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Title image: Erich Furrer and Daniela Bissig, caretaker couple on the Jungfrauoch. Photo: Franziska Frutiger

The top job



Where is Switzerland's undisputed top job? At a big bank? At a chemical company? In the corridors of political power? No, it is 3,500 metres above sea level at the self-styled "Top of Europe", the Jungfrauoch. It is on this lofty perch that Daniela Bissig and Erich Furrer work all year round. Bissig and Furrer are caretakers at the perennially snow-covered Jungfrauoch high-altitude research station. We paid them a high-flying visit (see page 10).

It is most fitting for two caretakers to be sitting atop Switzerland, surveying the view across the Alps and beyond. Caretakers play a key role in Swiss life. During our childhoods, they were the scrupulous background presence in the school building. And because the majority of Swiss do not own their home but live in rented accommodation, caretakers have remained lifelong companions for many of us. Caretakers are the guarantors of order in our apartment blocks. They clean the stairwell, make sure the house rules are observed and that the household waste is properly disposed of, mow the grass outside, keep the bicycles upright, and throw back any wayward footballs to the children next door.

Talking of apartment blocks, it is, incidentally, worth noting that no other European country has such a high proportion of tenants and such a low proportion of homeowners as Switzerland. The fact that most people in Switzerland rent has implications for our towns and cities, our everyday lives, the environment, and political life (see page 4).

We are a land of tenants, but that is not the fault of caretakers, I hasten to add. Indeed, I wish to extend an honourable mention to the best caretaker of them all. She would never refer to herself as a facility manager, and still sprightly at the age of 80 is in charge of looking after our six-apartment building. Endowed with the patience of a saint, she is the glue that binds us together, helping to maintain good karma among neighbours new and old. She still cleans the stairwell and is unfailingly friendly – even when someone has just walked up the squeaky-clean stairs in their muddy running shoes. Hurray for her! Life in our little neighbourhood would be a lot less congenial without our caretaker.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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