

In need of a stress-free break, **Isabel Conway** heads to the ultimate Swiss resort of Verbier

On your Hike

WHO needs snow? Looking out over one of Europe's famous ski areas – the 4 Valleys in Switzerland's renowned Valais region – from my sun-dappled mountain-top perch, picking up a nice tan above Switzerland's ritzy Verbier, it's easy to ask yourself that leading question. All the things we love about skiing – minus the toe-numbing cold, sky-high seasonal prices and torture of clomping about in cement blocks posing as ski boots – seems to be here already.

I have come to Switzerland to enjoy some 'chill' time. From mountainside yoga to e-biking – the latest craze for all in search of a helping hand up those formidable hills – and gently hiking through pastures and forests with a guide to forage for delicious wild plants, the aim is to take a few days out to relax and recharge the batteries. Returning home rejuvenated and not in need of another holiday, the complaint of many a hard-partying holidaymaker, is the end game.

Here, surrounded by a spectacular Toblerone-esque array of mountains, it's time for the ultimate 'chill' while enjoying Switzerland's remarkably warm mid-July weather.

Our Manchester-born yoga teacher, Kirstin Robertson, (www.wholeycow.ch), explains that it's the perfect opportunity to "leave all your worries below down there in the valley and connect with the elements up here". Her voice is soft and calming, and we are practicing some mindfulness and breathing exercises, deeply inhaling the pristine Alpine air.

"Feel yourselves grounded in these mountains. Be aware of the

sun, the cool air, our bodies, our connection to the ground and our inner selves," Kirstin urges, after we've spread our yoga mats on a wooden platform at Savoleyres, overlooking Verbier's 4 Valleys.

The technique used by Kirstin is called Vinyasa Yoga – and with the region's highest peak of Mont Fort looming in front of us, my fears of impossible contortions, strained muscles and zero benefit are unfounded. Instead we are introduced to a gentle, relaxing session that leaves us all blissfully stretched and rejuvenated after a couple of days of hiking and e-biking.

Back in Verbier, and nearby Val de Bagnes and La Tzoumaz, the pleasure of mountain biking turns out to be no adrenaline-fuelled race favoured by free rider types compensating for the loss of insane wintertime off-piste ski action. We discover that more than 1,000km of mountain tracks are accessible, especially for those with more limited fitness (or cyclists on the lazy side), enabling ordinary folk to ascend to the top and enjoy awesome panoramas with minimum effort. The trick lies in the lithium battery-operated



NO SWEAT: The focus is on taking time out



WHEELY GOOD: The Alpine views are hard to beat

motor attached to the crossbar that takes over on the hills or whenever you want to rest your legs a bit.

It's mid-July and Verbier has morphed back into a quiet town of only several thousand inhabitants, unrecognisable from the busy wintertime ski resort. Streets are almost deserted (A-listers like Sarah Ferguson and James Blunt, who have chalets here, are usually only spotted when its snowy) as we wander through town to check out cycle rentals in a shop crammed with sporty mountain bikes, race models and plenty of e-bikes.

"Don't mind anyone saying it's the cheats way up the mountain – I often jump on an e-bike for a bit

of exercise," says the bike shop manager, Christophe, pointing out the two-wheeler's essential gears and brakes – all similar to a normal bike – and the tiny digital screen that shows your cycling mode from eco (normal cycling) and sport (just a little assistance) to turbo (a serious uphill push), before we set off to the gateway to the mountains at Les Ruinettes.

Over four-and-a-half hours we prepare to notch up more than 50km with Andras Szeceksay of Singletrail (www.singletrailverbier.com), who takes us on intertwined tracks overlooking steep valleys and gorges above the tree line descending down to 800m on Verbier's outskirts.

What could be more relaxing than a

stroll and an educational forage above La Tzoumaz, viewing beautiful scenery along marked trails winding in and out of forests of pine, larch and Norwegian spruce. Later we learn how to cook the edibles we foraged, including stinging nettles, hogweed, yarrow and wild spinach, into an unusual 'free' lunch that's a lot tastier than we anticipate on this 'cooking weeds' field trip.

Mont Fort is the highest accessible point of the 4 Valleys and we end our 'chill' experience gently travelling up in the cable car named after Diana Ross of The Supremes (who used to own a chalet in the area). We are admiring distant Mont Blanc and the legendary Matterhorn when a fit-as-a-fiddle man brandishing the Tipperary colours appears on the viewing platform.

Liam O Reilly, a holidaying teacher who hails from Clonmel, Co Tipperary, is on a 200km hike across the Alps when we meet at the Mont Fort summit. He is heading for Zermatt, using

Getting there:

- Direct daily flights with Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) and Swiss (www.swiss.com) are priced from €61 one way – hand luggage only. Return rail transfers from the airport to Verbier with the Swiss Transfer ticket cost CHF 146 (€132.41) for adults and CHF 73 (€66.21) for children. See www.myswitzerland.com

- Isabel stayed at the 3* Hôtel Bristol Verbier – rates start from CHF 145 (€131.50) per double room with breakfast.

- The Verbier Infinite Playground Pass is given to all guests paying tourist tax who stay a minimum of one night in the region – benefits include free pedestrian access to mountain lifts and free PostBus travel; 20 per cent off daily mountain lift rates for cyclists; free admission to sport centres; 30 per cent off golf green fees locally; free tourist office activities, from guided hikes to a brunch at mountain pasture and other activities; and VIP pass savings on ski lifts and Verbier village tours for 2 adults and 2 children estimated at €125. Find out more at www.verbier.ch/vip-pass

- For all information on Verbier and its surroundings, visit www.verbier.ch/en



This week's top late deals

Golf in Costa Dorada? Of course!

Costa Dorada, the stretch of Spanish coastline based around Salou, is fast becoming a golfing hot spot – and there are a number of courses to spend the day at. Lumine Mediterránea Beach & Golf Community have renowned grounds with brilliant facilities. As well as the three courses (Lakes, Hills and Ruins) guests can enjoy an infinity pool and restaurant. Club de Golf La Graiera is another top choice, as is Club de Golf Costa Dorada.

Thomson has 11 nights in Costa Dorada on September 1, staying at the SunClub Apartments, Cap de Salou, from €589pp. See thomsonholidays.ie



Make the most of North America

If you're crossing the Atlantic you may as well make it a multi-destination holiday to get as much in as possible. American Holidays have a selection of trips to give you a bigger taste of North America.

Their 20-night Canada Experience + Alaska Cruise packs in a lot with four nights at the 4* Holiday Inn Toronto Downtown, two nights at the 4* DoubleTree Niagara Falls, four nights at the 4* Best Western Plus Sands Vancouver and three nights at the 3* Whistler Peak Lodge, Whistler, followed by a seven-night Alaska cruise onboard the 4* Celebrity Infinity. Prices start from €2,960pp including flights in May 2018.

There's also a Florida trip this September which takes in Orlando for five nights and Miami for three nights, and two nights in Key West. It costs from €1,229pp including flights and five days car hire.

To find out more, call American Holidays on 01 673 3804 or visit www.americanholidays.com



Explore your sense of adventure

Stunning Costa Rica is famous for its forests with all sorts of wildlife, but you can also hit two of Costa Rica's other famed features – volcanoes and beaches – on an escorted trip with G Adventure.

On the eight-day escorted tour you can get the adrenaline pumping in La Fortuna, then soak up the hippie spirit of Montezuma and relax on the beach plus visits to Arenal and San Jose. You're free to choose your own adventure and optional adrenaline-inducing activities like waterfall rappelling.

Accommodation, flights and transportation are included in prices from €1,445pp for the trip on November 4. To find out more, visit Sunway.ie

