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Making a splash in Lucerne

When Switzerland's first mixed bathing area opened at Weggis near Lucerne in 1919, the authorities had to ban hobby photographers from taking pictures. They may have been a nuisance to people enjoying recreation and relaxation at the lakeside, but the resulting pictures today offer a fascinating glimpse into bathing in times gone by. The photographs form part of the current "Lust for the Lake - Public Baths in Lucerne" exhibition, which runs until August 31, 2008 at the Lucerne Museum of History. The exhibition is set out like an old-fashioned lakeside bathing area. Around 50 curtained cabins can be opened, each revealing a different aspect of Lucerne bathing history. This includes many photos, several home films, as well as objects and clothing, including a beach bride's outfit.

Museum director Heinz Horat said that the Weggis baths proved very popular in their first season: "From July to September 1919 there were around 33,000 people coming to the baths, of them 18,000 bathing and around 15,000 just looking." Some pictures show quite clearly people standing around in early swimming costumes, with fully clothed observers sitting in the background.



Bathing beauties – typical early costumes from the Weggis baths (Lucerne Museum of History)

The mixed Weggis baths were quite a daring concept for the time. But it was just after the First World War and tourism was slow. Times were also changing. At first critics thundered that the baths were immoral, but police inspections reported no problems at all. People seemed to be enjoying their newfound bathing freedom.

In the 19th century, lake bathing was a way of keeping clean, as most houses did not have bathrooms. As the health and wellbeing movement took off, taking a dip also became popular, but the sexes were strictly separated. As some of the original bathing outfits on display show, women would have struggled to move around in their two-piece woollen costumes – trousers and a dress on top down to the knees – that weighed

up to five kilograms when wet. Men had a rather more streamlined outfit, based on male underwear of the time. Bathing wear later became skimpier and men wore trunks.

But then with the opening of the baths in Weggis, with men and women together, the authorities decided that men had to wear a bathing suit covering the upper part of the body. Bathing was an accepted pastime by the 1920s. Posters, some of which are on display, advertised lakeside beaches. It had become a social event, and with this – inevitably of course – came bathing fashion.

"Usually from this period you have black and white photos so you get the impression that all the suits were dark, but you can see from our examples that they were coloured, with red and white stripes, or in pinks and greens," Horat says. A matching little cap was de rigueur and the modern woman also had so-called "beach pyjamas", for out of the water. In the 1940s ladies' swimming costumes became fitted, and two-piece suits from the United States also gained acceptance.

But it was the arrival of the bikini in France in the late 40s – named after the Pacific atomic tests of the time – that really caused a stir. French actress Brigitte Bardot helped popularise it and by the time Swiss actress Ursula Andress strode out of the sea in her cream bikini in the James Bond film Dr No in 1962, it was firmly established.

Bathing areas have also changed over the years. The first were fenced off using wooden palisades. Men had bigger pools than women and were allowed to jump into the lake. Washing areas were partitioned off at the sides.

Although some of the old baths have now disappeared, people still have a large choice of areas around Lake Lucerne, including Weggis.

from swissinfo

Der Hecht

Ein Hecht, vom heiligen Antōn
bekehrt, beschloss, samt Frau und Sohn,
am vegetarischen Gedanken
moralisch sich emporzuranken.

Er ass seit jenem nur noch dies:
Seegras, Seerose und Seegries.
Doch Gries, Gras, Rose floss, o Graus,
entsetzlich wieder hinten aus.

Der ganze Teich ward angesteckt.
Fünfhundert Fische sind verreckt.
Doch Sankt Antōn, gerufen eilig,
sprach nichts als: Heilig! heilig! heilig!

Christian Morgenstern