

EUROPE MONASTERIES

A fine Romansh

Intrigued by an ancient language clinging to life in a tiny hamlet in the Swiss Alps, **Luke Slattery** took up lodgings in the local abbey.



The Benedictine abbey of Disentis stands above an Alpine pass threaded by a tributary of the mighty Rhine, whose source lies across the mountain crags.

It's a stirring landscape of thrusting and plunging diagonals, to which one of Switzerland's oldest monasteries brings a touch of man-made grandeur.

With its exuberant baroque facade and shapely bulb-domed bell towers, Disentis seems not so much to exalt the Creator's works as to rival them.

I've travelled to Disentis from Zurich by train to spend a night in the Benedictine abbey. Along the way there's a change at Chur – the largest town and regional capital of the Grisons, if you're French-speaking, Graubünden if you're German – with time to take in the Roman ruins sheltered by a timber chapel designed by 2009 Pritzker Architecture Prize-winner, Peter Zumthor.

The slow train out of Chur for Disentis curls its way through the Rhine Gorge, passing apple-green mountain pasture and forested peaks flecked with autumn brass.

In winter, this is skiing country. In the soft seasons, it's all about hiking, walking and the pristine mountain landscapes.

But I'm drawn to Disentis by the local language – a tiny fragment of Latin called Romansh – that clings to life in this remote alpine hamlet. German, the dominant

tongue of eastern Switzerland and the most powerful economic language of central Europe, is its most persistent linguistic predator. But it's not the only one.

Speaking one night to a Swiss hotel concierge who was learning Mandarin, I asked half-seriously why he hadn't taken up Romansh instead. "Because," he shot back, pinching his thumb and index finger closely together, "it's spoken by *this* many people."

A good reason, I thought, for a journey to Romansh-speaking Disentis.

I'm shown to my room in the abbey – a large corner suite with 180-degree views of the magnificent landscape – and given time to settle before a meeting scheduled with Father Ioannes outside the western portal.

"Romansh," he explains, dressed in his order's austere, black-hooded habit, "means 'from Rome,' or from Latin." Turning into the mild southerly breeze, and gesturing towards the mountains massing on the Italian border, he continues: "It may be the closest of all the so-called Romance languages to its Latin origins. Closer, even, than Italian. When our founders came to this place in the eighth century, they gave it the Latin word 'desertus'."

"It doesn't mean 'desert' because as you can see it is not a *des-ert*. But it was most probably desert-ed," he explains.

A paediatrician by profession, Father

The Benedictine abbey of Disentis, main and right, is one of the oldest monasteries in Switzerland, having been founded in the 7th century. The complex, however, dates back to 1696.



Below: The Oberalp region surrounding Disentis was originally called 'Desertus' – Latin for 'deserted'; Benedictine monks during a service inside the monastery. PHOTO: MAGNUS FRÖDERBERG

Ioannes was schooled in Greek and Latin, and speaks excellent English honed by travels through Africa and the subcontinent. But as his mother tongue is German and his Romansh is less than perfect, he's organised a lesson for me with a linguistically gifted final-year student raised in the valley.

The student's name is Not Soliva, and he gets straight down to business. "Here are two sentences in Romansh," he says with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Can you work them out?"

*Ilis dis ch' ein gia passai eran cuorts.
Mo era quels han fatg mei avunda staunchels.*

"Ein" looks a lot like the German indefinite article, but it turns out to mean "they are". I have better luck with "gia": Italian for "already". I get "mo" as a variant of "but" (Italian "ma"; French "mais"), as well as the Latinate words "passai" (to pass), "han" (to have) and "fatg" (to do/make).

After a few initial wins in the language game I get ahead of myself. When I take "cuorts" to mean "hearts", Soliva shakes his head and smiles. "You were on the right track with French, but sorry – it's 'short'."

I stumble again with "dis" – not, as I suspect, a version of "said", but a relative of the Latin dies, or "day" – and linger so long over "staunchels" that Soliva times me out. "It means tired," he says.

So, put it all together and it means: *The past days were already short. But even these have made me tired enough.*

The lesson leaves a sharp impression of the evolution of Romansh from its origins in spoken Latin to its uncertain status as a rare species surviving in a habitat that has always been challenging, and is now rapidly changing.

I pass the afternoon wandering through the village, where I spy what I take to be a typical Swiss car, its back seat piled high with hubcap-sized wheels of orange rind cheese. Continuing to the edge of town I come across the source of this lactic hoard: the Sennaria Surselva alpine dairy.

After a tour of the dairy, a cheese tasting, and a few purchases from the shop, I return to the abbey. On the way I meet Not Soliva, satchel over his shoulder, heading home

