

# Valais



With the 10 highest mountains in Switzerland – all over 4000m – this scenic canton offers pinnacles of pleasure for those who enjoy the high life.

A certain supply of snow plus challenging slopes makes the Valais region one of the most popular in the world for skiing. A series of mountain valleys cuts south into the Alps from the Rhône valley, which slices east to west through the canton, leading to ski resorts as varied in scenery and challenges as they are culturally mixed. Depending on your choice of ski resort, you can ski from Francophone Switzerland into France or German Switzerland into Italy and back in the same day!

The Alps are as stunning in summer, offering limitless hiking possibilities for all levels, including the classic Mont Blanc circuit through Switzerland, France and Italy.

Long a region of struggling farmers until the advent of Alpine tourism, the canton is dotted with delightful high mountain villages and, lower down in the Rhône valley, vineyards that provide some of the country's best wines – the whites are a perfect accompaniment to a local cheese speciality, raclette, about which you can learn more on p52.

The Valais is not just about yomping and chomping. Martigny hosts one of the country's key art centres and Sion is notable for its medieval core, dramatic castle and museums.

Valais is also good for soothing nerves and tired muscles in its thermal bathing centres, notably those of Leukerbad.

## HIGHLIGHTS

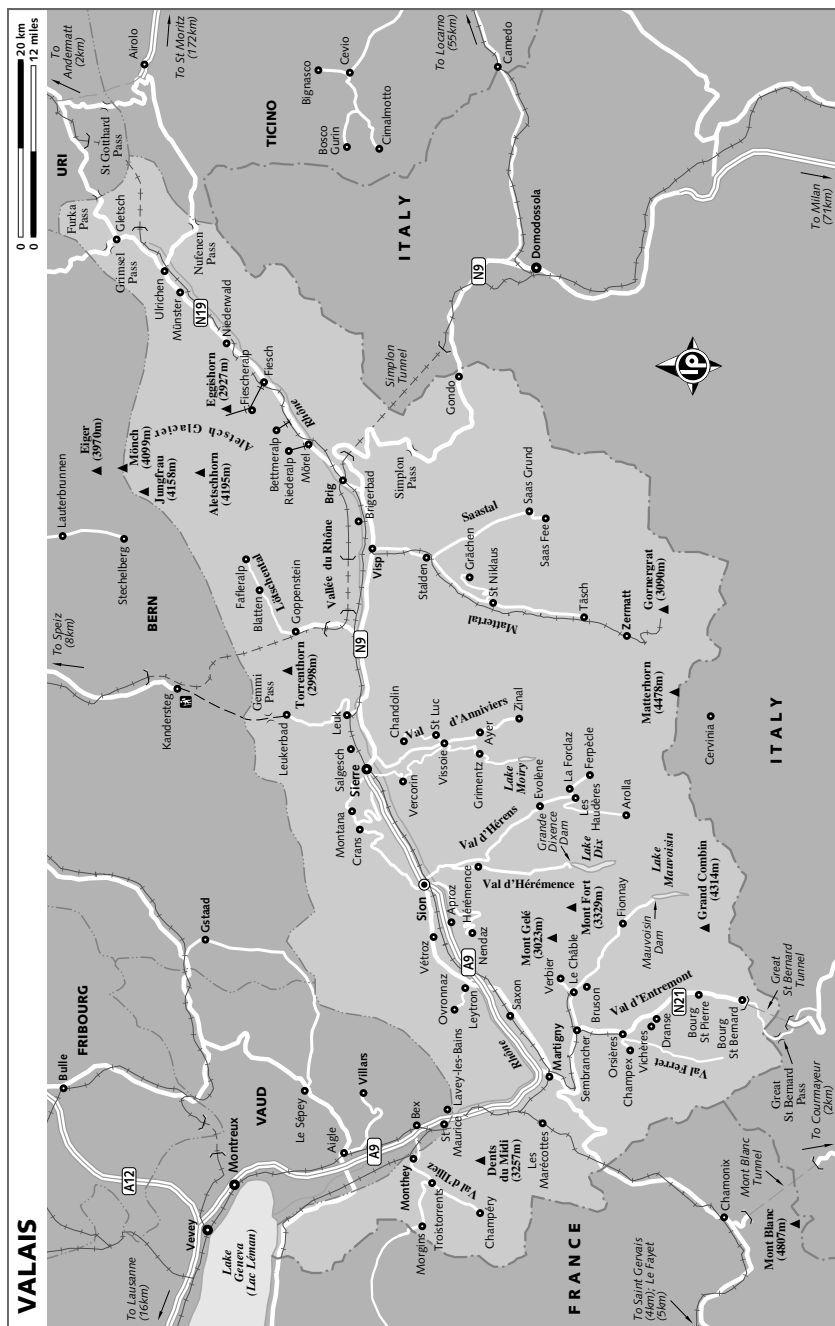
- Skiing, snowboarding and hiking in the shadow of Switzerland's emblematic **Matterhorn** (p135), or, for those with the right stuff, scaling it
- Checking out the world-class art exhibitions at Martigny's **Fondation Pierre Gianadda** (p120)
- Cheering along your favourite bovine in the spring and autumn cow battles in the villages of the **Val d'Hérens** (p129)
- Exploring the medieval centre, castle and basilica of **Sion** (p126)
- Frolicking in the regenerative thermal baths of **Leukerbad** (p132) while admiring the massive mountain stone walls around the town



■ POPULATION: 281,000

■ AREA: 5224.5 SQ KM

■ LANGUAGE: FRENCH & GERMAN



## History

As in neighbouring Vaud, Julius Caesar was an early 'tourist' in these parts. Historians fail to record whether he packed his skis, but we do know the Roman leader brought an army to conquer the Celtic community living in the valley, penetrating as far as Sierre. Once under Roman domination, it appears the four Celtic tribes of the Valais were peaceably integrated into the Roman system. Artefacts and archaeological remains still attest to the passage of the rambling general and his boys from Rome.

Sion became a key centre in the valley when the Bishop of Valais blessed the town with his presence, making his home there from AD 580. By 1000, the bishop's power stretched from Martigny to the Furka Pass.

That power did not go uncontested. A succession of Dukes of Savoy managed to encroach on the bishops' territory and a Savoyard army besieged Sion in 1475. With the help of the Swiss Confederation, the city was freed at the battle of Planta. Internal opposition was just as weighty and the independently minded communes that made up the Valais region stripped the bishops of their secular power in the 1630s, shifting the levers of control into the hands of the Diet, a regional parliament.

The Valais was not invaded again until Napoleon Bonaparte called by in 1798. The little man with big plans was determined to dominate the routes into Italy. Valais joined the Swiss Confederation in 1815.

## Orientation & Information

The Rhône carves a broad, sunny valley from east to west between the serried ranks of the Bernese Alps to the north and the Valaisan Alps that mark the southern frontier with France and Italy. French speakers dominate the lower valley, while German has been used in the upper (eastern) half of the canton since the 6th century.

Information is available at the regional tourist office, **Valais Tourisme** (☎ 027 327 35 70; www.matterhornstate.com, www.wallis.ch; Rue de Pré Fleuri 6, Sion; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri).

## Getting There & Around

The smoothest routes are from Italy to Martigny (via the Great St Bernard Pass and Tunnel) and Brig (via the Simplon Pass and Tunnel). The most direct route from

Chamonix in France to the Valais is by road from Martigny. The N9 highway enters the canton in the east via the Furka Pass and passes through main junctions like Brig. In Sierre it becomes the dual carriageway A9 motorway, continuing to Sion, Martigny and then north to follow Lake Geneva to Geneva. The same route is served by a major rail line, with a branch route into Italy via the border town of Domodossola.

The Adventure Card Wallis is a general transport card for the Oberwallis (German-speaking Upper Valais) area and entitles holders to two, three or five days' (Sfr89/109/169) unlimited travel on trains and buses in the area within a one-month period. It gives you 50% off on most lifts and sporting activities on those days too.

Special bus passes for Sion + Region and Martigny + Region are available in summer. Together they cover the whole of Lower Valais. The Martigny Pass includes the *Mont Blanc Express/St Bernard Express* trains. The Sion version includes some cable-car discounts. Ask at the towns' tourist offices about the passes. Another pass is the Valais Central pass, which runs from Martigny to Leukerbad. It gives you three days' unlimited transport within a week (adult/child Sfr48/38).

## LOWER VALAIS

The western, predominantly French, half of the Valais region is rich in history, art and snow-sport options, and the source of the some of Switzerland's best wines.

### WESTERN VALAIS & VAL D'ILLIEZ Champéry & Les Portes du Soleil

The hamlet of Champéry (population 1180) in the Val d'Illice is at the heart of an extensive, international ski paradise known as **Les Portes du Soleil** (Gateway to the Sun; www.portesdusoleil.com). With a total of 208 lifts and 650km pistes of all classes (intermediates predominate) spread out on the Swiss and French sides of the frontier, there is plenty of ski fun for all. Cross-country skiing is abundant too – 243km of trails. There are also eight snowparks for snowboarders.

To get to the pistes you have several options. Passing through the largely uninteresting town of Monthey, you swing southwest. At Troistorrents, the road forks. You can

continue 8km to Champéry, or branch west to Morgins. Lifts operate from both villages. The main town on the French side is Avoriaz. Ski passes for a day for the whole area cost Sfr55/37/44/46 per adult/child to 16/ senior/student or youth.

**Croix de Culet** (1963m) affords an eagle's view of the nearby Dents du Midi mountain peaks. The viewpoint is only a short wander from the top of the Planachaux cable car.

Champéry's ski lifts operate from June to August for hikers and mountain bikers. The Planachaux cable car operates as late as October in good weather.

The **Champéry tourist office** (☎ 024 479 20 20; www.champéry.ch) will tell you more. Another source of info is www.chablais.info.

From Aigle (20 minutes along the track from Martigny to Lausanne), a train runs via Monthey every hour to Champéry (Sfr12.40, one hour).

## St Maurice

You'd never know that this quiet village (population 3680), named after an early Christian martyr, was the site of an ancient and horrible massacre. Maurice and his Christian companions in a Roman army unit are said to have been cut to pieces in AD 302 for refusing to march against other Christians or worship the ancient gods of Rome. Their faith was commemorated by the construction of the 11th-century **Abbey Church**. The town castle also has a **military museum** (☎ 024 486 04 04; www.stmaurice.ch; Ave d'Againe 15; adult/child Sfr6/3; ☎ visits 3pm Tue-Sun Nov-Apr, 10.30am, 2pm, 3.15pm & 4.30pm Tue-Sun Jul & Aug, 10.30am, 3pm & 4.30pm Tue-Sun May, Jun, Sep & Oct). Trains from Martigny run around three times an hour (Sfr6, 15 minutes).

## Lavey-les-Bains

Although just inside the cantonal frontier of neighbouring Vaud, Lavey-les-Bains is south of St Maurice along the motorway. The **thermal baths** (☎ 024 486 15 55; www.lavey-les-bains.ch; admission for up to 3hr adult/4-16yr Sfr22/14; ☎ 9am-9pm Sun-Thu, 9am-10pm Fri & Sat) here comprise three pools (indoor and outdoor), Jacuzzis, steam baths and saunas. Children under four may not enter.

Local postal buses run from St Maurice, on the train line between Geneva and Brig, to Lavey (Sfr2.80, 10 minutes).

## MARTIGNY

pop 14,050 / elevation 476m

It might be the oldest town in Valais, but Martigny has a modern and somewhat muddled feel. While not immediately compelling, it does offer a handful of considerable cultural attractions, including reminders of the city's ancient Roman masters, who controlled the area from 15 BC.

## Orientation & Information

Tree-lined Place Centrale is where the action is. Sitting at one of the long line of pavement cafés and bars, the locals watch the world pass by. The **tourist office** (☎ 027 721 22 20; www.martignytourism.ch; Place Centrale; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 2-6pm Sat in summer, also 10am-noon & 4-6pm Sun Jul & Aug, closed Sat afternoon & Sun rest of year) can help with inquiries.

## Sights & Activities

The main attraction is the **Fondation Pierre Gianadda** (☎ 027 722 39 78; www.gianadda.ch; Rue du Forum; adult/student/senior Sfr15/8/13; ☎ 9am-7pm Jun-Nov, 10am-6pm Dec-May), a spacious art gallery rambling across an area of pretty parkland. The latter doubles as a showplace for contemporary sculpture, with contributions from the likes of Henry Moore and Alexander Calder. This delightful setting, established in 1978, attracts top-class art exhibitions from around the world and people from all over the western half of the country to admire them.

Included in the entry price is access to a couple of unrelated but curious permanent exhibitions. Above the main art gallery is the **Musée Archéologique Gallo-Romain**, housing coins, pots and sculptures from Roman and pre-Roman times found in the vicinity. The finest piece is the head of a bronze bull.

Mighty bulls are replaced by horsepower in the **Musée de l'Auto** (Automobile Museum), on the same premises. Some 50 polished-up automobiles dating from the late 19th century on look ready to take to the road at any minute.

The Roman Empire withstood barbarian pressure for a long time, and the restored **Roman Amphitheatre** (admission free) is again the scene of occasional summer concerts. The visitor is given free rein to wander round every aspect of the site.

The baroque **Église de Notre Dame des Champs** (Our Lady of the Fields; Rue de l'Église) hides remains of Romanesque and Gothic churches, and even

a 4th-century baptistry. By the Dranse river, the **Chapelle de Notre Dame de la Compassion** (Our Lady of Compassion) is curious for its exvoto paintings. Perched above the chapel is **Château de la Bâtiaz** (Bâtiaz Castle; www.batiaz.ch in French; ☎ 4-6pm Thu, 11am-6pm Fri-Sun mid-May-mid-Oct). It is worth the climb up the hill for the views over surrounding vineyards alone. On display inside is a collection of remakes of medieval war engines and instruments of torture. Suitably sickened, you can stop off at the castle tavern for some refreshment.

## Festivals & Events

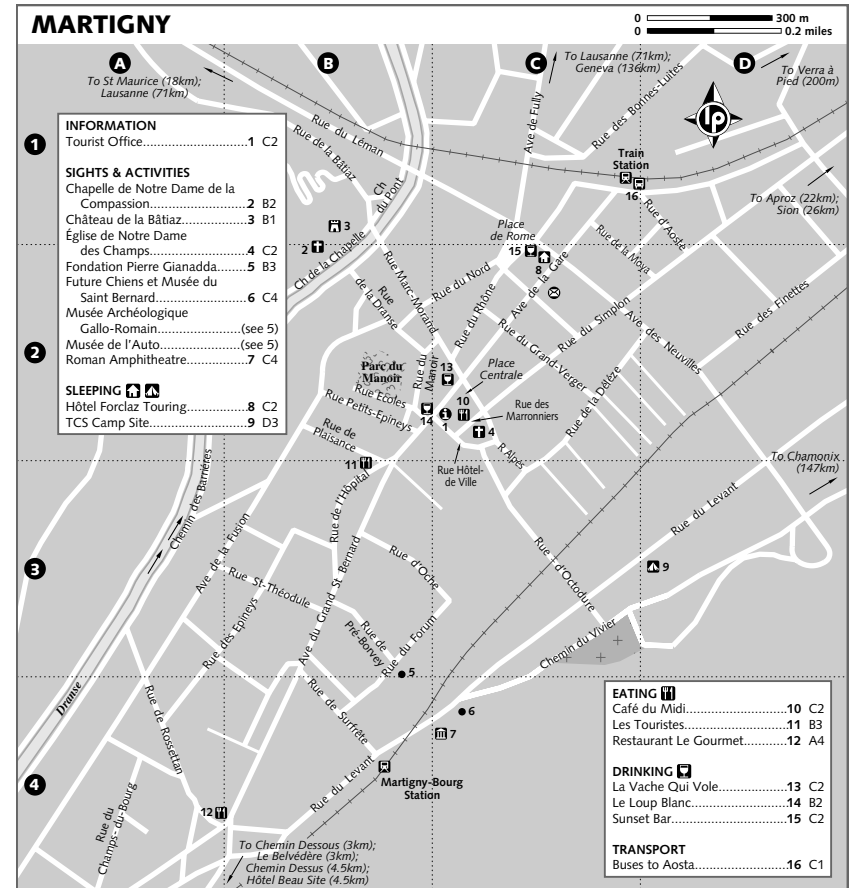
Pigs don't fly, but cows certainly fight. At least they do in Martigny. The 10-day October **Foire du Valais** (Valais Regional Fair) ends

with a bovine bash-about of epic proportions (see the boxed text Close Cow Encounters, p129). Tickets are around Sfr16 for seats and Sfr10 to stand.

If the idea of watching crunch-tackle cows doesn't thrill you, there's sizzling action at the **Foire du Lard** (Bacon Fair) in December. Local residents have been picking on the prize porkers since the Middle Ages.

## Sleeping

**Hôtel Beau Site** (☎ 027 722 81 64; Chemin Dessus; www.chemin.ch; s/d Sfr70/130) Sometimes it's worth going the extra kilometre (actually 6km from central Martigny). This charming four-storey rural getaway was built in 1912. In summer or winter, its bucolic position with views of



the hills and down to the Rhône valley make it a peaceful spot. It has its own restaurant with a terrace. To get here follow the road from the roundabout of Rue des Champs-du-Bourg to Chemin sur Martigny. Local bus No 5 heads up here hourly (25 minutes).

**Hôtel Forclaz Touring** (☎ 027 722 29 42; www.hotelforclaztouring.ch; Rue du Léman 15; s/d Sfr100/150) Yes, it is an awful concrete block with purple door and window frames, but inside the rooms are comfortable and reasonably spacious, if utterly functional. The 6th-floor restaurant with mountain views is a winner.

**TCS camping ground** (☎ 027 722 45 44; Rue de Levant 68; person/tent/dm Sfr7.40/9.20/21) This camping venue has a swimming pool, sports facilities and good views of the countryside, and is a half-hiking boot's distance from the town centre. It has its own restaurant, bar and shops.

## Eating

**Le Belvédère** (☎ 027 723 14 00; www.lebelvedere.ch in French; Chemin Dessous; mains Sfr26-42; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Sat, lunch Sun) About 3km south of Martigny up a narrow, high-climbing country road, this is a splendid mansion turned into a fine restaurant. You can enjoy views out over the Rhône valley and such succulent dishes as *tournedos de filet de boeuf et son foie gras poêlé* (a tournedos of Val d'Herens beef with pan-fried foie gras). See the directions for the Hôtel Beau Site.

**Café du Midi** (☎ 027 722 00 03; Rue des Marronniers 4; mains Sfr20-35; ☎ Wed-Mon) Tucked away in the pleasant old centre of Martigny by the church, this is an old-style café and restaurant. They don't make places like this any more, and it's perfect if you are after fondue or an *assiette valaisanne* (aka *Wallisersteller*, a dish principally made up of mixed cold meats, a cheese selection and a few pickles). Note that locals eat this dish with their hands.

**Les Touristes** (☎ 027 722 95 98; Rue de l'Hôpital 1; meals Sfr45-55; ☎ Tue-Sun) A classic, straight-up-and-down locale, with white linen and wooden chairs and tables, makes for a pleasing ambience for an Italian meal over good local wine. On sunny days head upstairs to the terrace.

**Restaurant Le Gourmet** (☎ 027 722 18 41; www.le-gourmet.ch; Ave du Grand St Bernard 74; meals Sfr100-190; ☎ daily) Housed in the Hôtel du Forum, this is the leading restaurant in town. With its amphorae and salmon-pink décor, the dining area transmits reminders of the city's

Roman past. The menu changes regularly. You may find such items as the *terrines de lapin au foie gras et pistaches* (rabbit terrine with foie gras and pistachios).

## Drinking

**La Vache Qui Vole** (☎ 027 722 38 33; Place Centrale 28; ☎ 10.30-1am) The 'Flying Cow' is an inviting, laid-back lounge bar, where good local wines are the order of the day. You can sit out on the terrace and it also offers snacks and a limited menu.

**Verre à Pied** (☎ 027 720 16 16; Rue des Prés-Beudin 20; ☎ 10.30am-1pm & 5-9pm) Don't be put off by the enormous four-star hotel in which this fine little wine bar is located. This is one of the best-stocked places in town, but the ungenerous hours mean you'll probably want to come for pre-dinner drinks only.

**Le Loup Blanc** (☎ 027 723 52 52; Place Centrale; ☎ 10-1am) The 'White Wolf' offers something for everyone. It's a modern bar that is great for wine tasting (local and foreign wines) and if you want to stay to eat, the menu offers a variety of Italian and local dishes.

**Sunset Bar** (www.sunset-bar.com in French; Rue du Léman 15; ☎ 6pm-1am Tue-Sat) Set inside the Hôtel Forclaz building, the bar attracts the occasional local DJ or band Thursday to Saturday. Sets start around 9pm.

## Getting There & Away

Martigny is on the main rail route running from Lausanne (Sfr22, 50 minutes) to Brig (Sfr24, 50 to 65 minutes). Buses go from Martigny via Orsières and the Great St Bernard Tunnel to Aosta in Italy (Sfr30.60, at least two departures per day).

The private **Mont-Blanc Express** (☎ 027 721 68 40; www.tmr5a.ch) usually goes hourly to Chamonix (Sfr31, 1½ hours) in France. There are up to 12 trips per day in the high season. Martigny is also the departure point for the *St Bernard Express*, which goes to Le Châble (Sfr9.80, 27 minutes; ski lift or bus connection for Verbier) and Orsières (Sfr9.80, 28 minutes) via Sembrancher.

## AROUND MARTIGNY

**Val d'Entremont & Great St Bernard Pass** The *St Bernard Express* train from Martigny to Orsières branches south at Sembrancher, heading south to the Italian border along the Val d'Entremont. **Orsières** is just off the main road to the Col du Great St-Bernard

## A SHAGGY DOG TALE

Since the 11th century, monks have maintained a hospice at the Great St Bernard Pass to give spiritual succour to people in the mountains and on occasion rescue travellers lost in the snow. And so the legend of the St Bernard dogs was born, as it was they who frequently found the lost souls and did the rescuing. The dogs have long stopped doing the work and in 2004, the handful of ageing monks who had long raised them and maintained a museum at their mountain hospice shocked all and sundry by announcing they could no longer take care of the dogs ('who seem to have become more important than us,' remarked one). A multi-millionaire from Geneva stepped in and saved the day, putting up the money to create a museum in Martigny (next door to the Roman Amphitheatre, due for completion in 2006) as well as kennels to preserve the race. And to keep the tourists happy, a posse of the doggies will be taken up to stay at the hospice each summer, as usual. The **kennels and museum** (adult/child/senior Sfr7/5/6; ☎ 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 9am-noon & 1-6pm Jun & Sep) operate in summer only.

and like-named tunnel, and marks the beginning of the little-visited **Val Ferret**. While in Orsières you may be tempted to stop by **L'Hôtel des Alpes** (☎ 027 783 11 02; lunch/dinner set menu Sfr65/115; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Sun, lunch Mon). A former hostelry for lonely travellers en route to and from the Great St Bernard Pass, it is now an enticing village-square restaurant. It offers mouth-watering set-meal options (which start as low as Sfr30 at lunch and rise as high as Sfr180 in the evening) in a rustic setting. Those in the know insist the best time is autumn, when freshly hunted game meat takes pride of place. It also has a handful of modest rooms.

A branch road leads to **Champex**, which sits by a looking-glass lake. From Orsières it's a 1¼-hour walk. A cable car operates in winter and summer to La Brea (2374m), where the views include the Grand Combin (4314m) to the east.

Animal lovers with a vehicle could follow the N21 road further south towards Drance. Turn off for Drance and head for Vichères. Keep your eyes peeled for a signed walking track that leads off the road a couple of kilometres before reaching the hamlet. This trail leads down along the Combe de l'A hill range and eponymous stream. In September it is a good walk for deer-spotting.

The N21 continues south to the Italian border, which you can cross by tunnel or the winding mountain road, depending on your preferences (views or time?) and weather conditions.

Although the **hospice** (☎ 027 787 12 36; www.gsbernard.ch; dm Sfr17-45, d Sfr56-69) is snowed in for up to six months of the year, it remains open to people who wish to sleep overnight

or just get a bite to eat. Five brothers of the St Bernard order and seven lay workers stay up here through the long winter. The only way up or down is on foot (snow shoe or skis) from the entrance to the road tunnel 7km downhill. It is essential to call ahead and find out if it is open and if there is space. In winter especially, you must call again just before you plan to arrive, as bad weather may make it inadvisable. If you decide not to go, let them know, because if they expect you and you don't turn up, they will wonder whether you have gotten lost or caught in an avalanche. This small courtesy becomes a necessity in the mountains.

To get to the hospice from Martigny in summer, take the *St Bernard Express* train to Orsières (see opposite) and change for the connecting bus (45 minutes). The total cost from Martigny is Sfr18.50. Otherwise the bus won't go past Bourg St Pierre.

## MONT BLANC

elevation 4807m

From numerous points in southwest Switzerland you can see this mighty Alpine peak, and although it's not in Switzerland there are times you think it close enough to touch. In France the main ski resort is Chamonix, popular with folks in Geneva and easily accessible by road from there and a little less easily by train and bus from Martigny. The biggest ski attraction is **Vallée Blanche**, a 20km glacier dangling from the side of Mont Blanc that constitutes the world's longest ski run. On the Italian side, the main resort is Courmayeur. For information on skiing in Chamonix and Courmayeur, check out www.chamonix.com and www.courmayeur.com.

See p122 for travel details. There are also buses from Geneva. The lower reaches of the mighty mountain reach into Switzerland like lava flow and hikers might want to take on the 215km **Mont Blanc circuit** in summer, about a third of which passes through Switzerland. The walk reaches a maximum altitude of more than 2500m and typically takes 10 to 14 days. In Switzerland there are a number of good places to commence, including Champex (p123) and the Col de la Forclaz pass, reached by bus from Martigny.

## VERBIER

pop 2500 / elevation 1500m

With its first ski lift only built in 1947, Verbier is but a young pup of a ski resort. It also attracts a youthful, trendy crowd of skiers and snowboarders, who often look cooler than the snow below their feet. In the high season, Verbier becomes a major party village, with as much ice clinking in whisky tumblers at local bars as you'll find on the slopes.

## Orientation & Information

Verbier is scenically situated on a southwest-facing ledge above Le Châble, the local rail terminus. The resort proper is uphill from Verbier village. The hub of Verbier is Place Centrale, where you will find the **tourist office** (☎ 027 775 38 88; www.verbier.ch; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon & 4-6.30pm Sat, 9am-noon Sun). Hours are longer in peak season. Just off the square is the post office and postal bus terminus. Verbier is mostly shut from late October to early December and during May. That includes the cable cars. The resort has a free bus service in the high season. Families, children and senior citizens get substantial discounts on lift prices for skiing and hiking.

## Activities

Verbier is at the heart of the **Quatre Vallées** (Four Valleys) ski area, which offers 410km of runs and 94 ski lifts. A ski pass for the whole area costs Sfr62. Cheaper passes excluding Mont Fort are also available. The Four Valleys area stretches east to Nendaz and Thyon.

The skiing is exciting and varied, with opportunities for the experts to flaunt their off-piste skills, particularly at Attelas and Mont Fort (3329m; have fun on the moguls!). Mont Fort is high enough to allow summer skiing on its glacier.

**Maison du Sport** (☎ 027 775 33 63; www.maisondu-sport.ch), behind the post office, offers ski-mountaineering, heli-skiing and other interesting (and expensive) options, including a five-day trek along the Haute Route to Zermatt. They can even arrange a tennis coach for you!

With the snow gone in summer, Verbier offers plenty of hiking. From Les Ruinettes, it takes two hours to ascend to the ridge at Creblet, and down into the crater to Lac des Vaux.

If being on the top of a mountain isn't high enough, then you can take to the air by hang-gliding or paragliding. Solo and tandem flights are available. **Centre de Parapente** (☎ 027 771 68 18; www.flyverbier.ch) and **Max** (☎ 027 771 55 55), based in the Hotel Rosa Blanche, both offer 30-minute tandem flights from Sfr170.

## Festivals & Events

The resort faces the music in July when it hosts the **Verbier Festival & Academy** (☎ 027 771 82 82; www.verbierfestival.com), a prestigious classical music and spoken-word event. Sports events include **Xtreme Freeride Contest** (www2.xtremeverbier.com). The name of the competition might be a little lax in the spelling department, but the event does spell a lot of fun, with snowboarders going through a range of exciting moves.

## Sleeping

Private rooms and chalets are reasonable, but book in advance. Most places shut in spring and autumn and prices are considerably higher in winter than in summer.

**Hôtel Garbo** (☎ 027 771 61 62; http://hotelgarbo.com; Rue de Médran 5; d up to Sfr250) If you don't mind a bit of chaos at the end of the day when skiers gather in the various nooks and crannies for a bite and drink (until as late as 2am), this party hotel's rooms are as good as any, clean, comfy and all with own bath and cable TV. Some have balconies and mountain views. Downstairs it also has the Netsu sushi and fusion food bar. It's 100m off Place Centrale.

**Hôtel De La Poste** (☎ 027 771 66 81; www.hotelposte-verbier.ch; Rue de Médran 12; per person half board up to Sfr200; (P) (E)) A mountain chalet-style place that is centrally located and has no-nonsense accommodation. Prices drop to less than half in summer. Timber dominates in the mostly bright rooms and the food is hearty.

## Eating

With about 45 restaurants and eateries spread about the resort and its runs, you won't go hungry in Verbier. The range spreads from as cheap and imaginative as chips to a handful of serious gourmet options.

**La Channe Valaisanne** (☎ 027 771 15 75; Rue des Creux; fondue per person Sfr28-34; ☎ daily in season) For a choice of 14 types of fondue (including one with mustard and cognac), or simply a raclette with local cheese, this makes a cosy and very Swiss option when hamburgers, pizza and poor Mexican begin to lose their charm. It's about 50m off Place Centrale.

**Au Vieux Valais** (☎ 027 775 35 20; www.vieux-valais.ch; Rue de Médran; mains Sfr20-40; ☎ daily in season) Voted 'mountain restaurant of the year' by *The Good Skiing and Snowboarding Guide* in 2005, this place is handily placed by the main lift down to Le Chable and up to Les Ruinettes. It does all the local cheesy classics, along with a sizzling *fondue bourguignonne* (a beef fondue in which cubes of meat are dipped into boiling oil).

## Drinking

**Pub Mont Fort** (☎ 027 771 48 98; Chemin de la Tinte 10; ☎ 3pm-1.30am daily Nov-Apr & mid-Jun-Aug) Phalanxes of after-drinking skiers gather over two storeys in this Verbier classic near the base of Attelas cable car. Happy hour (half-price tipples) is 4pm to 5pm daily (January to April only). Shots are the order of the night and closing time seems to be interpreted broadly. Downstairs it also serves up food.

**Taratata** (☎ 079 456 25 02; Place Centrale; ☎ 10pm-4am Dec-Apr, Jul & Aug) One of the handiest of the four or five clubs in Verbier. It shuts from late April to late June and from September to November.

## Getting There & Away

Trains from Martigny run hourly year-round, take 30 minutes and terminate at Le Châble. From there you either get a bus or, when it's running, the cable car. The full trip costs Sfr15.20 and takes about 50 minutes.

## VAL DE BAGNES

From Le Châble it's a 19km drive south and up to Lac de Mauvoisin (Lake Mauvoisin) and its impressive dam. Several hiking trails fan out from here, including one that crosses the mountain frontier

with Italy over the Fenêtre du Durand pass (2797m) and down into the Valpelline valley in Italy's Val d'Aosta region. Three daily buses run on weekends and holidays from Le Châble. You may find the simple, lone hotel at the base of the dam open, but don't count on it.

## OVRONNAZ

Few foreign visitors cotton on to this small but pleasing family ski resort with thermal baths. From Martigny, head east up the A9 as far as the Leytron turn-off. From Leytron, which is on the north side of the motorway, a winding mountain road leads 10km to Ovronnaz. The **tourist office** (☎ 027 306 42 93; www.ovronnaz.ch) is at the north end of the village near the Coop supermarket.

The skiing is limited and mostly for intermediates, but makes for a pleasant day on the slopes. The highest lift reaches 2500m. What makes it especially fun is combining the slopes with bath time. A combined lift pass and entry to the **Thermalp baths** (☎ 027 305 11 11; www.thermalp.ch in French; ☎ 9am-8.30pm) costs Sfr53 (a saving of Sfr8 on paying for them separately).

There is only a handful of hotels, but the tourist office can help with various B&Bs and apartments.

Buses run from Martigny (change at Leytron) hourly (Sfr13.40, about one hour). You have similar options from Sion.

## SION

pop 27,700 / elevation 490m

Sion (Sitten in German) has a dramatic backdrop, sheltered by the twin battlement hills of Valère and Tourbillon.

The capital of Valais has retained much of its attractive medieval architecture. A helter-skelter of cobbled streets ramble from the Château de Tourbillon's perch down to the old town centre, passing a collection of museums, churches and historic houses along the way.

## Orientation

The French-speaking town lies north of the Rhône. The train station is downhill and south of the old town centre, facing the modern, commercial heart of Sion. Most of the areas of interest are within walking distance of the station, along Ave de la Gare and Rue de Lausanne.

## Information

Sion has a **post office** (Place de la Gare 11; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-4pm Sat) and a **tourist office** (☎ 027 322 77 27; www.siontourism.ch; Place de la Planta; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12.30pm Sat).

## Sights & Activities

A one-off ticket to all museums (*Passeport tous musées*) is available for Sfr12. It is valid for two days over a 15-day period.

### CHÂTEAU DE TOURBILLON

It's a rough trek uphill to this **castle** (☎ 027 606 47 45; Rue des Châteaux; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm mid-Mar-mid-Nov), and all that's left are ruins of the exterior walls. However, the view of the town is well worth the climb.

### BASILIQUE DE VALÈRE

On the hill opposite the Château de Tourbillon, this fortified height contains a **basilica** (Rue des Châteaux; adult/child/family Sfr3/2/6; ☎ hourly visits 10.15am-4.15pm Tue-Sun, plus 5.15pm Jun-Sep) dating in part to the 12th century. The world's oldest playable organ juts out from the inside wall opposite the apse like the timber stern of a medieval caravel. Built in the 15th century, it was restored in the early 2000s. Concerts are held here every now and then, especially for the Festival International de l'Organ Ancien et de la Musique Ancienne (International Ancient Organ and Music Festival), held here on Saturday afternoons (from 4pm) from mid-July to mid-August. In the front part of the church where the organ is are 15th-century frescoes, the best of them depicting St Sebastian.

The interior of the church is divided by a wall. In medieval times such divisions were typical. On the main altar side would gather the clergy and nobles, while the plebs would be herded into the other side. In the 17th century the Pope ordered such divisions be removed, but here the clergy resisted. In the end, it was never taken down, but a doorway inserted instead. This is the part you pay to see. Just inside are the beautifully carved choir stalls. The apse is covered with bright frescoes. Downhill from the basilica, before exiting through the gate in the complex's medieval walls, is the **Musée Cantonal d'Histoire** (☎ 027 606 47 10; adult/child/family combined with basilica Sfr7/4.50/15; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-May, 11am-6pm daily Jun-Sep). It offers a blend of medieval ar-

tefacts and modern bric-a-brac. From the basilica you have a commanding panoramic view across the city.

### MAISON SUPERSAXO

Built by Georges Supersaxo in 1505, this impressive **residence** (Passage de Supersaxo; admission free; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) offers a keyhole peek into the lives of the rich and powerful in 16th-century Switzerland. Supersaxo built the house to provoke his friend-turned-enemy, the bishop of Sion. The provocation backfired when Supersaxo was exiled.

### OTHER MUSEUMS

Local art, ancient and modern, is highlighted in the **Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts** (Museum of Fine Art; ☎ 027 606 46 90; Place de la Marjorie 15; adult/child/family Sfr5/2.50/10; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun). Workmanlike paintings and sculptures on display fail to give the museum the lustre of the Louvre, but it's an opportunity to view the region through local eyes. The collection is lodged in the impressive grey stone Château de la Marjorie et Vidonnat.

You can learn more about Sion's Roman invaders and the lives of medieval folk at the **Musée Cantonal d'Archéologie** (Archaeological Museum; ☎ 027 606 47 00; Rue des Châteaux 12; adult/child/family Sfr4/2/8; ☎ 1-5pm Tue-Sun). Among the displays are various models and dioramas.

Just up the road from these two museums is the **Ancien Pénitencier** (☎ 027 606 47 07; Rue des Châteaux 24; adult/child/family Sfr6/3/12; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-May, 11am-6pm daily Jun-Sep), until the 1990s the town prison. Since 2000 its cells, which have been given a lick of paint but still retain a vaguely sinister air, have been the site of regular exhibitions.

It's stuffed animals a-go-go at the **Musée Cantonal d'Histoire Naturelle** (Museum of Natural History; ☎ 027 606 47 30; Ave de la Gare 42; adult/child/family Sfr3/1.50/6; ☎ 1-5pm Tue-Sun).

### CHURCHES & TOWERS

At the heart of the compact old town, two churches stand side by side. The **Cathédrale de Notre Dame du Glarier** dates largely to the 15th century, although some earlier elements remain. The smaller **Église de St Théodule** dates to the 16th century. Up Rue de la Tour from the churches is a stout reminder of Sion's medieval past, the **Tour des Sorciers** (Wizards' Tower), one of the watchtowers in the one-time city walls.

## Sleeping

In addition to various (mostly modern) hotels, the tourist office can provide a list of chalets and B&B-style accommodation in the area around Sion.

**Hôtel du Rhône** (☎ 027 322 82 91; www.bestwestern.com; Rue de Scex; s/d Sfr132/190; ☎) Fronted by a pretty fountain, this modern block offers spacious if somewhat bland rooms. Parking costs Sfr10.

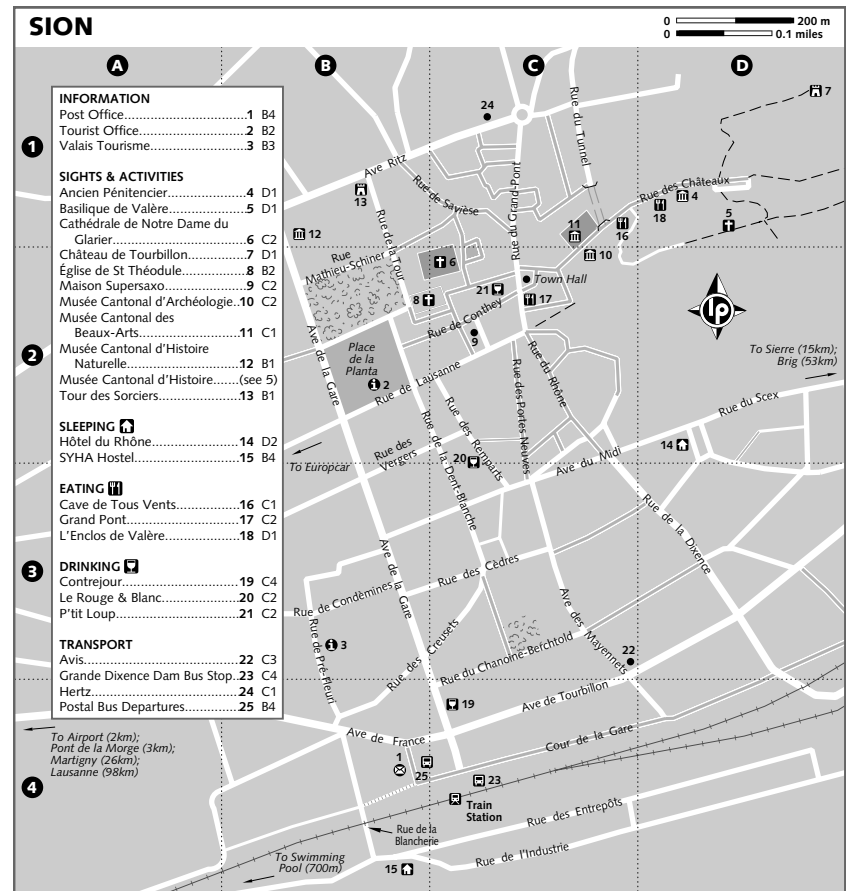
**SYHA Hostel** (☎ 027 323 74 70; www.youthhostel.ch; Rue de l'Industrie 2; dm/d Sfr29/72) Behind the train station, rooms in this clean, bright youth hostel are mostly equipped with four beds, although there are some doubles. You can sit outside the modern building in the yard in summer.

## Eating

Rue du Grand-Pont is lined with eateries and bars.

**Grand Pont** (☎ 027 322 20 96; Rue du Grand-Pont 6; meals Sfr30-40; ☎ Mon-Sat) One of the best. Whether outside on the pavement terrace or inside the spacious dining area with its art-covered walls, you can try anything from guacamole to healthy servings of salad. There are some Asian options too, but skip the pasta.

**L'Enclos de Valère** (☎ 027 323 32 30; Rue des Châteaux; mains Sfr25-40; ☎ Tue-Sat) This French restaurant is magnificently set on the road leading up to Tourbillon and boasts a shady garden where you might chomp into a *filet de poulain aux poivres noir, vert et de Sichuan*



(foal fillet with black, green and Sichuan peppers). There's a kids' menus too.

**Cave de Tous Vents** (☎ 027 322 46 84; Rue des Châteaux 16; meals Sfr40-60; ☎ daily Jun-Nov, Mon-Sat Dec-May) Wander downstairs into this perfect cellar atmosphere for local dining, including such favourites as raclette and fondue, and an assortment of hearty meat dishes. It's great in winter.

### Drinking

**Contrejour** (☎ 027 323 21 11; Ave de la Gare 6; ☎ 6pm-1am Mon-Thu, 6pm-2am Fri & Sat) Easily the hippest hangout in town, this is a slick lounge bar, with good wines and mood music, all done for the best-dressed scions of Sion.

**Le Rouge & Blanc** (☎ 027 323 80 82; Rue des Remparts 10; ☎ 3pm-midnight Mon-Thu, 3pm-1am Fri & Sat) A rowdy pub-style place that caters to all comers, from the pool players who hang out the back to the better-dressed punters lounging about near the street-side windows.

**P'tit Loup** (☎ 079 358 36 67; Rue de Conthey 6; ☎ 5pm-midnight Tue-Thu, 5pm-1am Fri & Sat) Hard rock is the rage here. A grunge of leather jackets jockey for position at the bar, vibrating like guitar strings to the heavy sounds reverberating from a powerful stereo system.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The **airport** (☎ 027 329 06 00; www.sionairport.ch; Route de l'Aéroport) is 2km west of the train station; bus No 1 goes there (Sfr3.40). There are year-round flights to Zürich (50 minutes), London and Corsica. During the ski season shuttle buses operate direct from the airport to resorts such as Crans Montana, Verbier and Zermatt.

#### BUS

Postal buses leave from outside the train station. For information, call ☎ 027 327 34 34 or ask at the train station.

#### TRAIN

All trains on the express route between Lausanne (Sfr28, 50 to 70 minutes) and Brig (Sfr17.60, 35 to 50 minutes) stop in at Sion.

#### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The A9 motorway passes by Sion. There's free parking by the swimming pool, five minutes' walk west of the youth hostel.

**Europcar** (☎ 027 323 86 86; Rue de Lausanne 148) is at Garage Delta. **Hertz** (☎ 027 322 37 42; Ave Ritz 33) is at Garage du Nord, and there's also **Avis** (☎ 027 322 20 77; Ave de Tourbillon 23-25).

### AROUND SION Val d'Héremence

Little explored, this valley is worth the trip to visit one of the great engineering feats of modern times. Stretching about 30km south of Sion, the valley is sectioned off at its southern end by the enormous Grande Dixence dam. At 284m, it is the highest dam in the world.

From Sion, follow the signs for this valley and the Val d'Hérens, which share the same road as far as Vex, where you branch right (southwest).

After **Héremence**, distinguished by its strange-looking Cubist-style concrete church, come two small hamlets, Prolin and Mâche. The heavily wooded and deep valley narrows as you gain altitude, finally opening up into a small plain before the road narrows to track status. It then makes a final series of switchbacks up to the base of the dam, which seems to rise up into the sky.

Just before embarking on that road you'll see a huddle of houses called **Pralong**, home to a couple of bijou hotel-restaurants that make handy bases for walkers in the area. Try the **Val des Dix** (☎ 027 281 12 13; www.grande-dixence.com in French; r per person Sfr52), which has spotless, timber-lined rooms and a snug restaurant downstairs.

Take the **cable car** (adult/child return Sfr9/4.50; ☎ 9.30am-12.20pm & 1.15-6.20pm) from the dam base to the top. As you stare across the milky green water, remember that six million cubic metres of cement stand between this lake and the valley stretching out below.

Hikers can do a circuit of the lake or cross over into the next valley and make for Arolla, a six-hour trek for the fit.

### Val d'Hérens & Val d'Arolla

Locals of this valley pride themselves on their authentic way of life, which includes dressing and working in traditional costume. The best day to see people dressed up this way in the valley's villages is Sunday.

Coming up from Sion, you pass through Vex and then **Euseigne**. Just before reaching the latter, the road passes under Gaudiesque-looking rock pinnacles commonly known

### CLOSE COW ENCOUNTERS

It might sound like a load of bull, but cow fights are a serious business in Valais. Known as the *Combats de Reines* (*Kuhkämpfe* in German), cow fights are organised in villages, in particular on the Val d'Hérens, to decide which beast is most suited to lead the herd to summer pastures. These Moo-Hammad Ali wannabes charge, lock horns then try to force each other backwards.

The winner, acclaimed to be the herd's 'queen', can be worth Sfr20,000. Genetic selection and embryo freezing are used to get effective contenders to the field of combat. Once selected, they are fed oats concentrate (believed to act as a stimulant) and sometimes wine.

Contests take place on selected Sundays from late March to late May and from August to late September and are usually accompanied by much consumption of Valaisan wine. Combatants rarely get hurt so visitors shouldn't find the competition distressing. There is a grand final in Aproz (a 10-minute postal bus ride west of Sion) in May on Ascension Day, and the last meeting of the season is held at Martigny's Foire du Valais in early October.

as the **Pyramides d'Euseigne**. They have been eroded into their strange form over thousands of years. Some 8km further south is the valley's main town, **Evolène**. Here is where you will find most of the valley's accommodation and a huddle of restaurants. **Hôtel Arzinol** (☎ 021 283 16 65; www.hotel-arzinol.ch; s/d Sfr55/110) offers a range of cheerful rooms in a timber chalet. The best have a balcony and on cold winter nights you can sit by the fire in the house's lounge room.

Another 5km and you reach the hamlet of **Les Haudères**. Here the road forks. To the left, one leads 7km up to another pretty mountain settlement, **Ferpède**, which represents the end of the road and the start of some mountain hiking in the shadow of the Dent Blanche (4357m).

The other road heads right, rising steeply onto a wooded mountain ridge before dropping down into another remote valley, the **Val d'Arolla**. After 11km you roll into a modest ski resort. To the east you can make out the Dent Blanche and to the southwest the Pigne d'Arolla (3796m), one of half a dozen peaks of 3600m or more that encircle the village of Arolla.

Set in gardens thick with larch trees, the deciduous conifer typical of the valleys here, the **Grand Hotel & Kurhaus** (☎ 027 283 70 00; www.kurhaus.arolla.com; r per person Sfr86) stands in splendid isolation a couple of kilometres beyond Arolla and has been in business since 1896. Cheaper rooms come without bathroom.

Four to seven daily buses from Sion run up the valley to Evolène (Sfr13.40, 45 minutes) and some roll on to Arolla (change at Les Haudères, Sfr20, 1¼ hours), which is 41km from Sion.

### SIERRE & AROUND

pop 14,360 / elevation 540m

The French and German languages compete for prominence in Sierre (Siders in German), although French is favoured. Great weather also comes up victorious, as this is one of Switzerland's sunniest towns. The **tourist office** (☎ 027 455 85 35; www.sierre-salgesch.ch; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat, 8am-7pm daily high season) is in the train station.

### Sights & Activities

History is reflected in the numerous **châteaux** and **grand houses** in and around the town. The tourist office's *Promenade des Châteaux* brochure has walking routes but most buildings are private and can only be viewed from outside.

Of these, the most inviting is the 16th-century **Château de Villa** (☎ 027 455 18 96; www.chateaudvilla.ch; Rue Ste-Catherine 4), set on high ground about a 20-minute walk from the train station along Ave du Marché. The walk itself is curious, as it takes you into the older part of the town, some of which is still littered with postage stamp-sized vineyards! The château is home to the **Musée du Vin** (☎ 2-5pm Apr-Nov), a modest display of old wine presses and other memorabilia showing how the grape nectar used to be made and stored. The château is worth visiting for other reasons though. First there is the **Oenothèque** (wine store; ☎ 10.30am-1pm & 4.30-8.30pm), with its extensive collection of wines, some of which you can taste before buying. Then there is the restaurant (see p130).

A 10-minute walk, partly past vineyards, from the Château de Villa is the **Château Mercier**, which is set with a series of other villas,

**AUTHOR'S CHOICE**

**Hôtel Terminus** (☎ 027 455 13 51; www.hotel-terminus.ch; Rue du Bourg 1; s/d Sfr120/190; ☒ ☑ (P) Sfr8) Recently transformed into one of the region's top addresses, this is a gourmet pilgrimage site with snazzy digs. Rooms are pleasingly laid out with modern furniture (touches like plasma TV and wi-fi). Ask about the big doubles in the loft. The chef behind the restaurant, Didier de Courten, was voted the 2006 Cook of the Year by the prestigious *Gault-Millau* restaurant guide. The restaurant (mains Sfr70-75, tasting menus Sfr120-185; ☒ Tue-Sat), in yellow and black (and with a lovely terrace), is the high altar of avant-garde cooking.

orangery and former stables in a pretty park. The whole lot is used for major receptions and similar events, but you can wander the grounds any time.

Just 3.5km away from Sierre and on the other side of the language frontier is the wine hamlet of **Salgesch** (Salquenen to Francophones). You can follow a walking route through Sierre and vineyards from the Château de Villa. In Salgesch you will find the **Weinmuseum** (☒ 2-5pm Apr-Nov), part of the museum in the Château de Villa, and loads of wineries such as the excellent Gregor Kuonen & Söhne.

**Sleeping & Eating**

**Bois de Finges** (☎ 027 455 02 84; www.tiscover.ch/camping-bois-de-finges; sites per person/tent only/car & tent Sfr6.40/10.40/17; ☒ late Apr-early Oct; (P) ☑) East of the town centre, an area of protected woodland contains several camping grounds, including this one, which is prettily located on the forest edge and near the Rhône.

**Château de Villa** (☎ 027 455 18 86; www.chateaud villa.ch; Rue Ste-Catherine 4; raclette Sfr30; ☒ daily) Giving the Terminus a run for its money, the château proposes a marvellous raclette feast, tasting six types of cheese (washed down with excellent local wine).

**Getting There & Away**

Around two trains an hour stop at Sierre on the Geneva-Brig route. The town is the leaping-off point for Crans-Montana; a red SMC shuttle bus (*navette*, free) from outside the station runs to the nearby fu-

nicular station for Montana (Sfr11.40, 15 minutes).

**CRANS-MONTANA**

pop 7000 / elevation 1500m

Visitors to this trendy twin resort about 15km northwest of Sierre are as interested in show as snow. Once favoured by the likes of President Kennedy and film stars, it now tends to attract new rich Russians. The skiing is mostly intermediate but excellent. As host of the European Masters Golf Tournament every September, the local courses, one of them designed by Spanish player Seve Ballesteros, are among the best in the country. The resort is a modern, sprawling affair, but set along a string of shimmering lakes.

The **tourist office** (☎ 027 485 04 04; www.crans-montana.ch; ☒ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-noon & 4-6pm Sun Dec-Apr & mid-Jun-Aug, 8.30am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat rest of the year) has branches in the Scandia building on Rue Centrale in Crans and the post office building on Ave de la Gare in Montana.

The ski area comprises 160km of slopes, 41 lifts and 50km of cross-country tracks. Crans-Montana area ski passes cost Sfr56/34/48 per adult/child/youth and senior for one day. For about 20% more you can include the **Plaine-Morte Glacier** (3000m). Five ski schools are scattered about the resort.

In summer, hiking and golf are the prime activities. The golf courses include nine and 18 holes. Prices range from Sfr40 to Sfr80. Contact the **golf club** (☎ 027 485 97 97; www.golfcrans.ch; ☒ May-Oct). The tourist offices can tell you about adventure sports, from canoeing to mountain climbing.

**Sleeping & Eating**

You can book online through the resort website (www.crans-montana.ch). It is often cheaper and sometimes more homey to lodge in private homes than in hotels (of which there are about 50). This can also be arranged through the tourist office.

**Auberge du Petit Paradis** (☎ 027 481 21 48; www.petit-paradis.com; s/d Sfr75/130; (P)) Situated just below Crans in the hamlet of Bluche, this is a cosy place at a price you'll find hard to beat anywhere else in the resort. Rooms are spotless with typical wood panelling.

**Hôtel Mont-Blanc** (☎ 027 481 31 43; www.hotel-montblanc.ch in French; Plans Mayens; s/d Sfr165/280; (P)) Just outside Crans to the northwest, this

spot is known for its grand balcony terrace, perfect for eating up the Alpine views along with the food. The place has 10 rooms and three suites.

**Hostellerie du Pas de l'Ours** (☎ 027 485 93 33; www.relaischateaux.com/pasdelours; Rue du Pas de l'Ours; ste Sfr430-650; (P) ☑) For sheer splendour, this grand timber 'castle' is one of the best places to stay. Just nine suites, all done with impeccable taste, combine stone with timber to create a truly warm welcome. The Jacuzzis in the rooms help too. It's in central Crans.

**Le Raphaele** (☎ 027 480 31 50; Rue du Pas de l'Ours; pizzas Sfr18-20, meat mains Sfr30-46; ☒ daily) Apart from having the distinction of being one of the very few places here to open year-round, this spot does pretty good pizza and quite reasonable food in general. In autumn the game menu is enticing.

**Le Pavillon** (☎ 027 481 24 69; Route de Rawly; mains Sfr35-46; ☒ Wed-Mon) Overlooking Lac Grenon, one of the pretty little lakes where much of the resort is strung, this small but warm dining option allows you lake views from inside and out. The menu includes fresh fish (depending on what the markets offer). Try the *filet de saumon grillé, poêlé de fenouil et tomates* (grilled salmon fillet with pan-fried fennel and tomatoes). It's about halfway between Crans and Montana (bus stop Pavillon).

**Getting There & Away**

See opposite for information on getting to Crans-Montana. Free shuttles move around the resort area.

**VAL D'ANNIVIERS**

Traditionally Sierre has had a close relationship with the people of the Val d'Anniviers, who would winter in their mountain homes and come to Sierre in summer to work in the vineyards. Some continue to do so. The valley is dotted by pretty towns and offers some fine skiing options.

From Sierre, the main road south winds up steeply on the east flank of the valley, arriving after 13km in the medieval village of **Vissoie**, with its 13th-century watchtower and 12th-century church. It is a valley crossroads for five ski stations (www.sierre-anniviers.ch). You can get a ski pass for the whole area (adult/child/student Sfr45/27/38), which totals 220km of ski runs. About 11km along a narrow road winding back north towards Sierre is **Vercorin** (☎ 027 455 58 55; www.vercorin.ch),

a pleasant family resort with limited (35km of pistes) but enjoyable skiing and a handful of places to stay and eat. It is also accessible direct from Sierre via Chippis. In summer you could take a one-hour walk (signposted) south to **Val de Réchy**, especially tempting in late September, when it is often possible to spot sizable groups of deer.

Closer and much more tempting are the combined stations of **St Luc** (☎ 027 475 14 12; www.saint-luc.ch) and **Chandolin** (☎ 027 475 18 38; www.chandolin.ch), with 75km of broad, sunny ski runs and fairytale panoramas. St Luc is 4km east of Vissoie, up a series of switchbacks, and Chandolin another 4km to the north. The latter is the prettier of the two, a huddle of timber houses hanging on for dear life to the steep slopes at around 2000m. While here, visit the **Espace Ella Maillart** (admission free; ☒ 10am-6pm Wed-Sun), dedicated to the remarkable Swiss adventurer who lived in Chandolin when she wasn't exploring the remote corners of Afghanistan and Tibet, or winning races as a champion sailor and skier. In summer, there are plenty of walking options, including the Chemin des Planètes (Planets Trail), an uphill amble from Tignousa (above St Luc) to the **Weisshorn Hotel** (☎ 027 475 11 06; www.chez.com/hotelweisshorn; r per person half board Sfr110), with models of planets in the solar system along the way (a variant sees you leaving the path at Uranus and following a trail past several mountain lakes to Lac de la Bella-Tola). The hotel, opened in 1884, is at 2337m and accessible on foot or by mountain bike only (or on skis in winter, when luggage is transported for you from St Luc).

The funicular from St Luc to Tignousa (Sfr13/8 per adult/child return) doesn't run between seasons. The walk from St Luc to Tignousa and on to Lac de la Bella-Tola is four hours. There are plenty of accommodation and eating options in Chandolin and St Luc.

Back down in Vissoies you could continue along the main road for **Zinal** (☎ 027 475 13 70; www.zinal.ch) via the hamlet of Ayer. At Zinal, too, there is good skiing, although the village is nothing special.

Another story is **Grimentz** (☎ 027 476 20 01; www.bendolla.ch), 7km up a winding road from Vissoies into a side valley. It is one of the prettiest mountain towns in Valais, its burned-timber houses huddled over narrow lanes and adorned with geranium-filled



flower boxes (some local citizens have the job of maintaining hanging pots of geraniums along several kilometres of the approach road to Grimentz!). The town makes a lovely base for local skiing. The 8km road south along La Gougra stream to the turquoise waters of **Lac de Moiry** (2249m) is open only in summer. Another 3km brings you to a second, smaller dam, where the road peters out. Before you, the Glacier de Moiry sticks out its dirty white tongue, a 1½-hour hike away.

In Grimentz, **Hotel de Moiry** (☎ 027 475 11 44; www.hoteldemoiry.ch; r per person half board Sfr105) is a modest, comfortable option with all the trappings of a warm mountain chalet. Eat heartily in the restaurant downstairs. How about a *tartiflette*, a potato and bacon pie coated in a layer of Reblochon cheese? There's a vegetable version too.

Up to eight postal buses a day run from Sierre to Vissoie, where you make connections for Chandolin (Sfr14.20) via St Luc, Zinal (Sfr15.20) and Grimentz (Sfr13.40). All these trips take about one hour from Sierre. In summer three buses run the 20 minutes from Grimentz to Lac de Moiry (Sfr9.80).

## UPPER VALAIS

The German eastern half of the Valais is dominated by the country's most powerful image, the soaring Matterhorn peak. A cluster of 4000m peaks and pretty Swiss German towns act as a year-round magnet for sport and nature lovers.

### LEUKERBAD

pop 1430 / elevation 1411m

Leukerbad (Loèche-les-Bains in French) is the largest mountain thermal centre in Europe. The Romans settled here and in the 19th century it was popular with travellers negotiating the Gemmi Pass to/from the Bernese Oberland. From the 1980s until the late 1990s, the municipality undertook massive renovation works with dodgy debts that finally resulted in a scandal, jail for various people involved and the placement of the entire area under financial surveillance.

The majestic mountain walls that encase the village like an amphitheatre grander than anything the Romans could have conceived makes for an awe-inspiring backdrop to your outdoor bathing meditations. The

grey rock walls rise out of pretty green and wooded fields.

### Orientation & Information

This attractive resort is 16km north of Leuk along a spectacular road. The **tourist office** (☎ 027 472 71 71; www.leukerbad.ch; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.15-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat, 9am-noon Sun Jul-Nov & Dec-Apr, 9am-noon & 1.15-5.30pm Mon-Sat rest of year) is in the centre. In the same complex you'll find the town hall, post office, a parking garage and the bus station. Cars are not used in the centre at night.

### Sights & Activities

There are six main thermal bath installations, but the biggest and best is **Burgerbad** (☎ 027 472 20 20; www.burgerbad.ch; Rathausstrasse; adult/child/student Sfr22/12/17; ☎ 8am-8pm Sun-Thu, 8am-9pm Fri & Sat). It has a number of different pools, inside and outside, including whirlpools and water massage jets. The complex also has a sauna and fitness studio, which cost extra. Another centre is **Lindner Alpentherme** (☎ 027 472 10 10; www.lindner.de; ☎ 8am-8pm Oct-Mar, 8am-7pm Apr-Sep), where a two-hour treatment in the Roman-Irish bath (reservation required) costs Sfr59, including an extra three hours in the thermal pools. They cost Sfr16/12 per adult/child for three hours without extras. Children under six are not admitted. The tourist office can give details of training and regeneration programmes and medical treatments.

A cable car ascends the sheer side of the northern mountain ridge to the **Gemmi Pass** (2350m). It's a good area for hiking. The cable car is Sfr18.50/26 one way/return, or it takes two hours to walk up.

The main **skiing** area is the Torrenthorn (2998m), yielding mostly runs of medium difficulty, but there are also a few easy ones and a demanding run that descends 1400m. One-day ski passes cost Sfr44/26/35 per adult/child six to 11 years/student and senior.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Weisses Rössli** (☎ 027 470 33 77; weisseroessli@blue mail.ch; s/d with hall shower Sfr50/100) Just off the central Dorfplatz, this is a cheerful place, with flower boxes on the little balconies and a welcoming, homey feel. A good breakfast is included and the proprietor is helpful. It has a restaurant serving up typical Valais fare downstairs.

### FEBRUARY'S FREAKY MONSTERS

The Lötschental is little known to outsiders, but many have heard vague telling of the Tschäggtätt, masked and hairy monsters that flit about the valley's settlements around Fasnacht time from 2 February until Ash Wednesday. Wearing old clothes covered in thick sheep or goat pelts, tied around the waist with a thick belt from which hangs a fat cowbell, these fellows don scary, locally made wooden masks and gloves dipped in soot. Traditionally (until about the mid-20th century) they would stalk villagers from noon to 6pm, rubbing the soot into any victims they could lay their hands on. Nowadays a few women join in this long, traditionally male activity. They tend to prowl around in the evening and, thankfully, are a little more respectful of their soot-loathing victims.

How the tradition was born is a matter of conjecture. One theory suggests these 'monsters' aimed to ward off the vestiges of winter and evil spirits (similar figures appear in other parts of Europe, from Austria to Sardinia), but another one sees the origin in a band of masked thieves that operated in the valley in the 11th century.

If you're in the valley on 3 February, you can catch a parade of Tschäggtätt from Blatten to Ferden.

**Hôtel de la Croix Fédérale** (☎ 027 472 79 79; www.croix-federale.ch; Kirchstrasse 43; s/d Sfr99/180) With its timber-lined rooms and friendly downstairs restaurant, this is a good central deal. Wood-panelled rooms, especially the doubles, are spacious and light and you're a short sprint from the Lindner Alpentherme baths. Downstairs, the Walliser Kanne (mains Sfr20 to Sfr35; ☎ Friday to Wednesday) restaurant offers a wide range of dishes, from tried and true local standards to a range of vegetable-laden rösti (crispy, fried, shredded potatoes) options, pasta and warm winter polenta (a thick mush made of cornmeal boiled in water or stock) dishes.

**Lindner Alpentherme** (☎ 027 472 10 00; www.lindner.de; Dorfplatz; s/d Sfr200/400; ☎ P ☎) This is quite a complex, plonked down smack in the centre of town with its 135 rooms and tempting bath installations. Apart from the standard rooms, already elegantly appointed (and whose price halves in the low season), there is a whole range of bigger and better rooms and suites to choose from.

### Getting There & Away

Leuk is on the main rail route from Lausanne to Brig. From Leuk an hourly blue postal bus goes to Leukerbad; last departure is 7.45pm (Sfr13.40, 30 to 35 minutes).

### LÖTSCHENTAL

This westernmost valley of the series of valleys and glaciers that together make up the Aletsch region, mostly accessible from villages east of Brig (see p139), is an engaging and little-visited foretaste. Most people

who venture into the area only make it as far as Goppenstein, 9km north of the N9 road, to load their cars onto the half-hourly Lötschbergtunnel train that whisks them to Kandersteg in the Bernese Oberland (Sfr20 to Sfr25 per car, 15 minutes). More trains are put on in summer.

Beyond Goppenstein, the road swings gradually northeast along a wild valley, a far cry from the ski jet set hue and cry of Crans-Montana, Verbier or Zermatt. Trundle through a series of villages to the end of the valley at **Fafleralp**, little more than a huddle of chalets and a wonderful mountain hotel, the Hotel Fafleralp.

The icy finger of the **Langgletscher** glacier stretches down towards the village and is the object of a fairly easy 1½-hour hike from the car park that marks the end of town. Other walks into the mountains, created by the cascading waters of glacial waterfalls and largely bereft of any vegetation but a touch of Alpine grass, are also possible. To further whet your appetite, see www.loetschental.ch (in German).

Cross-country skiing is possible in the vicinity and there's even a little downhill action on the **Lauchernalp** at **Wiler**, 3km southwest of Blatten.

Up to 12 postal buses run from Goppenstein to Blatten, and on to Fafleralp (32 minutes) from June to October.

### VISP

pop 6580 / elevation 650m

About the most visitors see of Visp is the train station as they change rides to get from the

**AUTHOR'S CHOICE**

**Hotel Fafleralp** (☎ 027 939 14 51; www.fafleralp.ch in German; per person up to Sfr84) Settled amid woods at the end of the Lötschental valley, this is a delight for those seeking a rustic getaway. Rooms are made of local wood and there's not a telephone or TV in sight. It's like being in a big family home, with cosy dining and lounge areas for those who don't want to get out in the snow. The hotel remains open in winter (often weekends only), although snow cuts the road off as far down as Blatten (4km southwest). An utterly fable-like atmosphere settles on the place then. If you reserve at the hotel they will pick up your luggage from Blatten and you will walk the 4km in snow shoes.

main line to the Geneva–Brig train line up to the Zermatt and Saas Fee ski resorts. The old centre is attractive enough with its cobbled streets and shuttered windows. Take the 2½-hour hike up the hill to the wine-growing village of **Visperterminen**; an occasional bus (Sfr6) does the same trip in 25 minutes.

Should you get stuck here, there is a cluster of hotels near the train station. Trains run every hour or so to Zermatt (Sfr32, 65 minutes). For Saas Fee you need to take the hourly postal bus (Sfr14.20, 45 minutes). If you take the Zermatt train, parking is free in Visp at the 'park and ride' car park between the station and the post office.

**BRIGERBAD**

Halfway between Visp and Brig but more easily accessible from the former are Brigerbad's open-air **thermal baths** (☎ 027 946 46 88; www.brigerbad.ch in German). The pools range from frivolous to curative. The five open-air **pools** (adult/child Sfr12/6; ☎ 9.30am–6pm late May–Sep) have a water temperature of 27°C to 37°C. Postal buses from Visp (Sfr2.80, 12 minutes) leave more or less hourly.

**ZERMATT**

pop 5420 / elevation 1605m

One word says it all: Matterhorn (4478m). The legendary peak towers over the town of Zermatt, acting like a magnet to ski fans, snowboarders and mountaineers. On 13 July 1865 Edward Whymper (who stayed at the grand Monte Rosa hotel) led the

first successful ascent of the mountain. The climb took 32 hours but the descent was marred by tragedy when four team members crashed to their deaths in a 1200m fall down the North Wall. Many mountaineers still come to conquer the peak, but a few unlucky individuals never leave. Their names are etched in stone in the town's cemeteries.

Skiers and snowboarders prefer going down to climbing up. The town doubled in size during the ski boom that raged in the 1960s and 1970s. For the rich and stylish, Zermatt is a place to see (as well as ski) and be seen (skiing or otherwise).

**Information****INTERNET ACCESS**

You can go online for free (or bring your laptop for a wi-fi moment) at **Papperla Pub** (☎ 027 967 40 40; www.papperlapub.ch).

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

The town has a **tourist office** (☎ 027 966 81 00; www.zermatt.ch; Bahnhofplatz 5; ☎ 8.30am–noon & 1.30–6pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–noon & 4–6pm Sat & Sun late Sep–mid-Jun, 8.30am–6pm Mon–Sat, 8.30am–noon & 1.30–6pm Sun mid-Jun–Sep).

**Alpin Center** (☎ 027 966 24 60; www.zermatt.ch/alpin center in German; Bahnhofstrasse 58; ☎ 8am–noon & 2–6pm mid-Nov–Apr & Jul–Sep) contains the ski and snowboard school and the mountain guides office (*Bergführerbüro*). For climbing the Matterhorn they recommend previous experience, one week's preparation and the small matter of Sfr1130 per person. Also ask here about Haute Route ski-touring and heli-skiing. In the off-season you can reach them by phone only from 9am to 11am and from 2pm to 5pm Monday to Friday.

**Sights**

Views from the cable cars and gondolas are almost uniformly breathtaking. The cogwheel train to **Gornergrat** (3090m) is a highlight. The mountain railway (Sfr36 one way) takes 25 to 43 minutes and there are two to three departures per hour. For the best views of the Matterhorn sit on the right-hand side. Alternatively, it takes around five hours to walk up from Zermatt to Gornergrat.

**Hinter Dorf**, off Zermatt's main street, is the oldest part of the village. It's crammed with tumbledown wooden Valais homes, a

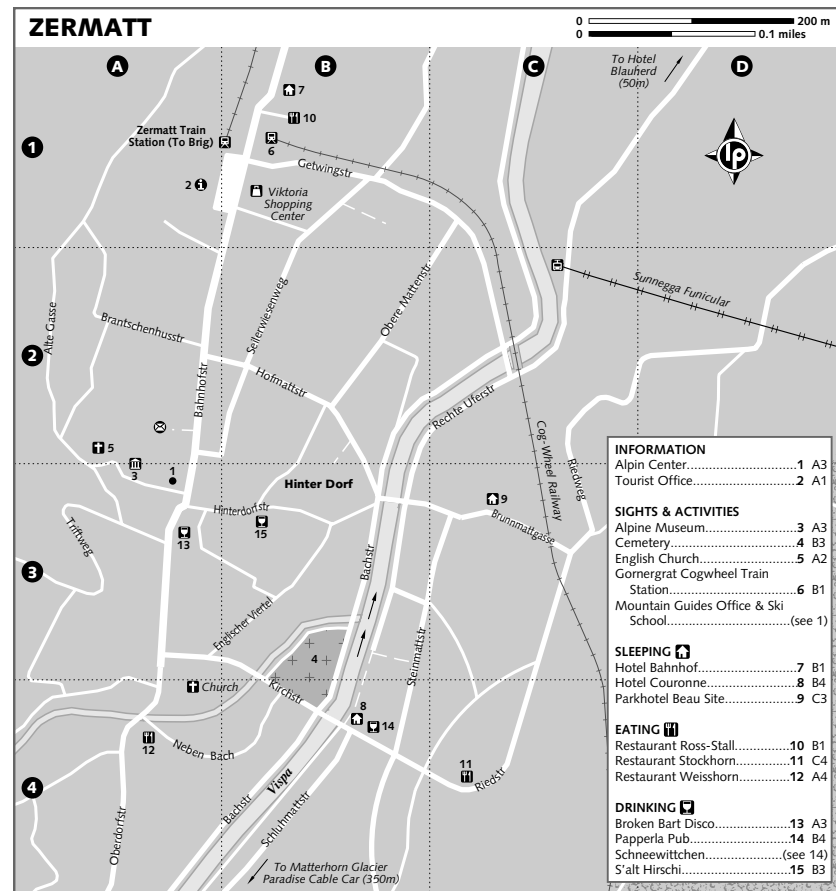
world away from the flashy boutiques by the church. The stone discs on the stilts of the storage barns are intended to keep out the rodents.

A walk in the **cemetery** is a sobering experience for any would-be mountaineer, as numerous monuments tell of deaths on Monte Rosa and the Matterhorn. The **Alpine Museum** (adult/child/senior Sfr8/free/4; ☎ 10am–noon & 4–6pm daily Jul–Sep, 4–6pm Mon–Sat rest of year) has exhibits about mountain ascents, local fauna, the development of Zermatt and famous visitors. Around the back is the **English church**, where there are more mountaineering epitaphs. A pair from Cambridge University in England was lost in the mountains in August 1959. Their bodies were found 30 years later.

**Activities**

Zermatt has numerous demanding slopes to test the experienced and intermediate skier in three main skiing areas: **Rothorn**, **Stockhorn** and **Matterhorn Glacier Paradise** (formerly Klein Matterhorn). In all, there are 245km of ski runs, and free ski buses simplify transferring between areas. February to April is peak time but in early summer the snow is still good and the lifts are less busy. Beginners have fewer options on the slopes.

The Klein Matterhorn is topped by the highest cable-car station in Europe (3820m), providing access to the highest skiing on the continent. It's also the most extensive summer skiing in Switzerland (up to 21km of runs), and the starting point for skiing at the



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Italian resort of Cervinia. This opens up a potential total ski area of 313km of downhill runs. The No 7 run down from the border is an exhilarating, broad avenue, great for intermediates and above. Be aware that bad weather can close the lifts leading up to the Klein Matterhorn on either side. Runs can be icier on the Italian side too (the skiing in Cervinia is best in March), but there are plenty of options and it is fun to indulge in the Italian atmosphere for a day. Don't leave it too late to get the lifts back up, or you could find yourself staying overnight!

When you take the cable car to Klein Matterhorn, if the weather is good, take the lift up to the top of the mountain. From here (3883m) you are virtually on top of Europe, with 360° views of the Swiss Alps (from Mont Blanc to Aletschhorn) and deep into Italy.

From September to late November you can head to Zermatt for a weekend package that involves testing several pairs of the latest skis to hit the market on a limited set of runs around the Klein Matterhorn glacier. This can cost from Sfr304 per person in a one-star hotel (double room) to Sfr419 in a five-star. The price includes breakfast, ski pass and test-ski rental.

A day pass for all ski lifts in Zermatt (excluding Cervinia) costs Sfr67/34/57 per adult/child/senior and student and Sfr75/38/64 including Cervinia.

## Festivals & Events

On 15 August, Zermatt comes alive to the sound of music with the Alpine **Folkloreumzug** (Folklore parade), involving 1400 participants. In September, look out for the **Zermatt Festival**, a series of chamber music concerts given by a skeleton crew of the Berlin Philharmonic in venues around the village.

## Sleeping

Zermatt offers plenty of accommodation, from five-star luxury down to rooms in private houses and chalets. There are about 120 hotels, hostels and similar, along with more than 200 holiday apartments (which you can usually book only for one-week blocks).

**Hotel Bahnhof** (☎ 027 967 24 06; www.hotelbahnhof.com; Bahnhofstrasse; dm Sfr33, s/d with shower Sfr76/96; ☹ closed around mid-Oct–mid-Dec) This hotel is opposite the train station and a mountaineer's mecca. It has 12-bed dorms and a shower on every floor. There are also compact, wood-

panelled rooms. Prices are without breakfast, but there's a kitchen.

**Hotel Blauherd** (☎ 027 967 22 91; www.hotelsuisse.ch/blauherd; Wieststrasse; s/d Sfr95/190; ☹) Although a bit of a walk from the centre, this very friendly chalet-style hotel is a fine option. Rooms are clean and cosy, the buffet breakfast is generous and you can use the pool in the nearby Hotel Cristiania, about 50m down the road. They will pick you up at the train station.

**Hotel Couronne** (☎ 027 966 23 00; www.hotel-couronne.ch; Kirchstrasse 15; s/d/sta Sfr162/264/304) This is in an excellent location overlooking the river. The best rooms are the south-facing ones with balcony, all of which enjoy views of the Matterhorn. There's a sauna (free) and you can take breakfast in the Wintergarden, again with views towards the Matterhorn.

**Parkhotel Beau Site** (☎ 027 966 68 68; www.parkhotel-beausite.ch; Brunnmattgasse 9; s/d half board Sfr240/400; ☹) The standard rooms in this opulent option are already very nice, done in walnut. If you want to pay a little more, there are all sorts of options on bigger and better doubles and suites. On the premises you have access to various saunas and steam baths, a pool and whirlpool.

## Eating

**Restaurant Ross-Stall** (☎ 027 967 30 40; Bahnhofplatz 50; meals Sfr50; ☹ daily mid-Jun–Apr) Housed in a typical-looking Valais house near the train station, this place specialises in fondue, which it does very well. Head downstairs for the main dining area and dig in to a meal consisting of *Walliser teller* starter, fondue washed down with Fendant white wine and sorbet with local alcohol (like Williamine) to finish.

**Restaurant Stockhorn** (☎ 027 967 17 47; Riedstrasse 11; fondue Sfr35, mains Sfr35–40; ☹ daily mid-Jun–Sep & mid-Nov–Apr) This place is what you have in mind when looking for a warm, cuddly, Alpine chalet. If it's fondue or raclette you want, stay downstairs. Here you will also see a very strange old machine with weights and cogs that turns chickens (order in advance) on a spit! For meat specialities cooked over wood fire, head upstairs.

**Restaurant Weisshorn** (☎ 027 967 57 52; Am Bach 6; fondue Sfr25–28, meals Sfr40–50; ☹ daily mid-Jun–Sep & mid-Nov–Apr) The garish mural of Chich-enitza, the Mexican temple, contrasts with the orange glowing Matterhorn table lamps.

The food range is just as odd, from nachos and quesadilla to fondue. The more adventurous will be unable to resist the chlifondue with mango, pineapple and nachos! Wash down with Heida white wine.

## Drinking

**Papperla Pub** (☎ 027 967 40 40; www.papperlapub.ch; Steinmattstrasse 34; ☹ 2.30pm–2am) This is *the* après-ski pub in Zermatt, especially if it's a slow time in the season (like January). Around the circular bar arranged on a couple of levels are high tables with stools or, if you prefer, low lounges. A DJ is usually in action and there's no shortage of ski-resort drinking hijinks. Next door, proceed downstairs to the Schneewittchen club (open to 4am), run by the same people.

**Salt Hirschi** (☎ 027 967 42 62; Hinterdorfstrasse 44; ☹ 9pm–2am daily Dec–Apr, otherwise sometimes 9pm–2am Fri & Sat) In the old part of the village, this quiet little bar set up in a traditional timber dwelling is an atmospheric spot for a *Glühwein* (mulled wine) or other poison. It serves a limited range of food in winter but there is none available in summer.

**Broken Bar Disco** (☎ 027 967 19 31; Bahnhofstrasse 41; ☹ 10pm–4am) Down in a vaulted cellar of the Hotel Post, this is a popular dance dive where you can jive on a keg and expend any energy left over after the day on the slopes. The Hotel Post is home to various bars and eateries in the one complex.

## Getting There & Away

Zermatt is car-free. Dinky little electric vehicles are used to transport goods, serve as taxis and so on around town. At the moment, drivers have to leave their vehicles in the huge open parking area in Täsch (Sfr7.50 per day), or in one of the several covered garages there and take the train (Sfr7.80, 12 minutes) into Zermatt. In 2005, the village voted to open the road as far as Zermatt and build parking stations at the village entrance, but it could be a while before this happens.

## TRAIN

Hourly trains depart from Brig (Sfr34, 85 minutes), stopping at Visp en route. The scenic route is operated by a private railway. Zermatt is also the starting point of the *Glacier Express* to Graubünden, one of the

most spectacular train rides in the world (see p23).

## SAAS FEE

pop 1600 / elevation 1800m

Hemmed in by a menacing grey amphitheatre of 13 implacable peaks over 4000m, backed by the threatening ice tongues of nine glaciers, little Saas Fee (1792m) looks positively feeble in the revealing light of summer. It is perched on a ledge above Saas Grund (1560m), a slightly drabber partner town further from the piste action. Although bits of the old village, with its chalets and timber barns on stilts, survive, this is largely a modern creation, less charming than its westerly neighbour Zermatt but equally full of twinkling cheer in the winter ski season.

## Orientation & Information

Saas Fee spreads out in a long line. The village centre and ski lifts are to the left (southwest) of the bus station.

The **tourist office** (☎ 027 958 18 58; www.saas-fee.ch; ☹ 8.30am–noon & 2–6.30pm Mon–Fri, 8am–7pm Sat, 9am–noon & 3–6pm Sun) is opposite the post office and bus station. Opening hours reduce slightly in the off-season. The local Guest Card earns various discounts.

## Sights & Activities

**Skiing** is the primary activity. About 100km of ski runs are more suited to beginners and experts, though intermediates have sufficient choices. Snowboarding is also good, but off-piste skiing is hazardous, due to the many glaciers. A general lift pass costs Sfr61/37 per adult/child for one day and Sfr340/204 for one week. Ski-mountaineering is possible along the famous Haute Route all the way to Chamonix.

The tourist office has a map of 280km of summer **hiking** trails in the region. In winter, 20km of marked footpaths remain open.

The highest underground funicular (metro) in the world operates all year to **Mittelallalin** (3500m), ascending 500m in 2½ minutes. It gives access to the Feegletscher, a centre for summer skiing (July and August) with 20km of runs above 2700m. Under the top station is the **Ice Palace** (adult/child Sfr4/2), 10m below the surface of the ice. It expounds on glacier-related topics. From Saas Fee to Mittelallalin by cable car then funicular costs Sfr69 return (children are half-price).

## Sleeping

Ask for the tourist office accommodation brochures. There are more than 360 chalet options scattered around Saas Fee and about 60 hotels.

**Hotel Alpenblick** (☎ 027 957 16 45; www.alpenblick-saas-fee.ch in German; r per person Sfr80) This large-ish chalet-style place left of the bus station and next to the swimming pool has rooms arranged as two doubles with shared living area. There are also apartments rented for weekly blocks. This place overlooks a fantastic garden.

**Hotel Sonnenhof** (☎ 027 958 13 13; www.hotel-sonnenhof.ch in German; s/d Sfr130/260) A centrally located mid-size hotel, this spot is family friendly and offers vegetarian food in its restaurant. Rooms are straightforward, with some wood panelling, carpet and TV. It is a quiet location with a spot of garden.

**Romantik Hotel Beau-Site** (☎ 027 958 15 60; www.beausite.org; s/d Sfr220/396) This classy hotel offers, aside from spacious, comfortable rooms, a tempting wellness centre and pools, which range from the Felsgrotte ('cliff grotto') to various steam baths, thalassotherapy and a Finnish sauna. You'll hardly have time for the ski runs!

## Eating

**Zur Mühle** (☎ 027 957 26 76; mains Sfr15-20; ☎ daily) For some typical Valais grub, you could pop by here. Rösti is the mainstay and comes in various forms, such as Walliserteller (with ham, onions and cheese mixed in). It is located atop the town's river.

**Carl-Zuckmayer-Stube** (☎ 027 957 21 75; meals Sfr50; ☎ Tue-Sun) Sit outside on the terrace for a hearty dish of deer schnitzel with glazed apple, chestnuts, red cabbage and Brussels sprouts.

**La Ferme** (☎ 027 958 15 69; meals Sfr70-80; ☎ 11.30am-midnight) On the main street near the tourist office, this place with country chalet airs has a rustic feel, with farm implements hanging from the walls. It specialises in meat dishes (and a good *fondue chinoise* at Sfr48).

**Fletschhorn** (☎ 027 957 21 31; www.fletschhorn.ch; tasting menu Sfr140-190; ☎ 10am-midnight daily mid-Dec-Apr & mid-Jun-Oct) This is one of the top 20 restaurants in Switzerland, offering gourmet cuisine with a French leaning. It's in a quiet location beyond the northern part of the village (get staff to pick you up in the electric car).

## Drinking

About a dozen bars are strung out along the long main street of Saas Fee. For cocktails, drop by **Metrobar** (☎ 027 957 14 10; ☎ 4pm-1am).

## Getting There & Away

Hourly buses depart from Brig (Sfr16.80, one hour) and Visp (Sfr14.20, 45 minutes). From Brig it is marginally faster to get the train and change at Visp. You can transfer to/from Zermatt at Stalden Saas.

Saas Fee is car-free. Park at the entrance to the village, where the first 24 hours in winter costs Sfr15 (covered parking). It gets cheaper after the first day and if you use the local Guest Card.

## BRIG

pop 11,880 / elevation 688m

With the number of road and rail routes bumping into each other here, it's likely you'll spend a night in this bustling burgh.

## Orientation & Information

The centre is south of the Rhône and east of its tributary, the Saltina. On the 1st floor of the train station is the **tourist office** (☎ 027 921 60 30; www.brig.ch; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat Oct-Jun, 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat, 9am-1pm Sun Jul-Sep). Postal buses leave from outside the train station. Directly ahead is Bahnhofstrasse, leading to the centre of town.

## Sights

### STOCKALPERSCHLOSS

Kaspar Jodok von Stockalper (1609–91), a man with an eye for business who dominated the Simplon Pass trade routes, did so well that he built this castle caprice in the middle of Brig. He even dubbed himself the 'Great Stockalper'. Locals didn't agree and obliged him to hightail it to Italy. However, the **castle** (☎ 027 921 60 30; Alte Simplonstrasse 28; adult/child/7-16yr Sfr7/free/3; ☎ hourly 50-min guided visit 9.30-11.30am & 1.30-4.30pm Tue-Sun May-Oct), with its Eastern-style onion domes, is a suitably three-dimensional memorial to one man's self-worth. You can wander the gardens and main court at leisure (admission free, open 6am to 10pm April to October and 6am to 8pm November to March).

## Sleeping & Eating

**Restaurant Matza** (☎ 027 923 15 95; Alte Simplonstrasse 18; s/d with hall showers Sfr40/80) This place provides

simple food and a basic flop for the night. While there's nothing special about it, it is in the old centre and perfectly serviceable. It's closed Sunday unless you pre-book.

**Hotel de Londres** (☎ 027 922 93 93; www.hotel-de-londres.ch; Bahnhofstrasse 17; s/d Sfr70/120) The décor is rather '70s, with gaudily coloured curtains, thick dull carpet and reddish wood panelling, but the place is comfortable and right on the old town's pedestrian-only central square, Stadtplatz (in spite of the official address), a five-minute walk from the train station.

**Restaurant zum Eidgenossen** (☎ 027 923 92 07; Geissplatzji; mains Sfr14-36; ☎ Wed-Mon) Head to the 1st floor for a Valais mountain chalet-style ambiance in which to enjoy local specialities and more interesting slabs of exotic meats including kangaroo (Australia), kudu (South Africa) and wapiti (Canada).

**Hotel du Pont** (☎ 027 923 15 02; Marktplatz 1; meals Sfr20; ☎ daily) There's something for everyone here, from fish to pasta. House specialities, however, revolve around meat, anything from a beef tournedos (Sfr45) to a *fondue chinoise* (about Sfr40 per person). It's closed for around three weeks at Christmas.

## Getting There & Away

Brig is on the *Glacier Express* line from Zermatt to St Moritz and the main line between Italy (Milan via Domodossola) and Geneva (Sfr55, two to 2¼ hours). Trains from Brig also run to Locarno (Sfr49, 2½ hours) in Ticino, via Domodossola (take your passport).

## THE GOMS & ALETSCHE GLACIER

Exiting Brig, you enter another world. Approaching the source of the mighty Rhône river (here known as the Rotten), the broad and deep valley begins to narrow as you gain altitude. The drama of pine-clad mountainsides and poetry of terraced vineyards clinging to south-facing hills that so characterises the west of the canton gives way to a more rural, Germanic scene. Known as the Goms, a string of mostly pretty villages (one of the first of them invitingly named Bitsch) of timber chalets, geranium-filled flower boxes and onion-domed churches stretches northeast, waiting to be counted off like so many rosary beads. On either side of the ever-narrower turquoise torrent that is the Rhône stretch billiard table-green fields with scattered farmhouses.

## PULVERISING COW PATS

The good folk of Riederalp, ever on the lookout for new distractions, came up with a new/old summer sport in 2005. In the old days, farmers leading cattle down from the high Alpine plains at the end of summer would smash up and spread as far as possible the animals' droppings to promote the growth of grass. Inspired by this now-forgotten tradition, locals held their first-ever Chüefladefäsch (cow pat festival) in September 2005. The aim of the game: to give as many cow pats as possible a good thumping with a golf club-style instrument. 'Four!' they might have shouted, as cow pats flew all over the shop at fields above the Aletsch Glacier. For those who like a flutter, the townsfolk had another idea. They demarked 49 squares on a field and let the cows out. Bet on the square in which you think one of the beasts will first drop a pat...

## Aletsch Glacier

The bucolic valley idyll of the Goms, however, hides great Alpine drama. For to the north, out of view from the valley floor, lies the icy spectacle of the Aletsch Glacier (Aletschgletscher), at 24km the longest in the Alps. It stretches from the Jungfrau (4158m) in the Bernese Oberland to a plateau above the Rhône. Its southern expanse is fringed by the Aletschwald, one of the highest pine forests in Europe (2000m).

## ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

There are three resorts on the southern rim of the glacier, separated from the forest by a ridge of hills. The westernmost is **Riederalp** (☎ 027 928 60 50; www.riederalp.ch in German), followed by **Bettmeralp** (☎ 027 928 60 60; www.bettmeralp.ch) and finally **Fiescheralp** (☎ 027 970 10 70; www.goms.ch in German), all at an altitude of just short of 2000m. Each has a tourist office, as do the towns in the valley floor from where cable cars depart to reach them. All these places are car-free.

## ACTIVITIES

The best thing about the glacier is that it can be easily visited. If you do nothing else in the Goms, stop at Fiesch and take the two **cable cars** (☎ 027 971 27 00; www.eggishorn.ch in

German; adult/child return Sfr42.80/21.40; ☎ every 30 min 8am-6pm Jun-Oct) up to the **Eggishorn** (2927m). This is most exhilarating in summer. As you float up over the green fields, champing cows and then, above the tree line, the stark olive, brown and grey Alpine landscape, nothing can prepare you for the sight that awaits on exiting the gondola.

Streaming down in a broad curve around the Aletschhorn (4195m), the glacier looks like a frozen six-lane motorway. In the distance, to the north, you can check off some of the country's greatest peaks: the Jungfrau, Mönch (4109m), Eiger (3970m) and Finsteraarhorn (4274m). If you scamper up the loose and rocky rise, topped by an antenna, to the west of the cable car exit, you might spy Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn in the distance.

While gawping at this wonder of nature (the whole Aletsch area is a Unesco World Heritage site), consider the grim news. The main glacier (the Grosser Aletschgletscher) covered 163 square kilometres in 1856, 128 square kilometres in 1973 and just 87 square kilometres today. In another couple of generations it may well be gone. The Grosser Aletsch Glacier is one of a series in these mountains.

Chase away these depressing thoughts with some physical activity. In summer the Aletsch area offers some inspiring hiking routes (an easy option is to take the cable car up, walk to the glacier and then walk back down to Fiescheralp, the midway station). In winter, there is some fine skiing among the three Alpine ski villages. Of the three hamlets, the one in the middle (Bettmeralp) is perhaps the handiest and prettiest. Each offer limited accommodation as well as some eating options. They are far more interesting than the three cable car-access towns in the Rhône valley, respectively Mörel, Betten and Fiesch. Once up in the villages, your ski pass will allow you to move between all three during the day's skiing.

In the Aletsch region there are 99km of ski runs and 35 lifts. The skiing is mostly intermediate or easy. Ski passes cost Sfr45/23 per adult/child per day, or Sfr54/27 including the lifts up from the valley towns.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Hotel Toni** (☎ 027 927 16 56; www.hotel-toni.ch in German; Aletschpromenade 9; s/d Sfr80/160) In the middle

of Riederalp village and a stumble from the lifts, this is a cheerful medium-sized hotel.

**Bettmerhof** (☎ 027 928 62 10; www.bettmerhof.ch; s/d Sfr165/320) You can't get much closer to the lifts in Bettmeralp. The rooms in these chalet-style digs are pretty standard for this kind of mountain hotel, with lots of wood panelling, carpet and, in some cases, balconies. Families should ask about the family suites. They have their own restaurant and pizzeria.

**Hotel Eggishorn** (☎ 027 971 14 44; www.hotel-eggishorn.ch; r per person Sfr100) This attractive hotel, with a variety of rooms, all of them offering marvellous views, is near the Eggishorn cable car, and so well placed for the skier or hiker anxious to get up to the glacier.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

The base stations for these resorts are on the train route between Brig and Andermatt. Cable-car departures are linked to the train arrivals. Mörel up to Riederalp costs Sfr8 each way, the same as from Betten up to Bettmeralp. Some versions of the ski pass include these cable cars. Various Swiss transport passes give you half-price on these cable cars.

#### From Fiesch to the Furka Pass

The trail out of the Valais continues northeast away from Fiesch, with still more postcard-cute villages along the way, including **Niederwald**, where Cäsar Ritz (1850-1918), founder of the hotel chain, was born and is now buried. Of them all, **Münster** is easily the most charming. Tightly packed chalets drop down the hill from a bright white church. A brook babbles contentedly through the heart of the village and weary travellers take delight in the **Hotel Croix d'Or et Poste** (☎ 027 974 15 15; www.hotel-postmuenster.ch; s/d Sfr118/236), the extraordinarily flower-laden hotel gathered around a little snippet of square on a bend in the main road through the village. Germany's literary giant Goethe slept in here in 1779. The 38 rooms are elegant, with different décor in each.

At **Ulrichen** you must make a decision. You can turn southeast down a narrow road that twists its way south out of the Valais and into the mountains that separate the canton from Ticino. Impressively barren country that at times reminds one of western Ireland, at others of the Spanish Pyrenees and still others of nothing you have ever seen, leads you to the **Nufenen Pass** (Passo di Novena) at

2478m, probably the most remote gateway into Switzerland's Italian canton. Dropping down the other side, the first major town you will encounter is **Airolo** (p291), 24km east of the pass along the quiet, almost gloomy Val Bedretto.

Should you decide to push on east of Ulrichen, you will head slowly upwards towards **Gletsch**. From here the mighty **Grimsel Pass**, with its spectacular views west over several lakes in Bern canton and the eastern Valais,

lies a short, steep drive north, but it is often closed even in summer (see also p174).

Marking the cantonal frontier with Uri canton is the **Furka Pass** (2431m), the run up to which offers superlative views over the Rhône glacier to the north. Open in summer only, it is the gateway into southeast Switzerland, but you can get your car on to a car train in **Oberwald** to negotiate the trip underground when the pass is shut. The train surfaces at Realp (see p233).

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