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Why this barking Swiss attraction lures dog-lovers by the thousand

Barryland is a unique tribute to the world of the St Bernard dog – a visit tells a great deal about our relationship with man's best friend



Lottie Gross
Travel Writer
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Published 13 August 2026 2:00pm
BST



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Barryland, a museum opened in 2025, is dedicated to celebrating the St Bernards breed. Credit: Thomas Masotti

When I first met Barry he was lying on the floor. His legs were twitching and his feet flicked back and forth as if he was dreaming of running, perhaps to rescue something or someone.

It wasn't an entirely unlikely dream, because Barry is a dog – a St Bernard to be specific – and he comes from a historic line of avalanche search-and-rescue dogs first bred in the 19th century at a monastery on [Switzerland's](#) Great Saint Bernard Pass.

Along with a small crowd of equally charmed onlookers, I watched as a handful of other St Bernards lumbered and lounged around him in the kennels of Barryland, a museum opened in 2025 dedicated to celebrating these mighty mountain [dogs](#).



I am a self-confessed dog lover. My entire career as a travel writer took a rogue turn when I wrote a dog-friendly guidebook to Britain after the pandemic and it accidentally became a best-seller. With five dog-based books published and several more in the pipeline I know better than most about the obsession we have with our dogs (41 per cent of households in the UK currently own at least one, with about 15.5 million in the country in total).

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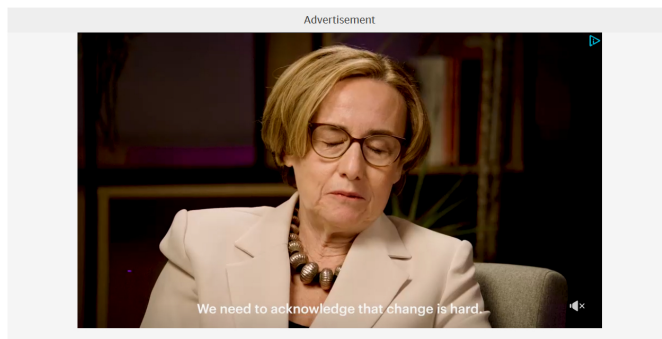
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St Bernards, though, have made it to the next level. They are Swiss icons, featuring in films – from live-action [Disney](#) movies in the 1970s to the *Beethoven* series of the 1990s and 2000s – and appear on branding for everything from Campari to cigarettes. The most celebrated St Bernard – the very first Barry – is even immortalised in taxidermy at the Natural History Museum in Bern.



'People will come specifically just to see him': the first Barry has been preserved through taxidermy Credit: Lottie Gross

He has a proud stance inside his glass box, though he didn't always look so powerful. He has been recast in taxidermy several times over the last 200 years to align with the tastes of whichever curator was in post. Today, his fur is a little worse for wear – they've had to patch him up a few times with fur from other dogs – and his anatomy is a little off if you really know your dogs, but he's a handsome boy nonetheless.

The original Barry is said to have rescued over 40 people during his tenure as an avalanche dog in the early 1800s. Today his remains are the museum's most popular exhibit. "People will come specifically just to see him. These dogs are revered the world over," said Martin Troxler, head of zoological preparation at the museum, when I popped in ahead of my Barryland visit.

Barryland itself, which is less than two hours by train from Bern, is proof. First opened in 2005 in the city of Martigny in southern Switzerland, it reopened in June last year after a huge refurbishment and expansion. Since then it has welcomed more than 135,000 visitors, sometimes as many as 1,400 in a single day.



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Barryland reopened in June 2025 after a huge refurbishment and expansion

The facility is all space-age curves and world-class tech, entirely designed with the living, breathing, snoring, drooling dogs – of which there are usually 12 on site – in mind. The ground floor is an exhibition space, charting the history of the breed and their role in past mountain rescue efforts, as well as many of the myths and legends that have been told about the dogs over the years. (Those barrels of rum you’ve seen tied around their necks? Just a marketing ploy, I’m afraid.)

Upstairs is the main event: set in a circular atrium are four sound-proofed kennels where you can watch St Bernards going about their deeply unbusy lives. They spend most of their days fast asleep or, at the very least, reclining on the temperature-controlled floor staring blankly into the middle distance, no doubt wondering when the next meal might appear.



Visitors to the space-age facility can watch resident St Bernards going about their ‘deeply unbusy lives’ Credit: Lottie Gross

These dogs live a far more pampered life than the many pets cooped up in flats across the world, and they get to enjoy the human-dog bond with their own dedicated handlers. They get twice-daily walks and constant access to a grassy garden through automatic dog doors. The kennels also have privacy areas where they can escape the eyes of those prying, dog-loving crowds. “He’s so cute,” I hear them coo in French as they gaze through the soundproof windows.

These dogs don’t live here, but instead are housed at off-site kennels and brought here on rotation so they are never overstimulated by weeks of being stared at by their adoring public.



The dogs get to enjoy the human-dog bond with their own dedicated handlers Credit: Getty

There are also weekly hydrotherapy and physio sessions, nail trims and grooming rounds. As the latest Barry snored away – there’s always one male St Bernard in the museum’s pack named after the original 19th-century St Bernard – an elderly male enjoyed a physiotherapy massage in the next kennel over.

Later on, with a gaggle of young children transfixed behind the glass windows, four-year-old female Muffin had her teeth brushed with chicken-flavoured toothpaste. Afterwards, she was allowed to roam free from the grooming table and trotted straight to the open window where she greeted the children with a gentle headbutt and slowly swishing tail.

The museum is run by the Barry Foundation, a non-profit set up by a group of passionate donors to save the dogs when the priests at Great Saint Bernard Pass monastery could no longer manage the breeding and keeping of these gloriously goofy creatures. The Foundation runs kids' camps to educate children about dogs and a training scheme to help other St Bernards become therapy dogs.



Barryland is home to an extensive exhibition on the cultural importance of the St Bernards breed Credit: Getty

"We are not a tourist attraction first and foremost," Andrea Zollinger, manager of corporate communication at the Barry Foundation, told me as we sat down for iced tea in the Barryland café. "This is about the history of the dogs and the breeding program, and making a difference. We are just happy to share it with the public."

The joy these dogs are so deft at dispensing is palpable at Barryland. Puppies bring the most excitement, of course, and there's a new litter expected to arrive at Barryland by October. But the older dogs are utterly charming, too. I watched an elderly woman in a wheelchair giggling as she ran her fingers through Muffin's thick fur.

I get that same sense of wholesomeness when I arrive at the Great Saint Bernard Pass, a 40-minute drive from Barryland, to meet the dogs that still live in the mountains. When the priests gave up their dogs to the foundation in 2005, they had one request: bring them back to a purpose-built visitor centre next door to the monastery in the pass each summer to see their homeland.

Sitting high in the Valais Alps on the border with [Italy](#), the pass has a sparkling alpine lake ripe for swimming and views of jagged dolomite mountains. A long-abandoned customs checkpoint sits on the roadside at the border, which you can stroll across to enjoy a honey grappa after a swim on the Italian side, before tucking into a hearty raclette at [the Auberge de l'Hospice Saint Bernard](#), a fairly basic hotel connected by a bridge to the monastery with the finest mountain views from its southwest-facing rooms.





Our writer visited the Barryland museum and nearby Great Saint Bernard Pass to learn more about these mighty mountain dogs. Credit: Lottie Gross

This is an idyllic place to be a dog; the kennels here are less high-tech than Barryland, but with far more peace and quiet thanks to fewer crowds, and much better daily walks. I watch as three female St Bernards – Jazz, Abby and Plume – orbit their handler, Deb, among the wildflowers of the Promenade des Chanoines.

The remoteness of the pass means visitor numbers here are far fewer than Barryland, but it offers a chance for quieter moments with the dogs, either during feeding time in the evening or on a [gentle hike with them through the hills](#). The age-old lament “it’s a dog’s life” has never felt so inappropriate.

Essentials

The writer was a guest of [Switzerland Tourism](#). There are regular daily