

THE JAW- DROPPING

RUDOLF ABRAHAM HIKES
SWITZERLAND'S NEW VIA BERNA
TRAIL, WHICH ENCOMPASSES
SOME OF EUROPE'S MOST
BEAUTIFUL, DIVERSE AND
DRAMATIC LANDSCAPES.

and the
SUBLIME

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he trail to the Sätteli Pass climbs steadily from Engstlensee, across a hillside burnished with autumn reds and golds. Low bushes and flagstones

glisten in the light rain, and a wooden cottage stands below me on my right, pinned to the green rectangle of a meadow by a long shaft of sunlight. Higher up, the flagstones peter out, my boots crunching through rocks as the trail arcs across long tongues of scree, reaching down into the shadow of the valley. Somewhere above me is the massive, weathered tooth of the Tällistock, which I'd enjoyed jaw-droppingly clear views of from the opposite side of the valley the previous afternoon, now hidden by a trick of perspective, and the frost-shattered cliffs rising from the scree.

I'm hiking the Via Berna, a new 186-mile trail which snakes its way across the Canton of Bern, starting in the town of Bellelay and coming to a full stop on the 7,414ft Susten Pass, on the boundary between the Bernese Oberland and the Canton of Uri. Along its way, the Via Berna takes in a whole slew of landscapes, from the fragile high moorland and peat bogs of La Sagne and the sculpted walls of the Taubenloch Gorge, to the jagged, glacier-spewing peaks of the Jungfrau-Aletsch



area – the most heavily glaciated part of the Alps, and a Unesco World Heritage Site – and lush meadows woven with a tapestry of wildflowers. It passes some of the most iconic landmarks in Switzerland – a country with absolutely no shortage of the jaw-dropping and the sublime – including the stupendous mountain walls of the Eiger, Schreckhorn and Wetterhorn, and the thundering Reichenbach Falls. And it comes with seemingly limitless scope for spotting alpine plants and wildlife, from marmots and ibex to mountain avens and vanilla orchids, bearded vultures and golden eagles – along with stacks of culture, and a public transport network which frankly should be the envy of the entire world. Not to mention plenty of opportunities to sample delicious Swiss food and wine, including chomping your way through a never-ending succession of local cheeses. Oh, the terrible hardships of a hiking trip in the magnificent Swiss Alps.

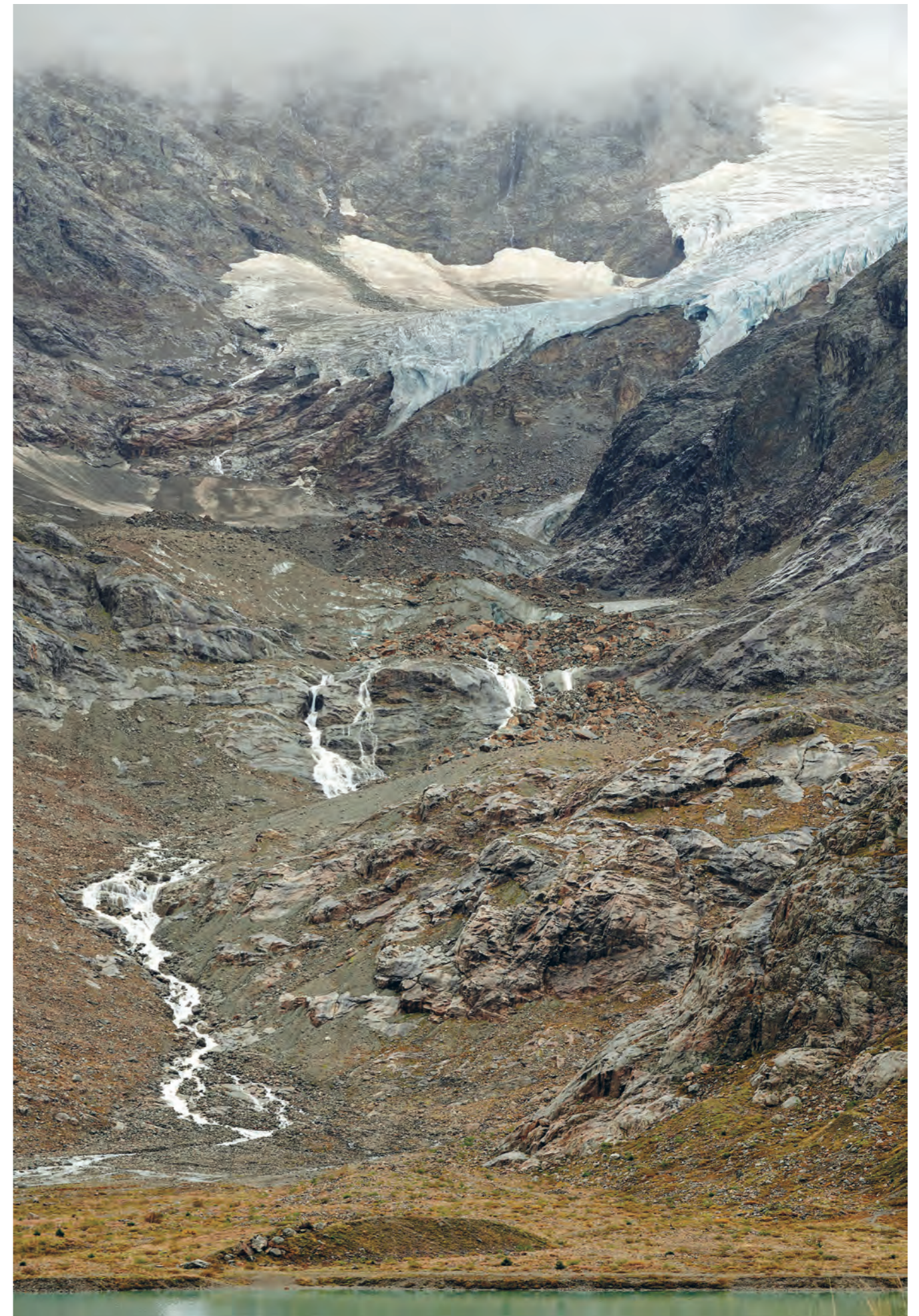
I've picked off the final third of the trail, which roughly corresponds with its highest and most spectacular scenery. Travelling from Zurich by train, I break my journey in Bern, spending an afternoon wandering the cobbled and arcaded streets and squares of its Unesco-listed old town centre, enclosed within a great looping bend in the River Aare, before continuing to Interlaken. From there, I take a local bus up to the village of Wilderswil, wedged between the elongated turquoise smudges of the Thunersee and Brienersee. Early the following morning, I jump onboard the Schynige Platte-Bahn, a narrow-gauge railway running from Wilderswil up to an altitude of around 6,500ft. Switzerland has over 50 mountain railways, and enjoying a ride on at least one of them is an essential part of any visit to the Swiss Alps.

Opened in 1893, the Schynige Platte-Bahn reaches a gradient of 25%, using a ladder-like rack between its rails to stop it slipping. The train crawls slowly, determinedly uphill, contouring the side of the Lütschine Valley as passengers crane their necks in unison to follow fragments of mountain grandeur gliding past the carriage windows, framed by the vertical green bars of conifers. From the station platform at Schynige Platte – the name means 'shiny slab', a reference to all the slate hereabouts – I shoulder my pack and hike up a short path towards the Alpine Botanical

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Evening light on the north face of the Eiger.

LEFT:
Cottage near Engstlenalp, on the trail up to the Sätteli Pass.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Low cloud above the Steingletscher and Steinsee, near the Susten Pass.





Garden, then over steep tussock grass to a raised knoll, from where I have an unobstructed panorama across the trough-shaped valleys of the Lütschental and the Lauterbrunnental. The view from here is enormous, taking in the Eiger, Mönch, Jungfrau and Breithorn in one great glacier-caked sweep of mountain walls, and, slightly closer, the crumpled, snow-streaked greys and greens and spidery ridges around the summit of the Schilthorn. Looking down, I watch as the tiny red-and-beige form of the train retreats downhill, moving across a steep slope before being swallowed by the mouth of a tunnel. On my right, a trail traces an arc below the sugarloaf rock tower of the Gumihorn to join a ridge, and beyond this billowing white cotton-wool clouds cling to snow-streaked tops above the Brienersee.

So begins the stage of the Via Berna from Schynige Platte to First – a stage which is, quite simply, one of the most unbelievably beautiful hikes I've ever done, anywhere. After following the cliff edge above Brienersee, the trail shuffles beneath the bristling rock towers of the Oberberghorn, then swings below the Lucherhorn to begin a long, deliberate

climb above the Sägistalsee, a jewel-like blue lake, the surrounding green of its meadows dappled with cloud shadows and grazed by the diminutive brown-and-white dots of cattle. I pass the small Männlenen hut, with its tempting offer of warm soup, at one end of an elongated, twisting sprawl of folded and faulted rock that looks like a geology textbook sprung to life. Then it's up towards the lopsided fin of the Faulhorn – the highest point on the Via Berna – for part of the way following a tapering ridge, as paragliders cruise overhead, looping back and forth against the stupendous backdrop of the Wetterhorn, Schreckhorn and Eiger.

I pause below the Faulhorn, munching on a sandwich and taking in the view while cattle watch wide-eyed from the trail ahead, tossing their heads occasionally as they lie in the lazy afternoon sun. Then descending from the Faulhorn towards Berggasthaus First, the trail loops above the Bachsee, a small lake split by a narrow isthmus – an almost unbelievably photogenic spot, the water's surface perfectly mirroring the Wetterhorn and Schreckhorn. I reach Berggasthaus First in the late afternoon,

ABOVE:
The iconic view across the
Bachsee to the Wetterhorn
and Schreckhorn.

I CROSS AN
IMPROBABLY
STEEP SERIES
OF SLOPES AND
BUTTRESSES,
FOLLOWING A
NARROW, AIRY
PATH HIGH
ABOVE THE
VALLEY FLOOR.



LEFT FROM THE TOP:
Cattle on the Via Berna;
Hikers on the trail from the
Faulhorn down towards the
Bachsee; Viewing platform
on the Cliff Walk at First.

**OPPOSITE PAGE FROM
THE TOP:**
The trail from Schynige
Platte; Pickaxe used for trail
maintenance.

then after dropping my pack in my room I watch from the broad terrace as the Wetterhorn turns gold, and the last of the evening light falls across the huge north face of the Eiger.

The Eiger. A true mountain of the mind, its infamous (and frankly, terrifying) Nordwand (north face) one of the most notoriously difficult climbs in the Alps, a 5,900ft-high wall (it's the highest north face in the Alps) of lethally falling rock and ice, for which it has been dubbed the Mordwand or 'murder wall'. But viewed from the terrace at Berggasthaus First it is a thing of sublime beauty, backed by the vast ice fields of Konkordiaplatz and the Aletsch Glacier, its face slowly turning blood red in the late evening light, above the slash of green that is the head of the Lüttschine Valley, and the scattered mountain town of Grindelwald, etched by long shadows.

Continuing in the morning from First, I follow a trail that contours the grassy slopes above the valley floor, before dropping towards Grosse Scheidegg, a broad pass where the road crosses from Grindelwald. Here the Via Berna drops into the valley of the Rychenbachtal, following the fast-running Rychenbach stream towards the old Hotel Rosenlauri, a historic guesthouse below the serrated spires of the Klein Wellhorn.

Before reaching Rosenlauri, I make a short but hugely worthwhile detour up the Rosenlauri Glacier Gorge, created by the Weissenbach stream as it descends from the huge glaciers above. The stream has carved a deep canyon, its polished limestone walls pressing together below a ribbon of blue sky, as glacial water rushes between them and shoots down waterfalls into milky green pools pierced by sunlight. A trail squeezes its way through the gorge by way of a succession of galleries and dripping tunnels, blasted through the vertical walls between 1901 and 1902 with the help of 180 packs of dynamite. In making this detour I also prove that it's not, in fact, the best one to undertake with a full pack – by managing, very cleverly, to get myself wedged in the slender, full-body-height turnstile at the far end of the gorge. I was stuck there for several minutes, an interesting experience that seemed rather less amusing at the time than it does now, managing to wriggle my way free (and avoid indescribable shame) just before the next





LEFT, FROM THE TOP:
The Schynige Platte-Bahn mountain railway; The bristling rock towers of the Oberberghorn.

RIGHT, FROM THE TOP:
Ridge path leading towards the Tannensee; Shafts of sunlight pierce the Rosenlauri Glacier Gorge.



group of people appeared around the corner.

I'm walking two stages today (the distance from First to Rosenlauri is really quite short), so I steam on down the valley – and by mid-afternoon I'm standing above the stupendously impressive Reichenbach Falls. A narrow path cuts across the cliffs to a lone plaque, commemorating the final showdown in Arthur Conan Doyle's 1893 short story, *The Final Problem*: 'At this fearful place, Sherlock Holmes vanquished Professor Moriarty, on 4 May 1891'. The setting of their fictitious duel would actually have been further along the ledge, closer to the falls, but – 130 years after Conan Doyle wrote the scene in which he'd intended to kill off his most famous character – this is as far as you can go. The best view of the falls however is a little way further down the Via Berna, which emerges into a patch of open ground directly facing the base of the falls as they tumble 360ft in one mesmerising, stomach-churning leap, unleashing great plumes of spray.

I'm more than a bit knackered by the time I reach the lovely Hotel Reuti in Hasliberg, where I spend the night, awaking the following morning to a view of the Wetterhorn catching the first, rose-gold light of dawn from my balcony.

The trail from Hasliberg follows a road initially, so I skip this part by taking the cable car to its middle station, then rejoin the trail from there as it climbs upwards to Planplatten. This is a 7,312ft high point at one end of a ridge, separating the verdant slopes of Mägisalp from the steep-sided valley running up towards Engstlensee. The top station of the cable car is only a couple of minutes further along the ridge, and there's a small crowd gathered, taking selfies against a backdrop of the peaks and glaciers of the Schreckhorn and Dammastock. As I head northeast from the cable-car station, the trail becomes quieter again, and I cross an improbably steep series of slopes and buttresses, following a narrow, airy path high above the valley floor. It's a beautiful walk, and the views far too breathtaking to not to stop and linger, so I unshoulder my pack, spike my poles into the soft ground and sit in a patch of grass at the top of a cliff, with a view across the valley to the distinctive form of the Tällistock, its sheer face home to Switzerland's oldest via ferrata route, as a buzzard swirls overhead. Picnic spots don't come much better than this.

THIS SPREAD:
View of the Wetterhorn
and Schreckhorn from
the Via Berna.



Photo Credits: All images by Rudolf Abraham.

Further along the trail, I pass a pair of hikers who cup their hands and shout across to the cliffs nearby, their voices echoing back with perfect clarity across a huge glaciated cirque. Then there's a wonderfully narrow ridge path above the Melchsee, passing marmots scurrying beside their burrows, before the trail heads down to the bleak, lonely shore of the Tannensee, and descends across a final sweep of cliffs to the scattered cottages at Engstlenalp.

The old hotel at Engstlenalp looks like it might have been frozen in time since the end of the 19th century, with creaking floorboards, heavy ceramic washbowls in the rooms, and token-operated communal showers, all offset by a fantastic restaurant and a genuinely warm welcome. Built in the 1890s, it has been run by the same family for four generations. It's a ten-minute walk over to the lake, Engstlensee, wreathed in low cloud on my visit, and sitting below the snow-streaked col of the Jochpass.

The next day, following the long climb up to the Sätteli Pass – and a very steep descent on the other side – I double back below the southern cliffs of the Tällistock and make my way down to the boutique sanctuary of the Gadmer Lodge in Gadmen. The valley here remains mysteriously sunny, while over in Grindelwald it's pouring.

The trail beyond Gadmen becomes increasingly wild and remote, crossing some extraordinarily beautiful moorland as low cloud gathers on the slopes of the Susten Pass ahead, while a family of goats follows me along the trail, stopping whenever I do to have another go at chewing the straps on the side of my pack.

A lone marker indicates the end of the Via Berna, beside the road on the Susten Pass. I scramble up to the top of some rocks, where the flags of Bern, Uri and Switzerland flap in the increasingly strong wind – before it's time to retreat down towards the shelter of Berghotel Steingletscher, with the promise of a warm dinner and a celebratory beer (or two) after this hugely rewarding trek across the Canton of Bern.

Here's the thing: the experience of hiking a long-distance trail like the Via Berna goes beyond doing a walk through some ridiculously beautiful scenery. It has the power to be transformative, to peel back the layers of the everyday and, increasingly as the days and miles mount up, it forces you to switch gears, to reframe, allowing you the time and space to breathe. Not to mention, serving up enough gob-smacking views to last a lifetime.

And right on cue, as I re-cross the slopes below the pass, brushing through waist-high purple flowers, the mist and low clouds part briefly to reveal the vast, fractured blue sprawl of the Steingletscher, clinging to the mountains above the windswept surface of the Steinsee.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

SWISS (swiss.com) flies to Zurich and Geneva. There are direct trains from Zurich airport to Bern and other places on the trail (timetables at sbb.ch/en; for a Swiss Travel Pass see mystsn.net/en). To return from the Susten Pass, take bus 162 (timetables at postauto.ch/en) from Berghotel Steingletscher to Göschenen, then a train via Arth-Goldau to Zurich airport.

BEST TIME TO GO

The Via Berna's hiking season is mid-June to mid-October.

CURRENCY

 Euro

TIME ZONE

 GMT +1

FOOD

There's no shortage of delicious Swiss food to try along the Via Berna – keep an eye out for Tête de Moine cheese in Bellelay, *zibecheueche* (onion tart) in Bern, and, of course, *rösti*.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Alpenblick (Wilderswil); Berggasthaus First (First); Hotel Reuti (Hasliberg); Hotel Engstlenalp (Engstlenalp); Gadmer Lodge (Gadmen); Berghotel Steingletscher (just below the Susten Pass).

HOW TO DO IT

You can hike the route as a rewarding three-week trip, or just pick off highlights along it. For more information see myswitzerland.com and viaberna.ch.

MUST-PACK ITEM

Folding hiking poles (Leki's FX Carbon series are best). Good hiking boots are a must, and an insulated gilet will come in handy on cool evenings and blustery mountain passes.

WHY GO

An easily accessible long-distance hiking route through some of Switzerland's finest and most iconic mountain scenery, with stacks of history and culture, delicious food, and great lungfuls of fresh air – what's not to like?