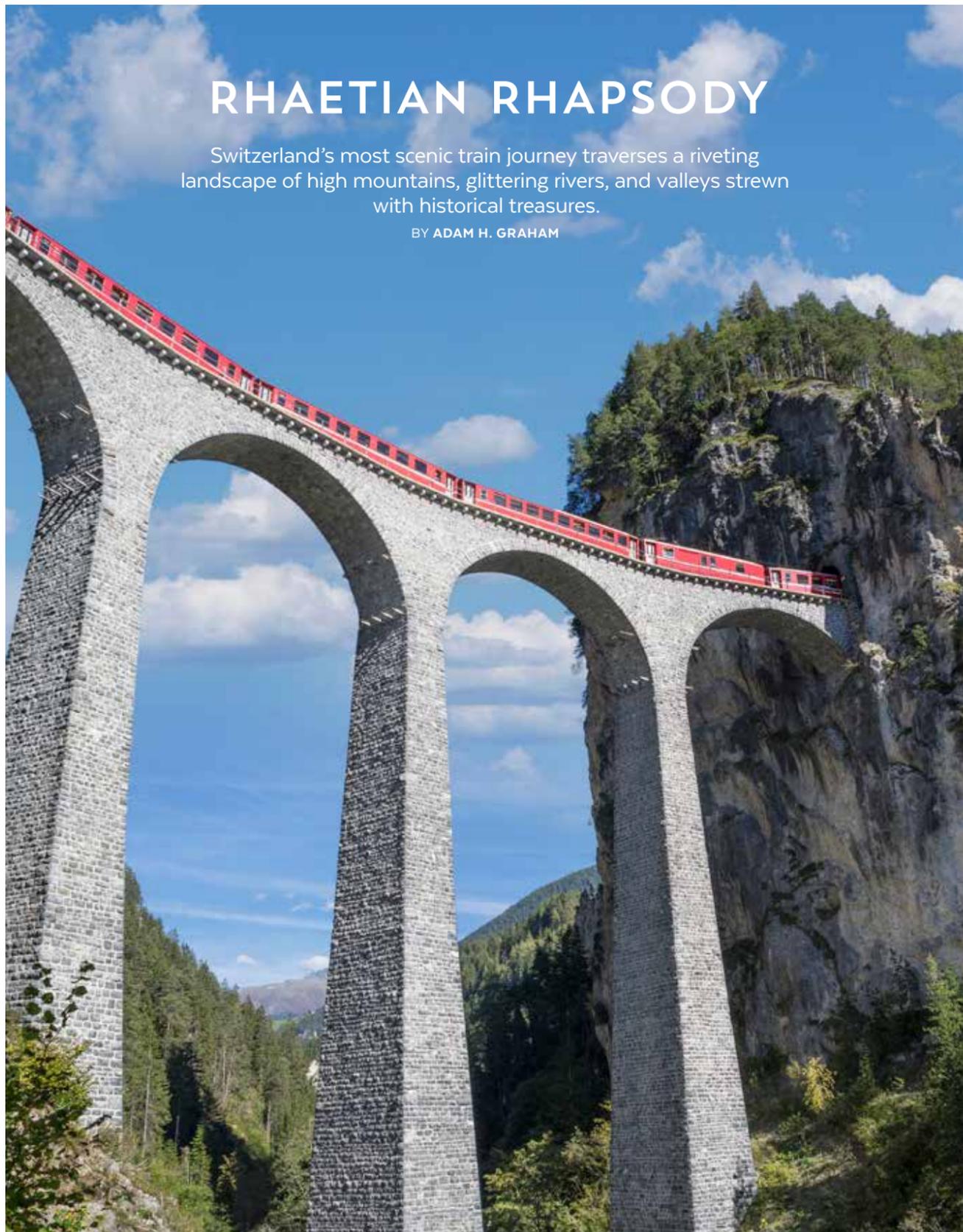# RHAETIAN RHAPSODY

Switzerland's most scenic train journey traverses a riveting landscape of high mountains, glittering rivers, and valleys strewn with historical treasures.

BY **ADAM H. GRAHAM**

Knowing what lies ahead, I ready my camera. I've ridden this railway many times since moving to Switzerland a few years ago and the thrill of the upcoming segment never gets old. After snaking around one final curve on its way to Filisur, the train leaps out over the Landwasser Viaduct, whose six 65-meter-high limestone arches span the bridge's namesake river. First-timers pressed up against the windows fixate on the unfathomably aquamarine waters below, but veterans like me keep their eyes level. The viaduct is so tightly curved that from my seat in the rear car, I can see the locomotive plunging into a rocky cliff face on the far side of the gorge, where a pitch-black tunnel barely wider than the train itself pierces the mountain. Click. The sheerness of the drop, the apple-red of the train, and the surreal turquoise water below make this a money shot that never disappoints. The whole experience lasts just 45 seconds, but it's as thrilling as any roller coaster ride.

The Landwasser Viaduct may be a one-of-a-kind marvel of engineering, but it's just one of many wonders on the Rhaetian Railway,

Above, from left: Like many villages in the Lower Engadine valley, Ardez boasts grand old houses decorated with *sgraffito,* a style of drawing in plaster that dates from the Renaissance; a train passing Alp Grüm, the last station on the line in the Romansh-speaking part of Switzerland before the railway descends to Val Poschiavo. Opposite: The dramatic Landwasser Viaduct.

a scenic 240-kilometer passenger route that stretches from Thusis in the easternmost Swiss canton of Graubünden to Tirano, Italy. Cutting through the Rhaetian Alps, it stops in St. Moritz and several lesser-known villages of Switzerland's Engadin Valley, known for its posh ski areas and the sparkling natural light called "diamond dust" beloved by writers and musicians from Rainer Maria Rilke to Friedrich Nietzsche to Richard Strauss. If that weren't enough, the Rhaetian is one of only three railways inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List (the others are in Austria and India) for its ingenious late-19th-century engineering and routing.

From end to end, the Rhaetian takes in 84 tunnels and 383 spectacular bridges that cross a lacework of glittering rivers and glaciers. It also passes Roman-era churches, Celtic archeological sites, therapeutic springs, and several mountaintop castles, some crumbling, others renovated with a precision that's inherently Swiss. Riding these rails is not just a mode of transit, it's a privilege.

Make no mistake, the Rhaetian is no tourist line, though sightseeing trains like the Glacier

Passing through Ardez.

Express and the Bernina Express run along segments of the same track. It's a regular passenger service connecting the remote communities of Graübunden. The benefit of this is that travelers can hop on and off hourly trains at all sorts of interesting stops along the way. You can even upgrade, as I do, to a panoramic car for an additional five Swiss francs. It's worth every *rappen*.

Coming from the direction of Zurich, the railway's first segment (which includes the Landwasser Viaduct) is a scenic two-hour stretch from Thusis to Silvaplana. It's one of my favorite parts of the route. The twists and turns offer wide-open vistas where waterfalls cascade beside lonely, high-perched castles, each gliding by your window as if they were specifically placed there by Swiss Tourism for the sole pleasure of passengers. From my seat, I count at least five hilltop fortresses. These include the 12th-century Schloss Baldenstein, used to ward off Baron von Rhäzüns and the Habsburgs, and the 10th-century Schloss Ortenstein, home to the noble Werdenbergs, pillaged by insurgent peasants in 1452, and instrumental in the founding of the Swabian League.

The Details
Whether you plan to ride the length of the **Rhaetian Railway** (*rhb.ch*) or make your way by public transport to other parts of Switzerland, the Swiss Travel Pass (available online at *myswitzerland .com*) is a terrific deal. Starting at CHF 216 (about US$214) per adult for a three-day first-class ticket, the pass not only gets you unlimited trips on the Swiss Travel System's 29,000-kilometer network of train, bus, and boat routes, but also complimentary admission to hundreds of Swiss museums as well as free travel on premium panorama trains like the Glacier Express.

Though it's possible to ride the entire length of the railway in a day, I'm taking my time on this trip. So when we roll into Samedan in the Upper Engadin, I disembark for the 10-minute walk to the village's tiny 12th-century plaza and one of my favorite thermal baths, the Mineralbad & Spa, designed in 2010 by husband-and-wife architects Quintus Miller and Paola Maranta. Inside, a warren of watery caverns and tiled tunnels flicker with light while an oversize silver tea kettle rattles in a relaxation room paneled with fragrant Swiss pine. Eventually I work my way up to the spa's open-air rooftop bath. It's nestled discreetly under the clock tower of the 400-year-old Reformed Church, so close that the glockenspiel bells ripple the water when they chime. While I soak in the steamy 38°C pool, glints of sunlight dance on the spine of the Rhaetian Alps.

I catch the next train two hours later and push on to Silvaplana, 11 kilometers down the track. Here, I'll be spending the night at the Nira Alpina, a glass-and-timber ski lodge overlooking a turquoise lake. Silvaplana may not be as ritzy as St. Moritz, two stops away, but it is

charming, and the Nira Alpina's kitchen turns out the best *gipfeli* (croissants) and buttery *zopf* bread in the canton. That said, St. Moritz is certainly worth a look for its spectacle of fur-booted, Moncler-clad visitors and vaunted hotels so elite they border on obnoxious.

From here, the railway splits. I'm first headed for the rugged and low-key Lower Engadin valley, home to Switzerland's Romansh-speaking communities. The train slips past sheep- and cow-dotted meadows crisscrossed by stone walls. Churches and homes are painted with colorful murals in a regional style called *sgraffito* that's found across Switzerland, but is especially noticeable here. Like the language itself, it's a tradition that stretches back to Roman times. I leave the train at the tranquil, mountain-flanked village of Zuoz for an hour-long walk around its historical sites—among them, the medieval San Luzum church, with stained-glass windows designed by Swiss neo-impressionist painter Augusto Giacometti—before continuing to Zernez. There, I hop on a bus that takes me past the wilds of Swiss National Park,

Below: The Langwieser Viaduct provides another spectacular river crossing on the way to Davos; completed in 1914, this was the world's first railway bridge to be built from reinforced concrete.

a 17,000-hectare preserve (the country's oldest and largest) that harbors ibexes, chamois, marmots, and other Alpine wildlife. The road eventually takes me to the scenic Ofenpass, used as a byway for thousands of years before Roman times and named after the Iron Age ovens excavated nearby. Then it's on to the halcyon Müstair Valley, which offers views of Italy, France, and Austria. The late-afternoon light is so fragile it feels as if it could shatter. Müstair's Benedictine Convent of St. John was founded in the eighth century when Charlemagne ruled the region. Witnessing its vaulted roof and delicately frescoed apses glow in such brilliance would no doubt have converted even the most wicked.

The least-traveled segment of the Rhaetian is the 60-kilometer Bernina line from St. Mortiz to Tirano, which takes two and a half hours to travel. As the train leaves St. Moritz, it chugs up through fragrant wooded valleys before cresting at the Bernina Pass and the ice-blue, glacier-choked Lago Bianco. Here, the altitude reaches 2,250 meters, making it one of Europe's highest train crossings. On the descent toward the Italian side, at Brusio, the track curls around a nine-arched spiral viaduct, forcing the train to coil like a snake.

Farther down is the sun-kissed Val Poschiavo, still in Switzerland but Italian-speaking and positively Italian in spirit. The village of Poschiavo has cobbled streets, open piazzas, and corridors so true to Renaissance style that I expect to see Romeo and Juliet milling about. It's also a great place to sample Swiss-Italian cuisine, and local shops are stocked with regional specialties like polenta and anise-flavored rye bread. One of the train's last stops in Switzerland brings me to Le Prese, a grand old inn perched on the scenic shores of Lago di Poschiavo. I disembark for a lunch of *pizzoccheri* (buckwheat pasta), farm-fresh burrata with tomato tartare, and beef simmered in local truffles before walking around the manicured property and soaking up the Alpine peacefulness.

But crossing the border into Italy is the ultimate pilgrimage, and I hop aboard the next train a few hours later. One minute I'm surrounded by Switzerland's dark green valleys and clock-watching train conductors, and the next there are palm trees and platforms filled with gesticulating passengers and insouciant sash-wearing *polizia*. It's as if I'd passed through a time-and-space portal and stumbled into a Fellini film. There couldn't possibly be two more contrasting neighbors on this planet, separated only by a five-kilometer threshold of granite, and of course, the coolest train ride in the world. ◉

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