

BACKCOUNTRY

Off-the-radar Swiss resorts don't  
come much better than this

# SWITZERLAND'S LITTLE ALASKA

Point your camera in the right direction after some fresh snow and  
you could be there, even if in reality you're just a few kilometres from  
Lake Geneva: welcome to Les Marécottes

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**T**hough it sounds like a herd of something small and furry, Les Marécottes, it turns out, is in fact a tiny ski resort in south-west Switzerland. It's home to Jeremie Heitz, a pro freeskier skier whose line-up of must-ski mountains is about 45° steeper than most peoples', and interesting enough to make a film about (*La Liste*). It's also a place brothers Nicolas and Loris Falquet have immortalised in films such as *Color Trip*, exploiting its reputation as 'Little Alaska' – point the camera in the right direction after some fresh snow and you could be there, even if in reality you're just a few kilometres from Lake Geneva.

But forgetting cameras and freeride stars, and just going skiing instead, Les Marécottes still scores. Great mountains are a given, with the Mont Blanc massif just to the south, and slightly smaller stuff in every other direction. And spiritually, if not literally, it's a 'one lift' kind of a place, with the mechanical means to get you from quaint Swiss mountain village at 1100m to a high, narrow, cliff-sided bowl 1000 vertical metres later. Never mind that you achieve the journey in two stages, by gondola and then chair, nor that there's a little drag lift off to one side, just above the trees: in essence, this is the kind of place where you should head for an adventure. Simply ride up as far as you can, then put skins on to continue in the same general direction.

The terrain rearing above us is a snowy rock face with a gully up the middle. A steepening skin track gives up where the only sensible thing to do is tie your skis to your pack and boot the rest. That's when you are reminded why skins are such a good idea, and of how very much stronger your legs are than the rest of your body put together. Also, after a bit, of how heavy your skis are even if you did pay extra to have less of them, weight-wise. Let's just say the climb is steep and not over nearly soon enough when the sun's out and

**Great mountains, and pockets of skiing loveliness, are a given**

Raphy Corthay, our guide, is setting the (brisk) pace.

But it's worth it: at 2469m is the Col de la Golette and a grandstand view of the south-east side of the Dents du Midi. As we get our breath back, Raphy points out various interesting-looking routes, none of them for beginners.

The classic Marécottes trip is to turn right after skiing down to Lac de Salanfe, doubling back down the Vallon de Van. But he suggests we turn left instead, then climb to a second col, followed by a descent of the Vallon d'Emaney to filter back cunningly round to the village of Marécottes, downhill all the way. He assures us that will avoid the crowds, which means we'll be the only people on our route, rather than having to encounter the couple of skiers we can see heading in the other direction.

For now there's a nice little interim ski-down as payback for the climb we've just made; over 400 vertical metres of non-scary, what-touring's-all-about kind of skiing, hunting out pockets of loveliness as we negotiate non-threatening bands of rock down towards the shores of the frozen Lac de Salanfe. The map tells us we're skiing over old arsenic mines, so you probably don't want to be eating any funny coloured snow for refreshment, even if the weather is definitely on the warm and spring-like side of the thermometer. Which would be unremarkable, except that it's only late January.

Back onto skins, there's now a climb of about 400m, but it's not nearly as steep as the couloir we ascended above the Marécottes domain. We could have saved ourselves much of this by making a high traverse from one col to the next, but we're 'ski' touring, not 'trying to avoid unnecessary climbs' touring, and besides, our total for the morning, thanks to having done the big bit by lift, will be a mere 750m up in return for around 1800m down. ➤

## THREE OTHER OFF-THE-RADAR SWISS RESORTS FOR FRESH TRACKS

### ROTHWALD

Up near the Simplon pass into Italy is a T-bar (and not much else), which is a contender for 'toughest lift in the world', but oh so worth it. The Rothwald website (astonishing to find this tiny place has one) gives you an inkling of what lies at the end. Click 'winter' and the first item on the menu is 'freeriding: open larch forest and beautiful shady freeride possibilities... located in one of the snowiest regions in the Alps...'. There's also 'ski touring' with a list of the main local tours; under the last item, 'transport', nothing about buses and trains, just a price list for snowmobile transfers to the Wasenalp mountain hotel, high on the hill. [rothwald.ch](http://rothwald.ch)

### MEIRINGEN

A game of two halves. Over the hill from big guns Grindelwald and Wengen, this is a thorough-going resort in terms of uplift but not big enough to have a real international following. So during the week, at least, no crowds. Time to enjoy the mostly cliff-free and not-too-scary sidecountry they've kindly left to look after itself; hooray for not ramming pistes into every last square inch of the domain. And then there's the terrain just across the valley, south of the resort, where things really get interesting: skins on for day tours galore with minimal gnarliness and maximum pure skiing fun, beneath the stunning peaks which tower over the Reichenbachtal. [meiringen-hasliberg.ch](http://meiringen-hasliberg.ch)

### SILVAPLANA/CORVATSCH

Part of the greater St. Moritz ski area, the Corvatsch lift system takes you rapidly up the southern side of the upper Engadine valley, to 3303m, comfortably away from the five-star glitz of St Mo. A glance at the map tells you there's plenty to go at but the best stuff can get you into all sorts of trouble – this is big country, and off the back you're onto glaciers and all sorts. So a proper day out should definitely involve a guide – you won't regret it. [corvatsch.ch](http://corvatsch.ch)





Reaching the 2462m Col d'Emaney reveals in-your-face mountainous-ness to the south and west. What is presumably to be our way down (basically the only apparently ski-friendly bit of terrain that I can spot) runs beneath the massive spiny cliff face of the Pointes d'Aboillon, with icy bits sparkling in strong sun.

The blackness of the steepest rock sucks up the warmth to release thought-provoking avalanches (thoughts such as, 'I'm not going to ski too close to the bottom of that cliff'). They come crashing down in end of season fashion (even though it's not), spilling streams of snow like elegant but temporary waterfalls down top-to-bottom fissures before piling up in characteristic snow cones at the bottom.

It all suggests our next pitch is going to be buttery spring corn rather than powder, and also that Raphy has got this all planned and has timed our arrival to a T. But before the good stuff, there's a moment of low level but nonetheless teeth-gritting terror: a still-hard slope must be traversed, with cliffs below (that's the only way they make these kinds

of slope) so it's time to make double-sure we're solidly attached to our de-skinned skis, and to lock the toes of our bindings for good measure. And – it hardly needs mentioning – it's strictly no falling over for the next 150 metres. Then we can breathe again.

And what a difference a degree makes, whether of slope angle, point of compass, temperature, or, in the case of the pitch we reach, of all three combined. Because we've just moved from inclined ice-rink to near-perfect snow slope of the consistency and smooth, easy angle to make your granny look like Lindsey Vonn.

A relaxed Raphy let's us have at it; he takes a line, whooshing past me and shouting "moquette!" – an indication, in French, that he's thoroughly enjoying himself, even if yelling "carpet!" does seem an odd way to show it. What he's happy about is snow so smooth and forgiving that it's like skiing down a very big Axminster rug.

Actually, I don't want to split hairs, or pile, or whatever you have in carpets, but I think that wouldn't be very

**Creamy smooth snow, or should that be Axminster carpet?**

slippery, certainly not skiing-slippery; the right wax would be critical, for sure. But it would be unctuously smooth, which I think was the key point he was after, so we'll let him have it.

This all goes on for quite a long way. Many rolls of carpet, in fact, before we turn east down the valley for more creamy smooth snow. Heading for the route of a summer track to descend through trees back to base we ski straight over the roofs of the Alpage Emaney hamlet, getting the brakes on before encountering streams of rock-solid avalanche debris.

This marks the beginning of the end, not just of our day out but of our care-free skiing – the point (common to most ski tours) beyond which life seldom improves until the moment you make it through the door of the bar. Our first sip, on the terrace of the Clair de Lune back in Les Marécottes, is a welcome one. *Fell Line*



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## DO IT

Raphael Corthay ([worldguiding.ch](http://worldguiding.ch)) offers a day's guiding in Les Marécottes from CHF125 (£100) per person, based on a group of six. Stay at Le Yeti B&B in the centre of Les Marécottes ([leyeti.ch](http://leyeti.ch)), which offers rooms from CHF134 (£105) per night, B&B, based on two sharing. An adult day pass costs

CHF44 (£35), including access by train on the local Mont Blanc Express and the ski bus. Les Marécottes is also covered by the Magic Pass ([magicpass.ch/en](http://magicpass.ch/en)), an annual ski pass covering 30 resorts across Switzerland. Visit [lesmarecottes.ch](http://lesmarecottes.ch) and [valleedutrient.ch](http://valleedutrient.ch). For access information see [tmrsa.ch/en](http://tmrsa.ch/en)