

Times change, but some traditions remain

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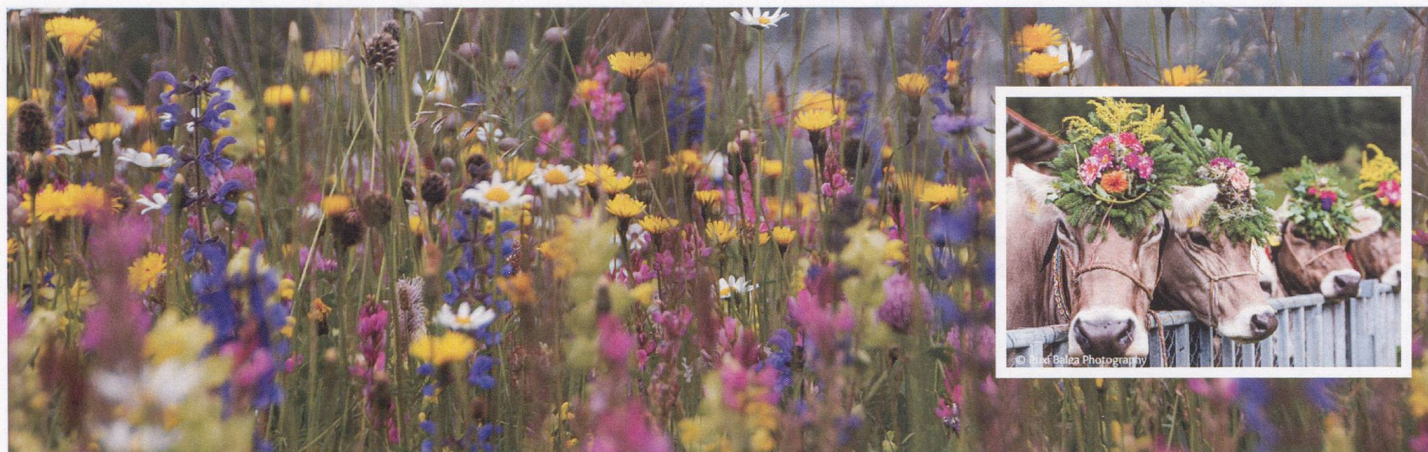
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For those of us from the lowland parts of Switzerland, the main attraction of the Alps is as a winter sports destination and during summer for hikes and other recreation. Also in the summer, the number of animals in the Alps swells beyond just the native ibex, chamois and marmots, as farmers send their cows, goats and pigs up to the mountain pastures.

The farm animals' ascent ("Alpaufzug") begins in May or June, depending on how much grass is available in the Alps. Why bring animals up into the mountains, apart from pleasing tourists with the sounds of cowbells echoing across the alps? Two key reasons are to enable farmers in the lowlands to preserve more feed for the winter and to take advantage of the nutritious herbs and grasses in the alps, which have a positive health impact on the animals – helping them to gain weight in time for calving. No doubt the cultural aspects are an important factor too.

Often several generations of a farming family have sent animals to the same alp, and the ascent and descent ("Alpabfahrt") are important cultural events and a pleasure to watch. Depending on the canton and tradition, animals are decorated with flowers between the horns, or with a long flower belt over the shoulder. Usually the bigger, stronger cows tend to carry big bells for part of the way. In some places, if the cows tire, the farmers ("Sennen") remove the bells and carry them on a wooden yoke over the shoulders, walking in lockstep with the cows. The resulting peal of bells would be sure to make even the hardest emigrant feel homesick. This lockstep is not as easy as it looks.

We were at an Alpabfahrt in Appenzell last summer. A young man and a group of young children, all nicely dressed in the traditional "Tracht" costume, led the procession. The cows followed in several groups spanning several hundred

metres, followed a short time later by the farmer. The animals were tired, but not so the farmer. Traditionally, residents along the way from the alp to the home farm come out to offer the farmer a Schnapps or wine – hence his jovial mood. He greets everyone with: "Habe die Ehre" ("it's an honour"), while raising his hat – an archaic greeting made all the more amusing by the amused state he is in.

The animals walked slowly between the beautiful old houses of the village of Appenzell. In the village square, they had to turn off in a different direction, which was a challenge one farmer, being a little unsure on his feet as he was. An impatient motorist in a BMW (with ZH number plates giving away her origin and likely lack of familiarity with this agrarian situation) tried to make



her way through the animals who were too placid or fearless to avoid her car. A small dent was the result.

The rights to graze an area in the alps are sometimes owned by individual farmers, but more often by cooperatives. In some areas a draw is held in public to determine which cooperative member is allowed to manage the alp for a fixed time.

My husband Hanspeter experienced a summer on an alp in Glarnerland 45 years ago. The ascent to the alp with the animals took about 5 hours. Three experienced dairymen were responsible for milking, making cheese, pasture maintenance and putting up fences in spring and taking them down at the end of the season. As the youngest in the group, Hanspeter was called the "tourist" by the longer-serving members of the team, but the men got on well. Hanspeter's job was to round up the animals, each of which wore a bell, for milking in a small barn. About 100 animals belonging to different farmers were on the mountain. About 80 of them were milked twice a day – by hand! The animals of each farmer tended to stay together, even though they had the opportunity to mingle with animals from other herds. Since the terrain had some deep ravines, Hanspeter had to make sure that animals didn't come too close to the edge. This was less problematic during the day, but during thunder and lightning storms it was dangerous.

The meals on the alp were not what a dietitian today would recommend. Breakfast: Bread and butter, coffee with milk. Lunch: Bacon and bread, coffee with milk. Dinner: Macaroni and cheese, peas and bacon, coffee with milk. For the Senn with cooking duties there was no menu planning involved – the menu was repeated every day over the entire summer.

The dairymen produced Ziger, soft cheese (apparently known as Sapsago in English), along with butter. The butter was delivered weekly to a restaurant 30 minutes below the alp, from which it was sent on by vehicle. The butter trip also served as an opportunity to collect groceries from the restaurant, along with the occasional bottle of cider – a special highlight.

Springwater was used. There was no power, so a small diesel engine was available to drive a butter churn. Cooking was done on a wood stove. In the evening Jass cards were played until the cards couldn't be seen anymore. Beds comprised loose straw with a sheet on it and wool blankets. A long drop served as a toilet.

After milking, the Ziger was prepared and stored until the end of the season in a tall drum. It was then cut up with a shovel, packed in jute bags, and taken down to the restaurant on a sledge and from there to the processor, Geska, in Glarus.

At the time Hanspeter was there, the Alp was not yet accessible by vehicle. While in the past all the animals were herded up to the Alps on foot, today an increasing number are being transported by trucks, particularly if the distance is too great. Similarly, today the milk is driven directly down to the Ziger factory where it is processed under hygienic conditions.

For us tourists, Alps are a sunny place for recreation because we never go up when the weather is rainy. However, for the dairymen and helpers there are long busy days on the alp – rain, hail or shine. When we last visited the alp where Hanspeter had worked years ago, an SUV was parked up. Times have clearly changed for the better for the staff. The

idyll for us tourists is not quite the same anymore, but at least the traditions of the Aufzug and Abzug still give a glimpse of times gone by.

Written by Gabriela Burch

Photos courtesy swissvista.com/Gabriela Burch/Heidi Wehrle

