

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 79 (2013)
Heft: [2]

Rubrik: Unesco Swiss world heritage site : Swiss Alps - Jungfrau Aletsch

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Unesco Swiss World Heritage Site

Swiss Alps - Jungfrau Aletsch

The Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch UNESCO World Heritage site is an outstanding example of the formation of the High Alps and their glaciers. The area is globally recognised as an area of outstanding scenic value. It has played an important role in European art, literature, mountaineering and alpine tourism.

UNESCO originally included the site into its exclusive list in 2001. But this was not enough: In 2007, the site was expanded into the east and west in 2007, bringing the total area to 824 square kilometres. The site spans the cantons of Bern in the north and Valais in the south, and is located about midway between Interlaken and Brig.

Gateways to the area

Many alpine municipalities form gateways for visitors to the area. Countless roads, trails, cableways, ski-lifts and mountain railways lead into it. A dense network of trails traverses the outer fringes, but its core remains a sanctuary for eagles and mountaineers. For a map showing the area's boundaries and access routes, go to www.jungfrau-aletsch.ch/en/besuchen-sie-das-welterbe.html.

Mountain and glacier galore

The site covers the impressive north wall of the High Alps including the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau peaks. On the southern side of the Alpine divide, there are many more peaks including curious names such as Schreckhorn ("Fright" Peak) and Wildi Frau (Wild Woman). These are surrounded by

gently sloping valley systems graced with some of the longest glaciers in Europe. Among these are of course the 23 kilometre long and 900 metre deep Great Aletsch Glacier, and the less well known Fiescher Glacier.

Glaciers have long held a fascination for mountaineers, who started to keep records from the 1850s. Unbeknownst to them, they created valuable data to help analyse the effects of climate change on alpine glaciation. The Aletsch Glacier is currently receding by 30 to 75 metres every year. It is estimated that between 1850 and 2005, the total glacier surface area shrank by 40% and the volume reduced by 60%.

A geological storybook

The area includes over nine peaks exceeding 4000 metres and surprisingly, this does not include the Eiger. These peaks demonstrate the phenomenal powers involved in the upthrust of great mountain ranges. This process began 20 - 40 million years ago, when the northward drifting African tectonic plate pushed 400 million-year-old crystalline rocks over younger carbonate rocks. This produced an array of unique alpine features, including horn peaks, glacial valleys and moraines. Glaciation itself played an important role in the formation of these features.

A great Alpine habitat

There is a great diversity of natural habitats with unique combinations of plants and animals.

These have evolved over a very long time, mostly without human intervention. They represent "natural successions" – sequences of plants and animals across time, altitude and space.

Effects due to recent climate change however, are evident. They include the changing tree line of the Aletsch Forest and new habitats developing in areas previously covered by ice.

The alpine vegetation is very different on the northern and southern side of the alpine divide, with a much drier climate prevailing in the south. Above the timberline, there are extensive areas of rhododendron scrub ("Alpenrose" or "Alpine Rose"), alpine grassland and tundra vegetation. On the dry southern slopes, steppe grasslands prevail.

The alpine fauna includes ibex, lynx, red deer, roe deer, chamois and marmot, as well as several reptiles and amphibians. Alpine birds also abound, such as golden eagle, kestrel, black grouse, lammergeier, pygmy owl and various woodpecker species.

Human heritage

Despite the area's remoteness, its human history spans from the Stone Age to modern times. Old sheep tracks lead up to the Aletsch meadows. On the southern slopes, irrigation channels ("Suonen") once brought precious water to lower levels.

Sources: whc.unesco.org/en/list/1037, www.jungfrau-aletsch.ch/en/, www.swissinfo.ch/eng/Specials/UNESCO-World_Heritage/Sites_in_Switzerland/



Sphinx Observatory above the Jungfrauoch, with views of the Great Aletsch Glacier
www.jungfrau.ch



Alpine Ibex near Lauchernalp (Lötschental)
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Alpine_ibex.jpg (Photo by Earth Explorer)