

An aerial photograph of a cable car system in the Geneva Alps. The image shows a cable car suspended from several thick cables, moving down a steep, snow-dusted mountain slope. The background features a vast, hazy mountain range under a cloudy sky. The overall scene conveys a sense of high-altitude adventure and scenic beauty.

High Adventure in the **Lake** **Geneva Alps**

By Jonathon Reynolds

Looking down between my boots I can see the village of Villars spread out below me. Looking up I see the arc of the paragliding canopy above me and in my ears is the sound of the wind and the pilot – Guy Bertrand – softly singing. It is a magical moment – the mountains spread out below us in every direction, the white massif of Mount Blanc rising in the distance while far below in the fields around Villars cows walk in the pastures. We can faintly hear the sound of the cowbells, each bell ringing with a slightly different tone.

This paragliding tandem flight is the high point – quite literally – of a five day magical adventure trip through the Lake Geneva Region of Switzerland. As we ride the winds and fly higher into the air I can see over the tops of the mountains to the other villages we have visited. Chateau-d'Oex is just out of sight over the mountain but to my right is Leysin and at the end of that valley is Les Diablerets with the glacier looming over the village. In the distance I can see the sunlight sparkling off the water of Lake Lemman (Lake Geneva) and on the far side the terraced green of the vineyards through which we bicycled 4 days ago.

The fantastic train network in Switzerland means that a few hours after

you land at Geneva Airport you can be whisked away to the mountains or lakeside on a comfortable train through impeccably cared for countryside. We took the train to Lausanne, home of the Olympic museum; a comfortable city nestled on the shore of the lake. We quickly explored the lower town and then hopped on the train again – this time with rented bikes – to a town a few kilometres down the lakeshore. The train passed through a short tunnel and we emerged on the far side into a different countryside. Terraced vineyards dropped in haphazard levels down to the lake. Between the vineyards a network of concrete paths and a few narrow roads provided an almost endless variety of cycle routes – routes almost completely free from traffic. The train station was high above the lake and we lazily coasted down gentle inclined through dozens of vineyards for a couple of hours. As we slowly descended alongside rose framed vineyards to the lake shore we drew closer to the town of Vevey. In Vevey we once again got on the train and took it back to Lausanne. After dropping off the rental bikes at the train station we wandered along the waterfront looking over at the mountains in Evian, France and talked over our plans for the next few days.



Looking into the clouds



Ready to fly

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Travel: International

To get to Leysin from Lausanne we took a train to Aigle and changed to a small two car inclined train which slowly worked its way high into the mountains. Pulling itself up impossibly steep slopes the train finally dropped us at a small station in Leysin. As the train carried us up the clouds had descended and the next two days ended up being cloudy and rainy. Since we had planned on paragliding and ballooning we thought our adventure trip was coming to a wet and dreary end. How wrong we were! The next day saw us on top of the mountain at the Klukos restaurant for lunch then hiking through the high country till dinner. It was windy, wet and wild and also incredibly beautiful and invigorating with the clouds streaming out from the peaks in the wind like tattered white streamers. When we arrived in Chateau D'Oex in a drizzling rain we already knew that we would not be floating high above the Alps in a balloon. The local tourist office had a more active suggestion – hydro-speed with Rivieres Aventures.

I had no idea what hydro-speed was but once I found out I could not wait to try it out. Basically instead of floating down through rapids in a kayak you become the kayak. A

stiff Styrofoam or plastic mini boat holds your arms and head out of the water and the rest of your body is covered in a reinforced wetsuit. Flippers on your feet and a helmet complete the outfit. A real advantage for us today was the fact that weather makes not difference – it doesn't matter if it rains since we are going to be totally soaked the whole time anyway! Soon we are on the bank of the river, our arms thrust inside our floats and we are practicing various movements which will allow us to navigate down the river. The first few minutes in the river are cold but the water soon warms up inside the wetsuit and I devote all my attention to avoiding rocks and following the guide. As we float further downstream the river gets higher and the drops become both more fun and more challenging. I am amazed at how physical hydro-speed is and even more amazed at how much fun it is – it is like kayaking only with your head at water level. All too soon, and just as I am starting to get e feel for the sport our trip is over and we climb from the river dripping water and beaming smiles as we sit in the van shuttling back to the old saw mill which is the base for Rivieres Aventures. A cup of hot tea and a change into warm dry clothes and we are ready for



Lunch at the top



End of a good run

a dinner and relaxing evening in the Hotel Bon Accueil an old 18th century wooden inn. The warm wood walls hold the promise of a good nights' sleep with the door slightly ajar to let in the clean mountain air.

The next day we head to Diablerets a small village sheltering under the mountains with a huge glacier hanging high above the village. Once again the weather was not on our side but it really doesn't seem to matter here. We can't go climbing or do the via ferrata routes but we can head down the mountain on dirt monster bikes! Dirt monster bikes are a cross between a mountain bicycle and a fat tired motor bike - without the motor. The fat wheels allow us to go over the grass and through the mud leaving no marks and not getting stuck. Pedalling them in any direction other than down is a lot of work but we have 700 metres to drop into the valley from the top of the gondola so it is no problem coasting down narrow tracks and then through some steep muddy sections in the woods. We are completely muddy and wet when we get back to the bottom but we all have big grins on our mud speckled faces. We then take another gondola up to the Glacier 3000 - so called because it rests at 3000 metres. Unfortunately the clouds close in so much we can't even see the cables the car is riding on. It is cold and dark and dreary but a great lunch at the top has us wanting to return when the weather is better.

The town of Villars seems huge after the small villages we have been in the last few nights. It is really not a big town but it is far larger than anywhere we have been since we left Lausanne. In an arc above the village rise ski slopes and high above the village centre is perched a Golf Course. We wander along a hiking route far from the town centre after a lunch at a delightful family restaurant tucked away at the end of a road. Once again the weather is not great but the promise for the next day is sunny skies.

Our last day in Switzerland dawns bright and sunny. On this day we pack in more activity than in the previous three. We hike around a farm high in the mountains for breakfast, the highlight of the week - we paraglide from high above the town and ride the winds into the centre of town! After slowly floating to earth we return to Diablerets and once again take the gondola into the clouds to see the Glacier 3000. This time as we get higher the gondola breaks through the thin cloud cover and we are faced with an incredible view of peaks stretching off in all directions. As we

disembark from the gondola we see right in front of us on the snowy slopes a roller coaster. Riding down this huge rollercoaster side with the wind in our hair and sunlight sparkling off the snow all around we laugh out loud at the sheer beauty of the place. On the glacier below us we can see small figures of hikers walking or snowshoeing on the trails.

We are very reluctant to leave but after a short time we must go or risk missing the train back to Geneva to catch our flight. A small two car train takes us on a fairytale journey down from the mountains and we slowly make our way back into the mad rush of the outside world. We change trains in Aigle leaving the slow two car train for a fast train to Geneva. As the train zips along the shore of the lake we look back at the mountains behind us. The sunlight sparkling on the water reminds us of the sun sparkling on the Glacier earlier in the day and a hawk hovering high above a vineyard reminds me of paragliding over Villars. Just as the hawk migrates south and returns with the seasons we too shall return to the Alps above Lake Geneva.



Lake Lemman (Geneva)

For more information:

- www.region-du-lemman.ch
- www.leysin.ch
- www.villars.ch
- www.villarsgryon.ch
- www.chateau-doex.ch
- www.dimension-3.ch
- www.mountain-evasion.ch
- www.riviere-aventure.ch



Dirt Monster bike though the fields