

Andermatt Switzerland

The Swiss resort town has undergone a remarkable rebirth, and can now boast its very own resident orchestra, reports *Charlotte Smith*

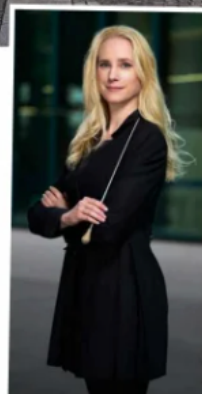


The hills are alive: (clockwise from main) the centre of Andermatt; the Swiss Orchestra performs in the Concert Hall; the Chedi Andermatt; Lena-Lisa Wüstendörfer

Once upon a time, Andermatt was a place in decline. Located in the Ursern Valley at the very heart of Switzerland, the Alpine village was an essential 19th-century trading hub, and grew throughout the century into a thriving spa destination. But the construction of the St Gotthard railway tunnel in 1881 diverted goods and travellers away from it, leading to a significant drop in tourism. Despite this, Andermatt's residents managed to maintain a decent standard of living, due to the presence of the Swiss Federal Army, whose High Command was

garrisoned in the mountains above. When the Cold War ended and the army departed, however, Andermatt found itself in financial trouble – perfectly encapsulated in the demolition of its once impressive Grand Hotel Bellevue.

As I look out at the snow-capped mountains from my generous balcony at the fabulously luxurious Chedi Andermatt, it's difficult to believe that just 20 years ago this was a town with scant



prospects. Today, Andermatt is a wealthy and sophisticated ski resort – home not only to the 5-star Chedi, but a 4-star Radisson Blu, a growing number of exclusive villas and apartments, with yet another 5-star hotel (The Alpinist) in development. It's no exaggeration to say that I experience two of the best meals of my life during my

short visit – at the Chedi Restaurant and at IGNIV, a fine-dining chain founded by 3-Michelin star chef Andreas Caminada.



And I'm even persuaded to undergo a massage at the Chedi Spa – not really my scene, but exceptional nonetheless.

All this extravagant luxury is the vision of Samih O. Sawiris, chairman of Andermatt Swiss Alps AG, who after consultation with the residents in 2005, set about revitalising the village with an ambitious new development, designed to complement the charming original buildings and to attract year-round tourism. It's testament to his sensitivity – and a desire to work with the villagers – that today, old and new areas of the town blend beautifully, with restaurants, shops, a golf course, state-of-the-art lifts to two ski areas... and a concert hall.

Sawiris is a keen music enthusiast, and foreseeing that seasonally reliant outdoor activities could only be a partial draw for tourists, he was adamant that the rejuvenated Andermatt would also be a cultural destination. Hence, Andermatt Concert Hall opened in 2019 to great fanfare and a showcase performance from the Berlin Philharmonic. The highest-lying concert venue in Switzerland, the flexible space makes little distinction between 'artist' and 'audience' areas, and as such offers an excitingly up-close-and-personal perspective of music-making.

It's now home to the Swiss Orchestra, founded in 2018 as a touring ensemble by Lena-Lisa Wüstendörfer, and since 2022 resident year-round in Andermatt. With a doctorate in musicology and a passion for unearthing forgotten repertoire, Wüstendörfer had already built a reputation for introducing works by obscure Swiss Classical and Romantic composers – and as artistic director of Andermatt Music, she now also invites visiting orchestras, chamber and folk performers and crossover stars to delight and educate her audiences.

'Andermatt is so special,' she tells me. 'No other Alpine region has a concert hall in use throughout the whole year. When I began this role, I spoke to a lot of people about programming strands that would suit the audience here. And now I think more than 50 per cent of people attending our concerts have come to the region specifically for the music. They're often travelling some distance to do so, which is really wonderful.'

'More than half our audiences come to the region specifically for our concerts'

Wüstendörfer's programming is certainly eclectic, suitable for audiences of locals and visitors from throughout Switzerland and further afield. I hear two concerts to launch the 2025-26 season during my stay. First up is the Budapest Festival Orchestra under Iván Fischer in a robust and fulsome account of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony



Local Hero

Bernhard Russi

Born in Andermatt in 1948, skiing champion Bernhard Russi (above) made his World Cup debut at the age of 19 in the giant slalom in Adelboden. His work as a stuntman for the Bond film *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* resulted in serious injury, but he went on to win gold at the World Championships in 1970, and two years later at the 1972 Olympics in Japan. Further World Championship wins were to come, plus a silver at the 1976 Olympics in Austria. Following his retirement from racing, Russi has become a notable designer of downhill Olympic courses and a popular commentator for alpine ski racing on Swiss television.

alongside Bach's Fourth Orchestral Suite and Fischer's own tongue-in-cheek *Dance Suite* for solo violin and orchestra, inspired by Bach and dance forms including tango, bossa nova and ragtime.

Two nights later, we're treated to 'A Night at the Opera', featuring the Swiss Orchestra in standards by Handel and Bizet alongside a fascinating overture by little-known Swiss composer Franz Xaver Schnyder von Wartensee. Also on the programme is some spectacular operatic singing by Trinidadian soprano Jeanine De Bique, who demonstrates phenomenal technical capacity and a lovely rapport with the audience.

It's the perfect way to complete my stay in this remarkable hybrid town – testament that with true imagination it's possible to preserve the past while looking positively to the future. 🍷
Andermatt Music's 2026-27 season opening weekend takes place on 25 and 26 September, with performances by the Ayoub Sisters and Swiss Orchestra. Further info: andermttmusic.ch/en/