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Rigi – Switzerland under the magnifying glass

A public baths designed by the famous architect Mario Botta will open on the Rigi at the start of July. The Rigi, renowned for its spectacular location, was once an exclusive spa resort, but the mountain has been little more than a fine-weather destination for sightseers over the past 50 years. This is now set to change.

A report by Hanspeter Spörri

“You’ve never been up the Rigi? Not even on a school trip? That can’t be true!” – friends and acquaintances react with disbelief to my confession. Everyone has visited the Rigi; it’s one of Switzerland’s most famous mountains. It is neither its height (1,797 metres) nor its shape that makes it spectacular. It looks like other lower alpine peaks and consists mainly of pudding stone, the sedimentary rock that is also found, for example, in Appenzell, Toggenburg and the Napf region. What makes the Rigi a famous travel destination is its location between Lake Lucerne, Lake Zug and Lake Lauerz as well as its unique panoramic views. This massif is also like a

ween sobriety and cheeriness, between professionalism and nepotism and between functional aesthetics and kitsch.



Angelo Zoppet is a journalist and civil engineer. I meet him at Arth-Goldau station and he immediately explains that only the station bears this name, the place we are in is actually Goldau. Arth and Oberarth are neighbouring towns. I have asked Zoppet to accompany me because he is an expert on the Rigi and a born fighter. He campaigns against the destruction of the landscape and poorly designed construction, sometimes making

structural problems are clearly in evidence today. But, an identity is now being sought and longstanding confrontation is slowly giving way to cordial cooperation.”

This confrontation may also explain why two railway lines climb the Rigi. While this is great for tourists, it costs much more than it brings in. The two rival companies with Rigi lines running from Vitznau in the canton of Lucerne and Goldau in the canton of Schwyz merged in 1992.



Having absorbed some advice from Zoppet, I finally board the blue train, which was built



View from the Rigi looking towards Küssnacht

theatre backdrop; it is the setting of Schiller’s drama about William Tell, which unfolds between the Gesslerburg, Hohle Gasse, Tellsplatte and Rütli. The Rigi is within easy reach for day-trippers from all the major Swiss cities by train, boat and the two cog railways that run from Vitznau and Goldau to Rigi-Kulm.



And what awaits visitors on the Rigi apart from the somewhat obtrusive touristic infrastructure at the summit and the smell of fries from the self-service restaurant? Perceptions are perhaps heightened when visiting this place for the first time: in the course of a single day, I find a Switzerland under the magnifying glass here – a country with all its qualities and contradictions, with self-belief and self-doubt, swaying between a fear of crisis and a mood of optimism, bet-

himself unpopular in the process. After just a few yards, he points out an example of ill-considered speculative architecture. Zoppet explains with some annoyance that various regulations were circumvented to get the property built.

He then tells me of his love for the Rigi. He says: “For me it represents home, unrestricted panoramas and my local recreational area for sporting activities. I also associate unforgettable memories of my youth with it, but it is a place of painful experiences too.” What does that mean exactly? Zoppet says that the Rigi also signifies ideas and action on a small scale. People here have long worked against one another rather than with one another. The two Rigi cantons, Schwyz and Lucerne, have not pulled in the same direction. This may also explain why tourism has waned at the Rigi. Zoppet remarks: “The

in 1953. I immediately feel as though I’m on a school trip with the thrill of anticipation at the unknown which has long been imagined. During the journey, I get an ever clearer view of the Kleiner Mythen and the Grosser Mythen, the impressive massif looming over the cantonal capital of Schwyz. The cog railway then goes through a romantic ravine, passing waterfalls and precipices. There are lots of day-trippers among the passengers, some Asians and a group attending a yoga and meditation class here. Suddenly, something comes into view that resembles a stranded UFO. It is the event tent at Rigi Staffel. Zoppet had mentioned it. “It’s absolutely hideous”, were his words. “How could anyone permit and construct such an ugly gigantic tent on this wonderful mountain ridge in the middle of a protected landscape?” He is quite right. This thing that advertises itself as a

“unique event location” for 100 to 750 people has been there since 2007.

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Nevertheless, I enjoy taking in the landscape. Arriving at the summit, I feel as Mark Twain and his travel companion, Harris, did: “We could not speak. We could hardly breathe. We could only gaze in drunken ecstasy and drink it in”, he wrote in his book, “A Tramp Abroad”, published in 1880. This must have been a busy spot even in Mark Twain’s day. He called the Rigi summit an exhibition ground and did what tourists love doing – he poked fun at other tourists: “They had their red guide-books open at the diagram of the view, and were painfully picking out the several mountains and trying to impress their names and positions on their memories. It was one of the saddest sights I ever saw.”

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This form of civilisation soon disappears when you leave behind the summit region. I begin to descend in the direction of Rigi-Kaltbad. After just a few minutes, a pleasant aromatic smell reaches my nostrils. Is it soup? Could it be cheese? Is it cake? It is the Kessiboden hut, and there is still room on its tiny terrace. I soon get caught up in a discussion with guests about the approval of the second homes initiative. While no consensus is reached about its impact, it is clear to the group why the initiative was approved; someone remarks: “Too much development has taken place, a lot of it is unattractive and just for the sake of making a quick buck. People have simply had enough of seeing the landscape blighted.” (See also pages 8–11)

There are highly experienced hikers among the group who are familiar with the inns on many of the mountains: “This is a wonderful place – it’s magical”, one remarks. “It’s down to Sylvia, the landlady”, he adds. Sylvia is sitting with guests at a table, leaving her husband Toni to serve customers. He has helped out here since taking early retirement from his position as a customer service advisor in the automotive trade but looks as though he has spent his entire life in catering. But the boss is Sylvia Planzer, who, at the age of 49, completed a business school course after a serious skiing accident and then worked in an office for two years. In 2005, she discovered that



View of the Rigi from the “Mythen”

the Kessiboden hut, then a bratwurst stand and kiosk, was available to rent. She had no hesitation in saying, “I’ll do it”. Since last year it has been a proper little inn rather than a kiosk.

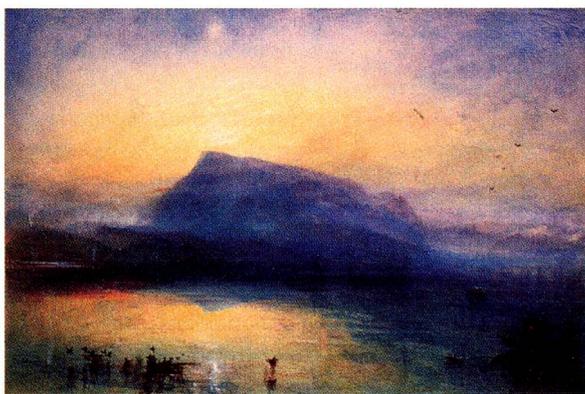
The produce served comes from the local region – deer sausage from Moutathal and cheese from the canton of Uri; the cakes are homemade, and the wild garlic for the soup is handpicked.

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I would love to have stayed for longer. But we have to set off for Rigi-Kaltbad to be on time to catch the train. The route across the Chänzeli is spectacular. And I also want to take a look at the new Botta baths. It is set to open soon after years of wrangling, failed projects and an unfinished building blighting the landscape for ten years. There are great hopes attached to it. Zurich’s “Tagesanzeiger” recently described the Rigi as a “crisis summit”. The Botta baths is now expected to herald a recovery. Roger Bernet is the director of Aqua Spa Resorts, which owns the Botta baths. He believes the new

baths will meet the great need for a slower pace of life. People will be able to enjoy the facilities and recuperate even in poor weather.

The baths is still a building site, but typical Botta features are already recognisable – a round tower and a natural stone façade made of granite, which does not come from the Rigi. The scheme will cost 28 million Swiss francs. Guests will soon be able to “bathe in an environment steeped in legend with a vista of the mountains”. This is what the online publicity tells us anyway. It is due to open on 1 July.

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Just a few minutes away by foot is a small chapel in an historical location. Total silence reigns, and clear water flows from a mountain crevice. This spring once gave the “Kalte Bad” its name. People seeking cures came here on pilgrimages as early as the 16th century. They plunged into the cold water, ran around the chapel, prayed and rid themselves of their ailments. There were four hotels on the Rigi at the beginning of the 20th century. Some were extremely luxurious and they could accommodate 2,000 visitors. Guests came from all over the world and included the aristocracy, the snobbishly wealthy and artists. Tourism and contemplation are closely entwined as the need for recovery, spiritual recuperation and physical reinvigoration has always brought people here. The journey is well worth it.



The world-famous painting “The blue Rigi” by William Turner

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