alpstein trails will take you quickly up into the mountains, and if you haven't been training your lungs down here at sea level, you will be CHALLENGED by steep grades at 6,000 feet!

Preparing properly in the months leading up to your trip — including doing weight training for your legs to strengthen your knees for the downhill trails — will allow you to focus on enjoying your Alpstein adventure instead of nursing your knees and catching your breath when you get there.

Also, the Alpstein is NOT for people with weak knees, bad hearts, vertigo or a fear of heights, as some paths are very narrow with sheer drop-offs.

LANGUAGE: With three official languages in their country (German, French and Italian — four if you count the half-official Latin-derived Romansch), the Swiss have their linguistic hands full just getting by in their own land; hence, English is not high on their agenda. Any attempt to learn some basic German prior to your arrival will help immensely and will add to your sense of adventure. Check out some "Learn German in Your Car" tapes from the Charleston County Library to make good use of your commute time before your departure.



FILE/STAFF

The trip to Italy will include a visit to Florence, whose cathedral and bell tower are familiar landmarks on the skyline.

Chef offers travelers chance to experience Tuscan culture

Italian chef and restaurateur Massimiliano Sarrocchi will offer a unique opportunity to experience a behind-the-scenes Italy — the food, the wine and the culture — during a tour offering the full flavor of Tuscan life.

For six days and nights in the Tuscan hills, your home will be a remodeled 12th-century farmhouse, owned by a Florentine artist. From there the tour will visit local vineyards, historical landmarks and offer in-depth knowledge of regional culinary traditions, including grilled meats, mushrooms and game. During the week tour members will be encouraged to participate in the preparation of occasional meals with cooking instructions led by Sarrocchi.

Throughout the week, you will explore some of the smaller hill-top cities in Tuscany such as Montepulciano and Pienza as well as the historical cultural centers of Florence and Siena. The days will be spent wandering through cathedrals and monasteries, enjoying the art and the natural scenery, and simply soaking up

the atmosphere over a coffee in the piazza. Toward the end of the week, the tour heads to the capital, Rome. While in Rome you will have the opportunity to make use of an extensive half-day guided tour of the historic city, leaving time of course for shopping, walks through the city and dinner.

The tour departs Charleston on March 6, 2004, and returns March 15. The complete tour costs \$3,100 per person and includes: Roundtrip airfare from Charleston to Rome; full accommodation; all breakfasts and dinners; ground transport and full-time licensed driver; basic travel insurance; cooking lessons; tour of local vineyards and wine tastings; excursions to Florence, Siena and smaller cities; certain gallery tickets; evenings out in locally respected restaurants; two nights accommodation in central 3-star hotel in Rome; and guided tours of the cities.

For further information, contact Massimiliano Sarrocchi at Il Cortile del Re, 193-A King St., 853-1888 or Natasha Herron at 442-2163.

EXCHANGE RATES

Below are the rates paid to travelers for each dollar changed as of Sept. 19. Rates change daily and are provided for guidance only.

COUNTRY	CURRENCY	UNIT	\$1 EQUIVALENT
Australia	dollar	.....	1.36
Canada	dollar	.....	1.26
China	renmin	.....	6.95
Costa Rica	colons	.....	334.17
Czech Republic	korunas	.....	24.58
Denmark	kroner	.....	5.90
England	pound*	.....	1.74
European Union	Euro*	.....	1.21
Japan	yen	.....	106.40
Mexico	peso	.....	9.72
N.Zealand	dollar	.....	1.54
Norway	kroner	.....	6.40
Philippines	peso	.....	47.30
Scotland	pounds*	.....	1.75
Sweden	krona	.....	7.21
Switzerland	franc	.....	1.27

Rates appearing on financial pages of newspapers are international bank trading rates, generally on transactions of a million dollars each and should not be confused with travelers' rates of exchange.

* Expressed in dollars. Countries using the Euro are Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Courtesy of Hawthorne Foreign Exchange located at the Charleston International Airport. For daily rates, visit www.hawthornefx.com.

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