

Loetschental - haven of rest

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Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1968)**

Heft 1543

PDF erstellt am: **13.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691684>

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LOETSCHENTAL — HAVEN OF REST

By LEE EUGSTER

Tourists discovered the Lötschental after the Lötschberg tunnel was inaugurated in July 1913. But even now, few train passengers emerging from the tunnel's southern mouth at Goppenstein in the Valais are aware that to their left a valley of great beauty branches off. All they can see is a narrow gap between steep Alps through which squeeze a road and the foaming Lonza River plunging into a deep gorge.

Not long ago, a rickety bus carried passengers from the railway station to Ferden, the first of six villages, then to Kippel where the road stopped. Near the valley entrance, "la baratte" — butter churner — a toothlike rock rears skyward as if to warn the curious of dangers. But now a good motor road leads to Blatten, halfway up the ten miles long valley. Comfortable yellow motor coaches of the Post Office start at Gampel between Visp and Sierre in the Rhone Valley, climb northward through the gorge to Goppenstein to pick up train passengers and also carry the mail to the villages.

At Ferden, the Lötschental makes a sharp bend toward the north-east and a marvellous sight meets the visitor. A straight valley, bedded between two ranges of high Alps, climbs very gradually toward the Lötschenlücke, a saddle linking the two chains. Over it flows the Long Glacier like a frozen river.

Along the southern bank, thick pine forests cling to steep slopes. The majestic pyramid of the Bietschhorn and the Breithorn dominate the valley with their glaciers. The villages sit on sunny ledges below the northern chain over whose top runs the borderline of the cantons of Valais and Berne.

The tall, blond and blue-eyed inhabitants of Germanic descent came to the Lötschental centuries ago. Their houses of time-blackened larch wood are two or three stories high, protected from rain and snow by wide eaves. The fairly flat roofs are weighed down by heavy stones, so that the winter winds blowing down from the Lötschenlücke cannot carry them off. Rows of narrow windows, from which hang deep red carnations in summer, open at the front side, while stairs lead to wooden galleries at the sides of the houses. On a beam under the eaves are carved a verse imploring the Lord's protection, the building date and the owner's name. The beams supporting the wooden ceilings of the rooms are also decorated with carvings of stylized suns, stars and flowers. These houses stand very close together, huddling around the whitewashed stone church as if for protection from the elements. In perspec-

tive, all the church spires point to the middle of the Lötschenlücke.

To build their houses, the people of this valley have always resorted to a form of communism. A man "invites" his neighbours to help him carry the beams and boards which have been seasoning for over a year to the building site, and they all work together until the house is under roof. All it costs the owner is the food and a hearty "the Lord reward you". He, of course, will help build another man's house.

In this serene valley, visitors can hike for hours. A mule path leads from Blatten, where the motor road stops, to Fofleralp at 5,400 ft. just below the Long Glacier. There, a few comfortable hotels stand in a larch wood grove. Wayside shrines are built all along the path, and at Kühmatt the charming chapel of the Visitation stands on a rock amidst a few hay granges. Past its sculptured door one discovers a richly carved guilt altar, and many ex votos indicate that the place is visited by pilgrims from the whole Valais.

Farther up, one meets women and children minding the cow herds grazing on the summer pastures, while the men remain down in the villages to tend the tiny fields of rye, barley and oats clinging to the rocky mountain sides or making hay.

Above Fafleralp, the path leads over short, springy grass past the Grundsee — a shallow pool of crystalline water — to the base of the glacier out of which oozes the Lonza, a tiny brook joined by many others until it becomes a roaring mountain creek.

As there is little traffic on the motor road, and no dust or noise on the path from Blatten onward, this sunny valley and its invigorating mountain air is a haven of rest for jaded nerves of city dwellers. After a day's hiking, they will be sung to sleep by the lullaby of the Lonza. Even the gurgle of frolicking brooks or the roar of cascades jumping over cliffs to join the Lonza on her way to Father Rhone are hushed at night, for their water dwindles until, the following day, the hot sun again melts the ice and snow of the glaciers.

As the Lötschental was isolated for so long, its rich folklore is still very much alive. Men carve famous carnival masks. In winter, the villagers mount theatricals on outdoor stages, or tell old legends while the women spin or weave, or the men carve ornaments on tools and furniture. For the Corpus Christi procession the women wear the costume made of a wide and long black woollen skirt and jacket, a hand-embroidered silk apron and the valley's characteristic hat with yards of silk ribbon pleated around its crown. The men, the Lord's Grenadiers,

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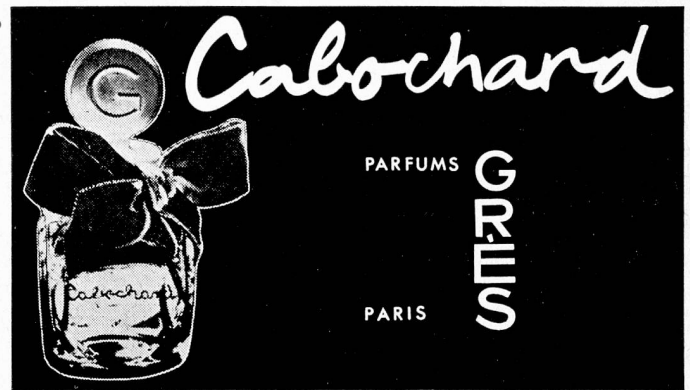
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wear the treasured uniform of Napoleon's grenadiers to lead the procession from the church to the wayside shrines. The few valley people who emigrated, come home for that feast to celebrate it with their family.

In recent years, a few houses with modern comfort have been built, but in a style that does not clash with the general look of the villages. Therefore, this valley still offers a welcome change to people who live in the concrete canyons of big cities.

(*"Treize Etoiles"* May 1967.)



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