

Mountains and men

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1965 The Year
of the Alps

MOUNTAINS AND MEN

by ARNOLD BURGAUER

The Bards of the mountains

Hermann Hesse, the German author and holder of the Nobel Prize for Literature, became a Swiss citizen by choice and conviction before reaching the mid-point of his life. In his early novel, "Peter Camenzind", he sang the praises of the mountains — that strangely different world with its wonderfully formed peaks, its distant vistas, its high pastures far from the noise and vapid activity of the busy world, its unforgettable clouds which pass across the sky like wondrous sailing ships, sometimes at a dignified pace and sometimes scurrying wildly.

The Swiss clergyman-author Heinrich Federer, in his novel "Berge und Menschen", had earlier described how the imposing virtually educative influence of the mountains can act as a transforming force for good on the character and soul of man. And no less an intellect than Friedrich Nietzsche once coined the bon mot: "Why do we climb up into the mountains? In order to sneer at our own quaking knees".

Indeed, why do we really go up into the mountains? Undoubtedly a great many factors combine to provide the psychological drive: a need for peace; joy in the unaffected, dew-fresh loveliness of nature; the charm of the solid and unsophisticated mountain folk with their fascinating old customs and ways; the beauty of the alpine blossoms, and the beneficial effects of the mountain climate.

Holidays in the mountains

It sounds paradoxical to most people: but the fact is that "do-nothing" vacations, simply loafing about on the seashore, are not what the overtaxed modern man needs to revivify his "rusty" body. Far more advantageous are holidays in the healthful, stimulating bioclimate of the mountains, at altitudes of between 3,000 and 6,500 feet.

Among the unique, curative qualities of this climate are: absolute purity of the air; low humidity, and magnificent solar radiation, so intense that Davos has a higher average mid-day amount of sunshine than many resorts on the shores of the Mediterranean. (According to studies carried out by the Swiss Research Institute for Mountain Climate and High-Altitude Medicine, under the leadership of Dr. W. Moerikofer, the intensity of solar radiation high in the mountains is relatively constant nearly all the year, whereas it is subject to sharp variation in the lowlands.)

As far as the purity of the air is concerned, the strong ultra-violet radiation in the mountains is mercilessly destructive of bacteria and thus tends to eliminate infectious diseases. For hundreds of years, and still today, the acknowledgedly most effective treatment for tuberculosis has been high-altitude climate. Pasteur himself discovered that the bacteria-count on Mont Blanc is virtually zero. The curative powers of the climate in such places as Davos, Arosa, St. Moritz, Leysin and others, were

proven a hundredfold long before chemically-based medicines were developed.

Scientifically speaking, the famous bio-climate of the mountains consists of no less than nine components. Not least of these is its beneficial effects upon muscle-tone, which has considerable influence upon our bodies' posture and bearing. An additional advantage is the low air pressure which, combined with a low oxygen content in the air at high altitude, helps to speed up recuperative processes, strengthens breathing and reactivates the lungs.

Aside from the very welcome, general toning-up of the body, the strengthening of the heart muscles and the associated improvement in circulation of the blood, all of which are an integral part of a stay in the mountains, high-altitude holidays have recently come to be more and more frequently prescribed for disorders of the liver and digestive system.

The absolute purity of the mountain air, incidentally, is not an invention of alpine tourist offices and propagandists. It is a scientifically proven fact. A dissertation by Egloff of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, shows that a cubic centimetre of London air is contaminated by approximately 20,000 dust particles; in Zurich there are some 1,200 particles, in Davos a mere 25, and outside the town itself only one dust particle per cubic centimetre of air.

Variety of landscape and vegetation

No matter from which direction one approaches the Alps, entry into the large longitudinal valleys offers an impressive kaleidoscope of variegated scenery and vegetation. The many so-called "dry zones" of the Alps, for example, are uncommonly favoured; considering their altitude and latitude, these regions show a remarkably high average temperature.

Switzerland's classic fine-weather zones are the Valais, the valleys of the Ticino, and the Engadine nestled between two chains of mountains. The Valais and the Ticino have a distinctly Mediterranean climate in many areas — in the middle Rhone Valley, for instance, plants thrive which are normally seen only in sub-tropical regions, while 5,000 feet higher up the mountains, arctic vegetation flourishes.

In the alpine world, there are far more bread valleys filled with light and warmth than is generally dreamed of.

[S.N.T.O.]

OLD GERMAN PORCELAIN AT JEGENSTORF CASTLE

An eighteenth-century porcelain vessel, which consisted of a handled saucer plus a cup, all in a single piece, was called a "trembleuse" (from the French "trembler" — to shake, tremble). It was designed to enable travellers to drink their coffee or hot chocolate in steady-handed comfort even when their coach was rattling over the roughest roads. The "trembleuse" is just one example of the creative products of the early European porcelain manufacturers, who strove to make life in the classical and rococo epochs more convenient and more festive. Some 230 selected examples of this subtle art, taken from an important private Basle collection, are on display at Jegenstorf Castle near Berne until 10th October, 1965. Dishes, figurines, table settings, desk sets, all demonstrate the imagination and great skill which inspired the products of such German manufacturers as Meissen, Höchst, Frankenthal and Ludwigsburg.

[S.N.T.O.]