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Val Müstair - National Treasure

Why Val Müstair?

In case you have wondered why we choose to showcase certain Swiss regions and localities, we have good reason. You may have noticed that we feature a different Swiss UNESCO World Heritage site on the back page of each Helvetia issue. Using each site as an anchor, we explore the region closest to it in greater detail. While there is a certain geographical randomness to these sites, they also take us to places in Switzerland which many have never seen or considered in this context.

Val Müstair is a valley at the very eastern-most corner of Switzerland and also the home to the Convent of St John's of Müstair, a UNESCO World Heritage Site (refer to page 24). Although the valley is part of the Swiss Engadin region, it is geographically separated from it by the Ofen Pass (*Pass dal Fuorn* in Romansh), facing south towards the Süd Tirol and Vinschgau regions in Italy.



The village of Müstair, with the Convent of St John in the foreground
www.graubuenden.ch

As a result, and despite of its altitude, the valley enjoys a mild climate and a greater number of sunshine hours than the Engadin itself, and thus is very dry. The River Rom, which flows through the valley, is one of the last remaining free-flowing rivers of Switzerland.

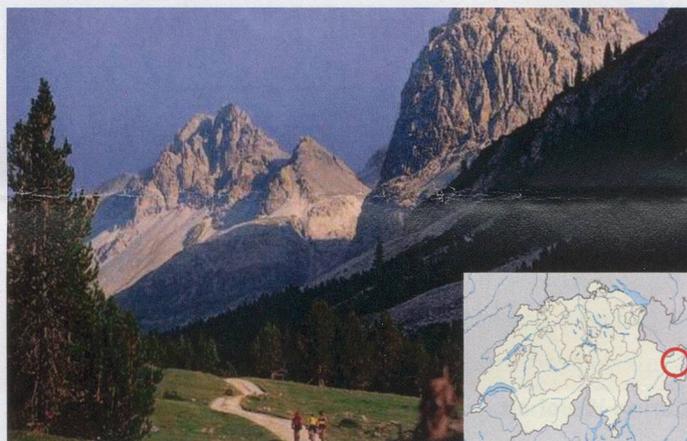
The most important villages in the Swiss part of Val Müstair include Tschier, Valchava, Santa Maria and Müstair at altitudes ranging from 1,247m to 1,660m. Over 70% of the population speaks Romansh and the rest Swiss German. The valley is sparsely populated, reaching a mere 1,605 inhabitants in 2000.

History of the Ofen Pass

The Ofen Pass reaches an altitude of 2149m and forms the divide between the Inn River (Engadin) and Val Müstair/Etsch River. A well built road traverses the heavily forested mountain pass, taking in the Swiss National Park on the northern side.

It is suspected that the use of the route goes back several thousand years, supported by finds dating from the Stone Age. It was routinely used during Roman times and increased in importance during the early Middle Ages.

The Ofen Pass derives its name from the old iron-smelting furnaces once operated to process the ore dug in nearby mines. Old ruins and iron slag can be found throughout the area, the high stonewalled furnaces being especially visible. The deforestation resulting from milling timber for the furnaces is also still evident to this day. Iron smelting ceased in modern times. With increasing reforestation and a shrinking human population, the area once more became the refuge to wildlife including wolves and bears, which survived until the end of the 19th century. The area became part of Switzerland's National Park in 1904. It includes some mighty mountains, including Piz Quattervals (3164m) and Piz del Diavel (3072 m).



Val Müstair
www.wanderland.ch

Biosfera Val Müstair/sustainable farming

In 2010, Val Müstair was included, together with the Swiss National Park, into a new UNESCO Biosphere Reserve comprising 371 km². Val Müstair has also been designated as a Swiss Regional Park, serving to protect the old and important core zones of the National Park. A one-off survey of the local flora and fauna carried out in June 2011 revealed an astounding number of 1850 different species. The creation of the regional park was strongly supported by 88% of the local population. The area offers a high quality of life and tourism is at the centre of economic activity. 80% of local farms are managed according to sustainable principles, highlighting the dedication of local people to the preservation of these unique and valuable natural resources.

By Susie Wood

Sources: www.de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ofenpass, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuorn_Pass, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Müstair, www.biosfera.ch, www.nationalpark.ch