Hiking Swiss Glaciers near St. Moritz
Hiking Swiss Glaciers at St. Moritz – Images by Lee Foster

by Lee Foster

The thrill of hiking across permanent Swiss glaciers can be experienced near St. Moritz, but only travelers in superb physical condition should consider it.

Managed by expert mountain guides, the hike is known as the Glacier Hike Diavolezza Morteratsch. The trek includes a walk across both the Pers and Morteratsch Glaciers.

Hikers first transport themselves by train to Bernina-Diavolezza and then via gondola ride up to 9,827 feet, across from Piz Bernina, the tallest mountain to be found in this Graubunden region of Switzerland. A hiker at the start of the venture
enjoys a close-up look at the 13,284-foot-high summit of Piz Bernina, whose valleys below are filled with glacial ice.

The intensive 7-1/2-hour hike covers eight miles of steep up-and-down terrain with a 4,000-foot vertical drop.

(If the idea of such a hike is daunting, a traveler wanting to enjoy the scenery can take the gondola to the top of Diavoleeza and enjoy the views and a beer at the outdoor restaurant. This option, rather than the hike itself, should be considered. Similarly, one can walk on level ground at the end of the hike from the Morteratsch Hotel up the trail to the Morteratsch Glacier, kick the ice, and imagine the more strenuous hike.)

First, hikers rapidly descend a rock-strewn hillside and then cross the Pers Glacier. Following another sharp uphill and then downhill rocky scramble, a hiker sees the Morteratsch Glacier. The hike then proceeds two miles down the Morteratsch Glacier to its boulder-studded terminus.

Views of the mountain peaks, including several peaks adjacent to Piz Bernina, and a close-up look at the crevasses, ice falls, and moraines on the glaciers are highlights of the trip.

The glaciers are moving forward about 65 feet a year. Between 1550 and 1850, these glaciers gradually advanced, proceeding toward the villages in the valleys below. The prayers of the local villagers were enlisted to encourage the glaciers to stop. Starting in 1850, the glaciers began to retreat.

The guide for our group of 30 hikers was 71-year-old Paul Nigg, who has guided hikes here for 46 years and has the physique of an 18-year-old.

Nigg was a philosopher of the mountains as well as a careful adviser of every hiker. He assisted each hiker in the decision about whether to start the ordeal and, once committed, he showed how to walk over the stone and ice efficiently.

“Find yourself in the mountains,” exclaimed Nigg. “Listen to the silence.”

“Mountains bring out the joy of being, just to be here, so surrounded by nature,” he
added. “In the mountains you are not distracted. You are surrounded by nature only.”

The Swiss Glaciers near St. Moritz, Switzerland

“Nature in the mountains is a wise therapy,” he expounded. “No two steps in the mountains are ever the same. In the Swiss mountains you can hike anywhere, you are free to go as you wish.”

The Swiss mountains are owned by the local village rather than by private holdings, so there are few issues of trespassing on private land.

Nigg volunteered to yodel, suggesting that such vocal outbursts were an expression of the joy of being alive in the mountains. He liked to throw out his chest, cast back his shoulders, and let out a yodel.

Nigg also instructed all hikers carefully in the fine points of rock and ice scrambling. For example, going uphill or downhill over rock with feet pointed sideways is much more restful than pointing feet straight ahead. He urged hikers to bend their knees, sway their bodies from side to side, and shuttle down the steep rock faces.

As mentioned, guide Nigg assessed each hiker at the start and required that several turn back, which was wise. A quarter mile into the hike he made a final plea to
certain individuals whom he felt could not endure the rigors of this adventure. A prospective hiker must be capable of 7-1/2 hours of intense hiking, at an altitude of 6,000-9,000 feet, with steep ascents and descents over ice and rock. Good hiking boots are required and crampons for the ice portion are helpful.

Once a hiker commits to this test and is well into the adventure, there is no turning back. If exhaustion, a knee problem, or a twisted ankle force a hiker to stop, there is no way to get out except by expensive ($3,000) emergency-rescue helicopter. Knees, especially, must be in excellent shape to complete the hike satisfactorily because of the steep ascents and descents.

A hiker experiencing extreme physical discomfort on this strenuous outing might be inclined to dwell on the legend of Diavolezza, who is portrayed as an attractive female devil. It is said that Diavolezza, protected by the deer-like ibex, would lure young hunters into the Swiss mountains, where they met an unfortunate fate. Some hikers may feel they have experienced a similar intoxication when viewing Piz Bernina.

For the hiker who can endure the physical stress of the trip, the rewards are numerous.

One learns that glaciers are not solid blocks of ice, but instead are composed of tiny crystals that can slide past each other as rivers of ice.

The views of the glaciers close up show the brutal force that frozen water can represent, carrying huge boulders forward with ease and crushing any rocks on the bottom into “rock flour.”

A grand mountain such as Piz Bernina appears even more awesome when an observer is immediately at its base rather than viewing it from afar.

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You Go

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