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Swiss Snippets

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas

Written by Diccon Bewes on December 22, 2009 in *Swiss year*

Snow is falling all around me, chestnuts are roasting on an open fire, the Salvation Army is playing O Come All Ye Faithful, and the tills are ringing like jingle bells. It must be nearly Christmas. Except that this is Switzerland, so it's not quite Christmas as I know it. On the surface, it might look the same, but the Swiss celebrate in a totally different way from the British. Welcome to a Swiss Christmas!

For one thing, it's a lot less hectic. The shops are busy, but with nothing like the madness to be found on Oxford Street, and TV is not full of endless adverts exhorting you to spend more. It all feels a lot less commercialised; not least because the shops aren't open all day every day. Last Sunday was one of only two in the whole year when shops could open, and even then not everywhere in the country: for many Swiss, God is still more important than Mammon.

Then there's the Christmas dinner, or lack of it. A recent survey showed that only 8% of Swiss eat turkey (or goose) for the Christmas meal, which is normally eaten on Christmas Eve evening rather than on the Day itself. A fifth of Swiss prefer to have fondue chinoise, where thin slices of beef are cooked in a communal pot of hot broth, then eaten with various sauces. But well over half just eat whatever takes their fancy, with no traditional meal year after year. As for mince pies and Christmas pudding, they are rarely seen in Swiss shops. Instead there's Panettone and Stollen, mixing Italian and German traditions, rather like Switzerland itself.

As for crackers, most Swiss have never pulled one. My friends and in-laws rather liked having them from England, for the novelty value if nothing else, but that was a few years ago when such innocent pleasure was allowed. Then the Swiss government reclassified crackers as dangerous weapons (those bangs really are lethal, it seems) meaning that importing or selling them became much more difficult. And this in a country where supermarkets sell giant, life-threatening fireworks and small children let off firecrackers in the street on National Day. It truly is crackers!

A Swiss Christmas has three very special advantages. Firstly, and rather astonishingly for me, is that you are allowed to have real candles on your Christmas tree. Crackers may be dangerous, but candles are apparently not. Health & Safety would never allow that in Britain, but in Switzerland you get to turn off the lights and sit beside a tree lit by dozens of tiny flickering flames. Second, few shops play endlessly repeating Christmas music. That might make it feel a little less festive, but at least you don't have to listen to Stop the Cavalry or Mistletoe and Wine a hundred times a day. Bliss. Lastly, the most amazing thing is that the trains don't stop, the trams don't sit in their sheds, and the buses don't lie idle. They all run every day of the festive period, precisely because that's when lots of people want to use them. For someone brought up on British Rail and privatisation, that's as miraculous as the story of Christmas itself.

So a happy Christmas to you, wherever you are.

Source: <http://www.dicconbewes.com>

St.Niklaus – a place for the thrill-seeker and the timid By Luzia Sauer

St.Niklaus did not only inspire the Swiss to make pastry, but also to dedicate chapels to him. For those of you who have paid a visit to Bettmeralp, tasted the saffron in Mund (pun not intended) and

seen the cows descend in Buerchen, it might be well worth to visit the parish St.Niklaus 27 kilometres further down south. St.Niklaus or 'Zaniglas', as the locals would call it, has received its name after the saint of its famous church in the 19th century.

The more obvious attraction of the place, however, is its location. St. Niklaus is situated in a valley 1120 metres above sea and surrounded by 36 four-thousand-metre-high peaks. This setting stimulated the performance of rather intense activities of a few young St.Niklauser in the mid-19th century. Josef Lochmatter and Peter Knubel, two local men, were among the first to climb the Matterhorn and did so not once but repetitively, and, as mountain guides, almost gained the exclusive right to the mountain's ascent. At around the same time their friend, Alois Pollinger, invented abseiling with two ropes which was necessary for him to cross a ridge on the 'Dent Blanche'. Not surprisingly, their sons continued the mountain climbing tradition and ultimately went up almost every mountain there is in the alps. They also began to climb mountains overseas and became the first ski guides in Switzerland.

An astonishing total of over 300 first ascents can be traced back to the climbers of Zaniglas. As a consequence, the world's only mountain climbing museum (Bergfuehrermuseum) was opened in St.Niklaus in the year 2000 to inform its visitor of the parish's adventurous past. Yet the 2,500-soul village also offers something for the less risky: There is a plethora of walking tracks scattered around the area designed both for ramblers who prefer easy strolls and those that can't resist the challenge of difficult mountain tracks. St.Niklaus' location and history sure make it a place well worth visiting.

If you visit the village from St Nikolaus Day (6 December) until Three Kings Day (6 January) then you're in for a treat as you will get to see the worlds largest St. Nikolaus. The huge figure built in 1998 is 36.50 meters high and is noted in the Guinness Book.

Sources: <http://www.st-niklaus.ch/site> http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Niklaus_VS

