

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 37 (2010)
Heft: 3

Artikel: The Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906741>

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Ballenberg: A journey in time through rural Switzerland

The Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg is actually nothing like a museum. Switzerland's rural heritage is brought back to life in all its glory, giving visitors an insight into how things once were. By Heinz Eckert

Following the trail around Ballenberg does not feel like visiting a museum. Yet it takes visitors around Switzerland's largest open-air museum, extending across one of the most idyllic parts of the Bernese Oberland.

Were it not for the entrance area with its ticket booths, it would take visitors a while to realise they were in an open-air museum. Perhaps only the absence of parked cars would remind them that they were already "inside". The surrounding area is almost as picturesque and well-maintained as the open-air museum itself. The transition from the neighbouring hamlets to the Ballenberg open-air museum, which is managed and maintained on the basis of scientific principles and monument conservation ideals, is almost seamless. "Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg – The Experience" is the advertising slogan and it delivers what it promises.

The Foundation of the Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg was founded in summer 1968 with the support of federal government and the canton of Berne. The museum was officially opened in 1978 with 16 exhibits in a park-like environment, overlooking Lake Brienz. The museum has since been extended continually. Today, over 100 historical exhibits and houses from almost all cantons are on display. Ballenberg is Switzerland's only open-air museum for rural life.

Ballenberg is most certainly not a dusty collection of rare items. Instead, it is full of life and hustle and bustle. Everything in this open-air museum is alive, every step provides an experience. All the buildings are furnished in keeping with period style and can be explored. Living rooms, kitchens and bedrooms give visitors the opportunity to discover traditional ways of

life, while the tradesmen give an insight into how people used to bake bread, make lace, weave, make cheese and produce roof shingles in the countryside. It smells of freshly sawn wood and iron wrought in the smithy. Visitors are also able to sample the many culinary delights.

All the buildings at the open-air museum were in danger in their original locations and could not be conserved there. They were carefully taken down and reconstructed in Ballenberg true to the original. Here they are surrounded by historical cottage gardens, meadows and fields with original varieties of flowers, herbs, fruit trees and plants long forgotten or in danger of dying out.

Various special exhibitions provide fascinating and unexpected insights into partly lost customs of rural Switzerland. Finally, 250 farm animals bring the stables and pastures to life. In addition to chickens, ducks, goats, pigeons, pigs and cattle, animal breeds threatened with extinction have also found a home at Ballenberg. They include the peacock goat, Swiss mirror sheep, Rhaetian grey cattle, a variety of downy-haired pigs, Diepholz geese and many more besides.

The first open-air museum, the "Skansen", opened in Sweden in 1891. Many such establishments have since opened around the world. They all share the same goal – to secure and preserve traditional buildings and to provide an insight into them and what lay inside with authentic fittings, furniture, equipment and tools. Nowhere is this goal better achieved than at the Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg.

It is well worth spending an entire day at Ballenberg.

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