

SAINTS COME BOUNDING IN

Phoenix Arrien enjoys dog day afternoons north of Martigny in the Swiss Alps

A GIANT paw saves me. Inspired by huge, charismatic saint bernards bounding all over the exercise yard, I jump into the fray. I get close to pulling a tendon during this unaccustomed exercise, until one concerned canine gently stops me with a paw backed by 90kg of muscle and gristle. I look up into soft brown eyes, and at a wet nose and a tongue that could clear an avalanche in two licks.

For centuries, saint bernards were bred to save us humans from ourselves. Just a short train and bus ride north of Martigny in southern Switzerland is this breed's ancestral home, the 11th-century Grand Saint Bernard Hospice monastery. Perched on the 2472m St Bernard Pass, in the region of the same name, the hospice lies at the centre of an ancient travellers' trail and

has since graced each generation of hounds, though the current Barry hasn't saved a soul. With changes in travelling styles and mechanised rescue equipment increasingly available over the past few decades, the dogs have stopped carrying out rescue work.

Remote living in snowy monasteries is hardly an appealing career today so the number of monks has dwindled to four: too few to care for 20 large dogs. So the monks sent out a distress call for someone to carry on the breeding tradition and in 2004 the Barry Foundation, formed and funded by donations, took over the care of the saint bernards by establishing kennels in Martigny.

The dogs live there from November to May, and that is where I make their close acquaintance.

Jasmine Abarca-Golay, manager of the Barry Foundation, remembers the furore that erupted when the monks said they couldn't care for the dogs any longer. "We had journalists and dog breeders pouring into Martigny from around the world. They were saying crazy things like the breed will become extinct or that one of the great traditions in the world will die."

All such fears now laid to rest, at the kennels visitors can see the dogs playing and training, and Abarca-Golay is planning a "picnic with the bernards" option. Into the surrounding fields I accompany her and another trainer for a work-out in which five-year-old Nolan and two-year-old Zen are put through their paces. The dogs are eager: floppy ears flapping as they run, sit, lie and heel while sporting red panniers that provide a touch of history.

Past and present collide, too, while I watch the dogs training. A helicopter buzzes overhead on its way into the mountains carrying a stretcher attached by a cable. For a moment the dogs look up at their flying replacement. Rescue in the Swiss Alps now has another form, but the legendary dogs live on, even saving the occasional over-enthusiastic visitor from herself.

With the mountains beckoning and inspired by close contact with the dogs, I am curious to visit the neighbouring region with the same name. Boarding a little red train called, with great affection, the Saint Bernard Express, we leave Martigny and head south through

the Switzerland of postcards and biscuit tins. Villages of pitch-roofed houses and steeped churches, backed by terraced vineyards, emerge from the snowy landscape. The little red caboose zips through dark tunnels and birch forests slashed by snow-laced gorges before reaching the town of Orsieres, at the centre of the Saint Bernard Region.

It's magical scenery where great snowy peaks rise into clouds, steep slopes plunge into misty valleys and little villages sprout from ledges and plateaus. Hiking is popular and local trails include the six-day Saint Bernard Route, taking walkers through six valleys and over the Grand St Bernard Pass, and the 10-day Mont Blanc route

spanning France, Italy and

One of the two main routes of medieval Christian Francigena that linked Britain to Rome, passed

During the warmer months from June to October, a connection between visitors from the railway and the monastery where the

Back in Martigny, a town of ruins and rustic buildings, the Saint Bernard museum, opened in 1980, features displays, toys, statues, movies and, of course, a little red train. Barry and the monks

■ www.fondation-barry.ch
■ www.pays-du-saint-bernard.ch

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became a kind of on-the-road refuge, a role the monastery still plays.

Since the 17th century, cowed hermits at the hospice have bred and cared for this large dog, whose broad chest cleared paths in the snow for the monks during their travels. It's undoubtedly an endearing image, harking to a simpler if more dangerous era in the Swiss Alps.

The dogs often found lost travellers and by saving more than 2000 people became known as the rescue hound, a tag that snowballed into legend. One of these tales involves the keg of spirits carried around the dog's neck, no doubt for medicinal purposes only.

Another legend concerns Barry, born at the hospice in 1800 and credited with saving more than 40 lives. The name

