

From the Zinal Glacier to the Swiss Jura Mountains: Exploring the High Alps on Snowshoes

By Ian Spare



Sitting here in Switzerland in the summer, the winter seems a long time ago. It's more than 30 degrees Celsius (that's 86 degrees Fahrenheit if you're in North America) and it's only 9 a.m. So, a great way to cool down is to look back at some trips around Switzerland and let the snowy landscapes cool the room.

I once made a comment on a Nordic skiing online forum about following a raquette track on skis for a short while. I got a confused reply telling me that raquette was French-Canadian for snowshoes, which the writer didn't think were used much outside North America. It turns out that raquettes is just a French word and one used here in the French speaking part of Switzerland. About 20 percent of the country would call snowshoes “la raquette à neige” (French). About 65 percent would say “Schneeschuhe” (German), while some 7 percent call them “racchette da neve” (Italian). I have no idea what the Romansh-speaking Swiss would say, and Google can't help me.

When going snowshoeing in Switzerland, the country can be divided into regions. We have the Swiss Plateau, which is around 30 percent of the country and between 400 and 700 meters (1,300-2,300 feet) high. Snow is scarce in this area. Although, it's possible to make the occasional trip, it's better to look at higher ranges.

The best known area is the Alps, of course: With a high point of 4810m (15,782 ft.) on Mont Blanc (France) and 82 peaks more than 4,000m (13,123 ft.) high. This is a 1,100 km (700 mile) long range of mountains taking in Austria and Slovenia in the east, and crossing Italy, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Germany and France in the west. There are 48 of the 4,000m peaks here in Switzerland, including some of the most famous summits like the Matterhorn and the Jungfrau.



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Often overlooked are the Jura Mountains. The highest point in this range is only 1,720m (5,640 ft.), with most peaks not rising more than 1,500m (4,921 ft.). In fact, due to current geological activity, those peaks are still rising. The range runs along the French-Swiss border with some lower foothills just inside Germany in the north.

On the Swiss side of the Jura there are large towns like La Chaux-de-Fonds, Le Locle, and Sainte-Croix. Actually, these are only large by Swiss standards and are famed locally as the birthplaces of the watch-making industries. Sainte-Croix is

particularly known for musical boxes. What the people living in these towns know is just how cold it can get during the winter. The village of La Brévine earned the nickname “Little Siberia” in January 1987 when it recorded a temperature of -41.8 degree Celsius (-43 degree Fahrenheit). This is still the coldest ever recorded in Switzerland.

Pictures will tell a better story about the terrain. I've picked out four trips that are local to my house on the plateau, or also known as my mountain chalet.

The High Alps 1 – Zinal Glacier

The Swiss Alps range is so big that it can be divided into 20 different ranges. It then gets confusing, so the Alps are separated into two groups of ranges: the Western Alps and the Eastern Alps. I have a chalet in the village of Zinal in the Val d'Anniviers – located in the Western Alps in a range of peaks known as the Pennine Alps. The Pennine Alps is home to all the big alpine peaks. Here you will find 41 of the 82 4,000m peaks, comfortably overshadowing all the other alpine ranges.

This is where you come to go high – traveling in the big mountains and glaciers of the Alps. One of the most interesting trips from Zinal is to visit one of the local glaciers. It's an easy trip up from the end of the village. It first crosses the small Nordic skiing area, past the old copper mines, and then a direct route to the glacier itself.

Once you get to the glacier you're in for a surprise. The movement of this glacier has carved out large ice caves at the snout and you can walk right in underneath the tons of ancient ice.

This is an interesting trip, but it's in the high mountains. You're crossing areas of some danger where there's frequent avalanche activity in the



winter and rock slides in the spring (as the mountains begin to warm up). It's important that you're equipped for this sort of travel and have the skills to interpret the changing conditions. If you're in any doubt, local mountain guides or mountain leaders make regular journeys to see the caves. You can join them either in a group or as an individual.



The High Alps 2 – Saint Luc and Lac Du Touno or the Hotel Weisshorn

Sometimes you need to escape the crowds. The problem with spending most of the winter in a place like Zinal is that other people like to take their holidays there as well. Normally, that's just fine. During Christmas, or other holidays, it gets busy on the ski slopes.

A great little trip can be made from the village of Saint-Luc. There is a funicular railway here as part of the ski lift system, which can shoot you up to 2,200m (7,220ft.) From here, you can quickly walk out of the ski area past a small astronomical observatory.

As you leave the ski area, you can embark on a tour of the solar system with scale models of the planets along the path – all spaced at scale distances from each other. I've made this trip many times – summer and winter – and it always amazes me how empty the solar system is and the large spaces between the planets.



Setting off from the sun, you quickly pass planet Earth and carry on until you reach Uranus. At this point, you have a choice: You can take the high road up to the Lac Touno and a high mountain pass, or take a well-maintained trail to the historic Hotel Weisshorn. Dating from 1882 and named for one of the local 4,000m peaks, you can enjoy a glass of the local wine and try some of the local cheese produced in the summer.

Like the previous trip, if you take the high route, you are



entering a high alpine environment. With all the risks that involves, join a guide or leader for your trip. The route to the Hotel Weisshorn is simple; it's on prepared trails and can be attempted by most snowshoers.

The Bernese Alps – Schwarzsee, the Black Lake

The Bernese Alps is a huge range taking in formidable peaks like the Eiger and the Jungfrau. There is a gentle side to the foothills with peaks

around 2,000m (6,500 ft.) and less severe, less steep ascents. One of my favorite locations is called Schwarzsee, by the German speaking inhabitants, and is only 50km (30 miles) from the Swiss capital of Bern. It's cold here. I've skied early in the morning and as you open the car door, the cold air just hits you...sucking your breath away.

In deep winter, the Black Lake (that gives the village its name) freezes solid and you'll see events held on the ice. It's often possible to walk or skate on the ice.

There's actually a little ski station here used by local people and schools during the week. It was once larger and there were lifts on both sides of the lake, but now there are just a handful of runs and surface lifts on one side of the lake. The tour then goes to an abandoned ski station on the slopes of the small peak called Schwyberg – at a modest 1,645m (5,400ft). These particular photographs are taken in November, which is often a bit early for good snow. In this instance, a bumper fall overnight has left deep powder all over the mountain.

There are a few of these abandoned ski stations around and there's been some debate about who is responsible for cleaning them up. The old buildings and lift pylons are a bit unsightly, but what the downhill skiers have lost has been the gain of snowshoers and ski-tourers.

The Jura – Mont Cochet

And finally, in the brief tour of a small corner of Switzerland, there's the Jura. When I described it as “overlooked with small peaks,” that really didn't do the area justice. It might be that the Jura is the best snowshoeing area in France and Switzerland. The rolling terrain and forests make it ideal for snowshoeing. The smaller slopes are less steep and less exposed, making winter travel much safer with much less risk of avalanches.





Mont Cochet is a good example of this. There are some ski lifts nearby again, but they're all on one side of the peak. Parking in the town of Sainte-Croix, I walked up on well-travelled tracks to Mont Cochet (1,483m/4,865 ft.).

The snow had come late to the Jura this year. This was one of the major falls providing good cover for snowshoeing, but maybe not so well for skiers. The ski lift wasn't running that day, but some guys had used

touring skis and skins to climb to the summit of Mont Cochet from the other side. As I watched them climb I thought it wasn't going to be much of a descent for them. They did provide some entertainment as the first guy to ski down decided to call out each rock he encountered. The hillside was echoing with calls of "caillou" (stone/pebble) or "pierre" (stone) every few seconds. It's a small peak, but it must have been a long way down for his friends following.

That's it for a quick, and very incomplete, tour of Swiss snowshoeing. Pictures of the snow cooled me a little, but it hit 40 degrees Celsius (104 degree Fahrenheit) while I was typing. It's time to find somewhere cool.

About the Author:

Ian is a UK Mountain Leader and an International Mountain Leader (IML) Aspirant, and is a member of both BAIML (British Association of International Mountain Leaders) and ASAM (Association Suisse des Accompagnateurs en moyenne Montagne).

He leads groups and individuals in the mountains in Switzerland and further afield. In summer conditions this includes trekking and walking while in winter he leads groups snowshoeing. As a Nordic Walking Instructor he can give an added dimension to moving in the mountains and introduce clients to a simple fun exercise they can make part of their daily routine at home.

For more information, visit <http://swissmountainleader.com>.

