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HELVE⁺IA

Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

BEAUTIFUL SWITZERLAND



Suonen - Bisses - Water courses - Waale - Levadas

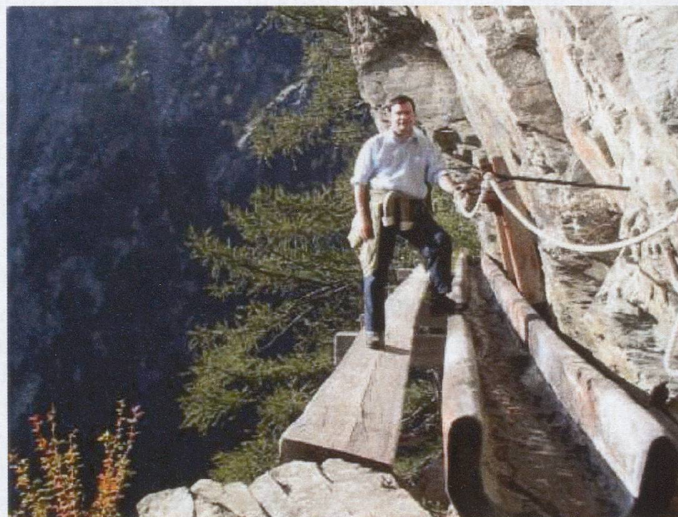
The names differ from place to place, but the problem is the same all around the world: In arid areas, farmers have to irrigate their fields. Sometimes water has to be brought a long way. In Switzerland the Valais is an area with a very dry climate for most parts of the year. Therefore melting water from glaciers has to be brought, along steep rock faces, down to the fields where it is needed. Even today this system is still used in many places to irrigate the fields. The irriga-



tion takes place according to a strict plan, agreed on by all farmers. Many folk tales tell scary stories about those farmers who diverted the precious water to their own fields when it should have gone to their neighbour's. According to folklore, they cannot find peace even after death and are condemned to correct their wrongdoing indefinitely.

In some areas these water courses are renewed just to attract tourists who can walk along the suonen. These water courses are built with whatever material is available on the spot. In soft ground they are just dug into the ground, in other areas they are built with stone, or bridges were made of hollowed-out trees, and in some places tunnels were chiselled

into the rock. The tracks along the suonen differ very much. In some areas you can even ride a mountain bike on the track, but in other places you should not suffer from vertigo because of the sheer cliffs and very narrow walkways. In many places it is highly recommended to secure children and adults with shaky knees: they should wear a harness and be fastened to the safety cable which are mounted along the most dangerous stretches.



Many foreign tourists and even many Swiss don't know anything about these great cultural monuments that date back at least to the 12th century. In the Valais you can spend weeks wandering along the suonen and have a great time away from the crowds. There are around 200km main and around 25,000km secondary suonen.

Those who would like to experience the water courses in a more gentle way could watch the film "An heiligen Wassern" with famous actors like Gustav Knuth and Margrit Rainer.
Paul Werthmüller

