

GENEVA

No Business Like Snow Business

Got a day to kill in the Swiss capital? Here's how to get the most from the nearby slopes

By HELENA BACHMANN



YOU ARE STUCK IN A business meeting in Geneva. You look out of the window and hear the Alps calling your name. Hitting those powdery slopes is easier than you think. There are several fine resorts

right on Geneva's doorstep. What, you've only one day to spare and don't have a car? No problem. Switzerland's efficient public transportation system can get you to the slopes.

A good spot is Villars, a small resort located at the eastern extremity of Lake Geneva. It may not be as well-known as Zermatt or St. Moritz, but with its dozens of well-groomed ski runs at anywhere from 1,800 to 3,000 m, it offers a good day's skiing just two and a half hours by train from Geneva. Best to go on a weekday, when lifts and slopes are not so crowded.

To save time and money, buy your lift ticket before you set out. Swiss Federal Railways offer a special deal for one day's skiing from six cities, including Geneva: €61 will buy you a round-trip ticket to Villars (and 11 other resorts) as well as a ski pass for the day. The ticket can be purchased at the Geneva train station.

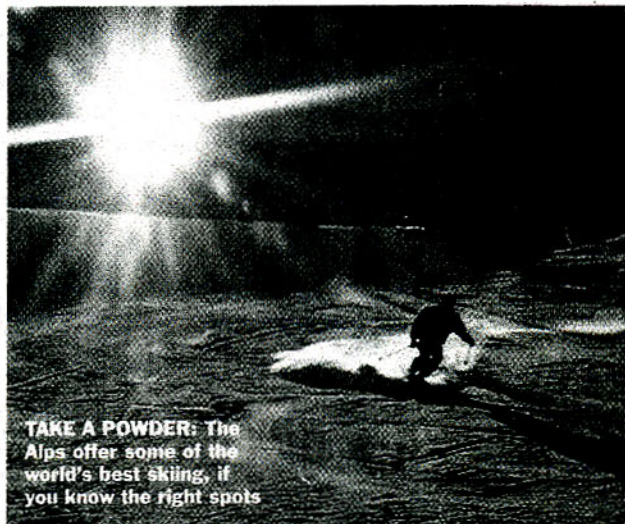
There are several morning trains leaving for Villars, but try to get the 7:51 that departs from platform four. After a change in Bex you will arrive in Villars at 10:01, in time to catch the 10:06 mountain train that will chug straight up to the slopes of Les Bretayes. The 20-minute ride through a dense pine forest offers breathtaking views of the Alps and the plateau below. When you arrive, look to the west and you will see the Mont Blanc glacier on the French side. You can rent skis and boots for about €30 a day at Chez

Kin-Kin (tel. +41 (0) 24 495 2208). And it's all downhill from there.

Villars shares ski areas with other resorts, but unless you're an experienced and fast skier ready to take on a vigorous trek through various runs, lifts and villages, it's better to stick to the slopes around Les Bretayes, which offer varying degrees of difficulty and terrain. You can take one of several lifts to higher altitudes and ski back down to Les Bretayes, alternating among different routes.

When all that schussing makes you hungry, head for the restaurant at Hôtel du Lac, located in a picturesque setting near Bretaye Lake. The rustic, chalet-style dining room, which serves hearty Alpine fare, may be a bit heavy on the folklore (giant cowbells hang from the ceiling), but it is a fitting decor for a traditional cheese fondue, which costs about €16 per person. Another typical specialty is *raclette*—melted cheese with boiled potatoes and pickles, at about the same price as the fondue.

Don't let the fondue distract you from your Swiss watch, however; the last train leaves Les Bretayes at a relatively early hour, 5:25 p.m., and arrives back at Geneva, after changes in Bex and Lausanne, at 8:16 p.m. If you are very sportive, you can ski all the way down from Les Bretayes to Villars. The slope passes through



TAKE A POWDER: The Alps offer some of the world's best skiing, if you know the right spots

STEPHAN WENGER—KEystone

some scenic wooded areas and, depending on your speed, the descent can take about 40 minutes. If you arrive before the train's departure for Geneva, you can have coffee or hot chocolate at La Chaumière tearoom, a two-minute walk along the main street. Swiss trains are very punctual, so try to be at the station at least five minutes before the departure. You will again see stunning scenery and, if you are lucky, a sunset over the Alps. That beats another business meeting any day of the week. ■