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The level crossing at Château-d'Oex. January 2003.

Photos: Gerald Savine

Early last January my wife Janice and I went to stay at La Résidence overlooking Château-d'Oex. The reason for the visit was to obtain reference pictures and photographs to enable me to do paintings of the annual Château-d'Oex Hot Air Balloon Festival.

Over Christmas and New Year there had been rain but before we arrived via Geneva and my favourite Swiss railway, the MOB, it had snowed and the countryside looked very beautiful.

I had planned to photograph hot air balloons during the build up to the festival. On Thursday morning we were swimming up and down the indoor pool with views over the snow clad valley when suddenly a whole clutch of balloons appeared up from the festival site. A few hectic minutes followed as we dashed to get dried, dressed and grab the camera. Outside I was able to photograph the ascending balloons. Fortunately they drifted low over the apartments car park. On the Friday at the festival site I was able to take a series of photographs of a balloon being prepared for flight and taking off into a perfect blue sky. I

now have plenty of references for future paintings!

The first Hot Air Balloon Festival was organised by the Château-d'Oex Tourist Office in February 1979. The first festival attracted 12 balloons from 5 countries. Within ten years the festivals competitions attracted 70 hot air balloons from 14 countries. 8 television channels and 150 journalists joined more than 25,000 spectators to see the spectacle. In 1994 the International Hot Air Balloon Week was followed by the 4th World Hot-Air Airship Championships.

Following two previous attempts from Château-d'Oex, in March 1999 Bertrand Piccard and Brian Jones set off to achieve the first round the world balloon flight in Breitling Orbiter III. The flight lasted a few hours short of 20 days when they landed in Egypt. A journey of 45,755 km!

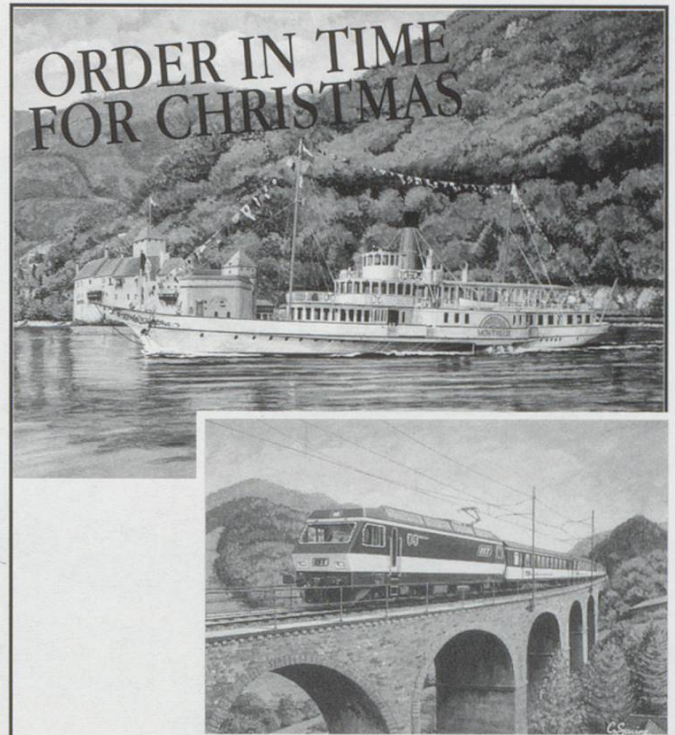
This January saw the 25th International Château-d'Oex Balloon Week. 110 hot air balloons from 25 countries were registered for the competitions. 60,000 people were expected to join in the fun of the week. As well as the com-

petitions there was a special day on Wednesday for the children. Friday evening the valley was illuminated by thousands of flaming torches and the many colours of tethered hot air balloons with live music from the village. On the first day of the festival as we travelled down to Montreux on the MOB we passed many trains full of passengers of all ages heading for Château-d'Oex.

Hot air balloon flights are available to the public at the festival, at a price, so this part of Switzerland can be traversed and seen a different way.

The 26th Festival will be from 24th January to 1st February 2004. Take a rail trip to Chateaux d'Oex and you could join in the spectacle and fun and possibly take a different form of transport in Switzerland.

A balloon above Château-d'Oex.



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