

# A letter to an architect about to spend a holiday in Switzerland

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1949)**

Heft 1120

PDF erstellt am: **26.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-693856>

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## A LETTER TO AN ARCHITECT ABOUT TO SPEND A HOLIDAY IN SWITZERLAND.

*This article is reproduced from the August issue of the "Architect and Building News" by courtesy of the Editor.*

DEAR L.,

Though I am quite certain that you have at least one relative who specialises in holidays in Switzerland and knows all about places, people and tips, I am going to offer my piece of advice in a strictly non-competitive spirit. Your journey begins, architecturally, when you go, as you should, to the Swiss Travel Bureau in the Strand which Alfred Roth, with the help of Sir T. P. Bennett, managed to get superbly carried out and which, if anything, is perhaps too full of good ideas.

There you will get, while you glance around, the best possible information concerning almost everything Swiss, and you may take it from me that these people specialise in that sort of thing a little longer than your helpful relative and will succeed to give you the right sort of information. If you are wise you take, in addition to your ticket from Victoria to your destination in Switzerland, a holiday ticket costing a few shillings and entitling you to six journeys at half price inside Switzerland.

In budgeting you allow about £1 a day, which, if you are not extravagant, should cover bed and board, though you will have to make some extra allowance for your wine. As I am on this subject, do not think you will have to call for Chianti or any other foreign produce; you can take it from me that Swiss wines are quite drinkable and none too expensive. I prefer the red wines of the Veltlin and the Canton Wallis, but there are others which you may discover.

As for food, you can be sure to get your money's worth everywhere in the German, French and Italian parts; you will enjoy greatly the friendly way you are served and, while you may find that money is by no means despised, not even in the Ticino, you will seldom have to complain of what it buys you. You can safely book your hotel, pension, boarding house or furnished room from here; they will stick to their part of the bargain over there, and you need not worry.

Let me warn you, however, that travelling inside Switzerland is expensive, and when you have exhausted your six holiday tickets you will feel the full effect of it on your allowance. But travelling is a joy not only because of the things you see passing by, but also because of the wonderful design of the new electric trains which you will use. By the way, do not use your full weight and muscular power when trying to open the large windows, or else you will bang your head against the glass and come down upon your knees by the sheer force of your effort; the window, being a precision instrument, offers you none of the resistance to which you may be used. You can travel third in comfort, and you will find the wooden seats to your liking, as they are perfectly shaped. There is a pleasant table for your use and you simply will marvel at finishes, fittings and colour schemes.

I think your plan to go to Basle first is a good one: quite apart from cutting down the journey as far as possible — and I expect you will travel via Calais-Strasbourg — it brings you to Switzerland where you might enter best, e.g., architecturally. If

you arrive there in the morning, as well you might, I recommend you to fortify yourself with two fried eggs and the generous portion of ham that goes with them; they understand that sort of thing in Basle and it will put you in the right frame of mind for your holiday.

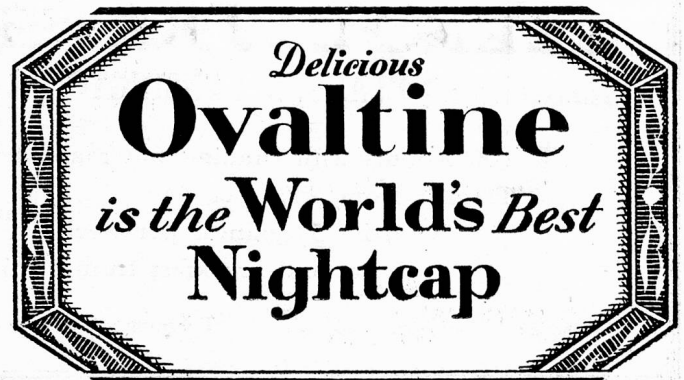
You will have no difficulties with language. They speak your own at least in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, and are eager to try it out on you. In the French and Italian-speaking Cantons you will normally find a German-Swiss, for they go everywhere, who will enjoy interpreting for you. It is not for me to generalise on national characteristics; besides, that is no easy job in Switzerland, where there are not only three national languages broken down into jealously guarded dialects with a fourth language, Raeto-Roman, in addition, but also 25 Cantons used to self-government since time immemorial.

You should, however, avoid identifying the German-Swiss with the Germans or the Italian-Swiss with the Italians, just as you would not even in your dream confuse the inhabitants of Normandy with the Norwegians. Take them as Swiss and leave it at that, or else you will be taken back, and entirely deservedly, not exactly to 1066, but to 1386, when they defeated the German Empire at Sempach and established their independence.

Incidentally, if you are enterprising, you will acquire a working knowledge of Swiss-German just as easily as if you were to try Welsh; as for French, you know, of course, that it is spoken best in Geneva or Lausanne. Your Italian, even if you have taken pains to brush it up, may be of little avail in some valley of the Ticino where a more expressive and perhaps not quite so melodious language is spoken which, distinctly though remotely, will remind you of the tongue of Dante and Michel Angelo.

On the whole, be prepared to enjoy yourself, for you will do so without a shadow of doubt, and if you follow my advice you will not permit architecture to distract you unduly from looking at other things which are equally enjoyable; nor, for that matter, should you confine yourself *de rigueur* to architecture at its very recent. If your "approach" is emotional you should turn to nature in Switzerland and you will not be disappointed; of human works, however, you should expect more an expression of peaceful well-being as befits a country where scenery dominates everything. Dramatic and emotional architecture would look poor against that background.

Prepare a list of buildings which you are going to visit. Swiss architecture is well represented in the R.I.B.A. library, and you can make your own choice



from the wealth of published material. By all means go and visit architects over there; with your list ready you will enjoy such contacts the more. You will be enormously impressed by the standard of design in everyday life no less than in architecture, and even more so by the almost flawless craftsmanship. As regards the latter you cannot, of course, go on admiring every day of your stay. Best get the comparing and admiring stage over on the first day, and after that do as the Swiss do, take decent workmanship for granted. I am not denying, however, that it is a terrific tonic.

Now, as your architectural itinerary begins in Basle, you might, apart from your list of more recent buildings, look at some of the earlier ones, distinctly experimental and modern in the way it was understood in the 'twenties and early 'thirties. Some of them you may find at Riehen, near Basle, notably work by Artaria and Schmidt and Rudolf Preiswerk. Later on, of course, you will go to Zurich, where Neubuehl and the Doldertal flats are among the architectural "musts" and you will find the former as good as ever and enjoy its unsophistical innocence. Near Basle you might have a look at Eglisee, with interesting low-cost housing dating from the late 1920's. Space standards and equipment are, of course, not up to post-war requirements in England, but heating by stoves is well-considered and you might like both planning and the look of the houses, making due allowance for the time when they were built. You will prefer those at Neubuehl, though.

While in Basle you might acquaint yourself with traditional Swiss architecture there; you will find it very steady. Look out for work not much later than the first quarter of the last century, for I doubt that you will develop a flair for the heavier 19th-century stuff. While the freakishness and exuberance of Victorian architecture might tickle your palate in England, the heaviness and almost clumsy solidity of continental "Victorianism" (I wonder if there is such a word and if it would be popular on the Continent) is not readily digestible.

I feel sure, however, that you will like the simple town house with its rows of shuttered windows. I do not see why you should not be taken in by rendered walls. By all means marvel at the quaintness of the detail. But it is enjoyable.

If you can spare one of your holiday tickets for a trip to the Simmental in the Bernese Oberland you will see traditional timber building probably at its

best. I am not so sure that the claim of the Simmental farmer's house to be one of the most interesting on the Continent is an overstatement. Man and beast and fodder are housed under one roof with eaves over-sailing some eight or ten feet (they can do that sort of thing just as well as Frank Lloyd Wright), giving cover to galleries on which the washing is dried. Some of them are hundreds of years old and have, of course, worn exceedingly well. They had the carpenters to serve them in those days, and one of the old farmers was apparently so pleased with the job he got that he recorded his satisfaction in front of the house, name of the carpenter and all, stating that he had done it "in every way to my liking." Inside these houses you find "Usonian" wall covering, e.g., boarded walls of a wonderful bisquety colour which no one has ever taken the trouble of oiling.

In Zurich a host of buildings awaits you. Also rain, if you are unlucky. In my time you used to have fried potatoes "roesti" for your breakfast, and they beat "chips" every time. The "quais" of the river Limmat are very pleasant, but you will be bored by the pre-1914 villas on the "Zuriberg," where, however, you will have to go to see some good stuff as well. A lot of housing has been done in that pleasant town, and I suggest you go and see it, as it is useful for comparison with post-war work in England. One striking feature is landscaping, and the excellent condition of all planted open spaces; the destructive instincts of the children are happily diverted into other channels, leaving shrubs and flowers intact.

I think the layouts of many of the new housing areas around Zurich are extremely interesting and free from "cleverness," and while you may, perhaps, find the architecture of the houses too "shutter-conscious," you will have to put that down to national habits and get used to them. For shutters are a very sensible arrangement in that climate.

You will notice, of course, that the recent housing in Zurich departs considerably from the example set in Neubuehl; personally, I regret it. You may even apply this observation generally and conclude that, while the traditionalists have become more modern, the modernists have become more traditionally-minded, or is that statement unkind to both? The "goodbye-to-asceticism" is quite obvious, and I do not think you will fall into the same trap as some recent critic who, probably from overfeeding on the excellence of Swiss workmanship and what goes with it, began to accuse the buildings of lack of inspiration. "They do not inspire,

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excite, uplift the spirit," he says, and I am sure he is doing Swiss architects an injustice with that. Besides, I wonder what he would do if he had the Jungfrau chain as a background to his building. Try to rival with it?

With that I can leave you safely to your list of buildings and to the contacts which you will make in the anticipation that both will keep you happily busy for several days. There is, on the whole, more to see in Zurich and Basle than elsewhere, that is, architecturally, of course, but you might find interesting buildings in the smaller towns and for that purpose I suggest you make good provision in your list. I doubt whether your allowance will carry you both to Geneva, where you might pay homage to the flats which the man from La Chaux-de-Fonds, alias Corbusier, built some time before the last war — or to the Italian south, the Ticino, where in the midst of other enjoyments, you may qualify your architectural conscience with a visit to the Libreria Cantonale at Lugano, I hope it is on your list, and in my opinion it is alone worth the journey from Zurich through the St. Gotthard Tunnel.

I think it takes you about 17 minutes to get through this tunnel, a stifling experience, but normally you find the sun shining when you emerge from it, even if you had rain until you came to the St. Gotthard. In the Ticino northern and southern cooking meet and mingle, and you will have even less reason for complaint than before. As for wine, you may agree with me that the "Nostrano" compares well with the "vin ordinaire" of France. Many of the hotels and pensions are in German-Swiss hands, while the Ticinese still retain control of the "osterias" where you may take your wine and play "boccia." Do try this game; it is similar to bowling but far more virile, and a considerable outlet for passion. It is, however, not the game which you can only play with an unsheathed knife handy, and which, for that reason is forbidden.

In the villages of the Ticino you will get your fill of stone masonry, and rubble is handled just as well as in Wales. Many of the roofs are still stone slated, which you cannot fail liking. In Locarno, Lugano and Ascona you will find besides a considerable number of modern houses, but I have not yet made up my mind whether I like them. If you are out to see typical Ticino villages, go from Locarno to the Valle Maggia and you will find a string of them, notably Intragna, where they will give you excellent trout in local osterias. I have never seen a place where the church was better placed, nor do I know one with loftier verandas. Strange how they manage in the south to create atmosphere, and with so few means, too. Often I have been tempted to put it down to the sense for ancillaries, from the casual porch, the little balcony, the veranda, down to the creeper near the entrance door and the skilfully suspended bunches of cob and onions in the loggias under the slated roof.

Yes, I think it is there that you may end your journey. By the time you arrive you should have done enough for architecture and yourself in that respect. Not that I wish to say that there is no architecture in the south, far from it. But it is perhaps even more part of life down there than in the north, and you will take it in a less critical and more easy-going way. The south will serve you the dessert of your architectural menu, and if you are wise you will linger over it.

WALTER SEGAL.

## BRITISH BALLET IN SWITZERLAND.

The Metropolitan Ballet, sponsored by the British Council, left London on Tuesday, August 30th, for Switzerland where the company will give 10 performances in seven cities and towns between September 1st and 11th.

Eight ballets will be performed; four classics, "Swan Lake" Act II, "Giselle" Act II, "Coppelia" Act II and "Prince Igor"; and four modern ballets, "Le Beau Danube" (choreography, Leonide Massine), "Ballamento" (André Howard), "Fanciulla delle Rose" (Frank Staff), and "Designs with Strings" (John Taras).

The 39 members of the company will include: 16 year-old Svetlana Beriosova, Celia Franca, Domini Callaghan, Henry Danton, Eric Hyrst, *Michel de Lutry* and Nicholas Beriosoff.

The first performance was given in Biel on September 1st followed by a tour of Berne (September 2nd), Lausanne (September 3rd and 4th), Geneva (September 5th and 6th), Interlaken (September 7th), Zurich (September 8th and 9th), and Basle (September 10th and 11th).

*British Council.*

(*Michel de Lutry* is the stage name of Michel Paschoud, son of M. Marcus Paschoud, who was well known in the Swiss Colony in London and now resident in Lausanne. Ed.)



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