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Study and hiking trails

A new look at the countryside

There are now over 200 study and hiking trails in Switzerland. What lies behind this boom?

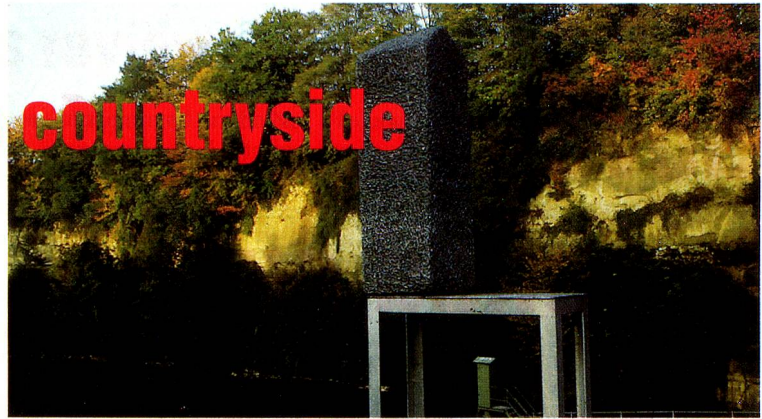
We have a joke trail in the Appenzeller moorlands, we have a sniff and taste trail in Geneva, we have a historic mine study trail near Schaffhausen, and we have the "Sentiero delle meraviglie" not far from Lugano. Anyone who wants to walk in Switzerland and learn something on the way will have no trouble finding one of the many study and hiking trails. In a day and age when we know the names of very few of the creatures which creep and fly around us "the teaching trail" obviously fills a need. In addition, tourist resorts – which have not been spoiled economically in recent years – now find walking an extra attraction to boast about.

Ruth Michel Richter (text) and Konrad Richter (photos) recently put on their boots, decided to come to terms with the new phenomenon of study trails and have produced a book about it. They describe 17 routes in detail and give short commentaries on 154 more. We decided to interview them.

Swiss Review: You have 171 study trails in your book, and in the short time since it was published a whole lot more have been laid out. How do you explain this?

Ruth Michel Richter: A combination of two elements. There is a need for things to be explained. People walk through the countryside without knowing anything about the trees and plants they see. The best way of dealing with this is to tell them while they are actually walking. It all started with forest study trails, but with time the idea has been extended to other areas. The other thing is that holiday resorts have taken up study trails as environment-friendly attractions.

Konrad Richter: There is also the fact that in Switzerland we have very different cultures, landscapes and ways of living in a relatively small area. Study trails help people to notice and appreciate this diversity. Here in Switzerland



A cheese dairy in Canton Fribourg and modern art on the cultural trail Baden-Wettingen-Neuenhof: study and hiking trails have a great deal to offer. (Photos: Konrad Richter)

we have been able to preserve more evidence of cultural history during the last two hundred years than countries around us which have been repeatedly devastated by war.

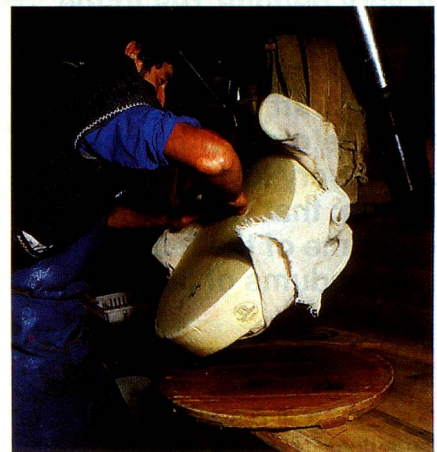
What gave you the idea of making a book about study trails?

Michel: It started out with my interest in industrial archeology, something which I have studied intensively. I came across study trails when an industrial trail was laid out in the Zurich Oberland. We discovered that virtually nothing had been written about the subject and at any rate there was no overview of it. Switzerland Tourism was in the process of stocktaking at the time, and we were able to cooperate with them.

Or visit a museum...

Perhaps it is raining or your feet do not feel up to a walk – but you are still thirsting for knowledge. If so, you should consult the new edition of the Swiss Museums Guide, whose 525 pages cover 831 museums throughout Switzerland and Liechtenstein. It includes a short description of each museum – in the language of the municipality where it is located – together with the address and opening hours. The museums are listed by place and subject. You may also buy a museum map with the guide.

Schweizer Museumsführer / Guide des musées suisses / Guida dei musei svizzeri, edited by the Association of Swiss Museums and the Swiss Cultural Heritage Database, 7th edition, 525 pp, Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, Basle 1996, Sfr. 34.– (+postage) or Sfr. 52.– (+ postage) including map.



What does one need to go on a study trail?

Michel: Good shoes and a healthy interest. It is usually just a question of a walk or a short hike. There are only very few mountain and cycle tours.

What is your favourite study trail?

Richter: The Segantini trail in Maloja. This is because it gives one a real understanding of the painter, Segantini, and also you see this fabulously beautiful landscape from a completely different angle. Generally speaking, a study trail teaches you how to look at things, for example how the environment has been affected by humans.

Michel: Personally I had a "eureka" experience with the area planning study trail in Treib. I was most impressed about how a very abstract subject that one rarely thinks about can be illustrated. Such knowledge can be very useful in other places and circumstances.

Interview: René Lenzin

Ruth Michel Richter, Konrad Richter, Erlebnis Lehrpfade in der Schweiz (Adventure Study Trails in Switzerland) – also available in French as: Partir à l'aventure sur les sentiers didactiques suisses – Volume 1, 144 pp, AT Verlag, Aarau 1995, Sfr. 48.– (+ postage). Volume 2 will be published in March 1997. This book – as well as Swiss Museums Guide – may be ordered from the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, CH-3000 Berne 16 (please state preferred language).