

Chocolate and cheese, mountains and snow, money and men: Piste artiste

ANGEL MOUNTAIN

ADRIAN GILLAN gets dizzy 10,000 feet up in Engelberg - 'Angel Mountain' - the gay-friendly heart of the Swiss Alps.

LAST year, Switzerland became the world's first nation to hold a public referendum on same-sex partnerships. Three in five Swiss voted in favour! So you can expect the gay-friendliest of welcomes: not just in city hubs like Zurich, Geneva and Bern, but also in an extreme non-scene Great Gay Getaway like Engelberg - high up in the central Swiss Alps. Perfect for gay group jaunts, queer solo detox or remote romantic retreat.

In recent years, the town's gay population has been fair swollen come mid-January by the Gay WinterWeek, which - although it took a rest this year - is rumoured to make a return, so keep 'em peeled. And why wait 'til next year when there's snow 'til April and the coming lushness of spring?

Set amidst eternal glacier-fuelled snows, sheer rock faces, verdant Alpine meadows and lofty peaks, Engelberg is just an hours spectacular train ride from Lucerne, and easily reached from Zürich airport. Visit June-September for a summer sizzler with luscious green mountains and walking trails ablaze with riotous wild flowers; come December-April for some serious fun on the white stuff - slopes and ski instructors to suit and please all! Caution: The thin air here could make you dizzy, not least because of all the hot, hunky athletes doing high-altitude training!

'Angel Mountain' was so-named after a 12th century nobleman - doubtless aided by said thin rarefied air - apparently had a vision of angels and was inspired to found a monastery in the foothills of 10,600-foot whopper, Mount 'Titter Yee Not' Tittlis. Both ancient mountain and redeveloped Baroque **Benedictine monastery** (complete with - steady - the largest organ in Switzerland; plus an adjoining cheese and fondue factory) still dominate this 4,000-populated mile-high commune-cum-club - most recently largely sustained on a history of 19th century health spas, and 21st century skiing.

Settle into the cosy, gay-beckoning **Hotel Spannort** (Dorfstrasse 28; www.spannort.ch; Tel: +41 (0)41 637 2626) on Engelberg's main pedestrianised, boutique-lined, snow-crunching street. Soak up the mountain views from its wood-

clad, chalet-style rooms; gorge on its superb restaurant for top-notch nosh; or relax in its sauna after a hard day out on springy hills or wintry pistes.

Whatever the time of year, ascend **Tittlis** (3020m, www.tittlis.ch) via a series of gondolas, culminating in the amazing rotating cable-car that glides you through the final leg, over the glacier, to the highest point in central Switzerland! As you rise, the air clears and the temperature drops to minus 15°C; after a dash around the glacier grotto with its weird ice formations you'll be glad of a coffee liqueur in the peak café.

On the other side of Engelberg's valley, across from Tittlis and the main ski drags, gentler slopes and hikes can be found in the **Fürenalp** (1850m, www.fuerenalp.ch) and **Brunni** (1600m, www.brunni.ch). Wherever you're up, descend as darkness falls and muster to enjoy some serious spring revels or après-ski crack; and there are several buzzing gay-friendly or gay-frequented places to sample. For a gentle, stylish-yet-laidback lounge bar, be tempted by **Eden** (Bahnhofstrasse 7; Tel: +41 (0)41 639 56 39); for nice grub and retro music to please all ages, check out **CCBaR** (Dorfstrasse; Te: +41 (0)41 637 4000).

The **Yucatan** (Bahnhofplatz; Tel: +41 (0)41 637 1324; www.yucatan.ch) is the main après-ski haunt for the young - with live music, hot staff and even hotter Mexican food. And **Spindle** (Dorfstrasse 5; Tel: +41 (0)41 637 0350; www.spindle.ch) is Engelberg's one-and-only club proper, and what a one at that. The abundance of fresh Swiss hunks and cuties makes this a droolsome homo-heaven, whatever the tease. It's especially queer on Wednesdays when local hotel staff surface for half-price drinks.

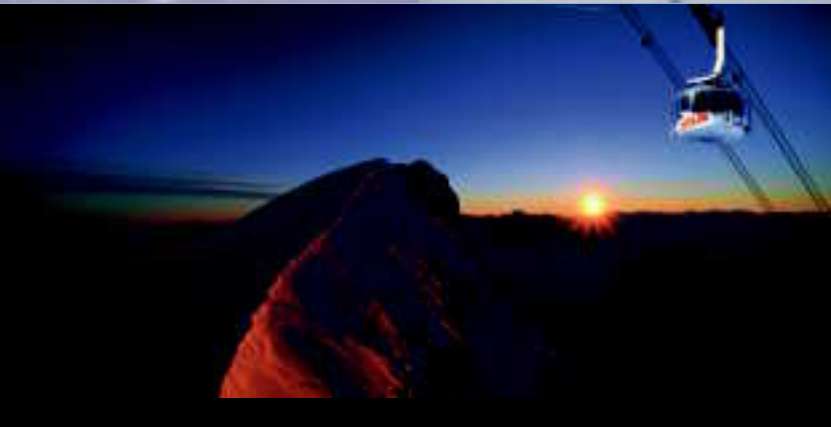
In a renovated landmark building, the bar at **Hotel Schweizerhof** (Dorfstrasse; Tel: +41 (0)41 637 1105; www.schweizerhof-engelberg.ch) is a suave and gay affair. Then dip into the hotel's fab Fondue restaurant - perfect for romantic couples keen to dunk each other's bread. Take the free old funicular, just behind Schweizerhof, up to the imposing **Hotel Terrace** (Terracestrasse 33; Tel: +41 (0)41 639 6666; www.terrace.ch) who's nightly free cabaret and theatre shows entertain and, again, tend to draw a peculiarly queer crowd.

Gay couples and gay groups, especially, will find Angel Mountain homo heaven. And anyone craving the occasional purer queer fix need only flit the short distance down-valley to Lucerne.

➤ For more on Engelberg: www.engelberg.ch

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