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Europe Retrospective: Discovering Switzerland

What does it mean to be Swiss?

As a Swiss who was born in America and lives in New Zealand, this has always been a difficult question to answer. Am I Swiss if I speak the language? Am I Swiss if I eat the food? Celebrate the holidays? Live in Switzerland? Am I Swiss simply if I am born to a Swiss mother?

I decided to find out. Following the end of my first year of university, I traded in the promise of a New Zealand summer to travel to a wintery Europe, spending a month in Switzerland during a total of two months across France, Germany, and Italy.

So, here are my impressions of Switzerland as a Swiss person who is also a foreigner! First of all, the language barrier cannot be ignored. It was the thing that most excited and worried me. However, I am happy to report that armed with a paltry “bonjour” and “je ne parle pas français” I was able to expand my arsenal to include important phrases such as “quatre heures” (afternoon tea), “la Romandie” (French-speaking Switzerland) and, according to some boys in Paris, the most important word in the French language, “putain” (I’m sure everyone knows what this means).

The linguistic diversity in Switzerland fascinates me. Even though New Zealand boasts three official languages – English, Maori, and New Zealand Sign Language – it is not common to find someone who commands more than one with confidence. Contrast this with Switzerland, where the opposite is true! I loved using different languages in different parts of the country, and even with different people in different



I spent the first part of my trip in Paris. I loved the culture, history, and gastronomy of the city (I ate so many crêpes...) Though most people spoke to me in English, this was my first time immersed in a primarily French-speaking environment.

situations. I mostly spoke English with my cousin, but with her son we would all speak French. My other cousins liked to switch between French and English, and my grandmother only spoke French. This added a lot of charm to the country and became something that I really enjoyed about my time there.

I loved Swiss public transport! There are very few trains in New Zealand, and most are for commercial or private use as opposed to public transportation, so riding both regional trains and the metro was a new experience for me (much to the amusement of every passenger around me, I’m sure). The national train network makes an already small country seem a lot cosier; the fact that the entire network runs under one system, with the same fares and process in every city, only eases the burden of travel. The entire country is your backyard!

And lastly, it cannot be understated that Switzerland is incredibly beautiful. Looking in any direction at any time was like looking at a postcard. I loved the mountains, I loved the architecture, and I loved the snow.

So, what did I learn? I still cannot and will not eat frogs. Pizza is cut into six slices instead of eight. You need to bring your own bags to the supermarket. Swiss chocolate really is to die for. There is a strange obsession with sparkling water. And I was quite disappointed to discover that McDonald’s (or as I more commonly heard it called: MacDo’s!) doesn’t serve Frozen Cokes in Switzerland.

But what does it mean to be Swiss? The truth is that I still don’t know. I saw a side of Switzerland that not many tourists do: I dined with the locals, I spent time in

their homes, and I spoke their language. In many ways, I was like a local myself. And for that reason, I feel a connection with this land that I can’t quite describe. One thing that I know for sure: I will be definitely returning to Switzerland. This was not a “au revoir” but a “à bientôt”.

Melissa Smith, daughter of Sandrine Smith, present treasurer for Swiss Society of NZ.



The Matterhorn, the famous Swiss (or Toblerone) mountain. The scope is difficult to describe: I was in awe, upon descending the mountain, at the shadow that the mountains cast on the town of Zermatt. This isn't something you see every day!



I am a student of physics so I was very excited to visit the CERN laboratory in Geneva. Unfortunately, it was closed, but I was still in awe of being so close!



Towards the end of my trip, I attended the Murten-Morat Festival of Lights. The lights and music were absolutely incredible. I was also intrigued by the bilingual nature of the host city, which inspired me to learn German!



There are so many countries on your doorstep when you live in Switzerland. I boarded a train bound to Frankfurt to visit a friend, and three hours later I was in another country! This was a completely new concept to me.