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Autor: Wenger, Susanne
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The journalist who explores Switzerland on foot

Thomas Widmer has been hiking around Switzerland on a weekly basis for many years, writing accounts of his walks that are as entertaining as they are detailed. His adventures make him happy – as they do millions of other people around the country.

SUSANNE WENGER

Leaf through a Swiss hiking guide and you will probably expect the book to focus on the famous mountain regions. Thomas Widmer, on the other hand, likes to recommend less well-known routes. Hägendorf in the canton of Solothurn, one of the insider tips in his new book, is an unassuming village at the southern foot of the Jura mountains. Widmer stumbled upon an area on the slopes above Hägendorf called Amerikanerblätz, a name that piqued his interest.

“Blätz” in Swiss German dialect means a piece of land. The municipality cleared this spot of trees in 1854, using the sale of the wood to cover the cost of paying for 128 villagers to emigrate to America. These were poor people, and Hägendorf wanted to get rid of them. A plaque marks where the villagers are said to have begun their long journey. “Every part of our countryside has its own stories and memories,” says Widmer.

The most popular national pastime

According to German news magazine “Der Spiegel”, Widmer, 62, from the canton of Appenzell, is Switzerland’s very own hiking guru. Widmer has a horde of followers who read his daily blog posts. He has also spent the past 20 years writing a popular column, which now appears in the magazine “Schweizer Familie”, the publication at which he works. Widmer uses the column to describe his weekly or twice-weekly walks, rain or shine.

The same friends accompany Widmer on his Saturday hikes. “Walking with others means sharing the enjoyment and getting more out of it,” he says. Many in Switzerland have the same passion. Something that broader sections of the population only really took up in the second half of the 19th century is now the most popular national pastime. According to the Federal Office of Sport, almost 60 per cent of people who live in Switzerland, or around four million, hike regularly.

Enshrined in the constitution

There has been a hiking boom in the last ten years, with a more diverse range of people taking up walking. More young people, more women, and more expats. According to a survey, people hike because of the health benefits and the enjoyment of being out in nature rather than the pursuit of sporting achievement. Switzerland is a hiker’s dream, with some 65,000 kilometres of signposted walking trails. This network has been protected in the constitution for over 40 years. No other country has safeguarded its hiking routes in this way. In 2023, hiking was also added to Switzerland’s national inventory of living cultural heritage.

Widmer thinks these developments are the reason why people like to read his publications. “Anything on the subject of hiking has a ready-made audience, provided you manage not to write complete drivel.” A self-effacing assessment, to put it mildly. Widmer writes beautifully, cheerfully and cleverly, sharing lots of information. He visits all corners of Switzerland and is always able to dig up something new and interesting, taking the reader with him on every adventure.

For pleasure, not pain

Peculiar names like Amerikanerblätz are not the only things that inspire him. Antiquarian books do too. Or he will travel by train, then on the spur of the moment decide to walk to one of the destinations shown on the ubiquitous yellow hiking trail signpost that you see at every station. The “Basler Zeitung” has playfully referred to Widmer as Humboldt, a prominent explorer of the Romantic period.

For his part, Widmer sees himself as someone who walks essentially for pleasure. “The era of deadly serious, elbows out, is over.” Not that Widmer is afraid of hard walking. He can go for hours, maybe with the odd scrape



“A hike is like a psychodrama,” says Thomas Widmer. The sign next to him says “Cross the bridge at your own risk”.
Photo provided





here or there. "A hike is like a psychodrama," he says. But for him, walking for pleasure also means "visiting an outdoor installation or lingering at a beautiful church". Stopping by at the local inn is also part of the experience, not least because he wants to support the people who work there.

Hiking as therapy

Widmer got into hiking while reading Islamic studies in Berne, where he missed the rural scenery of his home patch. He now sees hiking as a sort of therapy to cope with the stresses and strains of modern life. On foot, time moves at a different pace. "I breathe better and my senses are heightened with every hour. I smell the flowers and the trees. Or a beautiful butterfly or deer will catch my eye." In his opinion, the best hikes are the ones when he returns home extremely tired but happy.

He believes that escapism is the reason why more and more people like to hike. "Tranquillity and space have become rare luxuries in our densely populated country." However, the hiking boom has now brought Switzerland's oft-discussed problem of overcrowding to the fore on hiking routes also used by a growing contingent of mountain bikers. Public transport connections in the Alps are excellent these days, attracting the throngs. BMX trails, bouncy castles and loud music greet visitors at the top of mountains.

Escaping the hordes

Widmer takes a pragmatic view. Anyone who has used a mountain railway or eaten at a mountaintop restaurant should accept a bit of responsibility and not complain too loudly, he says. Widmer actually finds "the stark difference between highly commercialised tourist areas on the

one hand and secluded areas on the other" quite practical. That's the thing with tourism: you can escape the hordes by not following the herd.

A "simple detour off the beaten track" is often all it takes to find quiet, he adds. Like going up a popular mountain from the 'other' side. Or staying close to home. "Head to wine country north of where I live on a misty New Year's Day, and you won't meet a single soul." Widmer resides in Zollikerberg near Zurich.

Beauty and reality

On his walks around Switzerland, Widmer sees a country of great beauty. But he also recognises the looming reality of urban expansion or the threat to mountain villages. He mentions the recent storm event in Val Bavona, which branches off the Maggia Valley and is populated only in summer. Earlier inhabitants of Val Bavona made the inhospitable terrain their ally by topping boulders with soil to create extra arable space called "hanging meadows". "I find human activities like these moving."

On a positive note, he mentions how the farmers have started selling their produce directly. He calls buying local produce at farm shops, bee honey or ice cream for example, "one of the biggest joys of hiking". The same applies to traditional Alpine farms. "I can buy the finest cheese at Alp Siez to take home with me from the St Gallen Alps. It's a taste of where I've been. Isn't that great?" Widmer wants to continue hiking for as long as he is able. He has a growing list of walks to do. "I already know I won't manage all of them in my lifetime. Sad but true."

Hikers on Bütschel-egg mountain (canton of Berne), with the Mönch and Jungfrau in the background. "Walking with others means sharing the enjoyment and getting more out of it," says Widmer. Photo: Keystone



THOMAS WIDMER
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Widmer's hiking tips for the "Fifth Switzerland":
www.revue.link/wanderer
Blog: widmerwandertweiter.blogspot.com