



SPLURGE

# THE BIG CHILL

WITH WELLNESS TRADITIONS THAT DATE BACK TO THE 16TH CENTURY, LUCERNE AND MOUNT RIGI ARE ENJOYING NEW-FOUND SPA FANS BY DOUG WALLACE

*“And how we did sleep! For there is no opiate like Alpine pedestrianism.”* —Mark Twain

**W**ITH FOUR official languages, Switzerland has always been a healthy mix of cultures, cuisines and diplomatic points of view, drawing influences from its neighbours for centuries. Yes, the trains run on time. Yes, the banking business is booming. And yes, the cheese is superb. But while Zurich, Geneva and Berne pretty much run the place, it's Lucerne everybody heads to for a week off. And so should you.

This charming little town where the Reuss River flows out of Lake Lucerne was founded in the 12th century and once ruled by monks. Tourists started showing up around 1850 when new rail lines connected the city with other parts of Europe. Now, five million tourists visit each year to walk down the cobblestone streets and across wooden foot bridges, drinking in medieval town squares, ancient churches and frescoed buildings, summer and winter.

■ **CITY OF LIGHTS** Lucerne has many decades of getting hospitality down right, particularly with the hotels. Though the Chateau Gütsch (currently under renovation)

had its famous fans (Queen Victoria loved it there) and the Grand Hotel National Lucerne has its culinary pedigree (French chef Georges Auguste Escoffier, credited with revolutionizing the dining industry by turning restaurant galleys into well-oiled, chef-driven operations, once worked in the kitchen), it's the **Art Deco Hotel Montana Lucerne** that offers true bang for the buck. The shortest funicular railway in Europe takes you from the sidewalk to the hotel lobby in 60 seconds, where you are bombarded with the beauty of a fully restored art deco interior. Built in 1910, the hotel features not only one of the best views of the lake but six new penthouse spa suites on the rooftop, built from what used to be staff quarters. Don't hesitate to book a table at the swank Restaurant Scala.

While waterside walks and quaint shops will keep you entertained, there is serious art to absorb at **The Rosengart Gallery**, where living art legend Angela Rosengart holds court over her family's collection of Picasso paintings, sculptures, ceramics and drawings, along with work from many other impressionists such as Cézanne, Matisse and Klee. Picasso, a friend of the family, created various portraits of Angela that grace one of the gallery nooks.

Music lovers should make a point of checking out the calendar for the **Culture and Convention Centre Lu-**

**cerne**, the elegant concert hall at the water's edge known for its sublime acoustics.

■ **QUEEN OF THE MOUNTAINS** What happens in Weggis ... well, you should actually share it with everyone. A little town just a short jaunt across the river from Lucerne, Weggis is your next stop. The colourful and comfortable **Post Hotel Weggis** is a great home base – a springboard to your down time up where the air is fresh and clean.

To say the gondola ride from Weggis up **Mount Rigi** is a thrill would be a gross understatement. This 1,800-metre mountain in the pre-Alps is currently enjoying a resurgence of its former status as a health-oriented spa playground. The 90-square-kilometre car-free recreational region has been known for its healing waters since the 16th century, when people would make the pilgrimage to the village of **Rigi Kaltbad** (literally “cold bath”) to take the waters and be inspired by a spectacular view and sunset.

Queen Victoria (once again), Goethe, Mark Twain and artist J.M.W. Turner were all fans of Rigi, the latter painting it several times, many of which hang in London's Tate Gallery. Twain ambled up the mountain (and really took his time, according to local legend) as part of a tour for his

book *A Tramp Abroad*, published in 1880.

In the 1940s and '50s, Rigi was *the* spot to spend the weekend – or longer – skiing, sledding, hiking and relaxing in the quaint chalets and small hotels. Leading the revival of the wellness tradition of the area is the brand-new **Rigi Kaltbad Mineral Baths and Spa**, which opened this past summer. Designed by Swiss architect Mario Botta, it is built into the mountain underneath a new village square and features indoor and outdoor pools, mineral water couches, neck showers, herbal steam baths and more. The spa has a tempting index of treatments and everything is connected via tunnel to the 50-room **Hotel Rigi Kaltbad**, which has just seen a complete renovation.

But don't stop there! Head to the very top of the mountain via cablecar to **Rigi Kulm**. The cogwheel railway was installed in 1871, the first of its kind. Sledding (if your tailbone can handle it), skiing and hiking are all part of the day's activity schedule. Check into the **Rigi Kulm Hotel**, even for just one night. People make this pilgrimage particularly for the sunrise, winter and summer, a sight that will be etched onto your memory for a long time. ■

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