

#JUNGFRAU

Swiss playground

Family travel in Switzerland allows parents the best of both guided and DIY experiences. *By Sue White*

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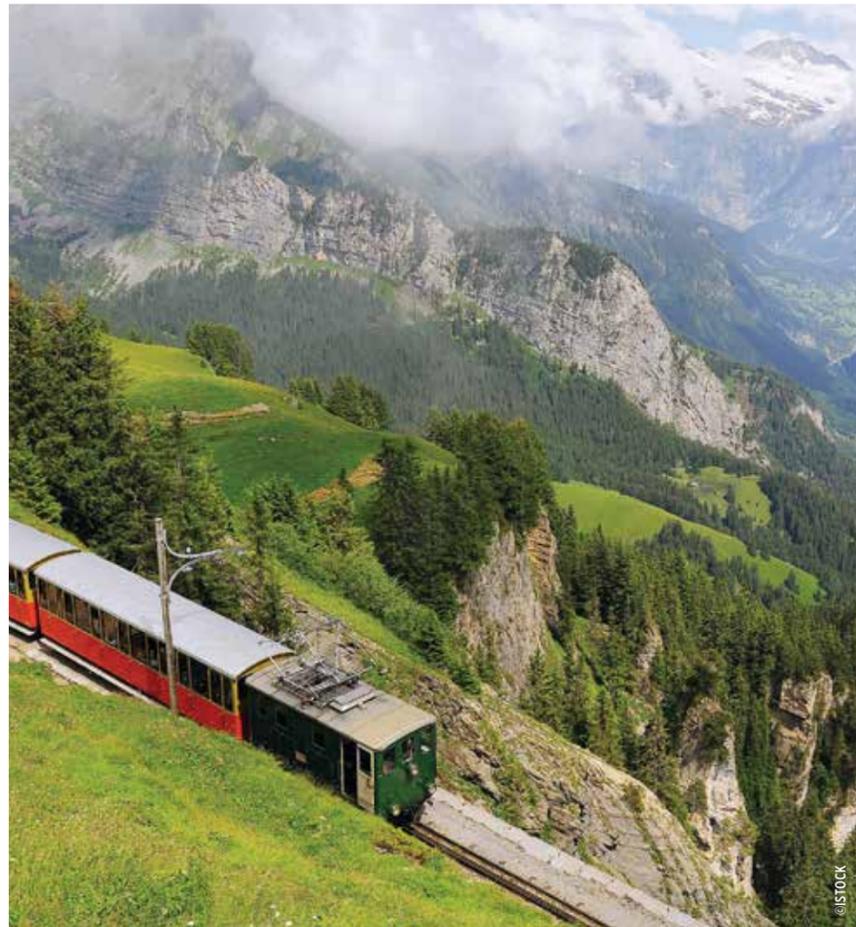
RAMPING ALONG THE GRAVEL TRACK, it doesn't take long to see it: wood, ropes, pulleys and two large piles of pinecones. My five-year-old son Ollie spots it too and, instantly recovering from his refrain of "I don't want to walk", runs ahead in excitement towards the wooden fort.

We've just set out along the Muggestutz adventure trail, a four-kilometre mountain hike themed around the legendary dwarves of the family-friendly Haslital Valley, far above the mountain town of Meiringen in Switzerland's Jungfrau region.

Disembarking the gondola at Mägisalp, we wind our way along the mountain path. Eyeing the views of the Eiger mountain and its snow-coloured siblings in the distance, the wildflower-lined trail reminds me just how good the Swiss are at taking 'family friendly' options to the next level.

Muggestutz is dotted with play areas, so every few hundred metres is a cubby house, a ladder heading up a tree (one leads to an 'eagle's' nest filled with treasures), a marble run perfect for rolling the walnut provided with our gondola ticket, or of course the fort where we spend a pleasant 20 minutes delivering pinecones up and down using a basket and pulley system.





Still, the best part comes after each play break. “Mum, let’s go to find the next one,” chirps Ollie. The Swiss may be famous for watches, fondue and chocolate, but creating a trail that encourages kids to hike? That’s pure genius.

Today we need the extra support. Ollie’s still recovering from yesterday’s Swiss hiking success: further along this same valley he happily hiked from the funicular station at the top of Meiringen’s Reichenbach Falls for, wait for it, two and a half hours, making it all the way to the captivating 200-metre deep Aare Gorge. He then trotted merrily along its 1.4 kilometre length. By the end of the day, I was spent. Ollie? An hour’s play at the excellent playground at the Gorge’s west entrance proved non-negotiable.

These are miracles I partly chalk up to the ease of family travel in Switzerland. The basics of getting around are so smooth it’s easy to do it all yourself without a guide. Travellers soon learn if travelling a route requiring a bus, two trains and a ferry, that not only will each arrive and depart on time, but there will be sensible, straightforward connections between each form of transport.

For a family that means a rewarding holiday can be had by mixing and matching short kid-length guided activities (say



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two to three hours) with self-guided options such as our Aare Gorge hike. Another self-guided equivalent further along the mountain range is the train and wildflower combination to Schynige Platte. Here, parents can relax over lunch with Alps views while kids play in the excellent new wooden playground.

Of course, guided activities are sometimes worth making an effort for. A few days later in the unmissable mountain town of Grindelwald I struggle to get my son out the door to meet a 7.40am bus. I blame what is surely one of the world’s most scenic playgrounds for my troubles. The complex ropes course in the middle of Grindelwald, overlooked by the Eiger mountain, had us both captivated until late last night, albeit for different reasons.

We make the bus by five minutes



OPENING IMAGE: The writer’s son Ollie enjoying the mountain walks.
 OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: A cow on a hiking path through Schynige Platte; Jungfrau’s beautiful scenery.
 THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: On the Aare Gorge hike; breakfast at an alpine cheese farm above Bussalp.
 FOLLOWING PAGE: Writer Sue White and son kayaking on Lake Brienz.



and head further up into the Alps for breakfast at a small cheese maker's farm. Each July and August Jungfrau Tourism coordinates the weekly opportunity for visitors to watch a summer-only tradition: a three-hour organised activity that is perfect for all ages.

Reluctantly peeling my eyes away from the view, I step into the barn to watch the second-generation cheese farmer ply his craft while his cows hover outside on the hillside, bells ringing melodically.

"He does it for love, culture and history," the farmer's sidekick confirms, as farmer Andreas carefully stirs then slices a large cauldron full of curds and whey.

The thick, unpasteurised milk we are offered evokes a firm "yuk" from Ollie, but I like the warm mixture. However, as we settle outside around a wooden table to dine on fresh bread, jam and of course cheese, breakfast gets the thumbs up. We walk it off by heading together down the mountain trail to the bus stop. It's a 40-minute jaunt that, thanks to a week of Swiss hiking, doesn't evoke one protest.

While the Swiss have figured out how to entice kids to walk, I've always known what would motivate my own child on our Swiss travels – cooking sweet food. We start off slowly, learning how to make meringues in the town famous where they

were invented (Meiringen, according to the Swiss). But it's a half hour train ride away in Interlaken where I share news of my trump card – chocolate making.

Ollie is the only child in today's 75-minute class but it's an all ages activity. The chocolatier from Funky Chocolate Club teaches us the different strengths of chocolate and shows us how to create and decorate our own bars to take home, all the while encouraging us to taste test until we burst.

Over the coming days, I attempt to paddle off some of the calories on the dazzling green waters of nearby Lake Brienz (water pistol fights with our guide keep my son entertained from the front of my kayak). We don thermals for a viewing of the Jungfrauoch glacier and inch our way along the ice palace beneath it. Near Interlaken again, we guide a local farmer's llamas through the woods on a unique two-hour stroll. And on our only wet day we retreat to the fairytale town of Thun, where a game of 'detective' in the 12th century castle has Ollie scouring old tapestries for clues and enjoying real-life stories of partying knights and condemned prisoners.

Eventually, it's time to leave Switzerland's mountains behind. Ready to head for the train, I click open the pram. "That's okay," Ollie says. "I'll walk." 🐾



TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE

Many major airlines fly to Zurich, Switzerland including Qantas, Etihad and Singapore Airlines. From there it's about 2 hours 20 minutes to Interlaken where trains depart regularly for both Meiringen and Grindelwald (about 45 minutes each). Consider buying a Swiss Travel Pass as this can significantly cut your transport costs. Day passes like the Supersaver also include most of the bus, train or boat trips you'll want to do.

myswitzerland.com/rail

STAYING THERE

Hotel Rebstock, Meiringen
hotel-rebstock.ch
Hotel Alpina, Grindelwald
alpina-grindelwald.ch
City Hotel Oberland, Interlaken
city-oberland.ch/

EXPLORING

myswitzerland.com

interlaken.ch

jungfrau.ch

meiringen-hasliberg.ch

ACTIVITIES

Aare Gorge

aaeschlucht.ch

Reichenbach Falls

grimselwelt.ch/ausflugstipps/reichenbachfall

Llama trekking

lamatrek-jungfrauregion.ch

Funky Chocolate Club

funkychocolateclub.com

Kayaking Lake Brienz

hightide.ch

Thun Castle

schlossthun.ch

Cheese farm visit (organised by Grindelwald tourism)

grindelwald.swiss

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