



online first to check events in Gstaad. The website www.gstaad.ch has details of all current and upcoming events in the town, including festive markets, weather reports and a live camera, and there's an accommodation booking service



The good life in Gstaad



A holiday resort in the Swiss Alps, this charming village has plenty for non-skiers even in winter, discovers **Adriaane Pielou**

The Alpine village of Gstaad first gained prominence among international jet-setters and home buyers thanks to the prestigious Le Rosey finishing school. Courtesy Gstaad Saanenland Tourismus

Darkness is falling, and across the mountains little lights are gleaming, reflected in the snow. I pull my scarf tighter and sink into my down jacket. Climbing into the Swiss Alps on board the little Montreux-Oberland Bernois train is proving unexpectedly cosy – comfortable seats, heating blasting away, coffee trolley clattering through every now and then. Still, it makes me shiver to look out over that vast landscape. Occasionally, we stop at a little mountain station, usually heralded by a row of pines, branches weighed with icicles. On and on the train climbs – I feel as if I'm in the children's film *The Polar Express* – until eventually, two-and-a-half hours after leaving Geneva airport, my stop is announced. Gstaad. The ski resort where you don't have to ski.

I step out onto the platform, my breath hanging like smoke in the air, and before I know it a chauffeur has taken my case and is opening the door of what he informs me is a 1962 Bentley that used to belong to the former local resident Roger Moore. Excellent. This is Gstaad and that is exactly the kind of thing I expect here. As we turn into the main road, snow banked up either side, an empty horse-drawn sleigh clatters past. That too.

Minutes later, I'm shaking snowflakes off my coat in the lobby of the Belle Époque-inspired Le Grand Bellevue hotel. Lit by glowing lamps, the big, old property looks like a home for the von Trapp family made over by a particularly cool interior designer. Blue tartan-upholstered squashy sofas, logs burning in a double-sided grate, bookshelves packed with fashion and art titles, flashes of turquoise and orange. A formally dressed waiter approaches. Tea and cake for madame? Yes, please. I sink into a sofa and give myself up to the warmth, firelight and flapjack – and the delightful prospect of enjoying a snowy setting without having to shiver on a mountainside, uncomfortable boots attached to slippery boards, nervously contemplating the drop below.

The next morning, in the restaurant, a high-ceilinged, tall-windowed room, I linger over a second cappuccino and croissant while bulkily jacketed guests clomp off to wait for the shuttle bus to take them to the chairlift. Poor things. I love snow. I love the Alps in winter. And I know Gstaad is supposed to be particularly good for beginners, and surprisingly cheap, too: Dh180 for a daily ski pass. But you don't have to deprive yourself of a holiday in the mountains if, like me, you prefer

walking in rather than skidding down them. You just have to avoid those resorts where there's nothing to do but ski – like those soulless 1970s-built places in the French Alps – and instead come somewhere like this, where the village has remained a proper village, and you can shop and stroll and spa and snowshoe instead. Or just sit and drink coffee and eat cake.

By lunchtime, I've walked the length of the village, from Le Grand Bellevue at one end to the dairy at the other end of the Promenade, or main drag. It took all of 15 minutes. I've mooched around, chatted to shop owners, and am starting to feel quite at home. There's just this one main street, with a toyshop/stationers and few other old village stores dotted among the Cartier, Hermès, Hublot, Moncler and Louis Vuitton stores. While you wouldn't go to Gstaad just to shop, it's hard not to find yourself returning to the hotel each day with a bag or two. From the Ralph Lauren store, perhaps, which looks like a witch's house out of a Grimms' fairy tale, topped by a weathervane. Or Early Beck, which has the village's best range of Swiss chocolate: Lindt, Cailler, even goat-milk choc. Or the Hans-Alexander Fuhrer cigar shop, or the three storeys of homeware heaven that

is the multi-award-winning von Siebenthal Cookshop, opened in 1872, the oldest shop in Gstaad, and voted best houseware shop in the world in 2012.

Above the village, the hillside is dotted with chalets: thanks to strict local planning laws, almost every building is in traditional chalet style, wood-fronted, balconied, and a maximum of three storeys. The famous Gstaad Palace hotel, which looms above the village, is an exception, but that was built well before the laws were introduced, when Gstaad, the impoverished farming hamlet, became Gstaad, the hideaway haunt of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, then Julie Andrews, Roger Moore, Valentino, and, more recently, Madonna and Bernie Ecclestone. There's no law against building down, however. The hillside is apparently a warren of underground pools, gyms and private cinemas.

The reason Gstaad remains so much more than a ski resort is that it grew up as a result of the opening of Le Rosey, the world's best-known finishing school. In the 1950s and 1960s, wealthy and famous people discovered Gstaad when they visited their children at half-term. They fell in love with the peace and quiet of the place, bought land here, built chalets, and that's what set

the ball rolling, much more than skiing.

"We have 7,700 permanent residents here – and 7,000 cows," says a local guide. "September to May, they're in their barns, but you can still see the cows when they're taken up to the meadows in spring and when they're brought down again in September. A big procession fills the street, just as always. And you can taste the grass they graze on in our butter and cream and cheese."

Despite the luxury boutiques and fairy-tale look of the place, I'm relieved to find it's not uniformly expensive. Local people still hang out in the village. Not, admittedly, at the cafe at Pernet-Comestibles, a "world of fine food" with Dh35,000 methuselabs and a caviar bar. But while a hot chocolate across the road at Charlie's Tea Room, in prime position by the ice-rink in the centre of the village, costs CHF9 (Dh 34), you don't pay much more for a steaming bowl of soup, bread and local Saanen cheese in the little wood-beamed Basta restaurant at the rear of Hotel Bernerhof, a favourite among local farmers.

The little PostHotel Rössli, in the middle of the village, built in 1823 and the oldest inn in Gstaad, is lined with black and white photos of how Gstaad looked in the early 1930s, before the first chairlifts arrived. You can eat fondue next to a tableful of local ski guides, the oldest of whom is 76. A must-do for one evening at least, everyone says.

I walk to the centre of the village, by Wally's Snack Bar (hamburger from CHF10.50; Dh40) stall, to get the chairlift. For a few exhilarating hours, I follow the marked paths, trudging through woodland, an enchanted forest of snow-laden branches, listening to nothing but the sound of my own breath, until the light starts to fade. I feel transported by the loveliness of it. By 4.30pm I'm back by the fire at Le Grand Bellevue, my hand hovering between a slice of fruit cake and raspberry jam and almond Linzertorte. Ahead lies a swim in the indoor pool in Le Grand Spa, a session in the hamman and Himalayan salt room, a massage, and then perhaps a film in the hotel's private cinema. You wouldn't believe how good a few days of such agreeable indolence in fresh mountain air makes you feel.

if you go



Source: Google

The flight

Etihad (www.etihad.com) offers direct return flights from Abu Dhabi to Geneva from Dh2,950, including taxes. Return rail tickets from Geneva airport to Gstaad cost from CHF160 (Dh605), including taxes.

The accommodation

The Oxford Ski Company (0044 199 389 9422; email inspire@oxfordski.com) handles quality accommodation in Gstaad, in chalets as well as hotels. Three nights for two people sharing a room at the newly reopened, revamped and well-located Le Grande Bellevue (00 41 33 748 0000, www.bellevue-gstaad.ch) this winter, cost from CHF3,463 (Dh13,105) with breakfast and dinner for two, excluding any travel. Rooms are large, minimalist but comfortable, with billowy duvets and terrific big bathrooms with large baths. The spa and, crucially, its therapists, are exceptional.

The 165-room Gstaad Palace (www.palace.ch) is a 10-minute walk up a steep hillside, and celebrated its 100th birthday last year. Across the road from the Palace is the 56-room Alpina Gstaad (www.thealpinagstaad.ch), which after a 13-year demolition and renovation job that included a Six Senses spa now looks like something out of a Bond film.

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Most buildings are in traditional chalet style with no more than three storeys. Valentin Flauraud / Bloomberg