

# LIVING

TRAVEL, L2  
STYLE, L8  
WHEELS, L11

## An alpine family adventure

Could seeing  
the world  
through new  
eyes make  
travel magical  
again? L5





## EUROPE

## Bonding in the MOUNTAINS

MARK SISSONS  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"Sure we'll be OK?"

"We'll be just fine. I'll be right there beside you." I treasure my eight-year-old stepson, Nayam, as we slip into our snug wet-suits, slip-resistant rubber booties and life jackets.

Embarking on this white-water rafting expedition is a thrilling leap into the unknown for Nayam, who has only recently learned to swim.

Now, we stand on the precipice of an epic journey down the roaring rapids of the Arve river, which flows from the Swiss Alps through the heart of Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, merging with the Rhône near Geneva.

If there's a hint of fear in Nayam's eyes, he conceals it with the skill of a seasoned adventurer. But as we near the water's edge, his grip on my hand tightens, excitement and nerves coursing through his veins.

"I trust you," he whispers, squeezing my hand tighter.

Trust forms the unbreakable backbone of any family dynamic. But for stepfathers and stepsons, it's a bond that must be forged through shared experiences. From the moment Nayam and I embarked on our first journey together, to Legoland in sunny southern California when he was just four, our connection has grown stronger with each adventure.

We've conquered the heights of Canada's highest suspension bridge near Golden, B.C., hiked through grizzly country in Glacier National Park and raced down the Pipe Mountain Coaster in Revelstoke.

But our courage was truly tested when we dared to face the Revenge of the Mummy ride at Universal Studios Hollywood.

Now, here we are on our maiden European vacation together with Nayam's mom, Anisha, exploring three iconic mountain resorts in the Alps: Switzerland's Crans-Montana, Chamonix in France and Courmayeur just across the Italian border.

And Nayam is already proving to be the ideal fellow explorer, his innocence and infectious awe a refreshing reminder of my own excitement during my earliest adventures — before I'd "seen it all."

Walt Streightiff, a Chicago Tribune writer, once said, "There are no seven wonders of the world in the eyes of a child. There are seven million."

Wonders like the shimmering summit of Mont Blanc towering above us as we ascend the cable car to the Aiguille du Midi, the 3,842-metre-high mountain peak overlooking Chamonix. Its summit terminus is perched on a jagged granite spire that dramatically extends into the heart of the Mont Blanc massif.

As Nayam gazes at one of Europe's highest peaks from the viewing platform, I share the tale of Jacques Balmat and Michel-Gabriel Paccard's astonishingly daring first ascent of Mont Blanc back in 1786, which marked the dawn of modern mountaineering.

"The top looks like a giant vanilla ice cream cone," Nayam remarks, pondering if the mountaineers below us ascending the glacier will find a cherry atop Mont Blanc's summit.

A visit to Crans-Montana in Switzerland's French-speaking Valais region also becomes a lesson in alpine history. Known as "the sunny side of the Alps" because it gets more sunshine than most other places in the region, Crans-Montana is an iconic ski resort in winter.

In summer, hiking, biking, golfing and fishing are all popular here amid alpine lakes and forests. A patchwork of vineyards on Crans-Montana's lower slopes produces some of Switzerland's finest wines. Hiking across the Rhône Valley are some of the most famous peaks in Europe, including the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc and Dent Blanche.

In the hamlet of Colombiere, a cluster of traditional mountain huts on the slopes above Crans-Montana, we visit a museum depicting the lives of late 19th-century rural families, who migrated seasonally with their cattle between the valley and high alpine pastures.

Nayam is amazed to learn that over a dozen children, parents and grandparents shared one of these tiny stone huts with their cattle and goats, fending off predators like the Aminona wolf. Wide-eyed, he contemplates these cramped living conditions.

"Kinda makes your bedroom back home seem comfy, huh?" I suggest.

Nayam nods, envisioning the olfactory challenge of squeezing so many people and farm animals into such a confined space. Cue the inevitable fart jokes.

In Courmayeur on the Italian side of the Mont Blanc massif, Nayam is eager to explore the historic alpine village I had described as a place where one could feast on pizza, pasta and gelato every day — a kid's culinary dream come true.

Similar to Chamonix and Crans-Montana, Courmayeur boasts a rich history and culture that predates mountaineering, skiing and other alpine sports. With only around 3,000 permanent inhabitants today, it exudes a village-like atmosphere, with compact streets adorned by shops, cafés, osterias, pizzerias and gelaterias.

In the centre of town, we visit the museum of alpine guides, Museo Alpino Duca degli Abruzzi, where we delve into a captivating collection of docu-



GIACOMO BUZZI

Courmayeur, on the Italian side of the Mont Blanc massif, has a rich alpine history and exudes a village-like atmosphere with compact streets adorned by cafés, osterias, pizzerias and gelaterias.

ments, photographs, mountain climbing equipment, and souvenirs from renowned expeditions. This includes the historic first ascent of K2, the world's second-highest mountain.

Grabbing my iPhone, Nayam takes dozens of photos of long-gone alpine icons and their primitive gear, fascinated again by how difficult life appears to

have been back when everyone lived in monochrome.

At dinner on our final day, we savour the most exquisite pizza and pasta, reminiscing about our incredible journey across the roof of Europe.

"Such a magical week," Nayam reflects, sounding wiser than his years.

Thanks for these memories,

Nayam. As the old Irish blessing goes, may the road rise to meet you, may the wind be always at your back, and may the sun shine warm upon your face. May we have many more adventures together.

MARK SISSONS TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF BEST OF THE ALPS, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.



MARK SISSONS

Writer Mark Sissons with his partner, Anisha, and stepson, Nayam, on their alpine trip.

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