

Chateau d'Oex, Europe's biggest hot air balloon centre

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CHATEAU D'OEX, EUROPE'S BIGGEST HOT AIR BALLOON CENTRE



Every year in January, hot-air balloon enthusiasts from all over the world converge on Chateau d'Oex (Pays d'Enhaut in the canton of Waadt) for a week of competitions.

It was in 1979 that the local Tourist Office of Chateau d'Oex decided to stage its first hot-air balloon week in order to boost the station's turnover and economy. A dozen teams responded to the offer and a few hundred people came along to watch.

Each year competing teams and spectators grew in numbers until 1994 when the event attracted a record 80 hot-air balloon teams, 65,000 spectators, 200 journalists and 12 TV chains. It was Chateau d'Oex's biggest event ever. Every day during the whole week, the competitors could participate in a large variety of "races": set courses, biggest height, pin point landings and many more. But the biggest event came on the last day with the "David Niven Cup", a long-distance race which took some contestants as far away as Italy, France and Austria.

Since 1994, the high costs involved for both competitors and spectators has produced a steady decline in the popularity of the event. With the rising Swiss Franc, competitors just could no longer afford the costs of transport and stay at the expensive Swiss hotels. Those who still came along opted for a stay in holiday apartments, often away from Chateau d'Oex, to the great dismay of the local hoteliers.

An increasing number of spectators also decided not to stay in Chateau d'Oex anymore but rather to commute daily either from home or from less expensive resorts, creating of course monumental traffic jams mornings and evenings.

But still, despite such setbacks, Chateau d'Oex remains Europe's capital of hot-air ballooning.

A spectacular sight each morning with the departure of the contestants for their daily competition.

SWISS ARMY KNIFE

"Every good Swiss boy has a knife (Hegel) in his pocket" was an old saying in Switzerland. And the pocket knife he was carrying was usually a Swiss Army Knife, often attached to a small chain which went from the belt to the right hand trouser pocket, where the knife was invariably tucked away. No Swiss boy or man for that matter would ever have dreamed to be without his cherished Swiss Army Knife.

The only snag was that the pocket knife he was carrying around was not really a Swiss Army Knife. What he had was a swept-up version in stainless steel which invariably incorporated a cork screw.

The actual knife issued to all Swiss



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soldiers never had that most important implement built in. Furthermore, in the old days at least, the knife issued to army recruits was made from ordinary steel which meant that from the very first time you used it to cut your meat, a stain appeared on the blade which no amount of soap or detergent could ever remove again. This led to an eternal tug-of-war between recruits and officers who insisted that on inspection the knife had to be absolutely clean and above all stainless. Since this was a total impossibility, the only solution was to purchase at the army store a second knife which you never ever used except for inspections.

The curious thing about the "Swiss Army Knife" is that it has never become part of the equipment of any army of any country, not even of the Swiss army either.

(Continued next page)

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