

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 47 (2020)
Heft: 5

Artikel: Cold weather : the trademark of La Brévine, even in summer
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1033037>

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La Brévine, known as the "Siberia of Switzerland", remains relatively cool over the summer months. The village inhabitants are quite used to the chilly weather. Pictured here: mayor Jean-Maurice Gasser (left); farmers Kevin and Grégory Huguenin (centre); and Geneviève Kohler, who chairs the village's society for local development (right).
Photos: Danielle Liniger

Cold weather: the trademark of La Brévine, even in summer

Set in the Neuchâtel mountains, the village holds the record for being the coldest inhabited place in Switzerland. Global warming may be disrupting its snowfall and low temperature records, but La Brévine is still drawing in the crowds.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

I arrived in La Brévine on 2 July, amid blustery weather. The valley of the same name was cloaked in fog. As I got off the bus in the village square, I suddenly shivered. Was my summer attire – a t-shirt and a light raincoat – going to be enough? The digital thermometer hanging in the square was showing just 18 degrees Celsius. It was the La Brévine effect! Perched at just over 1,000 metres in altitude within a depression in the Jura mountains, this commune in the canton of Neuchâtel

holds several records for its cold weather. Amongst them is the lowest temperature ever recorded by a MétéoSwiss local weather station: on 12 January 1987, the thermometer reached -41.8 degrees, setting the record for the coldest inhabited place in Switzerland. According to Jean-Maurice Gasser, the mayor of La Brévine: "It's coldest first thing in the morning, when the sun is coming out. You would expect it to get warmer, but the sun's rays clash with the cold from the ground."

In the streets of this little village, crossed by four roads, a summertime stroller will find themselves sliding into a frosty fantasy. There is a shop which rents out cross-country skis on wheels during the summer, named Siberia Sports. A hostel, closed at the moment, bears the name Loup blanc (White wolf). Behind it is the Alaska furniture shop, and Isba, the Russian for a log hut, an old restaurant. But the village's icy reputation has not always been so well celebrated: "its reputation made people think that the peo-

ple were cold as well, whereas in fact, the cold doesn't change anything. We just go about our business as usual," comments Jean-Daniel Oppliger, manager of the restaurant and new hotel, the Hôtel-de-Ville. Oppliger participated in the launch of the Fête du froid (Cold festival), which first took place in 2012, in glacial winds.

Warmer winters and 30-degree summers

The teeth-chattering weather has been transformed into a marketing strategy. "We've had up to 5,000 visitors from Switzerland and France come to celebrate the cold," enthuses

the mayor who was in charge of the renovation and transformation of the Hôtel-de-Ville restaurant. This municipal property now offers accommodation for up to 27 tourists, as well as a large room at the back for hosting local events. La Brévine and its population of 630 are quite prosperous. "Finances are stable," says Jean-Maurice Gasser. All the same, he would like to welcome some new people to the area, as it is "gradually growing smaller".

At Siberia Sports, Pascal Schneider, who supplements his income by working as a carpenter during the summer, relies on the snow to keep his business running. He watches the winters go by in the knowledge that



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? In search of the somewhat different Swiss records. This edition: The coldest municipality in Switzerland.

the years of snowfall perfect for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing belong to the past. "Last winter there was almost nothing. People were only able to go cross-country skiing three or four times. We could only use 30 kilometres of the 163 km track in the valley," he remarks. Schneider grew up in the area and has seen the temperatures in Little Siberia change completely during his lifetime. "When I was younger, the temperatures would stay between -15 and -30 degrees for three weeks at a time. These days, we might see -25 degrees one morning and then rain two days later. In summer 2019, it was 30 degrees for two whole weeks," he says.

Another one for the record books: in 2006, temperatures in La Brévine reached 36 degrees.

Cold weather, warm hearts

Nevertheless, the summer nights remain chilly with the possibility of frost from mid-August onwards. In any case, tourists arrive in La Brévine with their own thermometer in mind. “People tell me it’s not all that cold,” says the manager of the sports shop. Even if it’s a few degrees warmer in winter now, higher up in the 20 km-long valley, the work of agricultural workers is still harder than elsewhere in Switzerland. In Cernil, at 1,200 metres in altitude, Kevin and Grégory Huguenin tell of their days spent out in the cold looking after their 100-strong cattle herd. Work begins at 5am, sometimes with a few strikes of a pickaxe to unfreeze the doors and a blowtorch to heat up the ends of the drinking pipes. “It’s a constant battle against the cold,” remarks Grégory, who remembers his first winter working in Cernil, with a thermometer showing -15 degrees and almost -30 degrees at the farm below, in Brouillet.



A wintery La Brévine. Provided there is enough snow on the ground, the village is a mecca for snowshoe walkers and particularly cross-country skiers.

Photo: Keystone

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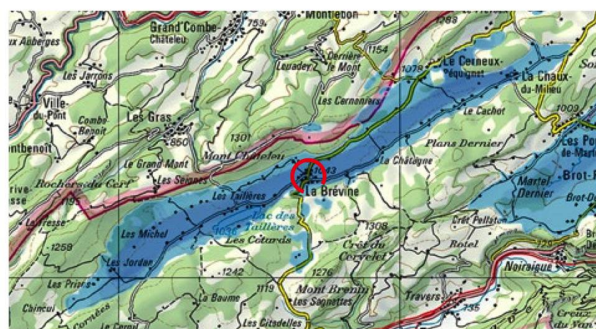
Despite, or perhaps because of, this the two young brothers, who represent the seventh generation of Huguenins to live in the valley, love their region. The cold weather warms local hearts. “Around here, you can knock on anyone’s door and they’ll invite you in to eat,” says Kevin. “There aren’t a lot of people living in the valley, around 1,500 perhaps, but the people are there for each other,” adds his brother.

Crisp summer nights

In summer, the valley and its three villages, of which La Brévine is the only cold weather record holder, transform into a haven of sunny, crisp evenings. At two kilometres from the village, the Lac des Taillières is frozen in winter. But in summer, its murky waters see windsurfers and kitesurfers galore. The steppe-like high plateau offers countless scenic hiking paths, including notably a trail of border markers set out in 1819 touching the edge of neighbouring France. A historic walk incorporates 18 information panels, which provide an insight into this land of frost and snow. Geneviève Kohler, President of the society for local development, takes us to station number 13, a beautiful building and home to the parents of the Huguenin brothers. The lodge hides an old fer-

ruginous spring, once known for its restorative qualities.

Another noteworthy body of water is the village stream. Known as “le Bied”, it disappears into a sinkhole, a sort of natural well, only to reappear in the Val-de-Travers. The part in La Brévine, set in the heart of the village, resembles something of a canyon. In 2018, the hole became clogged and overflowed, causing a flood. “People had 30 cm of water in their homes,” recalls the mayor of the commune. For the manager of the Hôtel-de-Ville, this is one of the factors explaining the Siberian climate of La Brévine. “In other mountain valleys in Neuchâtel, the water flows along the surface and carries the cold away with it,” explains Jean-Daniel Oppliger. “But here, le Bied disappears and the cold is left behind.” Could this be the real explanation? Perhaps, although the extreme temperatures of La Brévine could have a thousand explanations.



The secrets of the cold

In reality, the icy climate of La Brévine is caused by several factors. The main one is that the village is set in a closed off depression, where the cold stagnates, creating a meteorological phenomenon called a “cold air lake”. For this phenomenon to occur, there needs to be high atmospheric pressure, a clear sky and an absence of wind and snow. In such situations, the neighbouring passes and mountaintops can show a difference of up to 30 degrees in temperature compared to the valley below. This is what was shown by a study completed in 2014 by the Institute of Geography at the University of Neuchâtel. (SH)