

WHERE ANGELS DARE

The name means Angel Mountain, after a heavenly choir heard among its lofty peaks by Benedictine monks. Can Engelberg in Switzerland live up to such a glorified reputation?

Words Catherine Weakley Photography Jon Wyatt



Standing in the circular cable car, as close to the window as possible, we watch the mountains slowly spinning. Not a hangover this time, but the world's first rotating cable car – in Engelberg, Switzerland. As I grab my skis to prevent them falling over (it's only the floor that moves, although sometimes it's hard to be sure) the nose of a camera pokes under my armpit, attached to a smartly be-suited arm and followed by a smoothly coiffed head. There are as many people in

casual clothes as in skiwear crammed into the lift, all heading for the 3028m Klein Titlis mountain. News of the views from here, the toppermost of Engelberg's slopes, has clearly travelled far, since the cable car is decorated with welcome signs for nationalities from as far afield as India and Japan.

But fantastic as the views are, with rows of dramatic peaks stretching into the distance, and including a Buddha shaped rock to appeal to for good karma, we resist loitering too long. Instead we want to worship the glittering expanses



A funny turn?

of fresh white gold that surround us on this April morning. Although I don't escape before a stylishly turned out sightseer requests a photo with me – this strange creature in Gore-Tex and helmet.

There are just a few short marked red runs in this sector of Engelberg, served by a chair and drag-lift. An unpisted run leads to the mid mountain focal point of Stand, or you can rotate your way back down in the cable car. However most people's mission is not the pistes, but the fluff that lies between and beyond, best explored with a guide – ours is Markus



Christen from local adventure specialists Outventure. Dropping away from the Titlis day-trippers, we point skis and boards on to the Steinberg glacier, sticking close to a severe rock face to maximise the visibility that is receding into cloud. Despite the popularity of the off-piste routes, Markus finds chopped soft pillows that fluff up around us, followed by clean sweeps of fresh powder to slash through. Blocks of blue glacial ice show the way as we pick through narrow gullies until the April sun burns through near the lower station

of Trubsee, just as the snow starts to feel heavy – time to head up again.

The Steinberg gives up more treasure – Markus spies an untracked spot as we travel up to Titlis and we work our way towards it. The runs on the glacier have local names which aren't marked on the map – Near the Mountain, Never Sun. The place we're aiming for is in the middle – perhaps that's its name. The names make these routes sound secret, and it can take a guide's skill to find them. Moving away from a tracked area to find our private stash, we sink deep >>>



Karma chameleon adapts to his new environment

Directions to the restaurant became a little cloudy



Cat's alter ego – the incredible snow monster

into powder that's still light, at high enough altitude to have kept its freshness, and snow billows out behind us like vapour trails as we plunge back to Trubsee.

Engelberg is stacked with such runs, its relatively small number of pistes hiding a huge acreage of off piste. Experts can have the time of their lives exploring it – and leave the pistes quiet for those who want to use them. As well as those on Titlis, there is sunny Bruni, a separate area of slopes on the other side of town with improved cable

car access this season, and Jochstock, linked to Titlis by a two-way lift. Three chairs on Jochstock, including a fast six-seater, access a small network of reds and blues (the quiet blues to Engstlenalp are particularly enjoyable for their views and solitude), and there's a run all the way to the valley floor – from Titlis you ride a gondola down. All over the resort there's a variety of places to rest up and enjoy the views – the Jochpass restaurant at Jochstock includes a friendly and bright self-service place, the new chalet-style restaurant at Stand



FAT SKIS AND STRONG LEGS ARE A MUST TO RIDE THIS RUN, OVER 1000m OF VERTICAL IN ONE SHOT

serves up splendid rösti, and the nearby igloo village makes a novel pitstop. You can spend a night wrapped up in furs within its frosty confines too.

Engelberg is little known on the UK market and, apart from rumours of its off-piste treasures, the thing that drew us there was a new chalet run by two British ex lawyers – the only such accommodation in Engelberg. Chalet Espen is a former Swiss Gasthaus beautifully restored by its hosts, and signs of its history are everywhere – from the old photos to the low kitchen beam

with ancient lettering that says nothing more romantic than “mind your head”. Simon and Catriona serve up delicious meals and are always ready to help, whether it be a lift to the railway station or the route to the bars and restaurants.

Engelberg is not a large resort, but has enough nightlife to keep us entertained, from the Chalet bar at the lift base through excellent pizza at the Alpenclub to the dance floors of the Yucatan and Spindle. There’s also the huge 12th century Benedictine monastery and church to check out, whose early



Chalet Espen's Simon in Ramsay mode

inhabitants gave the resort its name after the heavenly voices who inspired them to build it.

Markus saves the most famous powder run till last, the Laub, an uncommonly wide powder swath cutting down at a rewardingly steady pitch from just below Stand to the Ritz restaurant near the Titlis base. We drop in and Markus takes us further and further left until we’re ploughing our own furrows, no fellow travellers in sight. Fat skis and strong legs are a must to ride >>>

WIDE GRINS ARE EVIDENCE OF THE MIRACULOUS RUN WE'VE JUST HAD



Fast facts
Engelberg
Resort 1050m
Slopes 1050m to 3028m
Lifts 25
Pistes 82km,
28% blue, 56% red,
16% black
Snowmaking 50%
Tourist office
0041 41 639 7777
www.engelberg.ch

this run, over 1000m vertical, in one shot. We give it a go but lactic acid gets the better of me – and this isn't even the longest of Engelberg's off-piste runs.

Towards the base the time of year makes itself known with dense watery sludge. Arms stretched out, we all but hydroplane over it, our wide grins evidence of the miraculous run we've just had. It being late in the season, the Ritz is closed, and the one franc bus back to the cable car base isn't running, so it's a 10-minute walk to the lift. After a run like that, however, tired as my legs are,

it feels as if the angels of Engelberg are helping me float along the path.

DETAILS, DETAILS

Chalet Espen (0041 41 637 2220; www.chalet-espen.co.uk) sleeps up to 14 in ensuite rooms. Prices start at £345 a head for a week based on two sharing, chalet board. A day's guiding with Outventure (0041 41 611 1441; www.outventure.ch) starts at 640 Swiss francs for four people.

Swiss (0845 601 0956; www.swiss.com) runs daily flights to Zurich from £69 return including taxes. Tickets for the two and a half hour train journey to Engelberg are available to buy from Switzerland Travel Centre (00800 100 200 30; www.MySwitzerland.com/rail) from £49 return.



Do you want ice with that?