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Greetings to your New Zealand spring-springing, from our Swiss autumn-turning! The weather is still wildly variable – it has been April-weather since May! – but we continue to have sunshine whenever we're playing tourist. I'm holding my thumbs as I write that (not easy to do that and type too!) because we're off travelling again soon. I like the custom of holding one's thumbs for luck instead of crossing fingers ... it feels somehow more comforting!

Our July and August travels have been within Switzerland – and it still takes me a bit of getting used to the idea that in three autobahn hours you can get from one side of the country to the other. (Of course, we like to take the longer ways.)

First a delightful swing through *Welschland* – the French-speaking part.

We spent time in Murten, and accidentally ended up at a historical battlefield; Mani's recollection of his school lessons comes back to give me edited highlights, and I promise myself to find a history book. So much history!



Murten rooftops from the city wall

Then Fribourg. They have a great little tourist "train" with a head-phone commentary, which is sheer heaven for an information-junky like me! The train criss-crosses the river over a wonderful variety of generations of bridges.

That night we stayed in a farmhouse bed-and-breakfast place. Potato-growing has been their traditional crop – but they're finding harvesting travellers is a better business now. If you're travelling – www.bnb.ch is a great site.

Then Avenches – a small town that remembers a grand Roman history. The Roman arena was in the middle of a set-change: the previous week it had hosted grand opera; the next day it was hosting a rock-festival. The ghosts of the gladiators probably still respond to the buzz of gathered crowds.

Then Gruyères – a picture postcard come to life, with a nice welcome: Mani had bought a walking stick in Murten. The policeman marshalling visitors into car-parks with a long walk up hill, took pity as Mani leaned on his stick... and sent us up to the top car-park, from which it was just a gentle amble. The *Schloss* is really worth visiting. It's well-presented – I loved the internal walls with 16th and 17th century graffiti, covered with a Perspex panel so we weren't tempted to add our own. And – the grounds display many wonderful modern works of sculpture which add a fresh dimension to its story of human habitation and artistic life.

Much more, and a cross-farm-tracks adventure in the Juras .. but then Saint Ursanne. Mani had painted its bridge from a post-card years ago – and

yes, it looks just like that. What delighted me was seeing how each of these historic and beautiful towns is so distinctively itself. All old, yes, but each different.

Then Basel, and some wonderful time with Wellington-Swiss Hans Buess's daughter Margaretha and her husband and son. Such sharing of memories and re-establishing of connections – Mani and Margaretha knew each other when she was "so high".

Back to Altenrhein – for 1st August in Appenzell, and home again in time to see the children parade their *lampions* around our small community. Driving home past our airport (yes, Altenrhein has the smallest international airport in Switzerland) – a joy! Thirteen storks gathered on the airport field! Mani says there used to be storks in his youth, but until this year we'd not seen any here. Then we'd start seeing two (we couldn't assume to call them a couple) in the fields. Then – this extraordinary sight. They must have been planning a flight, because now we're back to two.

Our next major excursion was to Lugano for the Swiss Abroad Congress. There's a separate piece on the proceedings, so here let me tell you about the fun things. One was having the company of Lotti Napp from Wellington. We made a formidable foraging team at the cocktail party, and I really enjoyed having her help with understanding what I thought I was hearing. They're still determined that delegates from English-speaking countries must demonstrate their true Swissness by being fluent in German or French!

Lugano was having a street music festival, which added to atmosphere – and as we lounged around listening to jazz we noticed how elegantly dressed the crowds were – young and old alike. Presentation matters in the Italian part! Lugano turned on wonderful weather for the lake cruise – especially since there'd been a cold snap in the north and snow on the San Bernardino pass. In Ticino we'd not noticed a thing – it truly is so different there. If we were not so fond of Altenrhein, that might be where we'd be...

Of course, amongst all the sightseeing there have been some intense conversations about the impact of the high Swiss Franc on the economy. Some employees have been agreeing to pay cuts and extra unpaid hours (all this without marching in the streets!). A long-term benefit might be some serious attention to the cost of living. Only recently has there been much media attention on price differences across the borders. Yes, it's great being a high-employment, high-wage economy, but there are some high structural costs built in – and ... our particular domestic discussion group reckons it doesn't hurt to have a reason to ask some hard questions about those!

Now the National Bank has acted to peg the Franc to the Euro. Add that to the forthcoming election, and the normal Swiss interest in econo-politics is at a high pitch.