



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTOPHE MARCOT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



The artistic look of the Lower Engadine has been taking shape over many years. Clockwise from top, the village of Tschlin, the sculpture garden in Sent with a work by the artist Not Vital, a traditional house in Scuol, and the library of the Villa Fior hotel in S-chanf.

Cultural gem hidden in Switzerland

TSCHLIN, SWITZERLAND

Tucked into jagged valley, Lower Engadine offers views, mystery and art

BY KIMBERLY BRADLEY

Imagine a mountain landscape speckled with rustic villages whose residents speak an ancient, isolated language. Centuries-old stone dwellings with mysterious renderings of wild men and mountain goats are etched into white facades. Panoramic views are so stunning you have to rub your eyes to make sure you are not in a Hollywood epic.

This is Switzerland's Lower Engadine, a rugged, near-forgotten valley in the easternmost corner of the country. Here, in the central Alps, the En River cuts a deep crevasse into the landscape. It is also an extension of the much better-known Upper Engadine, where St. Moritz attracts skiers and celebrities.

My travel companion and I were here to ski on the last of the spring snow and to hike along the Via Engiadina trail. Our holiday rental house sat 1,680 meters, or 5,500 feet, above sea level, and I expected new cultural experiences — this is, after all, one of the last areas in which Romansh, a language described to me as “street Latin,” is predominantly spoken.

The artistic tradition in the Lower Engadine (or Engiadina Bassa in Romansh), however, did not emerge out of nothing. “You can feel the energy of all the creative people who have come for

centuries,” said the St. Moritz architect Hans-Jörg Ruch, who for the last 20 years has updated historic buildings in the Upper and Lower Engadine and beyond, converting them into private homes and art galleries.

“Philosophers, authors, artists always came here, but it was usually to the upper valley,” said Ladina Florineth, owner of Villa Fior, a charming seven-room hotel that opened last summer in a renovated patrician house in the town of S-chanf. “Now people are discovering the lower part, which is becoming more important for those who want something authentic,” she said.

While St. Moritz has been the host to famous art world names like Beuys, Warhol and Schnabel, the Lower Engadine has started to attract its share. Two years ago, Eva Presenhuber, a Zurich blue-chip gallerist, built a sculptural holiday house in Vnà. The Pritzker Prize-winning architect Peter Zumthor was apparently so taken with Tschlin, a tiny village on the Lower Engadine's eastern edge, that he designed a hotel for it. The hotel did not come to fruition, but the Swiss curator and art-world star Hans Ulrich Obrist plans to establish an archive and artist's residency in the same town.

And the enigmatic, peripatetic artist Not Vital, a native of the region, owns several properties that display his own sculptures and works by other artists. On the western edge of Sent, where he was born, he spearheaded a hilly outdoor sculpture garden called Parkin Not dal Mot. In nearby Ardez, he runs a foundation that displays art and makes a mission of collecting and archiving books



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The small village of Scuol in the rugged Lower Engadine, with views of the central Alps.

and publications written in Romansh.

Despite all this, the Lower Engadine has escaped overdevelopment largely because of its inaccessibility. Old traditions abound. There are those intriguing inscriptions, called sgraffiti, etched into the thick-walled buildings, a decorative custom imported from nearby Italy in the 16th century. There are even farmers who still share their houses with livestock. And there's the landscape.

“This valley's rugged beauty, its shifts from warm to cold, dark to light, attracts creative people looking for contemplation,” said Hans Schmid, a local hotelier. Mr. Schmid gave up a job as culture

director of the Swiss canton of St. Gallen to run Hotel Piz Linard, which opened in a historic building in 2007. Standing pink and pretty on the village square of Lavin, it has become a cultural draw for locals and visitors, offering weekend concerts, film screenings and exhibitions.

Other hotels also cater to culture vultures: In Vnà, a village of 70 residents, a few entrepreneurial locals established a foundation in 2004 to renovate the town's cultural center, a building that had fallen into disuse. In 2008 the center became Hotel Piz Tschütta, which offers recitals as well as a charming restaurant and guest rooms.

Now packed with works by some of today's biggest artists, Castell is like a contemporary art center with an Alpine backdrop. Highlights include James Turrell's “Skyspace Piz Uter,” from 2006, a cylindrical, chapel-like space on the hotel grounds. And at the curved red bar designed by Pipilotti Rist, bottle labels display the Swiss artist's video projections.

Castell is also a site for a late-summer event called St. Moritz Art Masters, in its third year, which now spills into the Lower Engadine with a series of art walks, talks and exhibitions.

In Tschlin, Markus Miessen, a Berlin architect, is collaborating with Mr. Obrist on another new art venue.

“We researched the whole area, driving around, and these villages are really birds' nests,” he said, explaining a plan to use the town's vacant school building and a farmhouse to hold Mr. Obrist's vast archive and create the artist's residency.

Located on a frighteningly steep road at more than 1,500 meters above sea level, Tschlin is a town that few just pass through.

“We wanted to find a place that was difficult to reach, so the fellows wouldn't just be passing through,” Mr. Miessen said.

Ms. Presenhuber, the Zurich gallery owner, said the area was “like Montauk in the 1970s,” referring to the tourist destination famous for its fishing at the eastern end of Long Island in New York State. “First artists and people without so much money settled there. Now, 30 or 40 years later, it's hyped. I think the Lower Engadine will be the same way in 10 or 20 years.”