

## Stories from the Valais

### 1,500-year-old larch - the oldest tree in the Alps

Not far from the Furka Glacier, beneath the Furka Pass on the eastern frontier of Valais, where the paths lead into the Gotthard region or towards Bern, the Swiss capital, stands near the village of Obergesteln the oldest tree in the Alps, a larch some 1,500 years old. Each year it grows and turns green once again, so the residents of the neatly built village are confident that their Methuselah-like tree will not leave them for a long time to come.

#### Giant trees in Goms

Valais has some of the finest larch forests in Europe and many giant trees whose savage beauty is no less astounding than that of the cedars of the Middle East or the high-stemmed trees of the Americas. In Goms, the romantic high valley of Valais that is home to Obergesteln, there are other youthful old trees of this type. Some have been positively dated at 800 years, which is why the giant tree of Obergesteln with a trunk diameter of 7.4 metres (24.3 ft.) is estimated to be 1,500 years old despite its hollow trunk. The estimation was made by an expert, Christoph Leuthold, a forest engineer with a doctorate from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, one of the top ten universities in the world, and the director of the Bildungswerkstatt Bergwald education workshop. Those who would like to see relatives of the giant tree of Valais should visit the enormous larches in the pastures of the Val de Nendaz in Lower Valais. Embracing them is a physical impossibility. But, as some connoisseurs of old trees like to claim, talking to them may not be entirely pointless.

#### Forests of Valais

In any case, the forests of Valais are another matter: the stone pine forest above the Aletsch Glacier is a world natural heritage site; the Pfynwald, one of the largest pine forests in Europe, takes three hours to walk through on the valley floor and refreshes the body and mind; and the primeval forest of Derborence in Lower Wallis, where the trees rose above a gigantic rockfall, is an experience beyond compare.

The old larch of Obergesteln probably began to grow from the ground just as ancient Rome was coming to an end. Nor has it lost touch with the Rome of today, as the old village beneath the Furka Pass is the original home of the current Abbot of Einsiedeln, the Benedictine Father Martin Werlen, directly subordinate to Pope Benedict XVI. So, visitors who might carelessly pass by Obergesteln on their way to the glaciers and passes should not miss the chance to stop here.

#### More information

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