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Autor: Wenger, Susanne
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Living the quiet life

The Verena Gorge near Solothurn is home to the only person in Switzerland who lives as an official hermit. However, keeping this historic site tranquil is easier said than done, given its popularity among tourists. Is it still possible to live a quiet life amid the crowds?

SUSANNE WENGER

The route to the Verena Gorge Hermitage is signposted. Yes, you read that correctly. A hermitage should be secluded, remote and hard to reach. Not this one: the Verena Gorge Hermitage is a bona fide tourist attraction situated just outside the city of Solothurn in the heavily populated central plateau region. According to the local tourist board, the hermitage is a “mystical place that exudes spiritual energy”. Sounds intriguing – even to the more secularly inclined. The southern entrance to the gorge can be reached on foot in half an hour. Signs tell walkers that they are approaching a listed national heritage site situated within a nature reserve. No vehicles are allowed, and dogs must be kept on their leads.

Along the stream, through steep Jurassic limestone cliffs. Birdsong. A green canopy of leaves high above. Frenchman Baron de Breteuil knew what he was doing when he built a footpath within this dreamy landscape garden setting in 1791. He had

fled to Solothurn, weary of the revolution in his home country.

Only a few people have made it to the Verena Gorge so far this morning. Two dogs bounce around off the leash near the stone bridge. Their owner is in luminous outdoor attire. “Don’t worry, they’re well behaved,” he says. Further along, a married couple: they have been coming here for years to recharge their batteries. “It’s just a pity we can’t buy any postcards,” they say.

Social distancing expert

One last bend, then the hermitage appears in the clearing: two small old chapels, with the hermit’s adjacent living quarters nestled under the imposing cliff wall. Everything is close together. It is a meditative place. Michael Daum lives in the little house overlooking a flower garden. The Solothurn authorities that own the site appointed the German as its new hermit four years ago, continuing a centuries-old tradition. Since the 15th century hermits have dwelt in the Verena Gorge, where Saint Verena is once said to have healed the possessed and the blind. Nowadays, the resident hermit is entrusted with looking after the chapels and keeping the gorge clean. The council pays him a small salary in return. On moving in, Daum said he felt he had been called by God.

It would be interesting to learn how the only official hermit in Switzerland is faring. How does he seclude himself from modern life? And what does this social distancing expert think of the pandemic and the recent

reconnection that many of us have experienced with nature and the virtues of simplicity and frugality? We asked whether we could pay Daum a visit, but the council refused our request. Daum will not talk to the media, and professional photographers are no longer allowed to take pictures within the grounds.

Contrast this to a few years back, when reports appeared in the domestic and foreign press about Daum’s two predecessors (one lived in the gorge from 2009 to 2014, the other from 2014 to 2016). The council helped to fuel the media by going public in its search for a new hermit.

Visitor magnet

When asked to explain the difference between then and now, mayor Sergio Wyniger said that a little less public clamour was necessary to ensure that the hermitage retained its appeal as a place of tranquillity and prayer. “But we’re not telling anyone they can’t

visit.” The council will continue to make this piece of local heritage accessible to the public. But it wants to enforce ground rules, because the hermitage has become a visitor magnet. Even more people came this year because of the pandemic. “Many had no idea that it was a spiritual place.”

The negative consequences were noise, rubbish, wanton Instagramming. Drones were spotted shooting footage of the hermitage from high above. These were immediately banned. Wyniger says that all the commotion not only disturbed those who had come to pray, but also distracted people with personal problems who wanted to see the hermit. It

The Verena Gorge Hermitage, nestled under steep limestone cliffs near the city of Solothurn, consists of two small chapels and the hermit’s living quarters including garden.
Archive photo: Keystone (2009)

all became too much for Daum’s predecessor – a nun. The current hermit handles the situation much better, according to his employer. Daum’s previous life as a police officer probably helps. But the present occupant also knows when enough is enough. One Christmas Eve, he sent away a young couple who had set up a mulled wine stand outside his house. The incident, which was reported in a local newspaper, caused some disgruntlement.

“Finding tranquillity is not always easy”

“You can’t please everyone,” says Wyniger. Daum is happy to help peo-



Higher, further, faster, more beautiful? In search of the somewhat different Swiss records. This edition: The extremely rare job of being an official hermit.



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ple, but he knows where to draw the line. Groups can now book an audience with the hermit. For 150 francs, they can listen to Daum talk about his life and his chores at the hermitage. Evidently, there is more than meets the eye to being a hermit in Switzerland. But what is it really like for someone to relinquish their worldly attachments? We still wanted to know, so we contacted Einsiedeln Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in central Switzerland. Father Philipp Steiner wrote back: “Our life at the abbey is one of solitude, but also one of fellowship.”

Three hundred years ago, the monks at Einsiedeln thought long and hard about how they could reconcile the tranquillity of an abbey with all the activities connected with an im-

portant place of pilgrimage. As a consequence, the abbey’s private quarters are situated more towards the back of the building, where it is quieter and greener. Father Philipp: “Nevertheless, finding tranquillity is not always easy these days.” The abbey church attracts many visitors, so it is a constant job to maintain the hushed atmosphere. Father Philipp and his fellow monks also host laity suffering burnout who have come for spiritual retreat. “It is rare for us not to have guests staying on any one day.”

Hand in the rock for good luck

Back to the Verena Gorge Hermitage, which is now beginning to get busier as we approach noon. An elderly man prays in front of the Ölberg grotto.

Not enough space in Switzerland?

Switzerland must certainly have changed if even the Verena Gorge hermits don’t have the place to themselves. The small country’s population keeps growing and currently stands at 8.6 million. It was 6.3 million 40 years ago. According to the Federal Statistical Office, it could hit 10 million within the next 20 years. Switzerland has an average population density of 215 people per square kilometre, which is double that of France. However, Switzerland’s mountainous topography means that more than two thirds of the population live in the central plateau region between Lake Geneva and Lake Constance, where population density is at its highest as built-up areas eat into the countryside. Conversely, floor space matters more to the Swiss now than it used to. Per capita living space in Switzerland is 48 square metres – seven more than it was 60 years ago. High-density building is presented as the antidote to urban sprawl, but the pandemic has raised the question of whether that puts public health at risk. Estate agents have started to see the beginnings of an urban exodus since the initial lockdown, as demand for countryside living increases. However, politicians disagree on whether critical levels of population density have actually been hit yet.

(SWE)



Michael Daum at the press conference following his appointment as the official Verena Gorge hermit

Archive photo: Keystone (2016)

Nordic walkers and mountain bikers hurry past. A bride and groom have turned up with their photographer. A merry brigade on their works outing are walking towards Restaurant Einsiedelei at the gorge’s northern entrance. A cacophony of school children are approaching from the opposite direction. The class stop to listen to their teacher. Each child is allowed to place their hand in the “Verenenloch” – a fist-sized hole in the cliff wall. “They say it brings good luck,” she whispers.

According to scientists, our ability to cope with a physical lack of space depends less on the number of people around us and more on how we treat and respect our surroundings. This is a view shared by the Einsiedelei-Gesellschaft – the body that assists Solothurn council in maintaining the upkeep of the hermitage. The Einsiedelei-Gesellschaft has produced a children’s colouring book that portrays the hermitage and its idyllic setting as a place worth protecting. In his foreword, the author says that he hopes to plant a seed in children’s minds that will blossom in later life.