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SWITZERLAND



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Happy trails for all

Signposts take walkers everywhere and deter other modes of transport

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CHUR — It was a typical outing on a pleasant Sunday afternoon in Chur, the oldest city in Switzerland and the capital of its largest canton, Graubünden. Friends and I took a cable car and gondola up Brambrüesch Mountain and then hiked across a hillside for several hours, following meandering routes through fields of heidelberries and along ridges with sweeping views of the Alps. The clinking of cowbells rang out across the valley and the spicy scent of alpine herbs hung in the air.

After a refreshing drink in a mountain hamlet accessible only by foot or chairlift, we ended the excursion with a high-speed toboggan run (on a metal track) down to a village in the valley and caught a public bus back to the city, a total loop of about 15 miles.

Not every hike ends with a 1.9-mile plunge down a mountain on what is considered the world's longest toboggan run, where you drop 1,500 feet in just seven to 10 minutes. One of the most extensive signposted trail networks in the world made it possible for us to do it without getting lost.

The Switzerland Mobility program, launched last year, has incorporated standardized, easy-to-read signposts throughout the country

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Hiking to the Heidelberger Hütte near the Swiss-Austrian border.

Swiss point the way to go on foot, not fuel

► TRAILS

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for local, regional, and national routes. The network covers more than 12,000 miles of land and water routes: 3,914 miles of trails for hikers; 5,281 miles for road bikers; 2,050 miles for mountain bikers; 683.5 miles for inline skaters; and 250 miles for canoeists. Routes are typically numbered and color-coded based on the sport — green for hiking, red for mountain biking, and so on — with the exception of some local routes that use red-and-white striped markers.

“We developed Switzerland-Mobility for three reasons,” Fredi von Gunten, chief executive officer of the organization, explained. “To advance the idea of human-powered mobility as an important contribution to [people’s] health, to show people the most beautiful places in Switzerland without motorized vehicles, and, last but not least, to protect the environment.”

These trails are linked to thousands of miles of public transportation options, from electric trains to fuel-efficient buses and other green alternatives. All of these routes existed, but outdoors enthusiasts had to consult many guidebooks, websites, or visitors bureaus to piece together route information. Now, information for all of the network’s routes is posted on SwitzerlandMobility’s new website, SwitzerlandMobility.ch. Choose your sport and you can look up routes in any of the country’s 26 cantons, selecting day or multi-day trips and picking your preferred conditions (easy, medium, difficult, or “unimportant”).

For each route, you typically will find a trail description and difficulty rating, a printable topographic map, a timetable for local transportation options, lodging recommendations, signpost information, notable facts about towns or sites along the route, and even a trail profile, which shows elevation loss and gain over the miles. Bike routes include information on rentals and shops, and canoe routes list local canoe clubs and rental information, if available.

Or, you can use an interactive map that gives a big-picture, at-a-glance look at the trails nationwide, with short route descriptions and overviews. This helped me narrow the field and choose a particular region to visit.

I headed for Chur (pronounced coor), a city I had



PHOTO BY KARI BODNARCHUK/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Hikers ascend from the village of Samnaun, and may meet a stranger or three on their way south to the village of Griosch, in that part of Switzerland bordered by Austria and Italy.

passed through on previous visits but had never explored. It serves as the ideal base camp, sitting at the crossroads of several big motorways and train junctions, and offering easy access to world-renowned ski and outdoor havens like Davos, St. Moritz, and Klosters. The stunning Lenzerheide Valley, where I had gone on the hiking and tobogganing loop, was just south of the city and offered miles of hiking and mountain biking trails.

My second day in Chur, two friends and I rented bikes from the train station, took a PostBus 20 minutes up the valley (virtually all buses in Switzerland have bike racks on the back), and did a 20-mile bicycle loop from the village of Valbella to the sleepy, white-washed village of Lain. En route, we pedaled on wide dirt roads along mountainsides, down paved bike paths beside Lake Heidsee, and through small villages and residential areas, following the number 602 bike route and other numbered markers along the way.

Although the routes were well marked, we had a little trouble staying on track because we didn’t understand an important trail-marker rule: If you’re following a mountain bike route, like the 602, you will not find a marker at every intersection, junction, or bend in the road. When you see a sign, you follow



it and continue in the same direction until you come upon another signpost later in the route.

Several bikers on a PostBus the next day persuaded me that navigating the bike routes wasn’t as tricky as I thought. Robert and Margaret Bauneister, in their late 50s, were biking from their home in Basel in north-central Switzerland to Venice, a journey of about 620 miles that they planned to complete in three weeks.

“The bike trails are all marked and very easy to follow,” said Robert Bauneister, who confirmed that you stick to the

same route until a sign tells you to change direction.

Thankfully, the signposting was never unclear on our next adventure which took us into the remote area of eastern Switzerland near the borders of Austria and Italy. On this two-day trip, we hiked from the village of Samnaun to an alpine hut a day’s walk away and then back down into another valley on the other side of a mountain ridge, a total of about 16 miles.

Only one road leads to Samnaun. It is narrow and often littered with pebbles and rocks,

If you go . . .

What to do

Pradaschier Rodelbahn (toboggan)

011-41-0-81-356-2207

postauto.ch (search for “Rodelkombi Pradaschier”)

The Swiss bus system offers a “Rodelkombi” ticket that includes the cable car ride, toboggan run, and PostBus ride back to Chur. Adults \$28, children \$18.

Rent A Bike

Rent-a-bike.ch (German, French) mct.sbb.ch/mct/en/reisemarkt/services/mobilitaet/mietvelo.htm (English)

Rents road, mountain, and children’s bikes at 80 train stations across the country, including Chur. Half day \$22.50, full \$30, includes helmet.

Free bike rental

In Zurich, Bern, and Geneva, you can rent a city bike (or skateboard) for free with a refundable deposit of 20 Swiss francs, or \$18 per day, 8 a.m.-9:30 p.m. year-round.

Swiss Trails

011-41-0-44-450-24-34

swisstrails.ch

Organizes personalized tours on any SwitzerlandMobility route.

Where to stay

Chasa Nova

Südstrasse 20, Samnaun-Dorf

011-41-818-618340

chasa-nova.ch (in German)

samnaun.ch (under Holiday Apartments on Accommodations page search for “Chasa Nova”)

A charming and contemporary mountain lodge a block from the main street, \$81.50.

Heidelberger Hütte

Gronda Valley

011-43-664-425-3070

heidelbergerhuetten.com/index_eng.htm

Cozy mountain hut with incredible fondue dinners. Dorm, private rooms \$14.50/\$18, room only; \$28/\$32 with breakfast, \$42-\$45 with breakfast and dinner.

Romantik Hotel Stern

Reichsgasse 11, Chur

011-41-81-258-5757

stern-chur.ch

Small, comfortable rooms; excellent restaurant; \$136-\$263, including buffet breakfast.

and it has hairpin turns and views of plunging drop-offs to the valleys below. Bus drivers-in-training on this hair-raising route must observe an experienced driver for three to six months before getting behind the wheel. When you pass through one rocky, chiseled-out tunnel en route, you understand why: The bus must come to a stop inside the tunnel and then inch its way around a 90-degree turn to make it through.

By the time you reach the tiny village of Samnaun, you feel like you have landed in another country: Residents speak a unique German dialect, there are no chain hotels, and it’s so removed from the rest of Switzerland, it’s had tax-free status since 1892. Despite its far-flung location, the area has more than 150 miles of hiking trails and 50 miles of mountain bike routes, all of which have the standardized SwitzerlandMobility markers.

For our final adventure, we followed the green number 23 markers and crossed several 8,000-foot passes, dipping briefly into Austria. The route took us through open fields with goats

and stands of larch trees and across barren scree fields on dirt-packed trails. At each trail junction and pass, we found an assortment of SwitzerlandMobility signs that kept us on track.

We spent the night at the Heidelberger Hütte, an alpine lodge that sits in a valley overshadowed by jagged ridges and 10,000-foot peaks and where the chef served a mouthwatering meat fondue.

We continued on Route 23 the next day, climbing out of the Fimbertal Valley and over a 7,800-foot pass and then dropping down into a lush green valley still being carved out by a river thousands of feet below. After a steady descent that took us through the hamlet of Griosch, we left Route 23 behind and followed local trails to our end point, a Dutch-run lodge with a welcoming cafe.

“Some more wishes you have?” the waiter said, as I took a sip of Rivella, a popular Swiss carbonated drink that’s sweet and syrupy.

“Only that I could stay here longer,” I replied.

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