

THE  TIMES**Last chance to experience the untouched Andermatt**

How the Chedi will look when complete

Abi Butcher

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I'm in full ski kit riding a rickety train through banks of snow so high I can barely glimpse the mountains beyond. We get off at a tiny station called Oberalppass and huddle in pairs up a windy t-bar before carving fresh tracks in light, fluffy powder down a steep, perfectly groomed red.

I am in the little-known Swiss resort of Andermatt (1,444m) where in two years' time the train will be superseded by state-of-the-art lifts linking it to nearby Sedrun — all part of a massive investment project headed by Egyptian property tycoon Samih Sawiris.

I'm an experienced skier, a type which Andermatt has no problem attracting to its steep, off-piste terrain. But with only two mountains, tourism here has been struggling. Now developers hope to attract a new breed of visitor with the opening of Europe's first Chedi - the initial phase of a CHF1.8 billion redevelopment that will change the face of one of the oldest and quaintest Alpine resorts.

We look around the five-star hotel as work in progress, and it's certainly an acquired taste: huge black-and-white Rubens prints cover an entire wall in each of the 50 rooms furnished in heavy wood, sheepskin, wine-coloured fabrics and fur.

It's hard to envisage quite how the development will affect the village. Detractors think it will spoil the place. Andermatt was once a thriving army base, but when Switzerland cut back its troops in 2003 its economy suffered and the surrounding area died too. Around CHF30m is being spent on regenerating an untouchable former firing range and turning it into an 18-hole golf course.

But people will come here to ski, and wisely, developers are leaving well alone the steep, north-facing Gemsstock (2,963m). Instead, 37km of new pistes will extend over the sunnier slopes of Näsche, with new lift links on Schnehüenerstock, Schijenstock and Calmut, to the more family-friendly Sedrun. A cable car will run to Näscheplateau from a central valley ski station in Andermatt — doing away with the need for the charming, but slow, train. The new area will have two new mountain restaurants and 123km of terrain in total.

Work begins on the ski area this spring, replacing the chilly t-bar we rode from Oberalppass to Calmut with a high-speed, six-man covered chairlift with heated seats: a good job, because one thing that you can't control for all the money in the world is temperature, and Andermatt can be cold.

If you like your creature comforts, après-ski activity and modern lifts, wait until the project is completed. But if you're like me and want unspoilt beauty, Swiss charm and quiet slopes, go now. Whether the change is by degrees or absolute, Andermatt will soon never be the same again.

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