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Alpine trails

20,000-km network takes biking, hiking – and even canoeing – to new levels of stunning, scenic beauty

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"It could be a little steep," my Swiss host warns at the dinner table, angling the palm of her hand to illustrate tomorrow's uphill climb. I nod earnestly and smile; but on the inside, the panic wells up.

The Swiss are born with hiking boots fused to their feet, and when you're warned that the trail may be steep, it's a little like having an Indian cook warn you that the vindaloo may be a tad spicy. You want to heed these types of warnings.

The next morning, I'm panting like an obscene phone caller. I still can't see the crest of the hill. All that's ahead of me is a string of switchbacks cutting through the forest of larch, holly and maple trees. The trail slashes back and forth to my right; to my left is a stunning view of mountain peaks and glacier-fed lakes.

Thomas Gloor – my fit, lanky guide from the Swiss Hiking Federation – lags a discreet five metres behind, making sure he doesn't lose a journalist on his watch. Gloor hasn't even broken a sweat.



JO MATYAS PHOTO

Virtually every corner of Switzerland is not only accessible — but clearly marked — thanks to the new SwitzerlandMobility network which offers up stunning vistas almost anywhere you are.

Just the Facts

SwitzerlandMobility network has been designed to pass by the most beautiful spots in the country. You can create an ideal itinerary on www.switzerlandmobility.ch

The interactive online maps contain information on rail connections, accommodations from

We are following the Trans Swiss Trail Number 2, one part of the 20,000 kilometres of routes that make up the new SwitzerlandMobility, the largest national network of non-motorized transport routes ever created.

SwitzerlandMobility is an extension of the wildly popular Cycling in Switzerland program – and for the first time, routes for cycling, hiking, canoeing, mountain biking and in-line skating have been connected to one another and to the country's über-efficient public transport network, making every corner of the country accessible.

The network is designed to be user-friendly: more than 100,000 standardized signposts, a helpline for customers, assistance with itinerary planning, accommodation and equipment rentals, and luggage transportation so you won't have to schlep your suitcase along the trails.

Our first day is a plum 13-kilometre section of trail from Beckenried to Seelisberg, shadowing the edge of Lake Lucerne, the twisting body of water locals call the Lake of Four Forest Cantons. Ninety minutes – and almost to the top of the climb – I glance behind me to see how Gloor is making out. He's scaling the rise while punching away at the keys on his BlackBerry, checking his emails. He is a hiking machine.

We have most sections of the trail all to ourselves. There are certainly no other North Americans, and I feel totally immersed in this region of William Tell. We meet the occasional trail devotees, usually Swiss or Austrian, some carrying their mountain bikes up the narrow path; others with cherub-cheeked toddlers strapped into baby backpacks. No one is out of breath.

Eventually, the steep trail tops out and then joins a paved, rural roadway past farmhouses and chalets that look like they haven't changed in centuries.

At the intersection, a bright yellow SwitzerlandMobility sign points the way to Seelisberg, a hamlet with the distinction of being home to a small, family-run cheese factory, as well as the one spot on two days of hiking that actually elevates Gloor's heart rate.

"Seelisberg is the historical heart of Switzerland – it's where everything began," he explains as we approach a break in the forest at the historical landmark known as Rütli Meadow. "My heart beats faster and faster."

At the end of the 12th century, the people of the three surrounding cantons met at the quiet meadow, forming a federation to resist the Hapsburg empire's oppressive rule. Now Rütli is a plain, flat meadow with a Swiss flag fluttering from a tall flagpole and the requisite cows grazing on the hillside. But it's a protected space that has the ability to elevate heart rates.

"You have to feel the ghost of the people who swore the foundation here," says

luxury hotels to sleep-in-the-straw farm options, as well as information on the history, sights and attractions along the routes. Packages or à la carte trips can be booked online at www.swisstrails.ch

See www.myswitzerland.com for general information on travelling to Switzerland.

Gloor of the clean, undeveloped patch of green grass. "At this, the birthplace of the confederation of Switzerland, the idea was that it is better to do things together than to do them alone."

The next morning we continue along the most Swiss of all hiking trails, a historical route known as The Swiss Path: a 35-kilometre hiking trail built along the southernmost reaches of Lake Lucerne where each of the country's 26 cantons is designated a section of the path, and each resident symbolically owns a 5-millimetre sliver.

It's a trail that toys with pine forests and vistas of mountains, meanders past neat stacks of firewood, and crosses fields filled with alpine flowers. The atmosphere is largely quiet, broken only by church bells in the distance.

I find myself intentionally slowing my stride, ironically not because of my heart rate.

It is, as they like to say in this part of Switzerland, the scenery that just keeps getting in the way.

Jo Matyas is a Kingston Ont.-based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by Switzerland Tourism.