Berne : a special by Adrian Blaser

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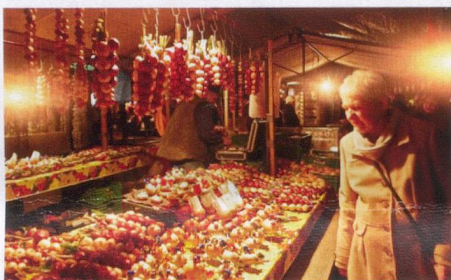
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Berne: A special by Adrian Blaser

Zibelemärit (Onion Market)

One of Berne's highlights is the Annual Onion Market (Zibelemärit). It happens on the 4th Monday in November and starts very early in the morning.

There are usually special trains from all around the country to Bern to be there early by around 3-4 am. From Wikipedia, I learnt that the Zibelemärit originated in the 1850s with marmettes, farmers' wives from around Murten, coming to Berne at around St. Martin's Day to sell their produce. However, a persistent local legend holds that the Zibelemärit is a much older festivity.

"Zibelemärit" in Berne
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According to this legend, the Bernese awarded the people from the nearby city of Fribourg the right to sell onions in the city in reward for their aid after a fire destroyed much of Berne in 1405.

As the name indicates, it is mainly onions that are sold at the Zibelemärit. Bernese farmers, who are proud of their decorative onion tresses and onion wreaths, also sell other onion products on the market, including Zibelechueche (onion tart, see Edith Hess' recipe on page 21), onion soup and onion sausages. Decorative chains of sugar onions are also popular with children.

Later in the morning, the narrow alleys are usually packed tight with people which is what the Bernese call the "Gstungg".

But there are also all other traditional market stands like at any other market too. And of course you can get Glühwein (mulled wine).

Local schools close early so the kids can take part in the famous Konfettischlacht (confetti battle). It officially starts at 4pm, but even in the morning you can't get home without having these coloured paper bits everywhere, and I mean everywhere! Trams can't run as the tracks are covered in confetti. It always amazed me that the next morning you can't find a single confetti lying around. I remember a few Zibele Märit when it snowed. It was just magical to be there, having mulled wine, Zibelechueche and it snows. Fabulous!

Aare by rubber boat

Travelling from Thun to Berne in an inflatable dinghy

Pretty much every year in summer, Pia and I would do our annual Aarefahrt (Aare trip). We would pack our Gummiboot (inflatable dinghy), take the train to Thun Schwaebis (on the route from Burgdorf to Thun) and blow up the dinghy.

A clever guy (retired) had set up a small business by having a compressor at the car park and for a fee (used to be SFR 5.00), he would inflate the dinghy for you. Alternatively, you use a hand or foot pump.

You then put the clothes in a watertight bag or barrel, put on togs and sunscreen and launch. Depending on the water flow, it can take you between 2 and 3 hours to get to Berne.
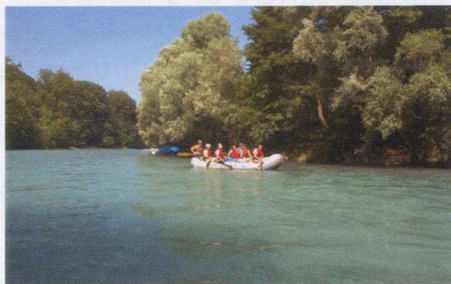
There is one tricky rapid you have to watch. It's called the Uttiger Schwelle. If you want to stay dry, you have to stay on the right side of the river. If you go through the middle of the river, you will get wet (guaranteed) and sometimes the dinghy turns.

Along the way, there are many shallow bits where you can stop and have lunch or just enjoy the sun. Once you pass the Eichholz (public campground,) you have to start thinking about getting ready to get out.

You will pass the Tierpark Daelhoelzli (like a Zoo) and afterwards come to the public swimming pool area, the "Marzili". It's advisable to try to exit the river at the earliest possible stairs by grabbing the handle bars.

Along the Marzili, there are about 5-6 exit points. Don't miss them, as afterwards there is not much hope to get out.

You can enjoy some more swimming in the Aare (which is never that warm, 21 degrees is a lot) or in the swimming pool before walking to the bottom station of the Marzilibahn which takes you up to the Bundeshaus area (www.marzilibahn.ch). It is only a short walk back to the main train station to get you back home.

"Gummiboot" on the Aare River
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Swimming at the Marzili

During my study years in Bern I worked for a few summers as Lifeguard at the Marzili Swimming Pool. Apart from the normal duties like watching the pool, cleaning and maintenance, we also supervised swimming in the River Aare.

There are many entry points into the river. The longest swim is from Eichholz to Marzili (about 15-20 minutes). On weekends and during busy school holidays, the city police patrolled the river with a motorised pontoon boat.

One of us Marzili lifeguards was rostered on that shift and at the end of the shift, they would drop you off at the furthest point so you could get a long swim back to the Marzili and continue on your next shift.

Aare River at the Marzili
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