



# A Matter of Gravity

IN ONE OF THE PLANET'S GREAT SKI REGIONS, ANOTHER WAY TO GET DOWNHILL



**BY TERRY WARD**



IN ADVANCE OF ADVENTURE ACTIVITIES, I HAVE SIGNED MORE than my share of waivers, fumbled through endless training sessions, and nodded knowingly at hours of safety videos. And so, as I prepare to sled down a moonlit mountain pass in Switzerland, I feel I am experiencing the ultimate in reckless, uncuddled freedom. Particularly because it is after dark, and I am perhaps a bit tipsy.

Swiss *schlitteln*, my friend Michel from Zürich has been telling me, is nothing like the backyard sledding on which I was raised — a series of uphill slogs punctuated by beeline descents and mild concussions. To see his countrymen at their sledding best, he insists we head to Bergün, a 2.5-hour car ride from Zürich into the canton of Graubünden. This *Heidi* stage-set of a village is home to 550 souls — all rosy-cheeked and prone to transporting everything from groceries to children atop traditional wooden toboggans. The population swells with enthusiastic sledders in winter, when the Albula



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mountain pass closes to car traffic and the road is given over to sleds.

Michel's keen to get down to sledding, but we spend our first afternoon traipsing across the snowy streets, popping into the town's 800-year-old Romanesque church, its elaborate paintings and ceiling murals restored to their original beauty during a refurbishment in 2009. We follow the clang of cowbells to a small paddock behind a wooden barn where a few Scottish highland cattle plod about in the snow, peering back at us with eyes as big as saucers from behind their shaggy bangs. Nearby, we see what I take for a bus shelter in the form of a log cabin, but Michel explains it's a *hofladen* — a souped-up farmer's stand. Inside, a refrigerator is stocked with locally produced cheese, butter, and milk, and we plunk a few francs in the honor box and help ourselves to two jars of fresh yogurt.\*

Throughout the day, people gather at an outdoor ice bar in the middle of town to down shots of schnapps and drink hot chocolate spiked with rum. Later, inside *gemütlich* guesthouses and candlelit restaurants, they raise glasses of white wine or steaming tea to their lips while tucking into burbling cauldrons of Gruyere and Emmenthaler. It's all fuel for the town's wilder side.

Bergün's serene picture-postcard façade belies the maniacal downhill experience that waits on one of the country's best-loved sledding runs, a short train ride — direction St. Moritz — from town. Michel and I purchase a sledding fare at Bergün's tiny station, and ride the Rhätische Bahn along its century-old railway route of spiraling tunnels and numerous stone viaducts and bridges. After 25 minutes, we hop off at the cluster of houses in Preda, at the top of the sled run.

Perched atop my rented sled, I wait for the crunchy snow to loosen its grip as the trail slopes downward. As I pick up speed, I'm second-guessing that second mug of *glühwein*, but Michel and the other Swiss sledders are charging forth, their bellies similarly laden with grog, fondue, raclette, and spaetzle. They launch themselves

with running starts and generally whoop it up with the international sounds of joy. Michel careens around corners and goes airborne over bumps, and I try to keep up, but the scenery slows me. The vaulted viaducts we'd chugged across on the train are illuminated, arching over valleys carpeted with snow glittering shattered diamonds in the moonlight. The sledding route carries me all the way back to town where Michel, the Swiss speed demon,\* is patiently waiting. A few enthusiastic sledders toss their toboggans over their shoulders and break out in a sprint for the station to make 11:30 train, the night's last ride. "More *glühwein* or more sledding?" asks Michel.

The latter, of course. And then maybe a mugful more of the former, and another walk around the village under the stars. ❁

The scenery is as exciting as the sledding above the Swiss village of Bergün, and a bright-red train makes for the world's most iconic shuttle.

