



Real Road Adventures: Interlaken and Jungfrau Region

Hi, I'm Jeff Wilson, putting the adventure pedal to the metal! Now here's a place where you can soar to the Top of Europe in the morning, go kayaking in the afternoon and storm a medieval castle at sunset. In other words, it's a place I want to be! There'll be no sleeping at the wheel when we visit the Jungfrau region of Switzerland.

[Standard open]

When someone says the word "travel" to me, inevitably it's images of towering mountains and pure blue water that pop into my head. That's because I have a passion for outdoor adventure, and I love visiting places where natural resources are cherished and treated with respect. And that's why I'm devoting this series to exploring sustainable travel destinations, and why I've come to the Jungfrau region in particular.

Anyone who craves the feeling of a glacial breeze on their skin, who yearns for lofty summits, and breathing fresh alpine air needs to visit the Jungfrau area at least once their lifetime. Not only does it offer stirring historical sights and some of the best scenery in the world, but there are thrills around every corner.

Travel researchers say that there's a spike in interest in sustainable travel. That's for good reason.

Thoughtful, responsible travel protects ecosystems and helps ensure that resources will be there in the future. And it improves the quality of our own experiences today.

I'm using carbon offsets from myclimate.org for my Swiss air travel and I'm driving an electric vehicle to explore portions the E-Grand Tour of Switzerland.

The E-Grand Tour is the world's first road trip for electric vehicles and features a network of hundreds of car charging stations.

In this episode, I'm basing myself in the towns of Grindelwald and Interlaken to go full speed ahead in the Jungfrau region.

Grindelwald, at the base of snow-clad mountains, is one of Switzerland's oldest and most picturesque resorts. It makes a great starting point for adventures into the surrounding area.

A 25-minute gondola ride carries you up to a scenic peak called "First."

Once you're on top of the mountain, there a ton of fun ways to get down.

"First" is what I'd call an "adventure playground." There are all kinds of outdoor activities combined with mind-blowing views of the Bernese Alps.

I like my views with a shot of adrenaline, and the First Glider is just the ticket.

First Glider is a zip line-like experience, except you fly face down.

[Soundbite Jeff]

So far it's not that exciting, in fact it's quite relaxing. Can somebody get me a coffee?]

But then, things start to get really interesting... To begin, you're pulled backwards nearly half a mile up the mountainside. If you've never ziplined before, this is a great opportunity to challenge yourself – the half mile ride is stable, safe, and above all...fun! You soar downhill at speeds up to 50 miles an hour. With the wind rushing past your face, you get that exhilarating I'm-scared-but-so-glad-to-be alive feeling!

Now, if flying through the air isn't your thing, there's plenty more to do on First. To get the exhilaration of a zipline while standing on two feet, take a stroll along the First Cliff Walk.

This suspended steel walkway leads along vertical rock walls, defying gravity as it juts out over the Alps. The walkway is 6,500 ft above the ground at its highest point. Cliff walks are becoming more and more popular in Switzerland; they offer even novice hikers full alpine thrills.

And if you're uneasy staring down into the abyss, just keep your eyes on the view...

The sweeping vistas stretch over rolling pastures and forests, and jagged mountain summits. On clear days you'll see a famous cast of mountain characters: the Eiger, the Mönch and the Jungfrau.

There are dozens of bicycle trails in the Grindelwald area, including several starting from First.

[Soundbite Jeff]

Hills are a piece of cake.

E-bikes are available for rental at the peak, and with that extra power, you can cycle effortlessly along the mountain trails. The ride back to Grindelwald is just moderately technical, but a beautiful, scenic descent.

Some of the trails have only recently opened to bikers, so in order to keep that privilege, it's important to be respectful in sharing the route with others. But the trip is definitely worth the effort.

Besides taking care to protect natural resources, another element of sustainable travel is protecting the cultural heritage of local communities. In Grindelwald, you can sign up for a "Historic and Culinary Tour" to see how the people here hone Alpine village traditions.

[Soundbite Godi]

Godi: Do you know Mount Everest?

Jeff: Okay.

Godi: yes. The first man who climbed Mount Everest.

Jeff: Hillary.

Godi: Hillary. You know the name? Very good. And he used the ice ax like this from his father. His father who made all the ice axes for the expeditions. They started to climb the high mountains.

The Bhend metal forge is living history. Like his father and grandfather before him, Ruedi Bhend sculpts axes with perfect precision – the same kind of axes that have been used for first ascents of many of the world's highest mountain peaks.

Just down the street, we check out a little store owned by local farmers. The Eigerness shop sells traditional handicrafts and regional food.

[Soundbite]

Godi: You know, people were farmers here. They only had cheese. They had their pigs.

Jeff: Sure.

Godi: It was simple.

Jeff: Yeah, it was simple, but they always, it's a rich, the grass is rich. The land is rich. Oh it's very tasty. Thank you.

And founded nearly a hundred years ago, the Ringgenberg Bakery and Pastry Shop is known for its luscious desserts and offers more than two dozen different kinds of bread baked fresh daily.

[Soundbite]

Christian: I'll show you the Eigerness bread is our house bread for eat with cheese and meat. And you can see the Eiger with the north face and the snow and the Wetterhorn bread. This is a bread without leaven.

Jeff: Unleavened. No yeast.

Christian: No yeast. Yes.

Jeff: This is beautiful. I like the bubbles. And the structure of the bread is really nice. And it's got, like, a translucent crumb. Oh look at that crust. Like the tear. Nice. Oh, you're right.

Not so sour, right?

Christian: Yes.

Stepping into the future, the ultra-modern Grindelwald Terminal is a transportation hub that includes two efficient gondola systems that can carry you to the highest mountain peaks.

I'm planning to catch this state-of-the-art Eiger Express to the Eiger Glacier station viewpoint. From there, I'll make a transfer to ascend to the rarified air of the Jungfrauoch.

The Eiger Express tri-cable system is Swiss engineering at its finest. On top of the fact that it uses less energy than typical aerial tramways, it's also more stable and travels at a much higher speed. It whisks you to the Eiger Glacier station in just 15 minutes. The gondola has only seven support towers across a length of 20,000 feet. It came with a steep price tag, but because it has fewer towers and maintenance paths, it's less intrusive on the landscape.

The Eiger, which translates as "Ogre," lives up to its name. The 5,900-foot north face is considered one of the most challenging and dangerous ascents in the Alps.

The north face earned the nickname "murderous wall" because of the many tragedies involving climbers here.

To get to the Jungfrauoch, I make a direct transfer to the historic Jungfrauochbahn. This cogwheel train burrows deep into the mountain hauling riders to the highest railway station on the continent.

When you take the Eiger Express Gondola in combination with this train, you reach the Jungfrauoch 47 minutes faster than in the past.

Once the train arrives, you have several options for exploring the station. I recommend hopping on the ultrafast lift that propels you up another 350 feet to one of highest observation decks in the world. The doors open to an outdoor viewing platform on the famous Sphinx observatory, which supplies important astronomical data to researchers.

Your first glimpse of the Aletsch glacier will stop you in your tracks. Maybe it's the altitude – more than 11,000 feet - or just the spectacular dreamlike vista. It's easy to see why this lookout has been dubbed the "The Top of Europe." The area has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage site of outstanding universal value, both because of its beauty, and for all the geological information it provides on how the Alps were formed.

This is the largest glacier in the Alps. The current length is around 14 miles. But, like most glaciers in the world today, the Aletsch is shrinking due to climate change.

It's not surprising that the Jungfrauoch, which is open all year round, is among the most popular sites in the country. There are so many great destinations in the Swiss Alps that it can be hard to choose among them, but in my opinion, this should be near the top of everyone's list.

Far beneath the glacier is a network of tunnels that create an eerily beautiful frozen world. Mountain guides carved out these passages in the 1930s using picks and saws, and today artists fill the frosty halls with whimsical displays that tell the story of the relationship between the local people and the glacier over time.

We go from the euphoria of mountain heights to the serene waters of the valley floor... The town of Interlaken (which means between two lakes) rests between Lake Thun to the west and Lake Brienz to the east.

The brilliant blue water of Lake Brienz ripples amid sheer mountain slopes.

[Soundbite Ben]

Ben: Yeah. Especially on a day like this when it's so nice and calm, there's nothing gonna throw us in.

Jeff: And the water is probably warm like bathwater, right?

Ben: Not quite bathwater. Not quite bathwater.

I'm dying to get out into the middle of the lake. And the best way I can think of is in a kayak.

Ben: And we want to be in that position, basically with the knees nice and wide.

Jeff: Right.

Ben: Shoulders up and over the hips. And then we get that nice, solid feeling.

Kayaking is one of my favorite outdoor activities. Not only is it a great low-impact workout, but it's an environmentally friendly way to get out on the water and interact with nature.

Leave your problems and stresses on shore and float suspended in time. Rustic villages and small medieval castles punctuate the scenery. Reaching down more than 800 feet at its lowest point, this is one of the deepest lakes in Switzerland.

The icy, turquoise water looks almost tropical in color.

The color is created by tiny particles of sediment that are carried by the glacial rivers that feed the lake.

These extremely fine particles sink very slowly, creating a luminous visual effect that's magnified by the clean, clear water.

Ben: This lake always starts off so still, you get reflections on the water, and then it builds during the day, and you get some waves generally in the afternoon and then at the end of the day it calms in the evening and finishes off with the sunset over the lake, it's beautiful. It's really, really nice.

Transitioning from one fantasy world to another...I'm headed to a chocolate shop.

The Funky Chocolate Club in downtown Interlaken offers daily workshops on chocolate making. Here you learn how to taste chocolate like a Swiss connoisseur. It's tough work, but hey, somebody's gotta do it.

[Soundbite Dori]

Dori: I have a question for you, Jeff. Tell me, what do you know about chocolate already?

Jeff: I know that I like it.

Dori: That's perfect. I guess that's the reason why you are here, right? The origin of cocoa and chocolate is in Mexico.

Jeff: Okay.

Dori: The Aztecs and Mayans were the first people who actually recognized some kind of value to cocoa bean.

Jeff: And what's the process then if they're too bitter, when they're fresh, what happens to make them...?

Dori: What we need to do in the first step will be to add some of the solid chocolates into our melted base.

You get tips and tricks for making very high-quality chocolate bars.

[Soundbite]

Dori: Technically, the chocolate needs to feel cold against our skin. So all we have to do right now, please have a look. You will dip your pinky into the chocolate just like this. And then please put a little bit of chocolate on the tip of your nose, where the skin is the most sensitive. As soon as you put it on the nose. It should feel cold instantly.

Jeff: It felt cool, maybe still a little...

Dori: Do you really believe this is how we measure it in Switzerland?

Jeff: I believe it.

Dori: You do?

Jeff: I believe anything.

Dori: I'm so sorry, but I have to disappoint you a little bit. Because this is not the way of measuring temperature.

Jeff: Okay.

Dori: But it is the way of maybe tasting it.

Jeff: Because I was going to say I'm not disappointed.

Dori: Nice one.

Operating under an “all you can eat” taste-testing policy, you’ll learn to decorate your chocolate masterpieces like a pro. The Club uses only organic- and fair-trade chocolate from certified producers.

Now, travel isn’t only about getting hyped up on chocolate and outdoor fun. It’s also about culture! About improving your mind! Come on, it’s time for some history.

Thun Castle is one of five fairytale castles that watch over the landscape around Lake Thun. Built 900 years ago, this gateway to the alps guarded an important pass between Italy and northern Europe. It was designed essentially as an administrative building for tax collection (pretty nice digs for a tax office, I’d say). Later it was inherited by the House of Kyburg, a local family of nobility.

But ownership became contentious when a quarrel broke out between two Kyburg brothers - one brother stabbed the other in the eye and threw him off the tower.

Eventually the ruling Lords of Bern took over the castle and it’s been in public control ever since. It’s been used for everything from a knight’s hall to a prison to a torture chamber. Today it houses a historical museum with the most amazing views over the lake and city of Thun.

Like its castle, Thun’s old town is also incredibly well-preserved. Cobblestone streets are dressed up in colorful flower boxes, and welcoming cafes line the squares. Who needs an ocean or beach for surfing? In land-locked Switzerland, you can ride the waves next to Thun’s covered wooden bridge across the river Aare.

One of the benefits of having my own car is that I can easily explore small, out-of-the-way places. And with an electric vehicle, I don’t have to worry about adding air pollution to this bucolic countryside.

In the mountain village of Habkern I get more insights into local history with one particularly Swiss craft.

As a musician, one of my favorite ways to engage with another culture is to learn about their musical instruments. And what’s more Swiss than an alphorn?

Alphorns are a wind instruments that produce simple sounds when blown on a mouthpiece. They were originally used by the mountain people of the Alps to communicate between villages.

[Soundbites]

Heinz: This original from 1808 ate this year, and it's shorter and with this, we can make signals.

Once upon a time, the alphorn maker would look for trees that were already the right shape. Today they're made a little differently.

[Soundbites]

Heinz: Today, we make this with the machines. He works very precise. And then all the Horn is the same. He can play together. Right before the Horn was only a little bit different then he cannot play together.

Jeff: I see, right, so they wouldn't have tuned the same way.

Heinz: You see, the wood is special. It's a spruce and it's a pure wood without knots or glue. And that's not so easy to find. And the wood comes here from this valley.

For sleeping in Interlaken, I've picked the Hey Hotel, just a couple of miles from Lake Thun. Many of the hotels in Interlaken still have that old-world style that harkens back to the golden age of travel. But most now cater to the needs of modern adventure seekers and nature lovers. For example, the Hey Hotel, offers a changing program of outdoor activities that are included in the price of the room.

One of the amazing things about Interlaken is how easy it is to find so many once-in-a-lifetime adventures... especially ones that leave a "light footprint" on the environment. On the schedule for today? Rafting!

I've done activities with the company Outdoor Interlaken before and they're a team of pro's.

[Sound up]

Yeah, a little bit of training, now that we're on the water, get your paddles ready. Ok, let's go forward. Pull.

With the first splash of a wave in my face, I'm reminded this water is pure ice melt, so wetsuits and life jackets are essential.

[Sound up]

Back on the job. Pull.

I get a huge surge of adrenaline as we take on the river.

[Sound up]

Hold on, get down.

This is a total bonding activity, since everyone in the boat is forced to work together and trust each other. We strive to conquer the rapids... and just keep from tipping over. When there's a lull in the action, we get a chance to sit back and take in the dramatic surroundings.

The best part of rafting? You always end up exhausted but happy.

To end my visit to the Jungfrau region, I take a small funicular for a 10-minute ride up to Interlaken's nearest mountain.

Harder Kulm, also known as "The Top of Interlaken," is one of my favorite scenic lookouts. The views are great at any time of the day, but at sunset they're especially awe-inspiring. You can look out over

The logo features a light gray world map in the background. The word 'REAL' is in a light blue font, 'Road' is in a bold green font, and 'ADVENTURES' is in a dark gray font. A blue horizontal line with a circular dot at its end passes through the 'R' in 'Road'.

REAL Road ADVENTURES

Interlaken's two azure lakes: Thun and Brienz. Behind them in high relief stand the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau. Take a moment to breath that clean mountain air and savor this corner of planet earth.

In a modern world full of stress, the lure and magic of mountain regions has never seemed stronger. They offer the chance of wonderment for every sort of traveler, and an obligation to preserve and protect them.

Thanks for coming along as I found my thrills in the Jungfrau region.

Join me again next time as I search for more Real Road Adventures!