



An elite Victorian
playground turned Swiss
Army hub emerging as
Switzerland's next great
ski resort

BY HILARY NANGLE

ON A BLUEBIRD DAY, the views from the 9,715-foot summit slay me. The optic white panorama encompasses more than 600 craggy peaks surrounding central Switzerland's Urseren Valley.

Puffy wisps trail skiers descending marked pistes and unblemished powder fields. Far, far below and out of view on the valley floor lies the once-sleepy eye-candy village of **Andermatt**, now emerging as a world-class destination resort with new hotels and luxury rental apartments layering contemporary chic upon its cozy, traditional town center, speedy new high-capacity lifts zippering surrounding peaks, and cross-country trails lacing a new championship golf course.

I discovered Andermatt four years ago while riding the *Glacier Express* excursion train that bisects the village and zigzags through the 6,706-foot Oberalppass, a highlight on my journey between two of Switzerland's most glamorous ski destinations – chichi St. Moritz, with its modern town center, and chalet-style Zermatt, with centuries-old log-and-stone farm structures in the old village center. Noticing skiers and construction, I began keeping an eye on this rising Mama Bear staking out a Goldilocks-pleasing location between them as a new, major player positioned to rival, or perhaps more accurately, complement both. I kept returning, watching as a new village center took shape and mountain infrastructure improved. Now, I'm back to share the secret, so that other avid skiers like myself can discover Andermatt – before the crowds do.

Looking around, it feels as if I'm standing not only in the center of Switzerland, but also the center of Europe. Three mountain passes – Furka (think James Bond's Aston Martin DB5 chase in *Goldfinger*), Gotthard, and Oberalp intersect the village and four major European rivers – the Reuss, Rhine,

**WINTER
BREAK:**

Discover emerging Andermatt, now in the midst of a transformation project.



Rhone, and Ticino — originate in the region. Thirteenth-century Benedictine monks labeled this divine landscape the Valley of the Devil, and myths still haunt the Devil's Bridge spanning Schöllenen Gorge. In Victorian times, Andermatt shined as an elite escape, attracting Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens, and Arthur Conan Doyle, among others. Then, in 1882, the Gotthard rail tunnel bypassed the village and three years later, the Swiss Federal Army garrisoned the strategically sited town to secure the passes and tunnel.

When the Army abandoned barracks in the early 2000s, Andermatt's economy sagged. In 2005, local officials consulted with Egyptian businessman Samih Sawaris about redeveloping the region as a tourism destination, and Sawaris saw potential. After rounds of discussion, during which community leaders realized they couldn't do it themselves, they agreed to acquire the Swiss Army's land and sell it to Sawaris at market price. In 2007, Sawaris launched Andermatt Swiss Alps, with a \$1.8 billion plan to revive the town, promising a

posh yet understated resort that preserves the region's unspoiled environment and rich cultural heritage while delivering world-class skiing. Phase I, on target for completion in the 2017-18 season, already has upgraded the overall resort and skiing experience. Phase II, as yet unscheduled, adds a new train station and more lifts. Those who crave scoring first bragging rights will find plenty to entertain them now and coo about to the folks back home.

Andermatt's transformation began with the village in December 2013, with the opening of the Chedi Andermatt, named Hotel of the Year 2017 by the respected Gault Millau Switzerland restaurant guide. The first of six planned hotels, the Jean-Michel Gathy-designed, 123-room contemporary-chalet-style Chedi, sited in the old village, just steps from the train station, architecturally integrates Andermatt's traditional town center on the south side of the train tracks with the new developments on the north side. The hotel

ON AND OFF THE SLOPES:

Above, challenge yourself on Gemsstock's off-piste powder. Below right, unwind in the Chedi Andermatt's Wine and Cigar Library.

wins me over with soaring Asian chic meets cozy Swiss design, the sushi in the Japanese Restaurant with Switzerland's only sake sommelier, the towering walk-in cheese humidor and East-meets-West cuisine prepared in the Restaurant's four open kitchens, the separate wine and cigar libraries off the main lobby, full-service spa, and especially the pampering ski butlers, who rush to buckle and unbuckle my boots and chauffeur me to the lifts.

North of the tracks, private vacation chalets sprout beside the new Kurt Rossknecht-designed golf course, where the Chedi-operated Club House and restaurant double as a base for the cross-country trails. Next season, a 180-room hotel with serviced apartments, a swimming and wellness area, and a concert-conference hall will open, joining other new and under-construction luxury complexes with rental apartments, all linked to the old village center via a pedestrian tunnel under the tracks.

Despite all the new, Andermatt's old village retains its traditional vibe. Pedestrians shouldering skis or towing kids on sleds still far outnumber cars. Horse-drawn sleighs clip-clop along narrow streets shadowed by St. Peter and Paul Church, a Baroque beauty queen dating from 1602. Timber and stone buildings house restaurants such as Bären, an Italian restaurant presided over by a Ticino chef, and Ochsen, the go-to for authentic fondue, along with inviting specialty shops. I drool over local foods in Muheim's butcher shop, smile at the colorful homemade socks in aptly named Sockenfenster (Sock Window), and long for a pair of Birdos custom freeride skis, handcrafted by American ex-pat Daniel Loutrel, a pioneer in innovative powder-ski design.

Andermatt's two ski areas, Gemsstock, revered for its challenging runs and off-piste powder, and Nättschen-Gütsch, favored by intermediates and families, face each other across the village, with the latter comprising a series of peaks rising toward the Oberalppass. The Sedrun-Oberalp area, another family pleaser, flows down the other side. Currently, the Matterhorn Gotthard Bahn, a cog and rack railway, provides the only winter transit between Andermatt and Sedrun. Back in 2012, with the Chedi rising, Sawaris acquired the three lift companies serving the two resorts, renaming the combined area SkiArena Andermatt-Sedrun.

In a brilliant move, Sawaris met with environmental, cultural preservation, and tourism organizations along with local residents when shaping his plans. Gemsstock, accessible via an existing two-stage cable car from Andermatt's west end, shines as an example of the resulting environmental and cultural detente. Here, Sawaris took a mostly hands-off approach, with upgrades only to make things a bit comfier, such as last season's new high-speed, bubble-covered six-pack servicing the midmountain intermediate slopes.

Of nine new lifts — including two eight-passenger gondolas — planned for the combined area, three now transport skiers, including two new-this-season six-packs on Nättschen-Gütsch's grin-inducing, sun-bathed slopes. Also noteworthy, as of this season, at least one trail from each lift has snowmaking, ensuring a longer season and giving an advantage in an era of climate warming, when many European resorts are scrambling to add it. Next season, the gondolas (one a two-stage from the new village center ascending Gütsch),

two more six-packs, a children's lift, and a surface lift will complete the unification through the Oberalppass.

Focusing infrastructure development on Nättschen-Gütsch preserved Gemsstock's most-favored-nation status among freeriders, who covet the seemingly endless off-piste powder — perfect for hucking cliffs, schussing couloirs, and making first tracks. "From the summit, you can freeride in all directions, and end up in Andermatt," says Fränggi Gehrig, an Andermatt native and instructor with the Andermatt Ski School. I pirouette gracefully in ski boots following his gloved hand as it sweeps the panorama.

The eponymous run honoring Olympic, World Cup, and World Champion downhiller Bernhard Russi, an Andermatt native still revered throughout Switzerland, belies Gemsstock's freerider rep. The summit-to-mid-mountain groomed trail plummets 3,150 feet. "The key section is the last 500 meters; it's straight down, a 60-percent grade," Russi says. "Everyone's goal is to ski it without stopping. Turning, turning, turning, and trying to carve is one challenge. The other is to put the skis in the fall line and run straight down. I've reached over 160 kilometers per hour, but I don't suggest this," he cautions. I heed his advice.

Over lunch at Restaurant Gurschenalp, renovated last season, I ponder Gemsstock's split freerider/racer personality: On one side, backpack-toting freeriders refuel with ham-and-cheese rösti, a fried grated-potato pancake gilded with ham, melted cheese, and egg; on the other, young racers clad in one-piece suits cheer and jeer a World Cup race on TV.

This yin-yang dichotomy not only distinguishes Gemsstock, but also the entire Andermatt Swiss Alps project. Intimate yet expansive, it embraces Old World traditions and contemporary style, offers racer-challenging steeps and freerider-pleasing adventures, deep powder and groomed pistes, serves rösti and sushi, and sells handmade socks and handcrafted skis. Neither St. Moritz nor Zermatt, Andermatt successfully captures the center. Donning sunglasses, I set my sight on the village far below, briefly entertain the inviting powder fields, but opt for a seemingly endless cruiser, my grin as bright as Andermatt's future. anderstatt.ch ■



MARTIN WABEL (GEMSTOCK)

FOTO HOMBERGER (EDEN ROC)