



AS EVER, **NICO HISCHIER** GOT SOME MUCH-NEEDED REST AND RELAXATION BACK HOME IN EUROPE THIS SUMMER. BUT THE AFFABLE YOUNG DEVILS CAPTAIN DID MORE THAN JUST KICK UP HIS FEET DURING THE OFF-SEASON. HE ALSO ADDED A NEW - THOUGH DECIDEDLY UNOFFICIAL - JOB TITLE: NEW JERSEY'S AMBASSADOR TO SWITZERLAND

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HISCHIER: MARC DESROSNIERS-USA TODAY SPORTS

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## AS SUMMER BEGAN TO

wane into fall, New Jersey Devils captain Nico Hischier made his annual 3,900-mile pilgrimage across the Atlantic Ocean from his summer home in Switzerland back to the United States. Summers back home always help recharge the batteries ahead of the gruelling 82-game NHL season. Good thing, too, because if all goes as planned this year, Hischier will be playing far more than just those 82 regular-season games.

Hischier's stateside home – in New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from New York City – brings impeccable skyline views, huge crowds and the constant hustle and bustle synonymous with the Tri-State Area.

Each day, he makes the 30-minute drive to the Devils' facility in Newark. It is the Garden State's most-populous city, a lively urban area with buildings seemingly stacked on top of one another and minimal green space. With a population of more than 300,000 residents packed into about 25 square miles, it's no surprise that at any given moment, one's ears can be met with the clamor of car horns or sirens – or just the general din that fills the city's streets.

It is a long cry from the Valais region of Switzerland, which is where Hischier grew up.

In Valais, those cacophonous sirens and car horns are replaced by the sounds of cowbells from the grazing cattle and sheep scattered throughout the hills and mountains. Expansive vineyards dot the landscape – Valais is Switzerland's foremost wine-producing region – scattered among the area's soaring mountain peaks. Cast under an estimated 300 days a year of sun, the area boasts nearly 5,000 miles of marked hiking trails, which cut through remarkable pale-blue rivers, vibrant meadows and up grand glaciers.

It would be difficult, nigh on impossible, to find two places more sharply in contrast. Where New Jersey is boisterous, dynamic and frenetic, everything moves at a slower pace in Valais. The sights and sounds of nature fill the senses, and walking is the primary mode of transportation within the picturesque small mountain villages.

This summer, Hischier had the opportunity to bring that beguiling Swiss charm to two lucky Devils fans. Or rather, bring the Devils fans



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## HOMETOWN ADVANTAGE

Hischier chalked up the ease with which he navigated the trails to being familiar with the Swiss terrain.

to that Swiss charm. Hischier and Switzerland Tourism jointly held a contest for two fans to win a once-in-a-lifetime experience to explore the Valais Matterhorn Region with the Devils captain himself.

Ethan Lowndes and Jasmine Saldanha, both 22, won the contest. That's how, in early August, they found themselves at Newark Liberty International Airport, preparing to board an Airbus A330-300 for an overnight flight bound for Zurich, Switzerland.

Their eight-hour journey across the Atlantic eventually gave way to a scenic two-and-a-half-hour train ride southwest through the Swiss countryside, bringing them to Hischier's mountainous home region.

The day began in Naters, which is around a two-hour drive from Bern. Hischier and the production crew sent to film the outing awaited their charges outside a church at 9 a.m. On this day, Hischier wasn't the captain of an NHL team with Stanley Cup aspirations. Rather, he was a happy-go-lucky 24-year-old laughing and reminiscing about his childhood.

With his white baseball cap on backward, a black hoodie and matching black joggers, Hischier cut an unpretentious figure. Relaxedly, he greeted his guests with a warm handshake and a smile, welcoming them to his hometown.

Naters, with its population

of around 10,000, is engulfed by sprawling mountains and sits about halfway between famed peaks Eiger to the north and Matterhorn to the south. The homes have brightly painted shutters with window boxes filled with colorful petunias and geraniums. Hischier led the group through the cobblestone streets, sharing stories from his childhood.

And make no mistake, Hischier was not an unwilling or passive participant. He was every bit the gracious and engaged host and tour guide – keen both to answer Lowndes and Saldanha's questions and get to know them by posing some of his own. The group found common footing on soccer fandom (Hischier supports English side Liverpool) and musical choices (rapper

Drake was a favorite). A quick pit stop at Hischier's boyhood school came with the revelation his favorite subjects were history and languages. And he hasn't let that enthusiasm slip by the wayside, either, as he now speaks Swiss German, English, some French and bits and pieces of Italian.

The afternoon brought with it a visit to Saas-Fee, a nearby resort village known as the 'Pearl of the Alps' due to its location in a valley surrounded by 13,000-foot mountains and glaciers that radiate a vibrant blue hue. It is a village comprised of wooden chalets, flower beds and fresh air (it is a car-free area).

It was all a fine exhibition of what the Swiss landscape had to offer, no doubt. But what about a taste of traditional Swiss fare?

A classic Swiss cable car brought the group to its outdoor lunch spot. From the cableway sprung forth panoramic views of seasonal streams formed by the glacial water beneath. Fields of wildflowers and lush forests separated the streams as they flowed down toward the charming village.



The Devils captain was happy to play the role of host and get to know his American guests.

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After a Valaisan plate lunch of various meats, cheese and rye bread, it was time to hike across the icy mass stretching nearly three miles and sitting at an elevation of 12,467 feet. The group divided off into smaller pods, each tethered together by a rope attached to harnesses around the waist. The Devils captain was at ease as he looked at the nature surrounding him in wonderment, joking, "You don't see that in Jersey."

Hischier isn't exactly new to any of this. The first-overall pick from the 2017 draft enjoys an adrenaline rush off the ice and could be described by some as a thrill-seeker. He has – cautiously, of course, as safety is always priority No. 1 – previously been on a glacier and has cliff-jumped into bodies of water. He would partake in bungee jumping and skydiving if it weren't for his commitment to hockey and the Devils.

"I was on a glacier before, but I haven't been in a while," Hischier said. "So, even for me, it was nice to be up there again and see how much stuff you can do and how nice it is. Especially the nature here. And it's really quiet. That's one thing I like."



For Hischier, getting away in nature is imperative during the summer and helps him recharge after a demanding year in New Jersey. "Every hockey season is intense mentally and physically," he said. "It's really

important to have this space where you can be yourself and not worry too much."

Hischier's patience and mindfulness were plainly on display during the hike. Armed with the understanding the excursion was a new experience for some, he was attentive and checked in to see how everyone was doing.

The hike began with a careful descent of a steep hill to get to the Fee Glacier. While a few in the group struggled, Hischier was seemingly effortless in traversing the terrain, wearing a buoyant smile the whole way down. "Hey," Hischier said, by way of humble explanation, "it's my hometown."

While on the glacier, Hischier fulfilled his obligations and ensured the production crew got everything they needed for the campaign. While he doesn't necessarily *enjoy* the spotlight and being in front of the camera, he understands it comes with the territory.

The group capped the day with a traditional raclette dinner outside a traditional old barn in Saas-Fee. A classic Swiss raclette consists of heating cheese, scraping off the melted part and serving it with boiled potatoes, pickles and onions. Here, the group learned about Hischier's family dynamic as he poured everyone a glass of wine from the region.

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In his immediate family, Nico has his father, Rino; his mother, Katja; and his older siblings, brother Luca and sister Nina. Luca, four years Nico's senior, plays for Biel-Bienne in Switzerland's top pro league. "He was always my idol, and I still say he is my idol now," Hischier said. "He always will be. He is my big brother, and you always look up to your brother a little bit."

Hischier followed his older brother's footsteps into hockey. And while both are listed as centers with their teams, Hischier quickly points out (with a chuckle) it was a mere coincidence they began their careers at the same position and that Luca now plays more wing.

The Hischier brothers played their youth hockey in the nearby village of Visp, as it housed the closest rink to Naters. Eventually, Hischier played



With views like this on offer, it's really no wonder Hischier values his time back home in the summer.



his first pro game for EHC Visp in the Swiss second division in 2015-16. That full-circle moment was made more special because his idol, Luca, was in the lineup with him.

That may seem a lifetime ago, but the two brothers still share an extremely close bond. It may come as a surprise, though, that hockey is a topic the pair rarely discuss. "We don't really talk too much about it, to be honest," Hischier said. "We are really close, and yeah, obviously, sometimes there are conversations about hockey, but usually, it's not long."

Luca's own hectic hockey schedule makes it difficult for him to travel to New Jersey, and he has only been to the United States twice as his brother enters his seventh

season with the Devils. Rino Hischier makes the trip overseas the most, travelling a couple of times a season.

As dinner wrapped up, Hischier began collecting the plates and assisted in clearing the table. He embraced the two contest winners – mere strangers just hours ago – and thanked everyone before departing for the train station to return to his apartment. "Nico was thoughtful and easygoing," Saldanha said. "It felt like a glacier hike with a good friend."

Not too long after his visitors returned home, Hischier, too, embarked on his trip back across the Atlantic. It would take some time to readjust to the contrasting world that life in New Jersey brings and to prepare for the hectic 82-game schedule awaiting him. While the sky-high expectations surrounding the Devils and the accompanying pressure are new to him and most of his teammates, Hischier knows keeping an even keel will be vital. "We can't get too low if we lose a couple," Hischier said. "And can't get too high if we win a couple."

Sitting at his dressing-room stall at Prudential Center after a gruelling practice, Hischier still glowed with the joy of his time at home – and his newfound tour-guide status. "The trip was about showing my home, and the glaciers are a part of it," Hischier said. "The mountains. The glacier. It's nature and the beauty of where I grew up. Giving a chance for someone to experience that was a good thing to do. They were able to see the beauty of Switzerland."

Hischier knows he's left behind the tranquility of his small Swiss hometown for the foreseeable future. That's OK. With any luck, he'll be adding to Newark's signature hum of electricity as he and his Devils take a run at the franchise's first Stanley Cup since 2003 this coming spring. Then, just maybe, he can show off the beauty of his homeland to another guest – Lord Stanley. **H**

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