



Taking the ‘Light and Air Cure’ in the Alpes Vaudoises

By Ian Spare

The mountains of the canton of Vaud, Switzerland lie in the alpine group we call the Bernese Alps and are often referred to as the Vaud Alps or Alpes Vaudoise in French. The highest point in the area is in the Diablerets massif at 3210m. The landscape of the area is dominated by views of the Diablerets, the nearby Grand Muveran (3051m), and the triple peaks above Leysin with their distinctive triple limestone summits named Tour d'Aï, Tour de Mayen and Tour de Famelon.

The Vaud is one of the 26 cantons of Switzerland and is in the Romandie, which refers to the western area of the country where French is spoken.

The land around Lake Geneva has been inhabited since prehistoric times and, by Roman times, was occupied by a Celtic tribe known as the Helvetii. The Helvetii were conquered by a Roman army commanded by Julius Caesar in 58BC. The Romans then established settlements in Vevey (Latin:

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Viviscus) and Lausanne (Lausonium or Lausonna). Although, by 27BC the centre of the Roman presence had moved to Avenches (Aventicum) where much of the Roman town can still be seen today.

The Vaud is known for some excellent Swiss wines. The history of growing grapes and making wines goes back a long time. It's certain that the Romans were responsible for part of this, but some archaeological digs discovered grape seeds in settlements dating back to the Iron Age. No one really knows if these were naturally growing or cultivated. Today, the Vaud canton produces about a quarter of the 100 million litres of Swiss wine and the neighbouring canton of Valais produces another 40 percent, so this is very much the centre of Swiss viticulture. The secret of Swiss wine is that we drink most of it ourselves; we've got some of the best wines you've never heard of.

Much of the Alpes Vaudoises is accessible on snowshoes and it's a great place for a snowshoe trip. Mountain railways link with the main Swiss rail network so it's easy to reach whether it's from the airport or another part of Switzerland. The close proximity of such sightseeing destinations as Lake Geneva, the historic Château de Chillon on the shore of the lake, or the fortified mountain village of Gruyères make it a good choice for anyone looking to combine snowshoeing with visiting some of Switzerland's most iconic attractions.

Leysin - Come and take the "Licht und Luft" (light and air) cure

At the top of a mountain railway rising from Aigle in the Rhône valley lies Leysin. This was first settled around 400 A.D. when inhabitants of the Rhône valley fled waves of



germanic tribes who were overrunning the Roman towns of Vevey and Lausanne as Rome's grip on the western part of its empire failed and faded.

In 1789, Thomas Malthus – the English economist – noted in his book “Essays Upon the Principles of Population” that the people of Leysin were long lived. They had a life span of 61 and were enjoying longer lives than many of their European counterparts. He attributed this, in part, to the healthy climate. By the early 1800s nearby villagers were sending their sick children to Leysin to recuperate

The people of Leysin reckon they received one of their first tourists in 1873 when a young German suffering from tuberculosis came to try the good air of the village. The first guesthouse opened a few years later and Leysin was firmly on the map when the railway opened at in 1897.



By 1930, Leysin was booming with nearly 6,000 people in the village – only a couple of hundred of these were still farmers while there were 3,000 tuberculosis patients. Large clinics, or sanatoria, were built to house the patients. These large, grand buildings had large balconies where the patients would be wheeled out to take the air. They can be seen all over Leysin and today house some of the international schools based there. Of course, this was all over with the discovery of antibiotics. When the antibiotic streptomycin was developed in 1946, one by one, the clinics began to close.

Now Leysin is a tourist centre – summer and winter – and a new wave of visitors come to take their own “Licht und Luft” (light and air) cure.

A short tour above Leysin

Just above the village there's a small old quarry (location: <http://bit.ly/leysin-quarry>), if you've

come by car, and the road is clear, it's possible to park at the quarry. Otherwise, the local cog railway and bus stop at Leysin Feyday are about 10 or 15 minutes walk. From the quarry the snowshoe company "TSL" have marked a series of trails, which give you a number of options.

Photo: Leysin - Dents du Midi

Spring Snow on the trail with the Dents du Midi in the background

A nice short route, suitable for a half day trip, is to take the trail towards Le Temeley, but to turn east (location: <http://bit.ly/leysin-turn>) towards Prafandaz before reaching Le Temelay. For those



who prefer a longer route, and didn't leave their car at the quarry, there's another option to continue to Le Temeley. Then, onto towards Mayen inside the ski area and use the ski lifts to descend to Leysin again.

The shorter route makes a loop through the forest before emerging onto alpine meadows. These meadows are known as alpages, or alpettas or alpettes, and during the summer, herds of cattle and sometimes sheep or goats graze on the abundant pasture. It's traditional in these areas for the farmers to have small chalets on the hillside often built on the side of the milking parlours.

As you descend through the meadows you pass a fine example of one of these alpages (location: <http://bit.ly/leysin-alpage>) built of larch wood. Larch is a common building material for these alpages, it's very water resistant and quickly turns a distinctive dark, almost black, colour when exposed to the weather.

Photo: Leysin Alpage

A short distance from the alpage you reach



a mountain restaurant, which is open most days in the winter. The Chalet-Restaurant de Prafandaz (<http://www.prafandaz.ch/>) has a big sunny veranda and cosy seating inside for those colder winter days. They serve a variety of local dishes including, but not limited to, a selection of fondues with an interesting beer fondue for those wanting to try something different.

Photo: Leysin - Chalet-Restaurant de Prafandaz

From here it's a few minutes' walk back to the car park or around a 20 minute walk back to the train and bus.



Col des Mosses I - Refuge du Pra Cornet

About 20 minutes by car from Leysin is the Col des Mosses, it's a high mountain pass linking Aigle to Château-d'Œx. There's some alpine skiing here and in years past there was more until lifts on the peaks of Pic Chaussy and Monts Cheveruils closed for commercial reasons. The pass is open during the winter – although on the more wild days it can be a serious journey.

The pass is an ideal area for what we call randonnée in the French speaking world; it's a term we use to cover pretty much any activity that involves powering yourself up the hill like ski touring, hiking or snowshoeing. It's one of my favourite words.

One of our favourite journeys is to visit the Refuge du Pra Cornet (location: <http://bit.ly/pracornet>), which is a small hut near the cross country ski area. The refuge serves drinks and snacks: On a cold day does a really excellent “vin chaud,” which is concoction of hot wine spiced with cinnamon sticks, vanilla pods, cloves, citrus and sugar.

There's number of places to park along the pass and the best idea is to park at one of the access points for the alpine and Nordic skiing. It's also easy to snowshoe up to Pra Cornet from the villages of Les Mosses or La Lécherette where the yellow Swiss Postbuses stop on their route over the pass.



After leaving the pass itself you find your route up through wooded slopes with occasional clearings and alpages before arriving on a gently sloping open area above the tree line. This includes fantastic views over the Col des Mosses back to Leysin and to the northeast and Rougemont, which is part of the Gstaad ski region.

Col des Mosses II - Les Monts-Chevreuil

At the north end of the Col des Mosses pass is the tiny village of La Lécherette with three surface lifts for alpine skiers and an entry point to some of the Nordic ski trails looping around the col. The village is also the location for a Swiss military base and there's activity on the firing ranges from time to time above the reservoir of Lac de l'Hongrin. The reservoir has a couple of large, impressive arch dams holding back around 53 million cubic meters of water.

Our route is well away from the firing ranges and takes us up onto the small peak of Les Monts-Chevreuil. We're heading for the [Cabane des Monts-Chevreuil](http://bit.ly/Cabane-des-Monts-Chevreuil) (location: <http://bit.ly/Cabane-des-Monts-Chevreuil>), which is at the top of the old ski area. The lift stopped running back in 2001, but the cabane is run by the local ski club and open regularly in the winter. Helpfully they have some signs back in La Lécherette telling you if the cabane is open or not so you can plan your lunch. The



local store in La Lécherette sells enough things to improvise a picnic lunch if the cabane is closed.

I like to take a route on the east side of the peak to quickly reach the north facing slopes before making a direct route to the cabane, but the “TSL” marked route uses this for the return so it’s a choice to make on the day. After stopping for a drink or food in the cabane we head for the small summit right behind the old lift and then onto the south facing slopes over the Lac de l'Hongrin. From that summit you have great views back to Leysin and the Tour d'Aï, Tour de Mayen and Tour de Famelon.

It’s a shame there’s no alpine skiing here anymore but it’s a great little peak and it’s a paradise for our randonnée.

Places To Stay - Leysin

Leysin (1,264 m) makes a great base to explore the Alpes Vaudoises. It’s a sunny village high above the shores of Lake Geneva. The village has a local alpine ski area, toboggan runs, cross country skiing, ice skating rinks and swimming pools. Three international schools add a cosmopolitan air with young people coming from all over the world to study.

The town of Aigle down on the valley floor is directly connected to Geneva Airport and from Aigle a traditional cog railway takes visitors into the village of Leysin.

The small bed and breakfast L’Epicea (<http://www.epicea.ch>) offers comfortable rooms at reasonable prices and although it doesn’t have restaurant there’s a great choice of dining in the village.

The Author

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