

by Greg "Pepe" Giese

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Tour de Alps 2006

Swiss and Rhone Alps Riffelalp Resort Review

**Zurich, Zermatt, Lauterbrunnen and Geneva, Switzerland
Chamonix, Mt. Blanc, France**

This will be the second year that I have stayed and reviewed the Riffelalp Resort for my website - www.cruisingreview.com. We visit during September, to avoid the summer crowds, and enjoy the alpine scenery and hiking.

The Riffelalp Resort is my favorite resort in Switzerland. It is both an excellent destination in itself, as well as perfect pre or post-cruise accommodation.

Located above Zermatt on the Gornergrat, the Riffelalp has a commanding view of the Matterhorn. On some nights, when the Moon is full and the clouds are low, Zermatt is obscured by the clouds while the resort is above them. The view of the Matterhorn at sunrise, sunset and during a full moon is wonderful.

To get to the Riffelalp, you start at the Gornergrat Bahn (cogwheel train) which takes you up a beautiful 15 minute ride from Zermatt. Along the way you pass a waterfall and great views of Zermatt below. At the Riffelalp station, you board a small electric train which takes you through the woods to the resort, which is perched on the middle alps of the Gornergrat, with a fantastic view of the Matterhorn, in all her majesty.

Entering the resort, you are greeted by a very warm staff at the front desk. The concierge is especially helpful in planning daily activities or dining in and around Zermatt.

The rooms are luxurious - and in traditional Swiss style, but with all modern and up-to-date amenities. The room we stayed in had a nice common porch with deck lounges so you could sit out and gaze at the Matterhorn. The main bath has a shower, Jacuzzi and bidet, while a separate room contains a sink and toilet.

The beds all have feather pillows and duvets (one thick comforter). I'm not a big fan of either. The art of the pillow now provides a much more comfortable sleep with synthetic filling. There are not sheets on European beds, only a duvet. This is basically a very hot comforter. So either you too hot, or too cold (because you have to take it off). The layer system of sheets and blankets work much better. Some people like duvets - I do not.

The room has a master control remote for the TV, sound system and DVD player (speakers are in the main bathroom as well so you can listen while you're in the Jacuzzi). It also has a bedside remote that automatically closes the curtains - perfect if you want to open the curtains in the middle of the night from bed to view the Matterhorn soaked in the Moonlight. The room has a minibar (small fridge with small bottles of liquor - not inclusive - so you're charged for what you drink). We used the mini-fridge for cheese and soda we bought at the local Coop (store) in town.

Internet: there are three Macintosh computers with free internet access just down the main hall from the lobby. Use these computers to check train times, and the latest mountain peak webcams if you're hiking to check the weather.

Breakfast is included with the room - and it has to be the biggest, most wonderful experience you'll have in Europe. Most European breakfasts consist of a few pastries, cereal and hot chocolate or coffee. This is a buffet that will keep you going all day - including a huge assortment of baked goods, fruits and a a-la-minute cook that will prepare your favorite omelet.

There are a multitude of restaurants at the Riffelalp:

Alexandre restaurant: this is main restaurant where breakfast is served in the morning, and more fancy fare in the evening. People tend to dress-up more for this restaurant.

Walliser Keller restaurant: The downstairs restaurant with a salad bar, wood fire cooked meats, a raclette machine and that cozy atmosphere found in a country kitchen. This is my favorite - I recommend eating here every night. Dress is casual. The cook prepares your meal right at the wood-fired grill. Probably one of the best dinner selections in Switzerland in terms of presentation, flavor, and local specialties.

La Terrasse du Pavillon: outside dining with a great view of the Matterhorn, open in good weather for lunch and afternoon dining.

The Lodge: this is the main bar, where lunch sometimes is served. Piano music, Cuban cigars, and a nice fireplace. I highly recommend trying Absinthe - a local (to Europe) liquor. I don't recommend buying any type of shot here. One night I was buying a few rounds for our group, and because the register doesn't have keys for specialty shots, each shot was more in price than a regular drink - since they had to charge a drink for each liquor that was in the shot.

The Riffelalp has one of the best spas in Switzerland. Not only does it have a beautiful indoor pool with fireplace, but it has a large glass wall which extends to the outside huge Jacuzzi. From the outside Jacuzzi, you can watch the Sun set behind the Matterhorn, and let your body soak in the warm water regardless of the outside temperature. Perfect after a long day of alpine hiking. They also offer massages, and have a variety of Spa amenities such as a steam room, sauna, etc.

Altitude: This resort is at just over 7,000 feet. It may take you a few nights to acclimate from the jetlag, and if you're coming in from a lower altitude.

Things to do: The Riffelalp is located midway up the Gornergrat. The cogwheel can take you to the top for a magnificent view of the Matterhorn, and surrounding peaks and glaciers. There are a variety of trails to and from the resort. I highly recommend buying trekking poles (down in Zermatt at the local sports store along with a day pack. In the daypack, you should bring water, a raincoat, gloves and a hat. Weather can change quickly in the alps, so be prepared and you'll never be caught off-guard. In September we've had snow showers, rain, sleet and temperatures from 32 degrees F to 75 degrees F.

Peak Pass: The best thing to do if you plan on visiting the local peaks is to acquire a lift pass, which gives you access to all the cogwheel, funiculars, and cable car lifts in and around Zermatt. Specifically, you can use the pass to go up to the Rothorn, Klein Matterhorn, and Gornergrat. There are lots of trails that start and finish from all these routes. Our favorite way to hike in the region is to take the cogwheel or cable car part way or all the way to the top of a peak, then hike down. This is not possible at the Klein Matterhorn, which is at 12,800 feet, but you can take trails from the mid-station to Zermatt below. The hike from the peak at Gornergrat to the Riffelalp is about three hours. The hike from the Riffelalp around the valley to mid-Rothorn is also about 3 hours, and you can take the funicular down from Rothorn paradise into Zermatt. Hiking is a great way to work off those fantastic raclette and dinners at the Riffelalp.

In all, the Riffelalp is my favorite destination in Switzerland. The staff is wonderful, the service is great, the food is fantastic and the views are some of the best in the world. If you want to experience the majesty of the Matterhorn in style, then I highly recommend the Riffelalp for at least a three day stay, if not longer.

Since Europe is very accessible - any Swiss or French Alps region is perfect for a pre or post-cruise.

Fair winds, and calm seas...

Greg "Pepe" Giese

Note:

A full review, including thousands of photos and video clips are available at -

<http://www.cruisingreview.com>

