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Swiss Abroad girls au-pair in Switzerland

Not a holiday, but a taste of the real thing

Living with a family in Switzerland at low cost and with a lot of free time. A prospect open to au-pair girls which many older people can only dream of. But is this the reality? Swiss Review asks Brigitte Hubatka Baumann and Liselotte Vontobel-Frick of the Swiss Association for Helping Young Women (FJM).

Swiss Review: What does an au-pair do?

FJM: As a rule she lives in a family and does about 30 hours a week of light housework, such as cleaning, cooking, ironing, shopping and looking after children, including one or two evenings a week baby-sitting. Having to stay in counts as work time, but mealtimes don't. An au-pair has the right to four or five weeks paid holiday a year according to age.

What conditions must an au-pair girl fulfil?

In Switzerland a girl from abroad must promise to stay a year, since the host family has to obtain an au-pair work permit, and it can only get one every year. This means that employment is never for a shorter period, and this in fact stops many girls from choosing Switzerland. But Swiss Abroad don't need a permit. In EU countries au-pairs count as working students and also require no work permit, so six-month stays are possible. In Switzerland au-pairs from abroad – except Swiss Abroad – must attend school (language courses) for three to four hours a week. Half the cost of the courses and travel is paid by the host family. Don't forget: an au-pair year is not meant to be a holiday!

Why become an au-pair?

An au-pair stay is considered as a linguistic and cultural experience. So basic language skill is a must. In addition, a year as an au-pair, or at most a year and a half, is often an ideal transition period to apprenticeship, university or professional life.

How and where are au-pairs recruited?

In Switzerland au-pairs are permitted only from western Europe, the United

States and Canada – except of course Swiss Abroad wherever they live. Most obtain the address of our recruitment service through the Swiss Embassy in their country, by word of mouth or through a youth exchange advisory agency.

What is your job as a contact agency for au-pairs?

The Association for Helping Young Women not only recruits but looks after au-pairs' interests. The latter activity has increased enormously in the last few years. Girls are no longer prepared to "swallow" any bad feelings they may have. On the whole we feel that is right. But they generally know more about their rights than their obligations. We always try to help them solve their prob-

The voice of an au-pair

"I enjoy my life as an au-pair in Switzerland very much", says Dorly Sturzenegger, a 20-year old Swiss Abroad girl staying at Münchenstein near Basle.



"Switzerland offers much better training possibilities than we have in Bahia, Brazil. I also like the change in seasons, particularly winter. At home the sun always shines, which I find a bore. I've been here a year and hope to stay several more. If my German is good enough, I would like to start a commercial apprenticeship next year. So far I don't feel I know the local culture and people very well. I can only say that it seems difficult to get to know the Swiss, even though they are very nice when you first meet them. At any rate I feel quite at home here".

(Photo: Archives)

lems, and if really necessary we place them with another family. Several times a year we organise informal get-togethers for au-pairs. But there are many young women who don't like being looked after but want to be as independent as possible.

How much does an au-pair earn?

In Switzerland wages and free time are subject to the guidelines of the Swiss Association for Household Training and Vocational Questions. In Canton Zurich – where rates are highest – the maximum monthly wage is Sfr. 680.–. But the family must allow for at least Sfr. 1,200.– to cover social security plus board and lodging.

How old is an au-pair girl?

The age is laid down by the residence authority. Generally speaking she must be at least 17 or have left school and must not be more than 29. Experience shows that when au-pairs are «too old» it is difficult to place them and there may be problems of integrating into the host family.

Why is the number of foreign girls registering at your recruitment office suddenly so much lower? Is Switzerland's image tarnished?

The recession has had an unnerving effect on many people. Even unemployed women are afraid to go abroad for fear they may miss the boat at home. We see the same trend with Swiss girls – they are hesitating to become au-pairs elsewhere.

What advice do you give Swiss Abroad girls who would like to be au-pairs but already speak good German?

We might recommend an au-pair stay in French-speaking or Italian-speaking Switzerland. At the FJM – like the Pro Filia recruitment agency – we have the addresses of more than a dozen organisations doing the same thing as us. And besides improved language skills, an au-pair stay gives Swiss Abroad girls extra understanding of their own culture and more independence, as well as developing their characters. An au-pair stay is always a good preparation for everyday life later on.

Interview: Alice Baumann

Are you interested in an au-pair job?

AJAS has the addresses of all recruitment organisations in Switzerland. Contact: AJAS, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3000 Berne 16.