



The tectonic plates that hold our continents float on a sea of molten earth. About a hundred million years ago, the African plate began moving north and banged into the European plate. The collision took place along a 300-mile ridge. Billions of tons of rock were rammed together. The landscape was warped, folded and pushed skyward, and the mountains of the Swiss Alps were born.

People have been living in, on and around the Alps for over ten thousand years. The ancient Romans wrote about the tribes who lived in these mountains. The most important were the Helvetians. During the 400s, as Rome fell, German tribes took control of the northern part of Switzerland. The Burgundians from France conquered western Switzerland. But the Helvetians, high up in their central mountain villages, remained free and unaffected by much of Europe's history. This is an extraordinarily beautiful part of the world, and relatively unspoiled.

One of the area's most interesting cities is Luzern. During the Middle Ages Luzern was a simple fishing village, but when the St. Gotthard pass, connecting northern Europe and Italy, opened in the 1200s, Luzern became a major staging area. During the early 1800s English poets showed up in Luzern and began describing the beauty of the nearby lakes and mountains. The British upper class, always ready for a holiday abroad, made Luzern a major tourist attraction.

I visited Luzern on a number of occasions both in summer and in winter and was surprised at the great variety of winter sports. Of course there's skiing. The early technique for making skis was very interesting.

They'd check out the side of a barn, and find a couple of boards that had a smooth grain running lengthwise. And they would put the tip of one end into a pot of boiling water to soften up the wood. When it came out of the water they'd stick that end between two boards in a log cabin, bottom side up, and waited until it dried. The result would be an eight to ten foot long ski with one end turning up. They'd

keep their boots attached to it with old belts and put a little grease on the bottom so they'd move faster. When they wanted to head uphill, they would tie rough rags on the bottom to give them traction. Primitive, but at the time a life-saving form of transportation.

But it was also a form of recreation. As early as the 1880s skiers got together and formed clubs to test their skills at racing down hill and ski jumping. Often at speeds of 80 miles an hour.

And if stand up skiing is not your thing, you can sit down. It's called snow biking and it was originally developed in 1892 by an American who called the equipment an Ice Velocipede. The early models were basically a bicycle fitted with skis instead of wheels. Snow biking became a sport during the 1940s, when two engineers combined their inventions to create a Skibob. George Gfälller, a German, invented a single-track steerable sledge, and Engelbert Brener, an Austrian, patented the "Sit Ski".

The City of Luzern is down in the valley. And one of Luzern's major attractions is its 650-foot roofed bridge which is the oldest in Europe. Called the Chapel Bridge, it was originally built in the 1300s as part of the city's fortifications. The triangular roof supports were used by 17th century painters to present the history of Luzern



and the patron saints of the city. There are over a hundred images. The water tower alongside the bridge was also built in the 1300s. Originally it was a lighthouse on the top, a dungeon at the bottom and a torture chamber in the middle -- even then multi-use dwellings were fashionable.

Luzern's old town is filled with ancient decorated buildings. The paintings present the history of a guild, or a family, or a special event. The first pharmacy in Luzern opened in 1530. The sign over the door reads, "There Is No Herb That Will Cure Lovesickness."

On the other hand there is some recent scientific evidence that a bottle of good wine, some excellent chocolates and a two week vacation couldn't hurt.



A few doors down the street are two painted buildings with a history that goes back to the 1100's. Originally they were the property of the Benedictine Friars of the Episcopal seat of Luzern, who lent them to the town council for their government meetings. During the past thousand years their buildings have been used as a Guild Hall, a City Hall, a school and a coffee house. On October 15th, 1836 they became the Hotel Des Balances, which is where I stayed during this trip.

It faces out on the River that runs directly through the center of the old city. The hotel balances a 1,000 year old history with some extraordinary modern elements. On the modern side, you have rooms that are crisp and white and filled with contemporary furniture.

One of the things that I noticed was there were giant mirrors in my room but no works of art. I liked that. Very often a perfectly nice hotel room is compromised by a painting that gets on my nerves. This way I could stand to the side of the mirror and see the great views of the city reflected in its surface.

The bathrooms are right out of the space program. The faucet for the bath tub was particularly interesting. I turned it. I pushed it down. I pulled it up. I called the front desk to have someone come up and show me how it worked. Tilt back technology that resulted in a great bath. Big bubbles. Small bubbles. Circulating water.

On the historical side, you have an interior that reflects the building's history.

The hotel has an excellent restaurant that presents the traditional dishes of European cuisine with a special emphasis on Swiss gastronomy.

The bar and lounge area offers a 5 to 7 course menu of

bite-size dishes. Nice alternative to a full meal. I'm a big fan of light dinners.

My favorite spot for eating and drinking in the hotel is the Terrace.

I am always aware of the fact that a restaurant's menu is written by a writer, and the food is prepared by the chef. So when I come into a restaurant I usually walk around and check out what's happening on the tables. And I order what looks good rather than what reads well.

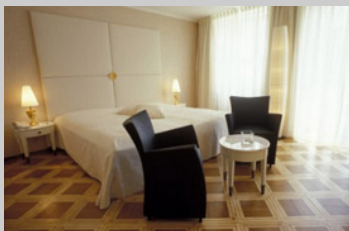
The terrace also has a great view of the river. It looks out on the ancient Water Tower Bridge and the Jesuit Church.



It's impossible for me to think about the Jesuits without thinking about chocolate, because the Jesuit missionaries who came to the Americas in the 1500s played a major part in bringing chocolate back to Europe.

Once it had been decided by the ecclesiastical authorities that chocolate did not break the fast, in other words, during lent and times like that, you could take chocolate because it was not considered a food. Once that was done, then the Jesuits went into high gear and they had a big commercial operation. They were growing cacao commercially through much of Latin America. They drank a lot of it themselves, too. They were big chocolate imbibers. And they shipped a lot of chocolate back to Spain and made a lot of money.

At one point, a big shipment came into the main Spanish port of Cadiz. It was so heavy, these crates that supposedly contained chocolate, that the porters could barely carry them. Finally the authorities demanded that the crates be opened and inspected. They looked at these huge bars of chocolate which weighed a tremendous amount. It turned out that there was about a finger's width of chocolate on the outside of solid gold bars. This



HOTEL DES BALANCES
WEINMARKT
CH-6004 LUZERN
SWITZERLAND
TEL +41 (41) 418 28 28
WWW.BALANCES.CH



Luzern, Switzerland

was smuggling of the first degree because all gold belonged to the crown, not to the Jesuits or the church or anybody else. So they had been breaking crown law. The upshot was that the gold was confiscated and chocolate given to the porters.

There are dozens of great chocolate shops in Luzern.

And as long as you're in the neighborhood you should stop into the Heini bakery and taste a few of their specialties. Cheese, milk chocolate, ice cream, anything related to the cow is important to Switzerland.

When I'm in Luzern my favorite cheese dish is Raclette. The chef takes a half wheel of cheese and places it in front of the heat source. The heat can come from a fire place or an electric raclette maker. As the cheese melts, it's scraped off the wheel and onto a plate. The cheese is served as a disc about three inches in diameter and about a quarter of an inch thick. The chef works at the edge of the dining room and the raclette comes to your table as soon as the cheese is melted.



There's a wooden bucket on the table filled with boiled fingerling potatoes. You take out a potato, place it next to the cheese, cut off a small slice, cover it with warm, soft cheese and pop it into your mouth. Alongside the raclette is a bowl of gherkins and pickled onions. The chef keeps an eye on each table. As you finish off the first dish, he starts melting your second, but this time he uses a different cheese. You can order from 3 to 12 rounds of raclette, each with a different cheese.

Another "udderly" delightful aspect of Luzern gastronomy is the Pretzel King shop. The classic pretzel shape is said to have originated in the church schools of Austria with the intention of reminding children of praying hands. In the shop of the Pretzel King they remind everyone of how great a really good pretzel tastes. They have ham-and-cheese on a pretzel. They have salami-and-pickle on a pretzel. They have a pizza pretzel, an almond pretzel, plus a series of sweet pretzels for desert.

A few streets away is the Lion Monument, which commemorates the eight hundred Swiss soldiers who died defending King Louis the XVI and Marie Antoinette during the French Revolution.

The royal family had been attacked by the mob, but as soon as the King was able to make a deal with their leaders and felt that his person was safe, he told the Swiss guards to put down their weapons -- at which point they

were all murdered by the revolutionaries. A classic sell-out.

Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Mark Twain visited this monument and called it "the saddest piece of stone in the whole world."



Just down the river from the monument is the baroque Jesuit Church, built in the mid-1600s. Baroque architecture was a Roman Catholic response to the simple architecture of the Protestant Reformation. The Pope wanted to send a message that Catholic heaven was a big, magnificent and ornate place and much more fun than whatever it was that Martin Luther was offering. The robes of Niklaus von Flue, Switzerland's only saint, rest here. Von Flue's major act was to propose an agreement that regulated the division of spoils among Switzerland's mercenary troops.

The economy of the Alpine village was based on small herds of cows and sheep and light farming. But with no natural resources, the economy was marginal. Since the farm work could be done by women and children, the men were able to go off and find other work.

The work they found was soldiering for pay. For hundreds of years the Swiss fought other people's battles for a fixed salary and a share of the loot. It was an important source of foreign income. But in order to be able



to offer their soldiers to one country without being attacked by another country, they instituted a policy of neutrality and offered their troops on an impartial basis -- if you had the money, they had

the men. It was an early form of migrant labor and very important to the history of the nation.

Switzerland no longer earns income from sending out troops; what it does do is bring in tourists. Modern package tourism got started right here in 1893 when Thomas Cook organized a group trip from England. That first tour, and much of the tourism since then, has been based on the beauty of the Swiss mountains and our desire to see what's happening on the top.

A twenty-minute cruise southwest from Luzern will put you at the foot of Mount Pilatus. And the steepest cogwheel railway in the world will take you to the top,

which is seven thousand feet above sea level. People have always been fascinated with mountain peaks. The ancient Greeks believed that their gods lived on a mountain. Many societies that live near mountains put their temples on top of them. They are also the best spot for meteorological and geological observations, or to check out your neighbors.



But Mount Pilatus was not always available to visitors. For centuries, local residents believed that the mountain was inhabited by dragons, and if you disturbed them they would send down storms and great floods. In 1585 a parish priest from Luzern and a courageous group of parishioners ascended Pilatus and challenged every lake and cave where the dragons were thought to dwell. The priests returned to Luzern and announced that the spell had been broken, the spirits were at peace, and for about thirty-eight bucks you could take a tour of the top. The dragons were Swiss and they knew a good business when they saw one.



Being just down the lake from the factory, Luzern is the perfect spot for you to get your Swiss Army Knife. Charles Elsner was a master knife maker, who originally sold his knives in his mother's hat shop. When he was thirty he organized the Association of Swiss Master Cutlers.

The objective of the association was to produce a pocket knife for the Swiss military. Now, the army was already buying knives, but they were buying them in Germany. In 1891 the first Swiss-made Swiss Army knife was delivered to the army, and this is one of them. It had a long blade, a screwdriver, a can opener, and a reamer for punching holes. And that was it. The Elsner family is still delivering pocket knives to the Swiss army, but this is what a Swiss Army Knife really looks like. It's made of a lightweight aluminum alloy; it has a blade, it has a small screw driver with a can opener, it has a big screw driver with a cap lifter and a wire stripper, and a reamer for punching holes. What everyone who is *not* in the Swiss Army calls a Swiss Army Knife is this shiny red version with a Swiss Cross embedded in the handle. This is actually the Swiss Army "Officers" Knife. Elsner developed the early version of this knife in 1897 but the Swiss Army never accepted it. Maybe the

corkscrew and the nail cleaner were just too much. But the troops loved it, both the officers and the enlisted men, and they purchased them with their own money. And they still do.

From the beginning the company, which is now called Victorinox, developed pocket knives for different groups. During the 1890s they introduced the "schoolboy" model, a "farmer's" knife and a "cadet" knife, and specialty knives are still being added. Today they produce approximately four hundred different versions of the Swiss Army "Officers" Knife. They also produce the knife that goes into outer space with the astronauts.

During my visits to Luzern the most unusual winter sport that I experienced was dog sledding. The native people in the Arctic have been using working dogs for over 4,000 years. Life at the top of the earth, especially in Alaska, northern Canada and Siberia depends on the daily use of working dogs. And the breeds originally domesticated, the Alaskan Malamute, and the Siberian Husky, are still relied on by dog sled drivers throughout the world. A good sled dog can run for over five hours. The best lead dogs are female. Because they are usually smarter than the bigger and stronger guys in the back.



Dog sled racing is a sport which was invented in North America. During the Alaskan gold rush of the 1800s, miners used dogs to move their supplies. Racing the dogs became a major pastime. The first all-Alaskan dog sled sweepstakes race took place in 1908. Dog sled racing was also a demonstration event in both the 1932 and 1952 Winter Olympics. Today it has a sizable and enthusiastic following and a full calendar of international events.

During my dog sled trip we passed a number of traditional Chalets. Originally the word chalet described a small dwelling used by shepherders in the Alps of Switzerland, Bavaria, France and Italy.

Eventually it was used to refer to any small house on the side of a mountain or in a mountain region. Chalets are made from heavy planks of timber that are framed together like a log cabin. The sidewalls often extend past the corners, forming private sheltered porches. The balconies are detailed with carved railings. The windows are small and the shutters are decorated. The roofs are low and slanted to deal with the heavy snow they must support. The most traditional roofs are made from hand

Luzern, Switzerland

cut wooden shingles.

Olivier Veuve is one of the few master roofers in the world who practices this historic craft. He spends the winters preparing the wood and then cutting it by hand.



OLIVIER VEUVE

I am making shingles. They are put on the roofs of the chalet in the mountains, or in towns. We make them here in the forest. We don't need big factories to make shingles; we can make them ourselves. The shingles protect the building from the snow. They are very elastic, but at the same time very solid. Our shingles last longer than the modern versions.



Machine made shingles might last for 20 years, while mine will be good for 50 years. When I was very young I kept the cows on the mountain. I would see many beautiful

roofs, and I knew I wanted to make them. I asked many old people if they would teach me the trade, and after a long time, I found two old men to teach me. I like this job because you work from the forest to the roof, you do everything yourself. And I am always outside here on the mountain, and it's nice.

For centuries the Valleys of Switzerland were dominated by powerful families who created city-states and spent much of their time fighting for control of the land and the peasants. But some areas escaped feudalism and lived in relative freedom.

They governed themselves through small assemblies -- actually an early form of democracy.

In the 1200s, however, Count Rudolf of Habsburg tried to take control of the forest cantons through his tax agents. Bad move. An arrogant jerk named Gessler was one of those agents. One day he hung his hat on a pole in the town square and insisted that everyone who passed must bow to it. A local farmer named William Tell passed by and told Gessler precisely what he could do with his hat. Gessler ordered Tell to shoot an apple off his son's head. Tell did so, mentioning to Gessler afterward that if he had missed with the first arrow the second would have gone into Gessler's heart. They argued and eventually that's exactly where the

arrow ended up, killing Gessler.

Historians are not really sure that William Tell ever existed or that the events of the legend ever took place. Nevertheless, it is the story of the death of tyranny and the triumph of freedom -- two essential elements in the culture of Switzerland. In 1804 Schiller wrote a play about the legend, and in the early 1820s Rossini wrote the "William Tell" opera. So, true or not, it has become a central part of the legend of the founding of the Swiss Confederacy.

TO LEARN MORE...

LUCERNE TOURISM LTD.

TOURIST INFORMATION
ZENTRALSTRASSE 5
CH-6003 LUZERN, SWITZERLAND
TEL: +41 (0) 41 227 17 17
WWW.LUZERN.COM

PILATUS MOUNTAIN AND RAILWAY

WWW.PILATUS.CH

HEINI BAKERY

LÖWENPLATZ 9
CH-6004 LUZERN, SWITZERLAND
TEL: +41 (0) 41 412 2020
WWW.HEINI.CH

PRETZEL KING SHOP

BREZELKÖNIG
NEUENKIRCHSTRASSE 91
CH-6020 EMMENBRÜCKE, SWITZERLAND
TEL. +41 (0) 41 289 6464
WWW.BREZELKOENIG.CH

JESUIT CHURCH

JESUITENKIRCHE
BAHNHOFSTRASSE 11A
CH-6003 LUZERN, SWITZERLAND
TEL: +41 (0) 41 240 3133
WWW.JESUITENKIRCHE-LUZERN.CH

VICTORINOX SHOP

SCHMIEDGASSE 57
CH-6438 IBACH-SCHWYZ, SWITZERLAND
TEL: +41 (0) 41 818 1299
WWW.VICTORINOX.COM