

Beauty of Aletsch Forest

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ON July 10, 1976, the Swiss League for the Protection of Nature inaugurated Switzerland's first Ecology Centre at the Villa Cassel on the Riederfurka, Upper Valais.

In 1901-02, the English banker Sir Ernest Cassel chose the splendid site of the Riederfurka to build a summer residence in the style of a half-timbered house with beautifully panelled rooms. Winston Churchill paid many visits to this house.

After Sir Ernest's death in 1921, the Valaisan family Cathrein owned the villa and turned it into a hotel. After they left in 1960, the unoccupied house began to deteriorate, but it was saved from ruin by the Swiss League for the Protection of Nature, which bought it in 1973.

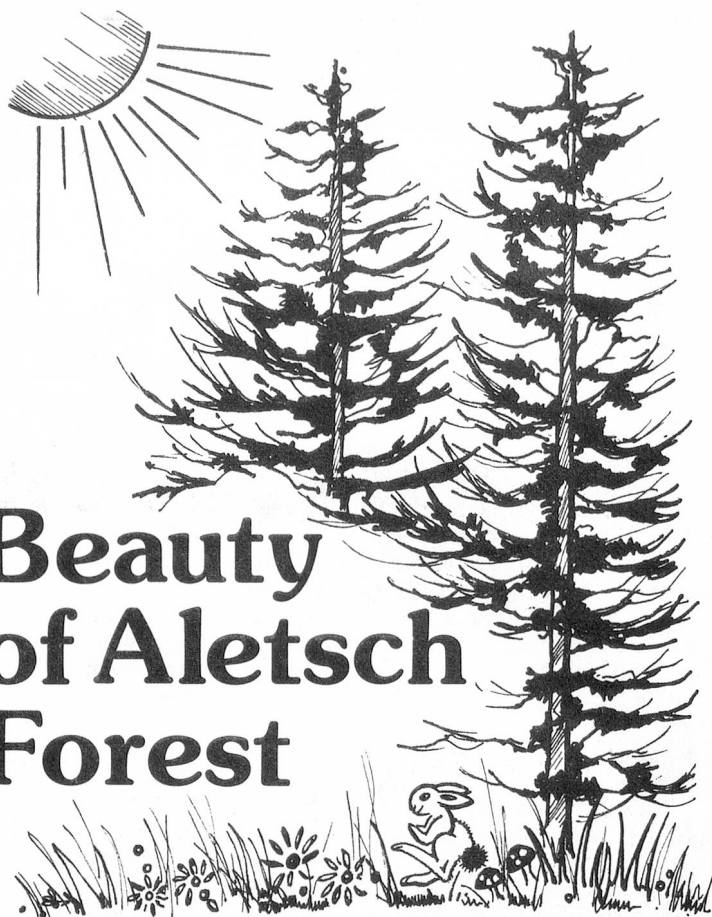
The League, which co-operates with the World Wildlife Fund, supervises 160 nature reservations covering 312.5 square miles - 1/82nd of Switzerland's surface. The League protects particularly charming landscapes or regions with a rich and sometimes rare flora and fauna. But none of them can compare with the beauty and scientific interest of the Aletsch Forest along the Aletsch Glacier, the longest glacier stream of the Alps.

The subalpine forest of larches and Cembra pines became a nature reservation in 1933. As the Villa Cassel dominates the forest and glacier, the League bought it complete with its out-houses and 81,543 acres of surrounding land to create an ecology centre.

After restoring the villa during two summers but preserving its characteristic outside walls, the panelling in the rooms and some of the original furniture, the centre was opened to the public. From June 1 to October 20, visitors are shown temporary exhibitions of documents, maps and films of what they will find in the Aletsch Forest 10 minutes below the centre.

All too often, people unwittingly damage or destroy the living conditions of particularly

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delicate wildlife through neglect or ignorance. Here, they are taught to look at plants and animals without touching them. They learn to respect and be responsible for nature.

The exposition also informs them of the historical development and the natural history of the reservation of Aletsch. Though the centre aims to create closer contacts with nature and to get people acquainted with the problems of protecting it, it also encourages scientific research in the region.

For study groups of up to 60 young people - students, teachers and especially scientists, photographers, geologists, glaciologists, ornithologists, biologists of wild animals or those studying climatology and botany - the centre is open for half days, full days or whole weeks beginning Sunday evenings and ending the following Saturday morning.

They have at their disposal workrooms, laboratories, a conference and a club room, a library and reading room, botanical, zoological and mineral collections. Books, topographical

guides of the reservation, a geographical map for excursions, posters and other publications are for sale.

People looking for quiet and natural surroundings to work, organise workshops, meetings, take courses or go on guided excursions find the centre a most ideal place. They will find room and board - with self-service - for a reasonable price.

To reach the centre by private car, drive from Brig up the Furka highway to Mörel and park the car there. Or in Brig take the Furka-Oberalp train to Mörel. From this village in the Goms Valley a cable cabin leads to Riederalp from where one reaches Riederfurka on foot in 20 minutes. There is a possibility of transportation of luggage.

For information, write from June to October to: Villa Cassel, Postfach 128, CH-3981 Riederalp VS, phone no. 028/5 22 44, or all year to: Secrétariat de la Ligue Suisse pour la Protection de la Nature, case postale 73, CH-4020 Bâle, phone no. 061/ 42 74 42.

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