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10 years Swiss Path

In 1991, the "Swiss Path" was opened as part of the year-long festivities to mark the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation. Ten years on, the trail that winds through the birthplace of Switzerland is as popular as ever.

The 35 kilometer-long Swiss Path begins on the Rütli Meadow above Lake Uri, a side arm of Lake Lucerne. Large trees offer plenty of shade on sunny days, making it a popular spot with hikers looking for a place to rest their feet or picnicking families making a stop during a tour of the lake by paddle steamer.

And it was on the Rütli Meadow back in 1291 - as the story goes - that three peasant leaders who were desperate to throw off the shackles of Habsburg rules signed a mutual pact. The event whether real or imaginary, sealed a strengthening of bonds between the people of what is now central Switzerland, and laid the cornerstone for the founding of the Swiss Confederation.

Trail helps mark anniversary

The creation of the interpretive trail was just one contribution to the festivities in 1991 marking the 700th anniversary of the pact, known by the Swiss as the "Rütli Oath".

Between 400,000 and 500,000 people walked at least part of the trail in the anniversary year, and we've averaged about 300,000 people annually since then,

says Peter Mattli, a local politician and president of the Swiss Path Foundation.

"The Swiss are very proud of their history and haven't forgotten how their ancestors fought for their independence. That pride is still tangible today," says Rolf Wild, from Central Switzerland Tourism, explaining one reason for the path's popularity.

All 26 cantons are represented along the way, beginning with Uri - one of the three cantons involved in the Rütli Oath - and ending with Jura, the last canton to join the confederation. Each canton is allotted a length of section according to its population with five millimetres equalling one resident. Working out the demographic equations though paled in comparison to the challenge of carving the trail out of the steep high cliffs that ring much of Lake Uri.

Beside and through cliffs

From the picturesque lakeshore of Bauen, the path enters a tunnel built through the cliffs. For 40 minutes, the stretch, which is also wheelchair accessible, goes under the cliffs, beside the cliffs and through the cliffs.

"It didn't take long before it was realised that it would be very difficult to build a path around the steep cliffs, so they decided to call in the army. In some places they had to use dynamite," says Wild. "In the end it worked, but it wasn't cheap so they decided to involve all the cantons of Switzerland.

"Everybody was in agreement that the Swiss Path had to be built," remembers Mattli. "But it wasn't so easy in this terrain. For safety reasons, we had to build tunnels and install nets to protect against falling rocks."

After about 15 kilometres from the Rütli Meadow, the trail opens up at the southern tip of the lake. By this point, it has also passed through about 200 years of Swiss history since the new stretch is dedicated to canton Solothurn, which didn't join the confederation until 1481.

Turning eastwards a series of footbridges cross a narrow flood plain. A viewing platform looks over the reeds, giving hikers a chance to observe the wide variety of native and migratory bird species that nest or rest there.

Once in Flüelen on the eastern shore, it's hard to overlook the yellow and black striped shutters of the Rudenz villa. The village stands at the entrance to the old Gotthard north-south trade route, and around the time the peasant leaders were swearing their oath, the Rudenz villa was being used as a tollhouse.

Not amusement park

"Wherever a canton starts or ends, there is information about the canton, about the history and then about the Swiss Path", explains Wild. "But it isn't meant to be an amusement park. The people who set it up wanted it to remain as natural as possible because they felt the beautiful scenery was enough on its own".

Article by SRI, swissinfo.org