

Side Trips - Interlaken

By making the mountains of the Bernese Oberland accessible by train and cable car, Swiss engineers paved the way for visitors to this popular region to explore some of the most scenic and enjoyable spots in the country. There are many organized excursions, as adventurous as they are varied, and Interlaken is the most sensible starting point.

Jungfrauoch

A train trip to Jungfrauoch, at 3,400m (11,152 ft.), is often considered the trip highlight by visitors. For more than a century, it's been the highest railway station in Europe. It's also one of the most expensive: A round-trip tour costs 179F (\$147) in first class, 167F (\$137) in second class. However, families can fill out a Family Card form, available at the railway station, which allows children 16 and under to ride free. Departures are usually daily at 8am from the east station in Interlaken; expect to return around 4pm. To check times, contact the sales office of Jungfrau Railways, Höheweg 37 (tel. 033/828-71-11 or 033/828-72-33; www.jungfraubahn.ch).

With luck, you'll get good weather for your day trip; you should always consult the tourist office in Interlaken before boarding the train. The trip is comfortable, safe, and packed with adventure. First you'll take the Wengernalp railway (WAB), a rack railway that opened in 1893. It will take you to Lauterbrunnen, at 784m (2,572 ft.), where you'll change to a train heading for the Kleine Scheidegg station, at 2,029m (6,655 ft.) -- welcome to avalanche country. The view includes the Mönch, the Eiger Wall, and the Jungfrau, which was named for the white-clad Augustinian nuns of medieval Interlaken (Jungfrau means "virgin.")

At Kleine Scheidegg you'll change to the highest rack railway in Europe, the Jungfraubahn. You have 9.6km (6 miles) to go; 6.4km (4 miles) of that will be spent in a tunnel carved into the mountain. You'll stop briefly twice, at Eigerwand and Eismeer, where you can view the sea of ice from windows in the rock (the Eigerwand is at 2,830m/9,282 ft. and Eismeer is at 3,110m/10,201 ft.). When the train emerges from the tunnel, the daylight is momentarily blinding, so bring a pair of sunglasses to help your eyes adjust. Notorious among mountain climbers, the Eigernordwand (or "north wall") is incredibly steep.

Once at the Jungfrauoch terminus, you may feel a little giddy until you get used to the air. There's much to do in this eerie world high up Jungfrau, but take it slow -- your body's metabolism will be affected and you may tire quickly.

Behind the post office is an elevator that will take you to a corridor leading to the famed Eispalast (Ice Palace). Here you'll be walking inside "eternal ice" in caverns hewn out of the slowest-moving section of the glacier. Cut 19m (62 ft.) below the glacier's surface, these caverns were begun in 1934 by a Swiss guide and subsequently enlarged and embellished with additional sculptures by others. Everything in here is made of ice, including full-size replicas of vintage automobiles and local chaplains.

After returning to the station, you can take the Sphinx Tunnel to another elevator. This one takes you up 107m (351 ft.) to an observation deck called the Sphinx Terraces, overlooking the saddle between the Mönch and Jungfrau peaks. You can also see the Aletsch Glacier, a 23km (14-mile) river of ice -- the longest in Europe. The snow melts into Lake Geneva and eventually flows into the Mediterranean.

Astronomical and meteorological research is conducted at a scientific station here. There's a research exhibition that explains weather conditions, and a video presentation.

There are five different restaurants from which to choose. The traditional choice is Jungfrauoch Glacier Restaurant. Top of Europe, opened in 1987, offers several different dining possibilities, and there's also a self-service cafeteria. As a final adventure, you can take a sleigh ride, pulled by stout huskies.

On your way back down the mountain, you'll return to Kleine Scheidegg station, but you can vary your route by going through Grindelwald, which offers panoramic views of the treacherous north wall.

Harder Kulm

For a somewhat less ambitious excursion, set out from Interlaken East for this belvedere at 1,301m (4,267 ft.). The funicular ride takes 15 minutes and costs 22F (\$18) round-trip for adults and 11F (\$9) for children. From the lookout, you can see Interlaken, the Bernese Alps, and the two lakes, Thun and Brienz, that give Interlaken its name. Departures are every half-hour daily from May until the end of October. The first funicular departs at 9:10am, the last one back leaving at 6pm (6:30pm July-Aug). There's a mountain restaurant at Harder Kulm, with observation terraces. For details, call tel. 033/828-72-16 or 033/822-34-44.

Heimwehfluh

You can also take the funicular trip up to Heimwehfluh, at 669m (2,194 ft.), where you'll be rewarded with panoramic views of both lakes and the classic trio of Jungfrau, Mönch, and Eiger. In addition to the lookout tower, there's a cafe and restaurant. The funicular station is about a 6-minute walk from the Interlaken West rail station at the southern end of Rugenparkstrasse. The ride takes about 5 minutes and costs 12F (\$9.85) round-trip for adults, 7F (\$5.75) for children. Departures are April to October daily from 9:30am to 5:30pm.

St. Beatus-Höhlen

According to legend, these caves in the cliffs above Lake Thun were once a dragon's lair until Beatus, a 6th-century Irish missionary, slew the beast and set up residence here. The caves came to be known as Grottes de St-Béat in French and St. Beatus-Höhlen in German. They can be reached by boat, bus, car, or even by foot.

The caves can be explored to a depth of 990m (3,247 ft.), along a path lit by electricity. There's a reproduction of a prehistoric cave settlement. The museum section also includes the cell of St. Beatus. Tours are available through the huge caverns and grottoes featuring the striking stalactites and stalagmites. The caves are open from April to October daily from 10:30am to 5pm. Tours depart every 20 to 30 minutes and cost 16F (\$13) for adults and 6F (\$4.90) for children. For details, call tel. 033/841-16-43.

Just inside the cave entrance is a well-managed restaurant. You can have a meal or a snack inside the cozy dining area or outside on the cave terrace.

The caves can be reached in a number of ways: The bus from Interlaken is the shortest route. From Interlaken bus station, take STI bus no. 21 for a 15-minute ride to the entrance of the caves. Round-trip tickets cost 5F (\$4.10) and buses depart every hour at 15 minutes to the hour. You can drive from Interlaken taking N8 toward Thun. Follow signs leading to the caves. It's a half-hour boat ride to the caves from Interlaken West. The arrival spot is an approximately 20-minute walk from the caves' entrance. Tickets cost 5F (\$4.10) round-trip. Walkers and hikers can make it a 2 1/2-hour trip: Start at Interlaken West station and follow signs for the caves.

Wilderswil/Schynige Platte

Less than 3km (2 miles) south of Interlaken, Wilderswil stands on a plain between Lakes Brienz and Thun, at the foot of the Jungfrau Mountains. It's both a summer resort and a winter resort, as well as the starting point for many excursions. The resort has 16 levels of accommodations, ranging from hotels to guesthouses, but most tourists stay in Interlaken and visit Wilderswil to take the excursion to Schynige Platte (tel. 033/822-34-31; www.schynigeplatte.ch). To get to Wilderswil, take the 6-minute train ride from the Interlaken East station. Switch to a cogwheel train for the harrowing, steep ascent to the Schynige Platte, at 1,936m (6,350 ft.). The rack railway, which opened in 1893, climbs the 7km (4 1/2-mile) slope in less than an hour, with gradients of up to 25%. There are more than a dozen trips a day in season, June to October, costing 47F (\$39) round-trip.

There's an alpine garden in Schynige Platte, containing some 500 species of plants; admission is 3F (\$2.45). From a nearby belvedere, visitors command a splendid view of the Eiger, Mönch, and Jungfrau. The resort's restaurant offers good food and drink.

Lake Thun

Occupying an ancient terminal basin of a glacier, Lake Thun (Thunersee) was once connected to Lake Brienz (Brienzersee). The lake is 27km (17 miles) south of Bern and there is frequent rail service, which continues east to Interlaken. The Lutschine River deposited so much sediment at Interlaken that the one body of water eventually became two. Lake Thun, once beloved by Brahms, is 21km (13 miles) long and 3km (2 miles) wide.

Because of its mild climate, Lake Thun is known as the Riviera of the Bernese Oberland. Popular lake sports include water-skiing, yachting, and windsurfing. Onshore there are excellent swimming pools (indoor and outdoor), windsurfing schools, golf courses, tennis courts, horse stables, and caves.

The lake's major resort is Thun, a small city that was founded on an island where the Aare River flows out of Lake Thun. The city has since expanded onto the banks of the river to become the political and administrative center of the Bernese Oberland and the gateway to the Bernese mountains.

The most interesting part of the city is on the Aare's right bank. The busy main street, Hauptgasse, has walkways built above the arcaded shops. There's a 17th-century town hall on Rathausplatz, where you can climb a covered staircase up to the formidable Schloss Thun (Castle Kyburg). The castle is now a historical museum (tel. 033/223-20-01). It was built by the dukes of Zähringen at the end of the 12th century. Later it was the home of the counts of Kyburg, as well as the Bernese bailiffs. The massive residential tower has a large Knights' Hall, which contains a Gobelin tapestry from the time of Charles the Bold and a fine collection of halberds and other weapons. Other rooms have important archaeological finds, an exhibit of military uniforms, period furniture, and toys. From the turrets, there's a panoramic view of the surrounding area. The museum is open daily April to October from 9am to 6pm and November to March from 10am to 4pm. Admission is 6F (\$4.90) for adults, 2F (\$1.65) for children.

Lake Brienz

Lake Brienz, directly east of Interlaken, is the smaller of the two Oberland lakes. It's about 14km (9 miles) long and up to 3km (2 miles) wide. Most North American visitors bypass the many vacation areas and resorts along its shores in favor of the more traditional resorts on Lake Thun. Europeans, on the other hand, tend to prefer Lake Brienz.

The resort of Brienz is at the northern end of the lake, facing Giessbach Falls. The town is famous for its woodcarvers, whose work can be found in souvenir shops throughout Switzerland. It's also known for its violin makers.

Brienz has good rail links with Interlaken. Trains run in both directions every hour. For train schedules and information, call tel. 0900-300-300.

The town's most popular excursion is a cogwheel railway trip to Brienzer Rothorn, where you'll get a panoramic vista of the Bernese Alps and Lake Brienz. The tour requires about 2 hours and takes you to an elevation of 2,310m (7,577 ft.). Nine trips run each day from June to October. A round-trip costs 72F (\$59) per person.

Giessbach Falls, some of the most dramatic falls in the Bernese Oberland, are accessible by funicular, which leaves from a platform across the lake. You can get there by car or boat. The funicular costs 6F (\$4.90) for adults, 3F (\$2.45) for children 6 to 16, and is free for children 5 and under. The boat to the funicular departs from the lakeshore wharf in the center of Brienz. Allow about 2 hours for the entire excursion. For more information about excursions in the area, call the Brienz Tourist Office at tel. 033/952-80-80.

For a glimpse of Switzerland's rural history, you can visit the Swiss Open-Air Museum of Rural Dwellings and Lifestyle at Ballenberg, near Brienz (tel. 033/951-11-23). This is a living, breathing museum -- not a

dusty, boring complex. Thirteen scenic areas, comprising more than 809 hectares (2,000 acres), lie within the jurisdiction of this museum; they include clusters of typical old farm buildings, tiny settlements, and gardens and fields that Swiss farmers cultivate using time-tested regional methods. The various sections of the museum, which include both a nature park and the still alpine waters of Lake Wyssen, are connected by good roads. The museum's acreage lies between the villages of Hofstetten and Brienzwiler, and various sections document architecture specific to different cantons and regions of Switzerland.

A tour of the museum takes about 3 hours. It's open April 15 through October daily from 10am to 5pm. Admission is 16F (\$13) for adults and 8F (\$6.55) for children. Guided tours are available by request, but reservations are necessary; plus there's a minimum charge of 100F (\$82.)

For those driving to the museum, there's parking at the Hofstetten and Brienzwiler entrances. You can also take a train along the Interlaken-Meiringen-Lucerne line to the Brienz railroad station and transfer there for a bus to the museum.

Lake Tours

A fleet of ships with a total capacity of 6,720 passengers operates on Lake Thun daily from April to October. A 4-hour voyage from Interlaken West to Beatenbucht, Spiez, Overhofen, Thun, and back costs 60F (\$49) in first class, 40F (\$33) in second class.

Boat trips on Lake Brienz are also available daily from June to September. There are five motor ships and one steamship, with a total capacity of 3,160 passengers. A 3-hour voyage from Interlaken East to Iseltwald, Giessbach, Brienz, and back costs 48F (\$39) in first class and 32F (\$26) in second class. For details, call B.L.S. (tel. 033/334-52-11.)

Meiringen

This resort lies about 13km (8 miles) from Brienz and can be easily visited on a day trip from Interlaken. Several trains headed to Meiringen stop at Interlaken's two railway stations every day. Travel time each way is about 50 minutes.

Strategically centered between three alpine passes (the Grimsel, the Brunig, and the Susten), this old town is a suitable base from which you can explore the eastern sections of the Bernese Oberland and the wild upper reaches of the Aare River. Classified as the major town in the Haslital district and set above the waters of Lake Brienz, Meiringen is famous throughout Europe for its meringue, a dessert that was supposedly invented here.

Rich in scenery and wildlife, the district attracts mountaineers, rock climbers, and hikers. Surrounding the town, you'll find more than 298km (185 miles) of marked hiking trails through unspoiled natural settings, with a complicated network of lifts to reach panoramic vantage points. Destinations for excursions include the Aare Gorge, the Rosenloui Glacier, and the Reichenbach Falls. The district also has a folklore museum, a crystal grotto, an antique water mill, and a pathway across a glacier. Almost everyone visits the parish church in the upper part of the village. Its crypt was built during the 11th century.

From Meiringen, you can set out for Grindelwald, a distance of some 27km (17 miles) and one of the great walks in the Jungfrau region. Along the way you can absorb the stunning panoramas of the massif, the Eiger, with its massive gray rock walls. Soaring summits and white glaciers form your backdrop as you walk along. If you get tired along the way, there are bus stops where you can board public transportation to take you into Grindelwald. This is also an option should the weather turn bad. Otherwise, depending on your stamina, the walk takes from 6 1/2 to 9 hours.

If you're in the mood for meringue, you can buy one or two at a local bakery. According to legend, the dessert was created when Napoleon visited the town and the local chef in charge of the welcoming banquet

had a lot of leftover egg whites. Inspired, he created the puffy mounds and served them in a saucer brimming with sweet mountain cream, much to the general's delight.

Aare Gorge is full of recesses, grottoes, precipices, and arches -- all fashioned by the Aare's waters over centuries. The cleft is 1,371m (4,497 ft.) long and 195m (640 ft.) deep, carved in the Kirchet, a craggy barrier left over from the ice age. In some places the towering rock walls of the gorge are so close together that only a few rays of sunshine can penetrate, just before noon. A unique natural wonder of the Swiss Alps, the gorge can only be reached by car, via the Grimsel-Susten road along the Kirchet. Admission is 6F (\$4.90) for adults and 3.50F (\$2.85) for children. The gorge is open May to October daily from 10am to 5pm; in July and August its extended hours are from 8am to 6pm.

If you're a fan of Sherlock Holmes, you'll enjoy an excursion to Reichenbach Falls, where the rivers of the Rosenlaur Valley meet. The impressive beauty of the falls has lured many visitors, beginning with the British in the 19th century. One visitor, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Holmes, was so impressed with the place that he used it as the setting for the scene in *The Final Problem*, in which the villain, Professor Moriarty, struggles with the detective and tosses Holmes into the falls. You can see a Sherlock Holmes commemorative plaque near the upper station of the funicular. The falls can be visited from mid-May to mid-September. The funicular takes you to a point at 834m (2,734 ft.) near terraces overlooking the water. Handrails provide safety. Departures are every 10 minutes daily from 8:15 to 11:45am and 1 to 6pm. The cost of admission is 7F (\$5.75) for adults and 3.50F (\$2.85) for children. The price includes the cost of the funicular. It's a 10-minute walk from Meiringen to the base of the funicular. If you're driving from Meiringen, take the road to Grimsel and turn right toward Reichenbach Falls and Mervenklinik. For more information, call tel. 033/971-40-48.

After admiring the cascade, you can hike through the river valley. The footpath through the Rosenlaur Valley is marked. After 90 minutes you'll arrive at the entrance to Rosenlaur Gorge. The surfaces of the sheer rock faces echo the sounds of the many small waterfalls within. The glacier gorges, which have been hollowed out by the waters from the melting ice of the Rosenlaur Glacier, are a spectacular sight. You can walk from one end of this gorge to the other in about 30 minutes. A small hotel and seasonal restaurant are near the entrance. Most visitors turn around at the uppermost reaches of the gorge and make the 2-hour trek back to Reichenbach Falls to pick up the funicular back to Meiringen. The gorge can be visited May through October daily from 9am to 5pm. The cost is 6F (\$4.90) for adults and 3.50F (\$2.85) for children.

The Murder of Sherlock Holmes

In 1891 the English writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the most famous detective in all fiction, Sherlock Holmes, acted too hastily in killing off his fictional hero. In a story entitled *The Final Problem*, after a battle with Professor Moriarty (called "the Napoleon of Crime"), Holmes and the fiendish villain were sent plunging to their deaths into Reichenbach Falls at Meiringen.

Although the Sherlock Holmes stories had proven successful, Conan Doyle apparently decided that he'd had enough of Sherlock's sleuthing. His rather outraged public disagreed, so Conan Doyle was forced to virtually call back Sherlock Holmes from the dead, and the detective went on to solve at least 60 more crimes.

The wonder of the falls is reason enough to visit the site, but Holmes devotees wanted more, so in May 1991 the town leaders opened a Sherlock Holmes Museum, Bahnhofstrasse 26 (tel. 033/971-42-21), in an old Anglican church at Meiringen. There, you can visit a re-creation of Sherlock Holmes's sitting room at 221B Baker St. in London, with exhibits donated by fans from around the world. The museum is open May through September Tuesday to Sunday from 1:30 to 6pm, and October to April Wednesday to Sunday 4:30 to 6pm. Admission costs 4F (\$3.30) for adults and 3F (\$2.45) for children.

Aboazziz@gmail.com