

Switzerland revisited

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Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1983)**

Heft 1803

PDF erstellt am: **17.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688835>

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AS I married a Swiss – Trudy Schlittler, of Neiderurnen, Kanton Glarus – 27 years ago and have benefited so much from the kindness and hospitality of my Swiss relations, I have come to regard Switzerland as a second home.

Regretfully, we have as a family not been able to return for the last five years until this May, therefore we were more conscious than ever before of the differences between life in Britain and Switzerland.

The country is more prosperous, noticeably so, perhaps because of the depressed UK economy. Certainly the Swiss shrug off the effects of their low inflation and show no pre-occupation with their own growing unemployment.

Switzerland was as clean, ordered and as inviting as it has always been. Shops are stocked to the brim, in fact even overflowing onto the pavements with the widest selection of goods.

On the roads, the pressure of traffic seemed to stifle many towns and villages which up to

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now have been able to preserve their peace for centuries.

Generally, everyone drove fast and with obvious impatience. This is hard to understand, since the excellent road system allows the driver to reach virtually any destination within the country inside four hours.

Learner drivers are taught on BMWs, no doubt in preparation for this race track!

The Swiss have a natural aptitude for marketing their products. Yet again, there was everywhere a sense of urgency to get richer or sell goods faster.

Magazines and newspapers are full of advertisements, promotional handouts accompany

many purchases and there is no letting up on the attentive service wherever you go.

Many countries have studied the successful tourist industry in Switzerland. No doubt the scenery is the main attraction – but alongside this one must give place to the good service and facilities which exists even in the small villages.

The hotels and restaurants are of such a high standard there is no need for a guide book.

We stayed in four hotels picked at random and each time we remarked that by any standards they were good value for money.

One reason for the success of Swiss tourism is that it is firmly based on the home market. It is noticeable that the Swiss eat out often, take at least one or two holidays a year in their own country and make very full use of the facilities which, in peak season, attract people from all over the world.

New technology has been widely adapted to ease a whole range of services and transactions. For instance, using a pay phone is bliss, since money inserted is displayed and you can see the amount decreasing as the call progresses.

Hang up before all is spent and you get a refund.

Petrol stations dispense fuel automatically from currency notes and credit cards, parking meters at border towns accept two different currencies and receipts are often on print outs giving full details of the purchase.

While one must admire the business sense the Swiss display, they are very fair, taking great trouble in always displaying the cost of goods and services, and they seem to take honesty for granted.

When we expressed concern at one hotel that our bedroom door did not lock properly we were told that nobody steals in Switzerland!

Although it is difficult not to feel envious of the high standard of living, we were always reminded that their prosperity is hard earned.

The Swiss are very attentive, seem to work non-stop, and whether it is in shops or restaurants, they give the impression of being able to do the work of two.

There is little demarcation, employees serve at table, do the accounts, write out bills and clean up. The bosses don't just supervise, but work alongside their staff.

Life in Switzerland is nevertheless like living in a chocolate box. There are so many good things all around that you cannot help questioning what is it really like and wondering where this close knit society is going.

For the first time in the cities one saw graffiti almost at every corner, defacing some of the most prominent buildings.

It suggests that the Swiss youth, the heirs to this prosperous state, are perhaps not as willing as one would think to follow in the footsteps of their industrious parents.

The young Swiss strut around in confidence with plenty of money in their pockets but knowing how hard their parents work for it one wonders if the writing on the wall reflects a rebellious element which will, in time, alter the course of Switzerland.

Meanwhile, it is clear that the country remains in strong capable hands, reaping the rewards of hard diligent work.

Looking back on our holiday, one memory persists. This is of the Swiss customs officer who on our arrival at the border questioned us at length wanting to know what we had brought with us in our car from Scotland.

He needed not fear. Switzerland seems to have it all, luxury goods of every make, beautiful countryside and unequalled standards of service.

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