

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 49 (2022)
Heft: 4

Artikel: The "highest" paid job in Switzerland? Custodian!
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1051869>

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The ‘highest’ paid job in Switzerland? Custodian!

In February 2021, Daniela Bissig and Erich Furrer landed the job of a lifetime: custodians and facility managers at the Jungfrauoch High Altitude Research Station. Their days spent at an altitude of 3,500 metres are marked by five weather observations. A report.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

She was an HR manager for the Directorate of Public Works in the canton of Uri. He worked in a power station in Nidwalden. Since February 2021, Uri natives Daniela Bissig and Erich Furrer have been living in a different world altogether. Their new job? Custodians and facility managers at the Jungfrauoch High Altitude Research Station, a scientific platform perched 3,454 metres above sea level. “When we got the job as caretakers or ‘facility managers’, I called my two daughters to tell them that we had some important news. They thought we were going to emigrate to Norway!” laughs Daniela. When her children and the couple’s former employers found out



Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swissrecords. **This edition: The absolute top job in Switzerland.**

about the new job in the lofty heights between the Mönch and the Jungfrau, they weren’t surprised. These two love the mountains and the snow. Daniela even has a snowflake tattoo on her right arm. And there’s certainly plenty of the white stuff here on this spur between the northern and southern Alps. “In winter, we go out at 6am, before breakfast, to shovel the snow that has built up during the night,” explains Erich. This daily task begins in front of the residential building and continues 100 metres higher up, on the Sphinx, the name of the rocky promontory where the station’s observatory is located and which the custodians access using an old-fashioned lift. They start by clearing two large terraces,

which can be exhausting after a heavy snowfall, and then have breakfast.

Weather-watching rituals

Their second task is dedicated to weather observations. Either Daniela or Erich ascends the Sphinx five times a day to monitor the skies for 15 minutes. In summer, the weather vigil starts at 8am and ends at 8pm. Perched on a terrace at the station, overlooking the large platform for tourists arriving on the Jungfrauoch train, Erich or Daniela report on the weather conditions. Their observations are used by MeteoSwiss as a basis for weather forecasts. What is the snow quality like? Is it raining – some-





thing which didn't occur 20 years ago – or is there hail? The custodians also describe the visibility and cloud cover. Fog is present about 40 percent of the time on the Jungfrauoch. The cloud report is completed by dividing the horizon into eight slices. Ten different types of clouds are categorised. Cirrus clouds are the easy ones, as they form at 9,000 metres. The other heights can be measured by looking at the surrounding mountains: the Jungfrau, the Kleine Scheidegg pass and the Schilthorn. When the sky is clear, the view reaches all the way to the peaks of the Feldberg (Germany) or La Dôle, 150 kilometres away as the crow flies. "This is a central task that mustn't be neglected no matter what," says Erich, who since March has been navigating around the station on a makeshift scooter put together by a Jungfrau train employee after he broke his leg in Norway.

The station custodians are responsible both for the maintenance of the premises and certain equipment, as

Above: Erich Furrer and Daniela Bissig on the Jungfrauoch. Their job requires them to be ready for any weather. Their workplace is exposed to driving snow, frost and storms.

Photos: Franziska Frutiger, www.franziskafrutiger.com

On the left: The daily caretaking tasks at high altitude are by no means limited to shovelling snow. They also include observing the weather and recording meteorological data.

well as welcoming the researchers who come to carry out experiments in these facilities. In the maze of corridors and different levels of the Jungfrauoch, we come across a Zurich scientist from the Federal Laboratory for Materials Testing and Research. At the Sphinx, we meet a Belgian researcher who is taking part in an experiment launched 50 years ago on the gases contained in the atmosphere. The inhabited part of the station is built into the side of the mountain. Its floors are connected by a small lift in a shaft carved out of the rock. On the ground floor, there is the custodians' workshop, three laboratories and a laundry room. On the first floor, ten small Swiss-chalet-style rooms provide accommodation for the researchers. They can also relax in a beautiful wood-panelled lounge whose walls display photos of two foreign researchers who died in a crevasse in 1955 and a custodian killed by a falling rock in 1964. The kitchen is on the third floor with an adjacent living room. On the fourth

floor we find the library, used by the researchers as a workspace. The caretakers' flat is on the fifth floor. From the double bed, there is a view of the Aletsch Glacier, which slopes down to the canton of Valais.

Taking a break at lower altitudes

Daniela and Erich work in the heights and spend their time off far below in Erstfeld, a village in Uri at the northern end of the Gotthard Base Tunnel. Staff rotations take place every two weeks: when they come down, another couple head up. At the time of our visit, Daniela and Erich were preparing to welcome two new custodians. The previous couple lasted four and a half years. "It's a job that requires a spirit of hospitality and service," says Daniela, who would like to keep her position until she retires. The first couple who worked at the Jungfrau station didn't manage to stay together. The husband remained working there for 30 years, despite his wife's departure on the arm of a



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A job in the sky

The Jungfrauoch research station offers the 'highest' annual paid job in Switzerland. The two couples who work as custodians at the station are employed by the International Foundation for High Altitude Research at the Jungfrauoch and Gornergrat (HFSJG). Founded in 1930, it represents scientific institutions from six European countries and China. The Swiss members of the foundation include the municipality of Zermatt, the Gornergrat and Jungfrau railway companies, the Swiss Academy of Sciences and the University of Bern. An average of 1,000 working days are carried out each year at this research site. The experiments conducted from the rocky outpost are now focused on the environment and climate. The station is home to approximately 50 experiments in fields as varied as meteorology, glaciology, biology and medicine. (SH)



The trip back down to the valley first leads through solid rock – a reinforced tunnel connects the research station with the summit stop of the Jungfrauoch railway.

Photos: Franziska Frutiger

military man, so the story goes. The station is akin to working on a ship. Is there a risk of arguments? "We each work on our own for most of the day," says Erich. The couple are reunited for meals and at night, and they also carry out the morning and evening weather observations (the most beautiful of them all) together.

At high altitudes, meals are large and the need to keep hydrated is imperative. The menus are put together in Erstfeld, and the food is then ordered from a shop in Wengen and arrives by train. "We spend less here because we order exactly what we need," Daniela points out while offering visitors little chocolates in the shape of the Jungfrau. The custodian couple are well aware of the physical effects the altitude can have. "On our first day back, we make sure we move slowly. The first night we don't sleep very well, but after that, we're

completely acclimatised again," she explains.

Solitude during the pandemic

It was in 2020 that our two hosts came to an instant agreement that they both wanted to apply for the job. "The only thing that worried us a bit was the financial side, since we would be losing about 30 percent of our income," comments Daniela. Thankfully, in the end, the foundation that employs them (see box on the left) increased their working rates slightly. Erich, who accompanied one of Daniela's two daughters up the nearby Mönch, is in his element here. "This is the job of my life," he declares. At the height of the pandemic, the two custodians sometimes found themselves completely alone at the station. "It was like being in a bubble," recalls Daniela.



A quiet evening spent in solitude with true rustic charm. Reading is a preferred hobby since the nearest entertainment is rather a long way off.