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A beautiful part of the upper Toggenburg with the 'Churfirst'-mountains

Following Toggenburg's 'legendary trail'

Legend has it that the towns and villages of Toggenburg valley owe their unique character to a giant who, beset by loneliness, built the settlements to attract people to the valley. Today, visitors can follow the "trail of legends" along streams fed by the tears of innocent maidens.

The trail begins at the top of the chair lift station, Alp Selamatt, where the story of the Toggenburg giant is revealed on a large board, complete with a picture of him. As the story reveals, the giant was responsible for the way the houses are spread unevenly across the valley and mountain slopes.

The giant was once the only resident of the valley, and to ward off his loneliness, he decided to build a town to attract people. He approached a dwarf he knew - a skilled craftsman - and asked him to build the houses he needed.

Once the buildings were completed, the giant placed them in a sack, which he threw over his shoulder, and started on his way back to Toggenburg. But as he was stepping over a mountain, the bag tore open on a sharp peak. The houses fell out and were strewn higgledy-piggledy across the valley. It is a story that most local children learn in school, and which is now reaching a larger audience thanks to the trail. "I think it is a good way to explain Toggenburg to the outside world," says Roland Stump, hotelier and president of Toggenburg tourism.

Communicate culture

"We can communicate our culture and history through the legends, and the pictures make it easy for children to follow the stories." In all, there are 10 stations along the trail, which winds across alpine pastures below the imposing Churfirsten peaks. The seven jagged peaks rise into the sky, each within a giant's arm length of each other. Stump says the region has developed more slowly than the rest of Switzerland and that could be one reason why the people of Toggenburg are more superstitious than their compatriots. "We still have farmers who want to be farmers, and they will always be farmers,"

he explains. "That's a tradition which provides a good basis for legends."

Looming over the valley on the north side, the 2,500 metre Säntis mountain is the highest in northeastern Switzerland, and like the Toggenburg valley, has its own peculiar resident - the Säntis Spirit.

Prey on innocent maidens

As the story goes, the spirit was able to transform itself into an attractive young farmer in order to prey on innocent maidens. Tricked into pledging their undying devotion to him, the maidens would watch in horror as the young man changed back into the spirit, which was "as crooked as a bent pine tree, as ugly as the night and as bitter and evil as could be". The poor maidens were trapped for eternity in the spirit's lair, their tears feeding the mountain streams. "Chills run down your spine when you hear the story, but that's what legends are all about," Stump says. Girls following the trail with their families can poke their head through a hole cut out of the picture of the Säntis Spirit, and pretend to be a maiden in the ghoul's evil grasp.

Occasionally, the trail breaks off and cuts through a stand of pine trees. The number of uprooted trunks that litter the ground attests to the force of a hurricane, which knocked down entire forests as it ripped through Switzerland at the end of 1999.

Belief in supernatural beings

The builders of the trail used a small fraction of the wood brought down by the storm to make the signposts. The wood still strewn across the ground serves as a reminder to the people of Toggenburg of how exposed they are to natural disasters, and how easy it was for their ancestors to believe in supernatural beings.

"Because the valley is open to the direction of the winds, the storms come running in to Toggenburg unbroken," Stump explains. "These storms may give birth to a legend that our children will tell their children in 50 or 60 years' time."

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