

The Grisons

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Die Schweiz = Suisse = Svizzera = Switzerland : offizielle Reisezeitschrift der Schweiz. Verkehrszentrale, der Schweizerischen Bundesbahnen, Privatbahnen ... [et al.]**

Band (Jahr): **- (1948)**

Heft 11-12

PDF erstellt am: **03.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-776380>

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THE GRISONS

Anyone looking for the first time at a map of the largest of the Swiss cantons will have difficulty in grasping even the main outlines of its geographical make-up. He may comfort himself, however, with the thought that even scholars cannot agree on the divisions of the Grisons Alps. The Grisons has been called "the land of the hundred-and-fifty valleys", and as such can offer the tourist a wide and varied scope.

The Grisons is in many respects a sort of Switzerland in miniature. Bound to the Confederation by pacts of friendship since the end of the Middle Ages, it joined this entirely in 1803. The history of the region reflects on a small scale the larger happenings of the country as a whole. A people early divided into strong communities grew with the passage of time into a democratic state. The heraldic symbols of the three older divisions of which it is composed will greet the visitor again and again on his wanderings. Armorial bearings of this kind are a traditional decoration for the fronts of the farms and citizens' houses which appear in the eastern Alps of Switzerland in so many individual forms.

The parallels of history are underlined by linguistic parallels. As in Switzerland as a whole, the majority of the Grisons is German-speaking. While Switzerland has a large French-speaking population, the Grisons has, in the same proportion, the Rhaeto-Romanic. For Romansh is not a dialect; it is a completely independent language with its own evolution and literature, its first printed works having appeared in the sixteenth century. The fourth national language of Switzerland, Romansh extends over an area which includes more than half of the Grisons. The southern valleys, however, the Misox and the Puschlav, are, like the Ticino, Italian-speaking.

We turn from features which Switzerland and the Grisons have in common to the eastern canton's own individual countenance. It differs first of all from the other similarly situated cantons in the much looser and gentler framing of its mountain chains. Typical of the western Alps are extreme differences in height between valleys and mountain peaks—the abrupt rise and fall of steep slopes. In the eastern Alps we discover a much more gradual merging of the structure of the land. The Grisons have no giants like those of the Valais and the Bernese Oberland. The Bernina is their only peak above the four-thousand-metre line. Instead we find magnificent broad, elevated valleys, with some of the highest permanent dwellings in the whole of Europe. The highest inhabited spot in Switzerland is the little village of Juf lying at nearly 7,000 ft. in the Avers Valley.

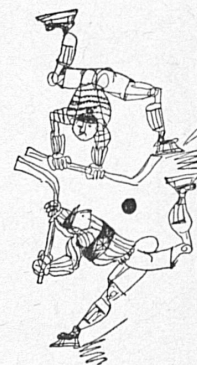
The Grisons is a land of passes, its northern gateway being the Rhine Valley near its capital, Coire (Chur). Beyond the "Curia", the ancient

seat of Roman government in Rhaetia, the old military and trade routes to Italy branch out. Coire itself has kept its impressive ecclesiastic and medieval character, overlooked as it is by the cathedral and the episcopal castle.

This region is, too, the hydrographical centre of Europe, for it sends out rivers to three seas: the Inn, rising above Maloja in the Engadine, feeds the Danube and through it the Black Sea. The streams of the southern valleys run into the Po and the Etsch, and these in turn into the Adriatic. The Grisons is also the birthplace of Europe's third largest river, the Rhine, which leaves Switzerland as a busy waterway to roll towards the North Sea.

In the land of three confederacies, speaking three languages, and the source from which three seas are fed, we meet with many different climatic zones and a wide variety of rural culture. The conditions of life are, by Alpine standards, very favourable, which undoubtedly contributed largely to the early independence of the canton; but agriculture and dairy farming long ceased to be sufficient to support the population. In the past century in particular, many Grisons found employment in the hotel industry and confectionery trade of their Italian neighbours. For foreign visitors discovered their home valleys much later than the tourist centres of the western Alps, and only then did it become possible for a people with initiative to prove their qualities in their own mountain country. As elsewhere, it was the medicinal springs which made the region famous as a health centre long before the healing powers of the climate itself were recognised. Among the spas which are still famous are Alvaneu, Passugg, Scuol or Schuls, St. Moritz and, on the threshold of the Grisons and the edge of the Rhine Valley, the St. Gallis watering-place of Ragaz-Pfäfers. The strongest impetus which the foreign tourist trade received came with the recognition of the beauties and the sporting possibilities of the mountain winter. The Rhaetian Railway, with its daring bridges over vertiginous gorges, was the technical key to the conquest of high skiing fields where good snow is certain to be found. Other mountain railways, ski-hoists and even postal coach services over wintry passes followed. Glaris and the Grisons were the homes of the first Swiss skiers, the forerunners of a new era of sport which was to shake erstwhile remote villages from their winter sleep and to turn them for a few months each year into centres of cosmopolitan life...

... Far from the crowded winter sports centres, there is also a part of the Grisons that lives on as in the old days: the Swiss National Park in the Lower Engadine, now deep in its winter sleep, in whose solemn silences the animals steal to the feeding-places, and we move only with circumspection, not wishing to intrude.



Zeichnungen — drawings : O. M. Müller; H. Fischer.

