

SUNDAY Travel

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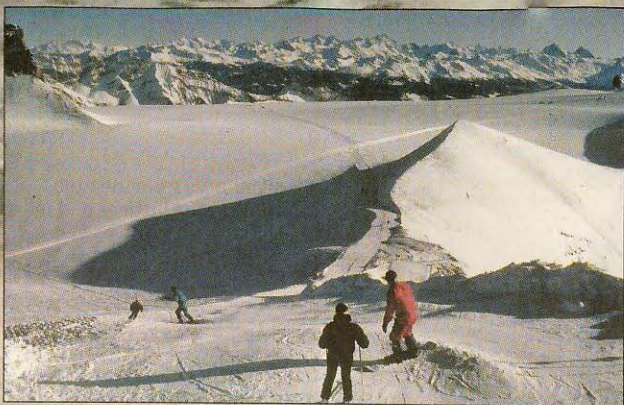
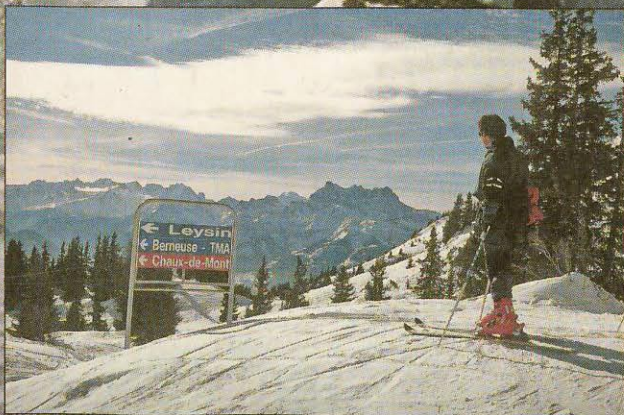
Tourists have begun flocking to the townships of South Africa to witness the genuine local way of life. / D16

SANTA BARBARA
NEWS-PRESS

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AN ICE TIME



STEVE HAGGERTY PHOTOS

A helicopter picks up skiers at La Videmanette summit village of Rougemont, Vaudois Alps, Switzerland. Inset, top, a view south of Vaudois Alps, from below the Mayen cable car. Inset, above, skiers on the top of Les Diablerets, Vaudois Alps, Switzerland.

IF YOU GO

SKIING THERE: Switzerland, where most residents speak English, is tourist-friendly. Hire a guide for your first day at any ski area. You can rent ski equipment there; the boots and skis are the same. Don't ski without trail maps; be aware that easy, intermediate and expert trails are marked differently than in the U.S.

WHO TO CONTACT: For information, phone numbers, ski packages and prices, go the following Web sites: For Lake Geneva tourism see www.lake-geneva-region.ch. For Vaud Canton Tourism, see www.region-du-leman. For the ski areas, see www.skiswitzerland.ch; www.diablerets.ch; www.leysin.ch; www.villars.ch.

GETTING THERE: Fly direct to Geneva. From there, take Swiss rail (the train) to your destination. For routes and passes, see www.raileurope.com/us/rail/passes/Switzerland_index.htm.

—Anne Z. Cooke

Glacial skiing in the Swiss Alps is a remarkable experience

By ANNE Z. COOKE
and STEVE HAGGERTY
NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENTS

LES DIABLERETS, Switzerland — As our helicopter hovered over Les Diablerets Glacier, in the Vaudois Alps east of Lake Geneva, our group, five of us besides the pilot, craned our necks in surprise. The vertical steeps and rugged couloirs we'd expected to be skiing on were nowhere in sight.

Instead, the glacier, a mile-deep swath of ice lying on a headland above the village of Les Diablerets, more nearly resembled an Iowa cornfield after a snowstorm. Ski tracks crisscrossed the surface and in the foreground, skiers riding a T-bar lift inched up a gentle hill. For an alpine glacier, Les Diablerets was a beginner skier's white dream.

Waiting below was our guide for the day, instructor Jean-Francois Morerod, backpack in one hand and skis in the other. Then the helicopter set down with a bump, the door opened and we ducked our heads and dashed. If any little devils — the glacier's namesakes — were hiding amongst the drifts, they weren't showing themselves.

You never know what you'll find when you ski in the Vaud canton, in the French part of Switzerland, except that few of the region's half-dozen ski areas are purpose-built resorts. Each village, here, tucked away in its own alpine valley, has a distinct look and feel. But all share a historic connection with the mountains.

"I can't remember when I wasn't skiing," said Mr. Morerod, as we clicked into our gear. "It's as natural as walking. But for most of us, it's not all go-go-go. Skiing is a way of life, a complete experience. The fresh air, the scenery and good food are all part of the pleasure."

From the summit of Les Diablerets glacier, at about 10,500 feet elevation, views of distant peaks, stand-

up like cake frosting, stretch away to the horizon. In one direction the Dents du Midi prick the sky and beyond to the south is Mont Blanc, in France. The glacier itself slopes gently toward the valley, disturbed only by lines of ski-lift towers and the periodic thuck-thuck-thuck of helicopters.

From the valley below, you can ride two cable cars to the ski slopes and eat lunch at the restaurant at Glacier 3000 — the food, and sit-down meals with wine, are superb. At day's end you can ride back down or ski down on a succession of intermediate-to-expert slopes. They were icy the day we were there; you might want to check the conditions before descending.

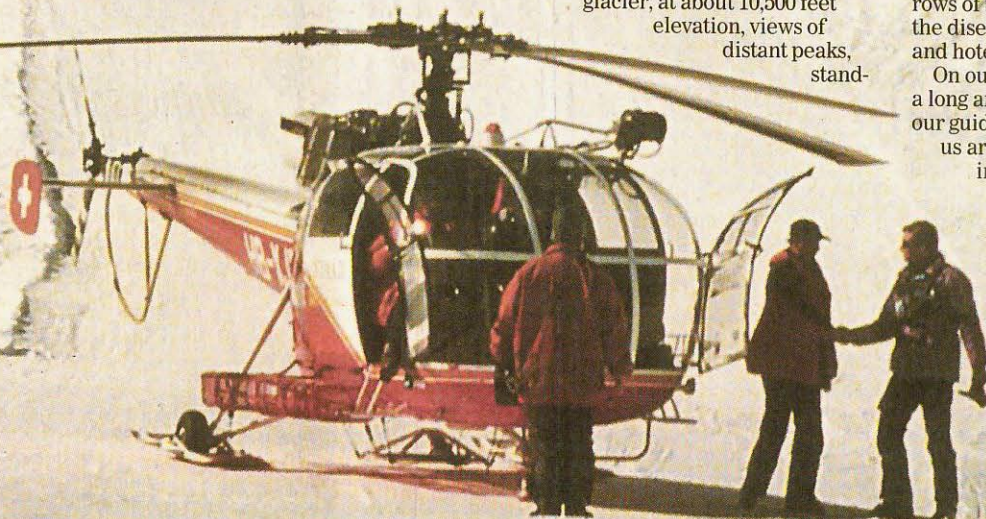
Our winter week in Switzerland began a few miles away in the village of Leysin, a family ski area popular with Europeans but virtually unknown to Americans. The British, Dutch and Germans who ski here expect to stay a week, which is how the town's many small hotels and chalets organize their calendars.

Most places are friendly and functional, and in addition to serving both breakfast and dinner, plan après-ski cheese-and-wine social hours, a good way to mix and meet your fellow guests. Depending on which week you're there, the accents you'll hear are a clue as to which countries are on school holidays. In winter, in fact, all Leysin's restaurants (nearly 50 of them) and 20 night spots depend on the ski and snowboard trade. But while they gear their menus and services to visitors, most don't advertise. There are plenty of cozy places to listen to music but they're tucked away behind shuttered windows. The hotel staff will point you in the right direction.

Leysin, cold and dry in winter, has an unusual recent history. In the 1930s and '40s it earned a reputation as a treatment center for tuberculosis patients, building multi-story convalescent hospitals above the town, with rows of balconies facing the sun. After drugs eliminated the disease, the buildings were converted to apartments and hotels.

On our first day of skiing, we walked to the ski lifts — a long and awkward block in stiff ski boots — to meet our guide, Philippe LaBarthe, who had agreed to guide us around the mountain. Riding up on the gondola, inside a "telecabine," a small gondola, we had our first view of the runs and the lifts — gondolas, chair lifts and T-bars — that flank the double summit, the 7,692-foot Tour d'Al, and 7,676-foot Tour de Mayen. They stand out because over the centuries, farmers cleared these slopes to create summer pasture for milk cows. That's why

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Mountains enjoyable all year around

■ ALPS

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"This is all grass under the snow," said Mr. LaBarthe. "There isn't much land in Switzerland, so people have to use it year around."

Though Switzerland is only half the size of Colorado, the mountains are uniquely dense and steep. The skiing, too, is different here, because each village operates its own chair lifts — as few as three or four, or sometimes many more. Since these ski areas overlap each other, you can start in any small village and ski over a huge area, riding up one lift, skiing down into the adjacent valley, riding up the next mountain, and so on. For convenience, groups of villages sell interchangeable lift passes, also good on shuttle buses and trains.

After a leisurely three-course meal at Kuklos, the revolving glass restaurant at the Berneuse cable car, we made our way to the top of Chauv de Mont. Though families with kids were everywhere, the number of tiny toddlers at the very top, and skiing

confidently, was an eye-opener.

For the last half of our ski trip, we moved to the Eurotel Victoria, in Les Diablerets, close to the lifts below the summit of the 6,432-foot Meilleret. Once again we booked a guide, expecting a scenic mountain tour. Instead, Christelle, who met us at the base area, was serious about her duties. By noon, we had skied all of Les Diablerets and half of Villars.

At lunch, Christelle proposed her favorite café, with unforgettable fondue. It sounded wonderful. So away we went, skiing farther and farther still, up and down, over ridges and into canyons, past Gryon ski resort, finally arriving at a quaint mountain hut with a south-facing view, the famous Refuge de Frienche.

Cheese smells floated out the door and waiters rushed back and forth from the kitchen, carrying salads, pasta, pots of fondue and bottles of wine. Gratefully we found an unoccupied table, ordered the meal and settled in to watch the sun dip westward.

Suddenly Christelle checked her watch, announced that the lifts

would be closing and we had to go. Racing back the way we'd come, we paused at each lift just long enough to ask the operator to phone to the next lift and say we were coming. Back at last — exhausted — we were the last skiers off the mountain.

At dinner that night, a fellow guest related the legend that explains the glacier's name. Once upon a time, it is said, good spirits lived on the mountain top, frolicking in flower-filled meadows that bloomed year around. Then without warning, it began to snow and snow, until eventually ice entombed the summit. The good spirits vanished and evil imps and devils took up residence.

Down below, frightened villagers cowered when they heard the devils groaning and banging, especially during storms. Sometimes the imps bowled with rocks, starting landslides. And the mountain that was once named for flower fields was renamed for the devils.

But that was then. Today, with skiers for company, the devils have fallen silent. And the glacier is a much friendlier place.