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Wenn Engel reisen, lacht der Himmel - when angels travel, the heavens laugh. It's a lovely saying - and although we don't claim to be angels, we always seem to benefit! It was so at the end of May and start of June, when the weather was variable to put it mildly. We (Margrit and Roman and Mani and I) went on a Great Rail Journey, and the heavens were in perfect humour the whole way.

Having travelled to the east of Europe last year, and Southern Spain this year, we thought "time to rediscover Switzerland!" And after all that driving .. what better way than by train. So away we went, travelling via Luzern to Brienz and up the Brienzer Rothorn, then to Zermatt and up the Gornergrat, and back with the Glacier Express over the Oberalppass to Chur, and home.

Such fun! Rail is such a great way to travel here: the carriages are comfortable - and many have panorama windows - so you see wonderful views; they're frequent, so you can be flexible; and it's cheap! We buy a "Halbtax-Abonnement" which for CHFr.125 gives you half-price travel on all rail and Postautos, and many of the mountain Bähnli - great value.

Brienz is one of our favourite places. Mani took me there 13 years ago on my first trip to Switzerland, when we took the track and pinion steam train up the Rothorn and created a minor sensation by planting a bottle of champagne in the snow up the mountain to cool, then toasting the top. That was the start of a happy tradition of bubbles in high places! This year, we only made it to the half-way station - the top part of the line was still closed for snow - so the bubbles stayed warm in our bag. But the excursion in that little steam train was still wonderful and the views just breathtaking.

Ballenberg is just a bus-ride from Brienz, and it's still more interesting now than when first we went. Ballenberg has clusters of buildings from each distinct architectural area of Switzerland - genuine old houses and barns and sheds moved there and preserved and presented as living museums, often with craft workers demonstrating the traditional crafts. I don't know how many hectares it covers, but we were glad to go part way round by horse-cart!

Then it was on to Zermatt ... well nearly. Actually our B & B book (a gift from the B&B in Brienz) found us some rooms in St Niklaus which is a classic little Wallis town, and we continued by train the next day into Zermatt, and then up the Gornergrat. The sky was blue. The trees were bursting green.

The snow was white. The air was warm enough at 3100 metres for us to be in our short shirt sleeves... and the Matterhorn was absolutely stunning! Sometimes you think that views you've seen a hundred representations of might be a disappointment in reality - but not this. Its towering presence, standing apart and sharply sculpted, was more than I could have imagined.

Back to St Niklaus to find some other Kiwis from Lower Hutt had found the same B & B (life is wondrous strange) then the next day a bus-trip up to Grächen, a high Wallis town on what they call the sun-terrace - and yes the heavens were still laughing. Actually, they might have been laughing *at* us

rather than *for* us, as we took an hour and a half walk without finding the lake, only to return and see a sign we'd missed which promised a 15-minute walk-way to the water!

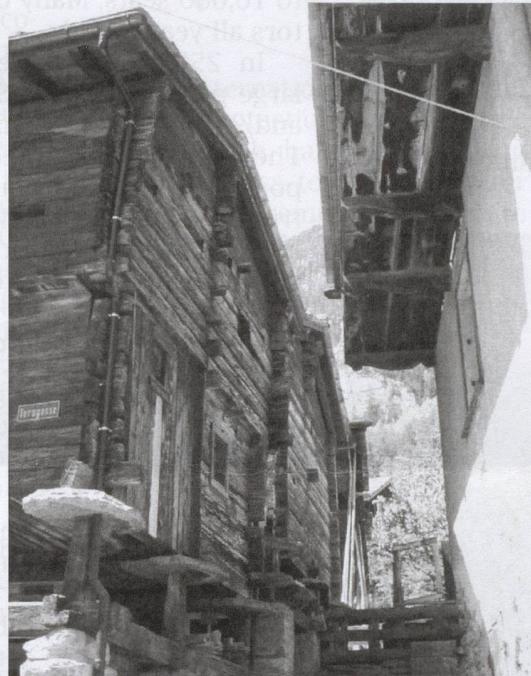
Consolation was some of the best Grappa I've ever sipped - a fine Wallis creation. We fell in love with the Heida wine too, from the Visperterminen, Europe's highest wine-growing mountain, and the local St Niklaus drop was pretty good too.

The next day, onto the Glacier Express at Visp - and through the wonderland of snow over Oberalppass - and home. Even better, we arrived to find the May Helvetia featuring Wallis .. and all the things we'd been seeing! So what with the pleasure of playing tour-guide to our New Zealand friends Jane and Peter,

showing them "our corner" around the Bodensee and into Appenzell in late April-early May, then the Great Rail Trip, we've been enjoying having our eyes full of Switzerland.

It's not just the scenery either. In our business together, Jane and I have been very interested in what's called "social capital", and how communities and countries develop that. How do you build up a society in which there is trust, mutual support and goodwill?

So, when I was describing some of "how things work" here in Switzerland, we kept finding examples of what we think underpins communities with high social capital. There's not space here to go into that (besides, maybe we can find funding to write the book on it, which would involve lots of travel!) but here's a lovely little example from the radio last week. There's a problem with litter at the Frauenfeld Railway station. The solution they're proposing.... Not just to crack down on litterers (though they're doing that) but also to pile up the rubbish so everyone can see how little individual acts add up. Isn't that so Swiss? Just perfect.



Wallis house and "spycher" in St Niklaus