

THE SNOW CHASERS

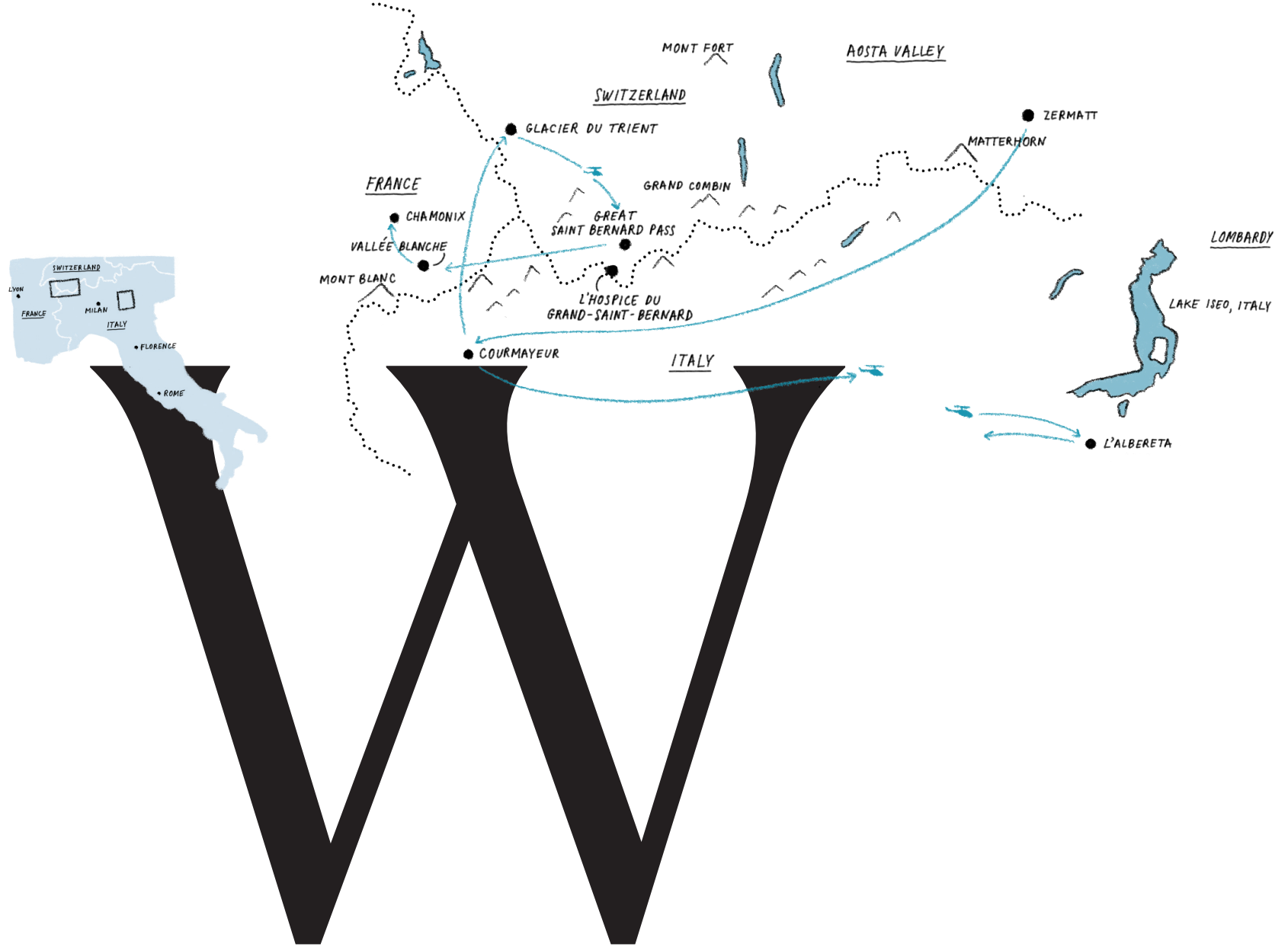
Want to maximize increasingly unpredictable winters? SwisSkiSafari tracks powder at



A view of the Alps across the trifecta of countries where SwisSkiSafari maps its itineraries: Italy, France, and Switzerland



a micro level so it can whisk its clients to Europe's prime slopes at a moment's notice. By **Jen Murphy**



WHEN I ARRIVE in northern Italy's Aosta Valley in early April of last year, the seasons are playing tug-of-war. At the base of Courmayeur, a chic ski resort snuggled into the foot of Monte Bianco—better known by its French moniker, Mont Blanc—trees brim with pale-pink buds on the verge of blossoming, and waterfalls and rivers gush with snowmelt. The temperature hovers in the upper 60s, and sun-drenched terraces overflow with tanned Italians sipping spritzes. Spring is in the air. But higher in the mountains, where it's barely 15 degrees, winter lingers. A late-season storm recently rolled in, and the slopes are carpeted in fresh snow, just as my guide and organizer, Danielle Stynes, confidently predicted.

The Australian founder of SwisSkiSafari has lived in Switzerland for 30 years and for the past two decades has been curating custom multicountry ski and snowboard trips in the Alps. For reasons even climate scientists don't understand, this region is warming at a faster rate than the global trend. The European Environment Agency reports that annual snowfall and snow cover have dropped across the continent and will continue to diminish, particularly at lower elevations, shortening the ski season. By the end of the century, the agency predicts, we'll have 100 fewer days on the slopes in the most affected regions. But Stynes scoffs at the notion of winter disappearing completely. The data, she claims, is too broad. "Yes, the climate is changing," she tells me. "But the weather has always been fickle. Now, we're

dealing with more extreme conditions. There's still plenty of snow. You just need to be more resourceful to know when and where to find it and how to reach the best conditions."

Stynes has long insisted that the optimal snow conditions must be chased. Her company's signature ski safaris cost upwards of \$1,500 per person per day (including accommodations) and over the course of a week typically combine three to four regions in Switzerland, France, and Italy to provide a range of microclimates, maximizing the chances of scoring great powder. She also calls on an avalanche expert with a doctorate in snow forecasting who feeds her hourly weather updates throughout a trip, and she maintains tight relationships with helicopter and snowmobile companies to ensure her clients can access primo terrain on short notice.

While many in the industry bemoan evolving climate patterns, Stynes sees the shift in weather as an opportunity to be more creative. "To be bluntly honest, I built my company on the concept of being nimble," she says. "My M.O. has always been to have a plan A, B, and C so I can pivot on a dime and make the best of every situation."

She recalls a 40th-birthday ski safari she planned for an American investment-fund owner who wanted her to re-create scenes from various James Bond films on the slopes. Stynes had the group hike uphill to a mountaintop chalet, where they were held up by a faux spy with a fake gun. She had set up a casino in the chalet and shipped

Ski touring across the Italian border, up toward the Great Saint Bernard Pass in Switzerland







Above: The travel operator's heli-skiers often have the descent to themselves, as they do here on Switzerland's Saleina Glacier. *Opposite:* SwisSkiSafari relies on private helicopter charters to ferry clients around the region.

black-tie attire there so the guests could dress the part. The group then schussed back to the village by torchlight, chased by ski patrollers disguised as Bond villains. Stynes even arranged for the ski station to activate the gondola to facilitate their transfer to another hill.

In the countries featured in her itineraries' alpine trifecta, Stynes believes the high elevations, where snow is still abundant, are full of untapped potential, particularly as temperatures fluctuate. Take Italy: Most people associate skiing there with the Dolomites, the massive mountain range in the northeast. But in her opinion, the Aosta Valley, in the Western Alps, is the country's best-kept winter secret, boasting reliable high-altitude resorts, glacier skiing, and effortless border hopping. "I can cherry-pick choice terrain and showcase Italian, French, and Swiss culture," she says.

Stynes typically kicks off safaris in the Swiss winter haven of Zermatt. After laying fresh tracks beneath the shadow of the Matterhorn for a few days, she likes guests to ski (or heli transfer) to Courmayeur so they can explore the mythical peaks of the Mont Blanc massif,

a group of mountains along the French-Italian border stretching into Switzerland.

Courmayeur is also a ripe base to develop new spring-safari routes that capitalize on milder winters, late-season storms, and longer daylight hours. Stynes invited me to join her on a reconnaissance trip: The plan was to scout fresh, culture-focused experiences in neighboring regions, such as Lombardy, that historically haven't overlapped with ski vacations. "Traditionally, a down day would be spent in the spa," she says. "But in spring, why not go wine tasting or boating? A true alpine safari isn't only about skiing—it's a sampling of the local culture."

ON MY FIRST EVENING, Stynes, a petite, no-nonsense blond who excels at both skiing and snowboarding, is in full tactician mode. Her snow whisperer and secret weapon—Robert Bolognesi, Ph.D.—phones just before dinner, and she feverishly scribbles notes on a map unfurled across the chalet's dining table



as they reassess our strategy. The snow has arrived, just as Stynes promised it would, but the most snow does not always translate to the best experience, she explains. You must also factor in wind, precipitation quality, and visibility. Bolognesi rates the latter an 8 out of 10, with a 10 being whiteout conditions. Another storm would arrive the following evening, he assures Stynes. If we pushed our heli-drop two to three days, we'd be rewarded with powder heaven—and the ability to see where we were going.

After a few calls, Stynes rejoins me at the dining table, where her map has been replaced with bowls of Parmesan fondue prepared by Martina Magenta, a pro snowboarder-turned-fashion designer and owner of Fior di Roccia. This remote, exclusive-use chalet is accessible only by snowmobile, making it an ideal retreat for Stynes's celebrity clientele, who prefer to ski incognito. (A lift to access the slopes of Courmayeur is just a few miles away.) By the time Magenta serves our second course, vegetable tagliolini made from scratch, Stynes has completely rejiggered our itinerary.

The next day, a helicopter would whisk us to L'Albereta, an ivy-clad Relais & Châteaux property surrounded by rolling vineyards in Lombardy's Franciacorta wine region, about 180 miles to the east. Stynes is known to double-book accommodations for big budget-guests so they can seamlessly transition, as we did, to the most extraordinary option possible. We leave our ski gear at Fior di Roccia and pack small duffels with clothing for two nights. But first, we pop into Courmayeur village to meet Magenta, who has agreed to open her family's cult-favorite boutique, Guichardaz, early so we can shop the leather belts and cashmere coats she designs as well as wares from Aspesi and Salvatore Piccolo, among other labels.

We spend the following three days awaiting Bolognesi's green light while enjoying the spring sunshine closer to sea level. Stynes arranges for a 1950s Alfa Romeo to take us to the top wineries, including Antica Fratta. (Once you taste Franciacorta, the region's namesake DOCG-designated sparkling wine, you'll never go back to prosecco.) Another afternoon, a restored Riva yacht tours us around Lake Iseo, whose lesser-known shores are just as pretty as Lake Garda's or Lake Como's. Our day on the water is capped by a VIP workshop tour of Bellini Nautica, the foremost Riva-restoration experts,



While waiting for optimal ski conditions, SwisSkiSafari might take a detour to Lombardy.

Right: Touring Lake Iseo aboard a Riva yacht. *Below:* L'Albereta, a Relais & Châteaux property nestled amid the vineyards of Franciacorta. *Left:* The hotel's pool.



Weather Beaters



HELI-SKI FROM A YACHT

When your lodge is a luxury yacht equipped with an A-star chopper, you never need to wait for a weather window: You sail to the best conditions for flying and skiing. Bella Coola Heli Sports (above), a British Columbia heli-skiing operation that offsets 110 percent of its carbon output, runs trips in the extensive fjord network of Canada's Great Bear Rainforest aboard the 138-foot, eight-cabin M/V *Cascadia*. Being able to anchor near prime conditions maximizes your hours to explore upwards of 5,500 square miles of terrain—to which the outfit has exclusive heli-skiing access—in the Coast Range. *From about \$195,000 for four nights for up to eight guests*

HIRE A POWDER CONCIERGE

Steve Conney, the weather-obsessed founder of snow-forecast site Powderchasers, offers a concierge service that delivers in-depth, personalized intel for your ski trips. His team reviews factors you won't find in a typical weather report, such as winds, snow quality, snow depth, and lift and terrain closures. Two weeks ahead of your departure, you'll receive updates on the ski areas where storms are expected to dump the most snow and advice on which resorts will have the deepest snowpack during your expedition. "We aren't afraid to tell clients to rebook or change resorts midway into a trip," says Conney. *From \$150*

BUY A WEATHER GUARANTEE

Sensible Weather, a start-up from climate scientist and former hedge-fund quant Nick Cavanaugh, offers a money-back guarantee on trips to partner ski resorts, including Crans-Montana in Switzerland and Val-Cenis in France, when the weather doesn't cooperate—for about 10 percent of the trip's total booking price. Sensible Weather monitors conditions via intel from agencies including NOAA and NASA and sends a text offering a refund (based on daily rates) if say, rain causes icy or slushy slopes, or a storm shuts down the ski lifts. If you tough it out and ski in poor conditions, you still get your money back.

BOOK AN ELEVEN LODGE

Chad Pike, founder of global adventure collective Eleven, is a real-estate savant who has positioned his mountain lodges in locations unparalleled for great skiing. Guests of Scarp Ridge Lodge and Sopris House in Crested Butte, Colo., have snowcat access to 1,000 acres of terrain at Irwin, an area situated in the snow shadow of the Ruby Range that sees twice the amount of snow as nearby ski resorts, averaging 450 inches a season. In the French Alps, Chalet Hibou and Chalet Pelerin are within 30 minutes of seven ski resorts, including snow-sure Val d'Isère, which sits at over 6,000 feet. A nearby helipad allows guests to heli-ski over the border into Italy.

as well as the company's vintage Riva collection—the world's most complete assemblage of the classic boats, featuring 20 models dating from the 1920s to the 1970s.

BY THE TIME we arrive back in Courmayeur, my skin is sun-kissed, my jet lag has vanished, and the mountains have received another dump of snow. Bolognesi's latest forecast dictates a 10 a.m. helicopter departure. We drive 45 minutes across the border into Switzerland, where the staccato beat of the chopper greets us. We board the aircraft to access the long, cruisey runs on Glacier du Trient, and our Swiss pilot, Roland Brunner, looks just as giddy as I feel. A minor injury is keeping Stynes off the slopes today, so Brunner deposits me and my hunky French guide, Guillaume, on a virgin peak. Our seemingly endless powder run, under a perfect bluebird sky, is well worth the wait. Stynes has carefully coordinated the logistics so that the helicopter transfers us to a vehicle that in turn drives us 35 minutes so we can end the day with a ski tour of the Great Saint Bernard Pass. The 90-minute uphill slog on skis is set amid jagged, snow-capped peaks and leads us to l'Hospice du Grand-Saint-Bernard, a refuge established in the Middle Ages by the archdeacon of Aosta. Skiers can overnight in the monastery's humble, dorm-style rooms, but we opt to warm up with bowls of tea and bean soup in the cafeteria, then ski back down to return to cushier digs.

Conditions align the following day for a descent of the Vallée Blanche, a 13-mile-long glaciated off-piste run on every die-hard skier's wish list. The world's longest lift-serviced slope serves up 9,000 feet of quad-burning vertical among crevasses, seracs, and towering ice formations. "This is real alpinism," says Stynes. "A single descent takes even the fittest skiers three hours." You must be able to adapt to variable conditions, and this mountain is not for speed demons: Going fast increases the risk of plunging into a crevasse, which can be nearly 100 feet deep. I'm given a harness to wear so my guide can toss me a rescue rope if I do fall into one. The run can

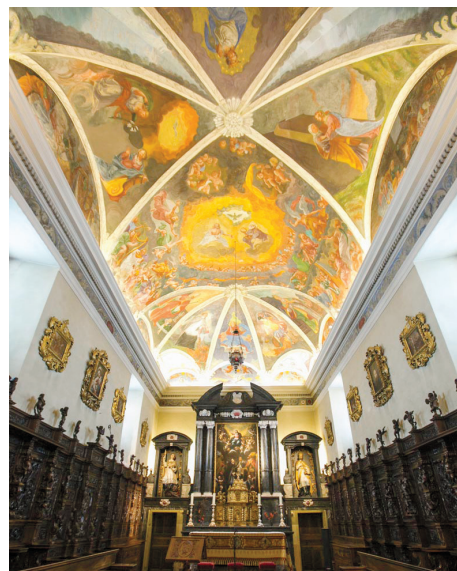
be accessed from both Italy and France; the entry via the latter's ski hub of Chamonix tends to be more crowded and requires two cable-car rides, a precarious bridge crossing, and a hairy roped-in climb down an icy footpath.

Bolognesi, to my relief, informs Stynes that Italy's gentler entry has equally excellent snow conditions. "Plus, the coffee is better on the Italian side," adds Stynes, in all seriousness. Those who doubt that a warming climate is altering the mountains need only ski the Vallée Blanche to be convinced. After hours making turns in a winter wonderland beneath colossal icy peaks, I'm startled when the snow and ice disappear the final few hundred feet of the run, giving way to a rocky, lunar landscape that forces me to clip out of my snowboard and hike the remainder of the way.

In the early 1980s, a gondola went directly to the level of the ice. When I last tackled the Vallée Blanche in the early aughts, glacial melt forced me to climb just over 100 stairs at the end of the descent to access the base station of the old gondola. As the ice continued to recede, the number of stairs reached more than 500 by the 2020s. My shaky legs are thankful to see the stairs have been replaced this season with a new gondola that transfers weary skiers to a train that drops them back in Chamonix, where Stynes awaits with both a French bottle of Taittinger Comtes de Champagne Blanc de Blancs and an Italian bottle of Franciacorta to toast our border-hopping escapades.

A few months later, Stynes rings me to say our adventure spawned a new spring-safari format for 2025 that will have clients fly into Geneva and out of Milan, which is only about an hour from the Franciacorta region, where they can recuperate from their skiing with Michelin-star meals, wine tastings, and spa treatments. She has already put rooms and dining reservations on hold and has her guides and heli pilots booked for the entire two-week itinerary. I ask if she's worried about the snow, already knowing her answer. "If you have the budget and the time, I can always find the snow," she says with a laugh. "We can't control the weather. But we can create a memorable experience around what Mother Nature deals us." ●

Below, from left: A small station in the Great Saint Bernard Pass; the church at the top of the pass; inside an (extremely) off-the-beaten-path restaurant for lunch. Opposite: L'Hospice du Grand-Saint-Bernard, built in the Middle Ages at an elevation of 8,100 feet.





PAOLO REDA/ALAMY