

Between Montreux and Gstaad

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BETWEEN MONTREUX AND GSTAAD

By CHARLES MONTANDON

It is still possible, not far from the rapidly growing cities of Geneva and Lausanne, to find Alpine localities steeped in an atmosphere of peace and genuine relaxation. Although it sounds paradoxical, the Vaudois Alps have been far less affected by the inroads of modern technology and commerce than many other mountain regions which are far more distant from the larger urban centres.

Quiet and unspoiled

The Alps in the Canton of Vaud form a triangle between Montreux, Gstaad and the mountain group of the Diablerets. Since they are surrounded by famous tourist centres near Lake Geneva and in the Bernese Oberland, and at the same time constitute the gateway to the popular Valais, they are generally passed over by visitors eager to reach the more mundane resorts. This makes them all the more precious to the connoisseur able to appreciate the natural, still charm of this district.

The area is not one of the "underdeveloped" parts of the Alps, touristically speaking. Its reputation among knowledgeable Swiss and foreign visitors is as good as it is old. And its facilities are quite up to date. For example, a cablecar runs from the Col du Pillon up to an altitude of 3,000 metres, where extensive ski slopes beckon even in mid-summer; and the Diablerets Glacier is a favourite landing spot for sport pilots. But the people of the Canton of Vaud have been more moderate in introducing modern innovations than those of most other Swiss mountain regions. The passionate skier and the hiking enthusiast are the ones who can find the most to satisfy them here, rather than the spoiled guest who comes to the mountains seeking the same featherbed comfort to which he is accustomed in the city.

The gateways to the Vaudois Alps, however, are indeed "paved with gold". To the west lies Montreux, its world renown going back many years. To the East there is the lure of growing Gstaad, today one of the Bernese Oberland's touristic focal points, but associated with Vaud since ancient times.

In the mountains of Vaud proper, there are only two large resorts — Villars-sur-Ollon and Leysin. In the other localities, the hotels tend to be unassuming and there is more emphasis on *pensions* and private holiday houses. This is true of Rougemont, Château d'Oex and Les Mosses in the East, as well as Les Diablerets, Chesières-Bretays, Gryon-sur-Bex, and the lovely narcissus-district in the Pre-Alps above Vevey and Montreux.

And what variegated loveliness radiates from this small resort area. In only a few hours, one goes from the sheltered shores of Lake Geneva up into the eternal snows of Les Diablerets, or from the famous vineyards of Villeneuve, Yvorne and Aigle to the bare mountain pastures of Taveyannaz, where the music-filled outdoor festival of mid-summer, "Mi-été", is held every year. From the beaches of Lavey on the banks of the Rhône it isn't far to the small lakes of Lioson, Retaud and Chavonne, as charming as the music of their names, set like blue jewels in the grey rock. In the course of extensive walks, a visitor to the area may discover an entire world of rare blossoms, stumble upon groups of shy chamois and taste rich, viscous cream under the shingled roofs of hoary alpine huts.

Ancient traditions

The area is rich in legends and old traditions. Even today, the older inhabitants speak in a rough and rustic dialect. When a storm blows up, the local saying has it that the devil is playing bowls on the peaks of Les Diablerets. And it was from that chain of mountains that, in former times, mighty rock-slides used to head down toward the Rhône Valley, a phenomenon which provided the Vaudois author C. F. Ramuz with the inspiration for one of his finest novels, "Derborence".

The farmers of the hamlet of Forclaz in the valley of Les Ormonts still own extensive pasturelands in common, which were granted to their ancestors during the Middle Ages by the mistress of the Aigremont castle, the ruins of which still tower over the village of Sépey.

In the Pays d'Enhaut, which spreads around Château d'Oex, a sense of belonging to the Duchy of Gruyères is still very much alive; in olden times, the Duchy included the region around Saanen and Gstaad as well. The memory of the last ruler of that area, the carefree Duke Michael, is still vivid today. He is reputed to have danced through long, mad nights with the loveliest of his feminine subjects, while the cities of Fribourg and Berne sent troops out to occupy the lands owned by this impecunious feudal ruler who had gone into heavy debt.

The Vaudois Alps comprised the first French-speaking area to join the Swiss Confederation. The Bernese conquered it long before they overran the remainder of Vaud towards the middle of the sixteenth century.

"Damounais" and "Ormonans"

This entire region is divided into two district sections, separated by the pass known as the Col des Mosses. This boundary was the scene of some bitter battles between the men of the Pays d'Enhaut and those of Les Ormonts in former times. Here, too, is the watershed between the Aare and the Rhine to the north and the Rhône to the South.

The Pays d'Enhaut is northward around Château d'Oex. The Sarine, which irrigates it, flows down to the Gruyère district. And just as they share the waters of the river, so the peaceable people of the Château d'Oex country (known in the local dialect as "Les Damounais") share certain elements of their culture with those of the Gruyère — for example, the brilliantly colourful doublet that is part of the traditional local costume.

The region of Aigle, which once belonged to the Dukes of Savoy, is distinctly Rhône country. The plain and hills between Bex and Villeneuve, for instance, are in certain respects similar to the Lower Valais and the Haute Savoie. From there runs a valley known as Les Ormonts — from "Mont des Ours" or "Bear Mountain". Les Ormonts is one of the most unspoiled regions of the Vaudois Alps. The farmers speak with an accent very reminiscent of the dialect spoken in the French-speaking part of the Valais. The "Ormonans" too, centuries ago, had occasion to fight some sharp battles with their Valais neighbours, encounters which took place on the high passes of the Diablerets massif. The "Ormonans" are considered hard-headed, zealous of their independence. Perhaps they are a bit reserved, mistrustful, even aggressive, but at the same time they extend a warm hospitality to any stranger whom they get to know a bit better.

A cautious acceptance of the new

As far as loyalty to tradition is concerned, there is little to choose between the Damounais and the Ormonans.

For a long time they both opposed the introduction of Protestantism, to which the Bernese wished to convert them; and for just as long, they resisted the spreading influence of the French Revolution, which sought to "liberate" them from the Bernese rule.

Today, the entire Alpine triangle of the Vaudois Alps is opening up to modern life — but with typical Vaudois cautiousness. Tourism is bringing badly-needed income to the region. Despite successes in cattle breeding in the Pays d'Enhaut and attempts at rationalising agriculture and handicrafts in Les Ormonts, the economy of the mountainous district remains a poor one. The growing hotel industry, however, has helped to put a stop to a decrease in population which, in some localities, had reached alarming proportions.

But, as has been said, the modern age is moving into this region only slowly, with great caution, suiting itself to the old ways and not disturbing the particular spirit of the local inhabitants. Thanks to their conservatism, the landscape has retained its uniqueness, that same atmosphere which, during the last century, so strongly fascinated the botanists who came to explore the valleys above Bex and the first English visitors who were adventurous enough to push up from Lake Geneva to Château d'Oex during their holidays. This individuality and peace, characteristic of the Vaudois Alps, are all the more precious now that they are becoming ever rarer elsewhere in Europe.

(*Swiss National Tourist Office.*)

A MOON SPACECRAFT AT THE SWISS TRANSPORT MUSEUM

In all probability it will not be long before the first man will set foot on the moon. The United States and the Soviet Union have detailed moon programmes. For instance, the American astronauts who will travel to the moon in the Apollo spacecraft will not land on the moon. Starting this craft on its return flight would require too much fuel. Therefore, the spacecraft will circumnavigate the moon, piloted by one astronaut, while the two others will transfer into a moon landing craft especially taken along for that purpose which will take them to the moon's surface and later back again to Apollo. A model of this moon ferry on a 1:3 scale can be seen at the Swiss Transport Museum in Lucerne until 30th September as a part of the special exhibition "Space Technique and Switzerland".

[S.N.T.O.]



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