



“There isn’t a better place on the planet to get your daily fix of stairs and steps than the plethora of hiking trails littering the Engadin Valley.”

THE SCENIC ROUTE

Road-Tripping Across the Engadin Valley with Kenny Schachter

The art critic travels through Switzerland in an Integra Type R—with stops at singular galleries, enchanting museums, and a gas station designed by an Aston Martin heir along the way



BY KENNY SCHACHTER

Kenny Schachter, the artist, curator, dealer, and irreverent art critic, has escaped New York in favor of Switzerland's Engadin Valley for years, basing himself above Vito Schnabel's Saint-Moritz gallery (he can see the neon sign out of his window). Between teaching at the University of Zurich and working as an advisory-board member of the annual Engadin Art Talks conference, he has come to know the region's art world—and its back roads—like a local.

The popular perception of Switzerland is as a stalwart of neutrality—a safe haven with the world's most robust and stable economy. Then again, there's also its sordid past as the Nazis' primary banker and personal safe-deposit box, not to mention the immigration kerfuffle last month where the Swiss electorate narrowly voted down an attempt to cap immigration. As abhorrent as it is unsettling, I discovered while researching this story that Switzerland only granted women the right to vote in 1971, making it one of the last Western nations to do so. (Some autonomous cantons held out as late as 1990!) And, prior to 1988, Swiss law designated the husband as the “head of the family,” requiring his permission for a wife to open a bank account or work outside the home. For Christ's sake, I'm astonished that women in Switzerland have never been barred from driving.

And yet I keep coming back, to experience the magical mountainous light and landscape, the multi-layered cultural depth, and the sweater-weather summer climate of the Engadin Valley, centered around Saint-Moritz. Funnily enough, Saint-Moritz is known—by the local chamber of commerce, anyway—as the “Top of the World,” while its polar opposite, Montauk, is referred to as the “End of the World.” While neither tagline is particularly accurate, geographically or otherwise, there are worse places to spend a summer stretch.



“Should the Schiefer Turm ever suffer the same fate as the church it once belonged to, I’ll be the first to know—it’s the view from my living room.”

The Leaning Tower of Pisa has nothing on Saint-Moritz’s very own version, known as the Schiefer Turm, whose cartoonish, exaggerated tilt actually exceeds that of the Italian landmark. It was built between the 10th and 12th centuries, but shifting ground led the attached church to be demolished in 1893, and the bells removed. Only the tower remains—for now. If anything should come to pass in the near future, I’ll be the first to know: I can spy the tower from outside the bedroom window of my rental apartment. That, and a ginormous illuminated Vito Schnabel Gallery sign.



“As much as I love Vito Schnabel (whose family has long-standing ties to the valley), the 15-foot illuminated sign of his gallery, directly below my apartment, haunts me from my bedroom window.”

Vito, son of the painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel, opened his eponymous gallery in 2015 in the former space of the legendary Swiss dealer Bruno Bischofberger (who helped launch Warhol, Basquiat, and the entire Pop Art movement in Europe) upon his retirement—daunting shoes to fill. Bischofberger, who recently died, was Vito’s godfather and Julian’s dealer.



"The office at Villa Flor, the seven-room hotel in S-chanf, where an oversize Julian Schnabel painting has been shoehorned into the ceiling."

Julian maintains a regional foothold when he's in town, occupying the majority of the charming Villa Flor, a seven-room boutique hotel operated by Ladina Florineth in the picturesque village of S-chanf. Florineth previously alternated between running a gallery and providing ski instruction for the Schnabel family (a common employment strategy for locals); as a result, the hotel is awash with art in every nook and cranny, including the behemoth-scaled Schnabel painting in Ladina's office, so large it's actually shoehorned into a slice cut out of the ceiling.

Nearby, Fritz Steinhart opened theStable (the spelling an affectation rather than a typo) in S-chanf in 2022, showcasing the works of international emerging artists in a re-purposed livestock-and-hay barn. Steinhart grew up on his family's farm before working in galleries—a familiar Engadin trajectory in a valley replete to this day with as much agriculture as culture-culture. Regrettably, the farms are facing tough competition from a rash of pornographically scaled McMansions and commercial structures—the Saint-Moritz building regulations are, at best, lax. On view until September 19 at theStable are installations by Swiss artists Caro Niederer and Yves Scherer.



“The main exhibition space of theStable gallery, situated in a converted barn.”

A few miles away, Saint-Moritz's Super Mountain Market, a concept store in the center of town founded in 2020 by Swiss resident Mario Weichselmann, has evolved—with the help of Weichselmann's partner, the Italian jewelry designer Angelo De Luca—into a gallery full of art, design, fashion, and a café. I presently have an exhibition and a series of talks there

through the end of the month entitled “Cubism: Cubes and Conversations,” presenting a group of text sculptures that simultaneously function as seating and plinths. The works were inspired by conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, who stated that “teaching was his greatest work of art.”



“A little Cubism with your cows? My hybrid cubed sculptures at the concept gallery Saint-Moritz’s Super Mountain Market, with stools by Martino Gamper.”

The gallery is additionally showcasing a new dining-room table by the wonderful Italian-born designer Martino Gamper, a patchwork quilt of disparate materials seamlessly collaged into a wondrous amalgamation.

Gamper will also be on hand for a joint talk; check with the gallery for programming. And come by any time for an espresso and a croissant—I'll regale you with art tales, and/or send you into a deep REM sleep.



"The local volunteer guide of the Mili Weber Museum in Saint-Moritz, housing the collection of the fabulously maximalist, miniature outsider artist. The grumpy guide was as belligerent as I was, and though she frowned on photography, I snuck a couple of sneaky snaps in when she wasn't looking."

Situated above Lake Saint-Moritz, the Mili Weber Museum is an all-encompassing fairy tale of a work of art located in the former house and studio of artist and illustrator Mili Weber (1891–1978), built by the artist's brother, Emil, in 1917. On a recent tour, I was chided by the short-tempered and snarky, though still endearing, guide not to take photos.

Suffice it to say, Mili was a reclusive, prolifically productive outsider artist and craftsperson. Weber illustrated children's books (including coloring books of Grimm's fairytales), composed music on a pipe organ in a dedicated room, furnished (and designed) treasure-filled dollhouses, and

made art covering the chalet from floor to ceiling. Literally, every crevice was replete with depictions of cherubic fairies and fantastical animals.



“My 1998 Japanese-market Honda Integra Type R (if you know, you know). More cacophonous inside (and out) than Ozzfest—perhaps not the most practical mode of transport—but fun for negotiating mountain roads.”

Cars were my gateway drug to art and aesthetics, and I’ve stored mine in the nearby village of Pontresina since being a long-term professor at the University of Zurich (a three-hour drive, as is Milan) and an advisory-board member of the Engadin Art Talks conference, transpiring every winter. Not just any old car, mind you, but a 1998 Japanese-imported, track-oriented Integra Type R. Despite the deafening, cacophonous exhaust soundtrack akin to a Metallica album, I couldn’t think of a more engaging method of transport.



"My son Adrian and me."

Forget Teslas; small-engined classics carry a fraction of the lead-acid batteries (nearly 2,000 pounds worth) and plastics found in a modern electric car and are a hell of a lot more fun to drive when navigating the hairpin-laden roads such as the Julier Pass, one of the main routes in and out of the Engadin. When I need to fill up my tank (and strength), I stop by my neighborhood gas station. Unsurprisingly, it's no ordinary Shell franchise but an attraction run by impresario Richard Gauntlett, whose father, Victor, owned Aston Martin during the 1980s.



“Beware: only in Europe can you fuel up on booze and gas in the same location, so take care!”

Gauntlett launched the unlikely hybrid café, gas station, and design boutique in 2023 with Meyers Manx (the maker of the original fiberglass dune buggy). It’s the size of a Mili Weber dollhouse, chockablock with a dizzying array of merchandise—and equipped with a full liquor license. (Only in Europe!) With its outdoor benches, it’s well worth a visit to fuel up while getting to know Gauntlett and his charming wife, Melanie Hopp, who are frequently ensconced in the premises. Be prepared to be peppered with equal parts anecdotes and hospitality. Don’t forget to bring a designated driver, though.

I’m not much of a food person and consume the same things pretty much every day, but there is a place I have frequented for years, lacking in fanfare or decorative flair, that is a local favorite. Hatecke is a landmark bar and butcher with five locations in Switzerland, including a fully functional farm

in the village of Scuol (located in the Lower Engadin Valley), where they raise animals and grow produce from where it all began in 1905.



“When the great-grandson of the founder of Hatecke, the famed local butcher and café established in 1905, kindly offered me up some of their signature air-dried organic, locally raised meats, what choice had I but to eat it! The first time in more than three decades of pescatarianism. Ugh.”

The grandson of the founder, Ludwig junior, and his son, David, run the family business and were so engaging on a recent visit that I had no choice but to respond to their generosity with a complimentary sampling of their flagship air-dried beef and assorted meats by eating them all—the first time in more than 30 years I’ve eaten meat. I also bumped into Diana Segantini, curator and consultant for Art Basel and the St. Moritz Art Film Festival, there.



"The Segantini Museum."

The Austrian-born Giovanni Segantini (1858–99), Diana’s great-grandfather, captured the Engadin’s luminous landscapes in a pointillist style and died brush in hand while painting *en plein air* in the mountains he so loved. Although little-known in the U.S., Segantini is the subject of an eponymous museum in Saint-Moritz and holds a nearly \$10 million record for his paintings at auction. The original studio space he personally designed in 1897 in Maloja (a 20-minute drive away) houses a rotating exhibition space. Until October, the works of Swiss artist Heidi Bucher (1926–93) are on view.

Steps away is Segantini’s former house, where Diana and her mother live. It’s crammed with enough tchotchkes to fill a stadium as well as works of art and design—much of it made by the family of his lifetime partner, Luigia “Bice” Bugatti (1862–1938), from the illustrious family of artists, furniture designers, and car manufacturers. Wow. And I thought I was an incorrigible, insatiable hoarder.



“There are more cattle than people in Switzerland—though few are as well coiffed as this one. They spend their summers roaming the Engadin before, inevitably, ending up on your plate.”

At times it feels as though Switzerland has a larger bovine population than a human one. The animals, like chickens (with whom I’ve previously collaborated in my art—don’t ask), are intelligent, emotional, and capable of feeling pain, joy, fear, and grief. The seemingly infinite herds dotting the landscape are utterly unaware of their impending fate as foodstuff. I still regret ingesting one. However, you can spend some time with the cows before their imminent slaughter, as there’s no better hiking destination on the planet than in and around the valley. ☺

KENNY’S PACKING LIST



Big Laces

\$ 5

Flat White Shoelaces

“My hiking shoes are often equipped with the custom laces I am always wont to wear.”





Cotton Citizen

\$ 8 0

Classic Crewneck Tee

“I wear these hyper-comfortable Cotton Citizen shirts for hiking excursions.”



Cotton Citizen

\$ 1 5 0

Relaxed Shirt

“Here is the Cotton Citizen shirt in blue (I’m

partial to cream, too).”



Quince

\$ 3 0

Cashmere Trouser Socks

“Quince makes the best affordable cashmere socks—they’re like walking on marshmallows.”

Kenny Schachter is a New York-based artist, writer, and lecturer

Photos: © Kenny Schachter

