

Travel & Outdoors

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Never mind the skiing, this alpine haven truly comes into its own in the summer months

NAN SPOWART

Was it feeding wild marmots by hand on the high mountainside? Was it the adrenalin rush of swinging over a deep gorge on a zip wire?

Or was it the exhilaration of zooming down an 11km run on scooters with monster wheels or the rollercoaster ride on the summer toboggan run?

How could we possibly choose our favourite moment of our holiday in Saas Fee in Switzerland when it was all so incredibly memorable?

It was probably the best family holiday we have ever had, and as keen skiers it was a revelation that the Alps in summer could be so much fun.

Saas Fee, in fact, boasts a glacier and does offer summer skiing, but there were so many other activities to keep us occupied that we didn't have time to try it out.

As it is perched high up in the mountains, we assumed from the start that Saas Fee would have good views, but we were unprepared for just how spectacular they would be, or for the prettiness of the village itself.

If any place fits the traditional image of a chocolate-box Swiss village then it is car-free Saas Fee which nestles under the Dom, the highest mountain entirely in Switzerland at 4,545 metres.

This is German-speaking Switzerland, and perhaps it shows as building has

peaceful streets without having to avoid any traffic other than the occasional electric taxi or bus.

Being without a car is no problem when public transport is so good. Regular buses connect all the mountain villages, as well as the larger town of Visp

The clichés about Swiss trains running efficiently were all true

been strictly controlled so that the village has managed to hold on to its rustic character, including the old Valaisian wooden houses and grain barns that date from the 17th and 18th centuries.

The only blot is the large car park on the edge of town but it is a price worth paying for walking down the quaint,

to which we travelled by train from Geneva airport.

Taking a short walk from the airport to our train, then relaxing on a spectacular journey along Lake Geneva was a fantastic start to our holiday and it was a joy to find that the clichés about Swiss trains running punctually and efficiently

were all true.

The train arrived in time to connect with our bus which we were able to catch beside the train station, and after a short journey up the mountain to Saas Fee we were met by an electric taxi and our hotel manager Paul who happened to be from Paisley.

He escorted us to our hotel, the Chalet Hotel Ambassador, where we had extremely comfortable rooms with balconies offering breath-taking views of the mountains.

With a small pool, sauna, whirlpool bath and excellent food, the hotel was all we could have wished for.

Run by Inghams, the packages the company offers mean that holidaymakers from the UK can still visit Switzerland without having to remortgage their home to pay for the trip.

Switzerland, of course, is not part of the euro and in recent years the pound has been weak against the Swiss franc but with cooked breakfasts, afternoon tea and cake and a five-course dinner with wine, provided by the hotel, there is little expense above the actual cost of the package.

It helps that Saas Fee has recently launched a new drive to attract tourists which means that anyone staying in the resort receives a free pass for all the cablecars, gondolas, chairs and buses, as well as discounts for various activities and venues within the resort, such as the leisure centre.

This pass represents an incredible saving as, for example, travelling by cable car and then the Metro Alpin, the world's highest underground railway,

The hills are alive



A mountain path above Saas Fee

PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTIAN PERRET

On a zip wire at the Adventure Forest, main; a marmot, below



to the world's highest revolving restaurant on the Mittelallalin at 3,500 metres, would normally cost around £50 per person but with the pass this amazing journey is all free.

It also means you can take a gondola up behind Saas Fee where the marmots can be seen emerging from the burrows to forage and frolic on the grass.

Armed with carrots we were at first sceptical that we would get anywhere near them, but to our delight they practically knocked us over in their haste to get to the treats. At one stage our son, James (15), had a marmot on his lap while Jenna (17) fed a baby one, simultaneously filming the experience on her iPhone in true teenage style.

Another highlight was our mountain walks through astonishing meadows of Alpine flowers including Edelweiss and deep-blue gentians. Even our teens, for once, did not moan about walking when there was so much to see including Ibex, chamois and pine martens. Besides, there was plenty for them to do besides walking. The Feilitz toboggan run is cheap and good fun with the toboggans reaching up to 40km on steep turns and a 360 degree corkscrew.

There's an Adventure Forest too, which is like Go Ape in Britain only –

unusually for Switzerland – cheaper. The ultimate challenge on it, is the zip wire across the gorge at the entrance to the village. At 280m it is said to be the longest in Europe and it is a fantastic experience.

Also reasonably priced are the Monster Trotti – scooters with wheels as fat as those on quad bikes and which are a really fun way to descend the mountain above nearby Saas Grund. These are suitable for all ages although it is a bit disconcerting when an OAP whizzes past you on the 11km scenic trail.

More expensive, but well worth it, is the tour through the Gorge Alpine for which a guide (and some bravery) is necessary, as it involves climbs along rock faces high up the gorge and around five zip wires, one of which ends in a dark cave. Kids are in their element here and it is all very safe with harnesses and helmets provided.

For those seeking peace rather than excitement there is a wellness trail above Saas Grund, complete with wooden sunbeds where people can soak up the sun and admire the stupendous views.

Saas Fee and the surrounding villages enjoy sunny days 80 per cent of the year, and with such a climate combined with the sheer loveliness of the surroundings, it is easy to see why it has been dubbed the Pearl of the Alps.

Now we just need to go back in winter to try out the skiing.

THE FACTS

The Chalet Hotel Ambassador offers seven nights on a catered basis (breakfast, afternoon tea/coffee and cakes, five-course dinner with unlimited wines) from £699 per person, including return flights from Edinburgh to Geneva and resort transfers. For more information or to book visit www.inghams.co.uk or tel: 01483 791114; www.myswitzerland.com



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Lap up the luxury

A Borders break blends grandeur with a winning common touch

PAUL GREAVES

I am usually no great admirer of the aristocracy; pomp, circumstance and baronial splendour just don't do it for me. I suppose it's down to my grandmother's influence on my formative years. A fervent left-winger with a disdain for the Great British Establishment, I once witnessed her throw a bucket of cold water over a prospective Conservative MP before telling him never to darken her door again. It worked and he didn't, although Margaret Thatcher went on to win that 1979 General Election for the Tories, and things have never been quite the same since.

Now, as I arrived at the Roxburghe Hotel, near Kelso, owned by the Earl of Roxburghe, one of the richest men in Scotland, I wondered what my grandmother, who died ten years ago, would have made of the place and my visit. Whatever her thoughts – and she

wasn't averse to letting you know them – she would surely have agreed that the reason for my stay was a good one. My wife, recovering from surgery, needed rest and recuperation, and when the chance arose to spend a few days at a country house hotel, I took it.

Ordinarily, the Roxburghe would not be an obvious choice for me – I don't play golf, fish or shoot. For anyone who does, the hotel, with a championship course, and some of the best salmon fishing and shooting in Scotland, is heavenly, but my wife and I just wanted a few days of relaxation, good food and attentive service. We found all three in a little gem of a place.

The Roxburghe – set in 500 acres of woodland and parkland – is approached by a long, tree-lined drive, and its exterior is a beautiful combination of weathered stone and mature shrubbery. Once inside, we were greeted by the glow of a log fire, warming the chill of an autumn day, and a receptionist with a smile to match. Every wall is festooned with paintings, many of which are huge, depicting former earls from the ancestral home at nearby Floors Castle. I stopped more than once to read the paintings' inscriptions as we walked to our room, which proved a delight. Beautifully furnished, it had a four-poster bed, a log



48 HOURS IN Krakow

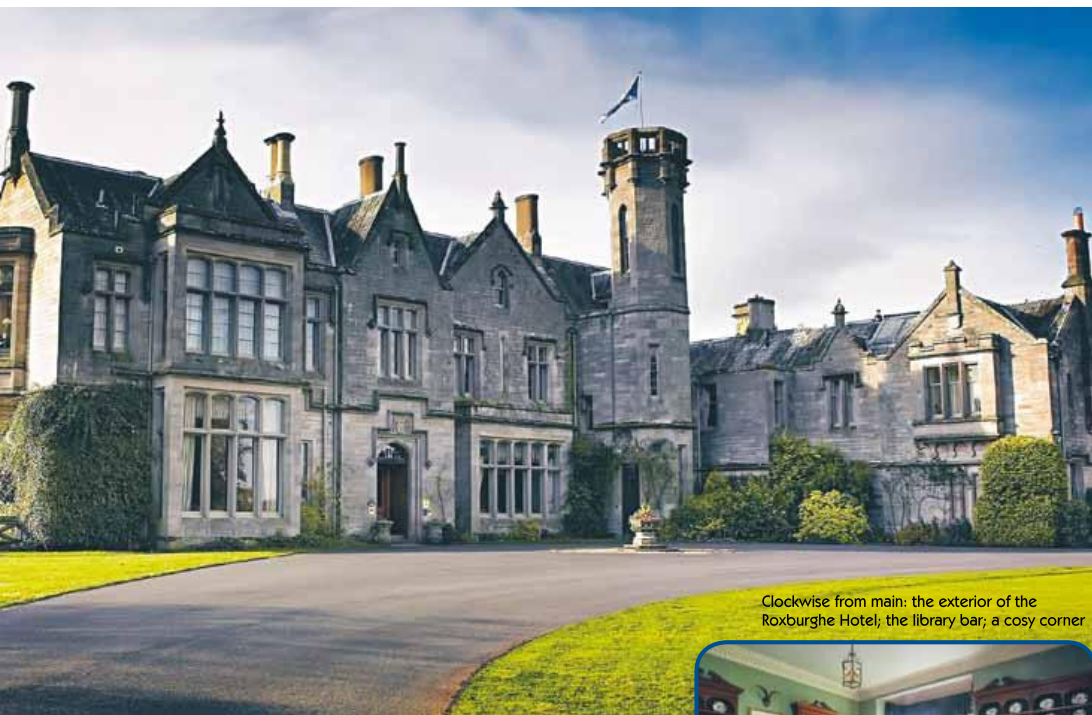
■ **Friday, 2pm** Check in and relax at the Hotel Park Inn by Radisson (rooms from £50, www.parkinn.com/hotel-krakow).

■ **6pm** Head for the cobbled expanse of the Main Market Square with its multitude of pavement cafes. A bison grass vodka (or Zubrowka) will help kick-start proceedings in traditional Polish style.

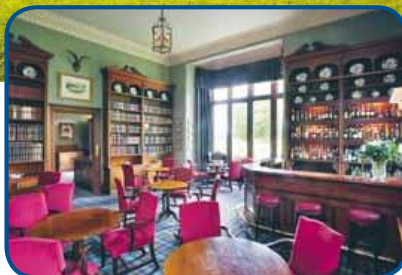
■ **8pm** Savour dinner at Kogel-Mogel (Sienna 12, tel: +48-12 426 4968). The vodka continues to flow freely at this old-world escape along with some seriously hearty traditional Polish dishes. The pierogi dumplings are a highlight.

■ **Saturday, 9am** Time to delve into





Clockwise from main: the exterior of the Roxburghe Hotel; the library bar; a cosy corner



fire stacked, ready to be lit, a balcony overlooking the hotel grounds below, and walls decorated with a floral paper that somehow brought all the elements together to produce a sense of unpretentious home comfort.

Of course, the success of any hotel stay depends to a huge degree on the quality of the food on offer, and, here, too, the Roxburghe excelled. Led by head chef Neville Merrin, the hotel uses locally produced game, beef, lamb and other foods and herbs from the Estate and the Borders to offer beautifully presented meals with real taste. My pork belly and Iberico ham was absolutely delicious, while my wife, a vegetarian, was impressed there were a number of options on the menu for her, and loved her choice, a courgette galette. The Scottish breakfasts – I seemed to order the full menu – were tasty, too.

The hotel is part of a much bigger estate, some 54,000 acres and 55 farms, and includes Floors Castle, where Prince Charles wooed Lady

Diana Spencer and Prince Andrew proposed to Sarah Ferguson. The Earl still lives at the castle and only part of it is open to the public. We visited Floors – and its adjoining garden centre – on our second day and, of the many items on display at the castle, what caught my attention, predictably, was a section on the Earl's most famous racehorse, Attraction. I've always had the occasional flutter (another thing I learned from my grandmother) and remember Attraction, bred by the Earl at Floors, winning the 1000 Guineas, the Irish 1000 Guineas and the Coronation Stakes in 2004, and helping boost my finances considerably that summer.

It soon becomes apparent that the staff have a pride in what they do and a willingness to make the best of things. On the final day, as we were about to leave, we asked at the reception for the address of the local business supplying its cheeses. Both my wife and I

had been so impressed by the range and quality on offer at dinner, that we wanted to take some home with us. As we were about to get into our car to leave, the receptionist came to the car park to tell us the cheesemaker wasn't open to the public that day. She had bothered to ring them, and her telephone call had saved us a wasted journey.

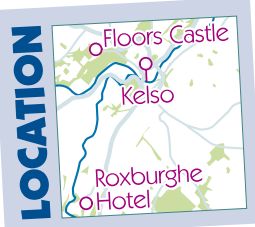
A small thing, maybe, but another example of why the Roxburghe is so special. I think even my grandmother would have been impressed.

THE FACTS

The Roxburghe Hotel, Kelso, tel: 01573 450331, www.roxburghe-hotel.com
Double rooms from £195 per night.
Floors Castle will open from 1 May-28 October, www.roxburghe.net



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LOCATION

the darker side of Krakow's history at Oskar Schindler's old factory (www.fabrykaschindlera.pl), which has been brilliantly converted into a museum that reveals some of the horrors of Nazi occupation.

■ **1pm** Enjoy a meal at Szeroka 18 (tel: +48-12 421 7920) in the old Jewish quarter of Kazimierz, a charming part of Krakow.

■ **3pm** Heading down a salt mine may not sound too tempting, but a head torch-led tour of UNESCO World Heritage listed Wieliczka (tel: +48-12 278 7302, www.wieliczka-saltmine.com), with its poignant chapels and statues, is a moving testament to man's determination to overcome tyranny.

■ **9pm** Many average restaurants crowd

the cobbled main square. One of the better options is Wesele (Main Market Square 10, tel: +48-12 422 7460), which offers the likes of roe deer carpaccio or a feast of heartier authentic meat dishes.

■ **Sunday, 10am** Take a trip to Wawel (www.wawel.krakow.pl/en), the castle complex that is the most visited attraction in Poland. Or just stroll along the riverside, beneath the castle's amazing walls.

ROBIN MCKELVIE

THE FACTS

Return flights to Krakow from Edinburgh with easyJet (www.easyjet.com) start from £163. For more information on Krakow visit www.poland.travel/en-gb



Krakow's Main Market Square; the Schindler Factory Museum, inset

PHOTOGRAPHS: ANGELUS BREWSTER

Bargain Breaks

COMPILED BY ALICE WYLLIE

SWEET HOME FROM HOME

Take a three-night break in Chicago with prices starting from £785p, a saving of up to £148pp. This includes accommodation at the three-star The Avenue Chicago on a room-only basis and return flights from London departing on 20 May. Call 0834 557 3870 or visit www.virginholidays.co.uk



COSTA EFFECTIVE

Prices for seven nights in Costa Dorada start from £338pp. This includes accommodation at the Monteverde Villa in Javea, which sleeps four, and return flights from Glasgow departing on 13 April. Call 0844 412 5970 or visit www.thomascook.com

COTSWOLD CREAM

The Kings Hotel in the picturesque town of Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds is offering savings and a complimentary room upgrade until the end of April. The 18th-century townhouse is charging £109 per night midweek and £129 at weekends for two people in an upgraded room with a two-course dinner and full English breakfast included. Call 01386 840256 or visit www.kingscampden.co.uk