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A magic sound across the centuries

A modest organ in the Valère basilica in Sion, the capital of canton Valais, claims a proud record: that of the oldest organ in the world still in continuous use. Constructed around 1430, this unique instrument is the focal point of a Gothic organ festival that has been held each year for 40 years.

Visitors lucky enough to be in the venerable church when the organist starts playing stop dead in their tracks. After a moment of uncertainty, they look up from the central nave and are surprised to discover the source of the magic.



The Valère basilica in Sion

The Valère basilica is a fortified church on a hill overlooking Sion. The organ is reached up a flight of steep, narrow stairs. It turns out to be very different from its huge cousins which we are used to seeing in modern churches. It does not have a variety of keyboards or an infinite number of pedals and buttons. Just a modest, diminutive keyboard reminiscent of a simple piano.

Valère's instrument is not the only Gothic organ in the world. Others of the period exist in other European countries. Spain has a number of 14th century organs, but their machinery had fallen into disrepair and so it had to be replaced by modern mechanisms. The organ in Valère is unique because the essential elements of its parts and mechanism were actually built in the Middle Ages.

By 1700, this organ had been modified to play baroque music. Because of this, it's not possible to say that it sounds as it did originally but it does give us a reasonably good idea of what medieval music sounded like.

Unfortunately, the organ cannot normally be visited by members of the public. After restoration work, completed in 1954, the Valère organ is only played in the Ancient Organ Festival. This event attracts the most brilliant organists all over the world to the town of Sion.

from swissinfo

An ice highway draws tourists and scientists

One of Switzerland's most impressive landmarks is not only a favourite tourist attraction but also a useful indicator of climate change.

At some 23 kilometres in length, the Aletsch glacier is the largest in the Alps, and a major part of the Jungfrau-Aletsch-Bietschhorn Unesco World Heritage site.

If you take the cable car from the village of Fiesch in the Rhone valley, up to the Eggishorn you are rewarded with a breathtaking view. When you emerge from the upper station you find yourself looking down on a huge river of ice, flowing slowly from the Jungfrau region to the Massa gorge 2,500 metres below.

The Aletsch is not only the longest glacier, but also the one with the largest surface area. It is fed by ice that has formed more than 4,000 metres above sea level, and it finishes up flowing into one of Europe's major waterways, the River Rhone.

It is not only the length of the glacier, but its thickness which is impressive. Measurements carried out by the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETHZ) have shown that at its source at the Konkordiaplatz it is about 900 metres thick. But as it descends it gets gradually thinner, and by the end its depth is only about 150 metres.

Three huge ice streams – already between seven and nine kilometres long – come together at the Konkordiaplatz. In merging they produce one of the striking features of the Aletsch: two dark stripes running practically all the way along the surface of the glacier. These are so-called medial moraines, consisting of the rock debris pushed down along the sides of the separate streams.

All glaciers are subject to melting and freezing. They are formed when more snow falls than can thaw in summer. The snow is gradually compacted and eventually forms glacial ice. New ice is constantly being added at the top, while at the bottom it wears away, in a process known as ablation. It is when the rate of ablation exceeds that of accumulation that a glacier starts to shrink. Every year the Swiss glacier monitoring network reports on how far specific glaciers have retreated or advanced. But the figures must be treated with care. On such a huge glacier as the Aletsch, the tongue reacts very slowly.

The values for a single year don't tell us very much. It's only when you add them together, and see the trends, that you see that the glacier has been in retreat over the last 150 years. And it is clear that the retreat has been greater in the past ten to 20 years than it was in the 1970s and 80s.

But in most of the last 10,000 years, the glacier was shorter than it is now. It is only in the last one or two thousand years that it has been relatively long.

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