

Berguen, Switzerland

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Alpine perfection is far from elusive in Switzerland, but it's hard to find a place with more charm than Berguen. Those heading to posh St. Moritz by train from Zurich chug right past this hamlet, home to 550 people.

Berguen, about two hours southeast of Zurich by car or 2 1/2 hours by train, is literally at the end of the road: It sidles up to the Albula Pass, which is closed to vehicles during the winter, when it becomes one of the country's best sledding runs. There's a small ski mountain in Berguen (Darlux), and you can be at the world-class resorts of Davos or St. Moritz in about 45 minutes by train.

Even the train itself, the Rhatische Bahn, is a cultural wonder. There's a move to get the century-old railway, with vaulted stone viaducts along a snaking route, on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

BEST FOR . . . families looking to experience an ultimate Alpine vibe replete with kid-friendly activities, as well as easy access to challenging terrain at Switzerland's top ski mountains. Couples will like the romance of the cozy village setting.

THE SKIING: Darlux is beautiful if basic. A bunny slope in the village, an ideal spot for teaching the kids how to ski, is accessed by T-bar and rope lifts. Two chairlifts at the village's southeast end lead up the mountain itself, where the lure is uncrowded, groomed terrain with 360-degree Alpine views. There are only six runs, none of which is for beginners. From the top of the first lift, there's a fantastic descent through the trees to the village. And you have your choice of black or blue runs from where the second lift lets off, at an altitude of about 8,202 feet. Snowboarders like the fun park, with its quarter-pipe, kickers and rails.

The skiing at Darlux is not what brings most people to Berguen, however; it's the sledding.

Two runs offer different challenges. Take the Rhatische Bahn from Berguen toward St. Moritz, climbing through tunnels to Preda (about 25 minutes). Then sled for more than four miles on traditional wooden toboggans back to Berguen. Amateur sledders should count on a good half-hour to take in the scenery and navigate the switchbacks. Nighttime runs are particularly magical (you can sled till 11:30). A second sled run, open only during the day and accessed by the Darlux chairlift, is about 2 1/2 miles long and is a narrow, plunging scream that's not for the faint of heart.

If you're a serious skier, Berguen is a great base for day trips to St. Moritz and Davos. Both resorts offer vast terrain and skiing for all abilities, and Davos is a snowboarder's haven. The train ride is one of the most scenic in the country, and that's saying a lot; even better, it costs only 80 cents or so with your lift ticket.

PRICES: Lift tickets at Darlux are about \$31 a day. Day passes for both sled runs (train ride included) are \$26 a day. Rent sleds (\$6.30 to \$22) and snowboards or skis (\$34 to \$54.50 a day) at Marksport on Berguen's main street (011-41-81-407-11-65, <http://www.marksport.ch/>).

THE SCENE: Norman Rockwell meets the Swiss Alps. Locals transport everything from groceries to their offspring atop wooden sleds. Most homes are painted in the traditional, stenciled Engadin style, with neat piles of firewood flanking them in that oh-so-tidy Swiss fashion. Gurgling fountains freeze over in the winter, creating natural ice sculptures in the town's main square. There's an outdoor convenience store of sorts where you can buy locally made yogurt and cheese on the honor system. (Just deposit your francs in the box.) A fire-engine-red train rumbling through town completes the image.

As an American, you'll be treated with a bit of wonder, as most of the tourists here are European and predominantly Swiss. The Swiss consider Berguen a local secret and are impressed by outsiders with the savvy to stop in. Apart from sledding, nightlife is practically nonexistent, but you can make a lovely evening lingering over fondue or raclette fireside in one of the restaurants before taking in a few sled runs.

WHERE TO STAY: All of the hotels and restaurants listed below are in the middle of town, on or right off the Hauptstrasse, with signs pointing the way.

Hotel Garni Bellaval (011-41-81-407-12-09, <http://www.bellaval.com/>), a short walk from the Darlux lift, offers spotless rooms with private balconies, plush duvets, wireless Internet access and luxurious bathrooms. Doubles start at \$55 per person per night and include a buffet breakfast with homemade muesli and local meats and cheeses.

The Hotel Weisses Kreuz (011-41-81-407-11-61, <http://www.weisseskreuz-berguen.ch/>) has operated as an inn since 1889. Following major renovations, it reopened in 2003 as the most luxurious address in town. Doubles with DVD players and private baths start at \$60 per person, with breakfast.

Hotel-Restaurant Albula (011-41-81-407-11-26, <http://www.hotelalbula.ch/>) is close to the train station and offers single rooms for about \$75 and doubles for about \$67 per person, breakfast included. Telephone, TV and private bath/shower are standard. The studios with kitchenettes are a good option for families and start at \$44 per person, based on quad occupancy.

WHERE TO EAT: The 230-year-old restored parlor at Hotel Weisses Kreuz is an elegant space for tucking into hearty local specialties such as pizokel (dumplings filled with spinach or meat, \$13) and venison sausages (\$10.25).

Recipes from the cookbooks of Berguen matrons add flavor at Hotel Albula. Try the cheese fondue (\$18) or capuns (chard dumplings with meat) cooked “grandmother’s way” (\$19.30).

At Hotel Piz Ela, on the main street, dine on Italian dishes, wood-fired pizzas and specialties such as roesti (hash browns with cheese, \$13.75). The lunch menu, with soup or salad and a main dish, is \$13.35.

INFO: Berguen Tourism, 011-41-81-407-11-52, <http://www.berguen.ch/>