



LOVE AND CABLE CARS

A couple finds the path forward on a hike through the Swiss Alps. **BY LARRY BLEIBERG**

SARA AND I had been hiking in the Alps in Switzerland for two hours when we reached our first waystation: a bright blue cable car tucked into a shed on the edge of a mountain. The ride was self-operated, and after we settled in and pressed a few buttons, the machinery buzzed to life. The four-seat car slid out of the station and soon we were floating above a spruce forest, slowly gliding down the mountain. The two of us turned to each other and beamed, absorbing the adventure, the scenery and each other.



Sunlight filters down through the clouds over Engelberg, Switzerland.

CECA PHOTOGRAPHY

The cozy cable car felt like a metaphor for our trip: As a widow and widower, we knew that life was both precious and precarious, hanging by little more than a cable strung across breathtakingly beautiful valleys. But we had both decided to take this journey together anyway.

We had planned to spend three days zigzagging our way up and down the Engelberg Valley, using the private cable cars that farmers make available to hikers. We'd have hours alone as we crossed some of the loveliest mountains in Europe, giving us time to dream about our future and reflect on our past.

Since we were staying at mountain inns, we could travel light, carrying daypacks with little more than snacks and a change of clothes. But when you've both lost spouses, you're never really traveling light—or alone. As we hiked across green pastures, I could hear my late wife singing verses from *The Sound of Music*. When we checked into an Alpine guesthouse, Sara couldn't help but be reminded about the family trip to Switzerland that she and her husband had planned but were never able to take. It all felt natural though. As Sara and I had learned when we had started dating, there were going to be four people in our relationship, and here in the Alps, there was plenty of room for everyone.

But travel has a way of focusing your attention. One night, upon finding ourselves lost on a mountainside at dusk, our only concern was how to ease our way along a muddy trail that corkscrewed 1,000 feet down to the town of Wolfenschiessen. When we finally made it, we were several hours behind schedule and couldn't find the cable car that was to take us up another mountain to our lodge.

That's when we met the innkeeper's daughter, cruising around town in her small hatchback. When we hadn't shown up, she had started calling around the valley. Someone had spotted us walking down a trail, and she had gone to find us. That too felt familiar to me and Sara. When you're lost, help can come from the most unexpected places.

The next day, we hiked past grazing

dairy cows to a cheesemaker's rustic cafe. While the hostess assembled a tasting plate, she recounted how she had left a life of banking in Zürich to join her boyfriend in the mountains. It was a simple existence with few traditional comforts, but if the red painted hearts that decorated the yard were any indication, they had found happiness in their unconventional life.

On our last day, we boarded an open ski lift to bring us back to the town of Engelberg. As the lift left the station, it began to sprinkle. The rain soon quickened and then turned to hail. We were

both miserable and didn't dare speak. As veterans of long, happy marriages, we knew that the words to come out of our mouths were unlikely to be loving. Sometimes, it's best to remain quiet.

As we floated down the mountain, I softly counted the numbers on the lift towers: 8, 7, 6 . . . knowing that after we passed 1, we would find shelter. Back at lower elevation, we stepped off the lift, soaked to the bones. But the rain had stopped, and the sun was emerging. Sara and I had found our way back to comfort because we had kept moving forward—together. ▼

SPOTLIGHT



A Sumatran rhino photographed at White Oak Conservation Center in Yulee, Fla.

In Danger: Sumatran Rhino

The mist-shrouded peaks and lush rainforests of the Indonesian island of Sumatra are home to a biodiverse bonanza of wildlife. Among the rarest is the Sumatran rhino, relatively tiny (adults typically only measure 6 feet long) and about as shy and gentle as any species that walks our fragile planet. It's also among the most endangered, dangling at the edge of extinction as poachers illegally hunt them, all because of a myth that their horns have special medicinal benefits for humans. The good news is that breeding efforts at local zoos and wildlife refuges are working to ensure the species' survival. — **COSTAS CHRIST**

For more information on the endangered species included in National Geographic's Photo Ark project, led by photographer Joel Sartore, visit natgeophotoark.org.

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