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Trudi Brühlmann's Travel Log

I had a great holiday – and I'm glad to be back!

Many friends asked me about my impressions of my first trip back to Switzerland after twenty years in New Zealand, and what had changed.

Well, here is a collection of impressions:

My friends are still the same, only a bit older.

Not much has changed with my friends; some have put on a few kilos and need glasses, others have lost a few kilos and shed some hair. My classmates and many of my colleagues are now retired, and for my older students, retirement isn't too far away either. The next generation, however, has changed a lot: Babies and toddlers have grown into young adults, respectable, responsible young men and women, and many families have added a new generation again. I met children that hadn't even been a thought when I left Switzerland, twenty years ago.

Switzerland is still very green.

I was warned that the urban sprawl had swallowed up vast areas of the Mittelland – so I was pleasantly surprised to find that there are still extensive forests and large green pastures; the wheat was harvested and had left yellow patches in the otherwise green mosaic. As the sky was blue, the lakes were mainly blue, too – and they were a balmy 23 to 25 degrees!

The variety of bread is still as good as it was.

Whether you get Gipfeli and Weggli and Semmeli from the local bakery or go to Coop or Migros, the smell is mouth-watering, and my three months were too short to eat my way through all the shelves. And the same can be said about the cheeses in our local Käserei and in the cheese departments of Migros and Coop. Bread and cheese are more expensive than the cheapo stuff in New Zealand, but a lot cheaper than the boutique breads and cheeses here.

Public transport is excellent.

The trains, buses, trams and ships run frequently and on time, and the travel information is very good. All public transport I travelled in was clean, and nothing was broken; all is very efficient - and rather automatic and sterile. The service at the little ticket office in a little village was extraordinary: The middle-aged lady rang a bigger station and asked for advice and quickly found the best solution for my travel needs: I had a Halbtax-Abonnement and three Monatskarten, one after the other, which was as good as a GA (not available for non-Swiss residents). Thanks to an all-Swiss Tarifverbund I could travel on all public transport all over Switzerland - and there is much public transport, from Oberschan to Rotenbaumgraben!

Wander- and Velowege are everywhere and well signposted.

Bikes are back as a popular means of transport; many of my friends bike to work or to the train station, and their children bike to school. Drivers seem to respect the needs of bicycles, as most drivers are or were cyclists themselves.

Helmets are not compulsory, however, many parents make them compulsory for their children. What I like about bicycles in Switzerland: They have bells and use them, instead of creeping up behind you and giving you a fright.

Switzerland is full of weeds – oh no: full of nature.

I couldn't believe my eyes: Weeds were simply everywhere: between the train tracks, between the cobblestones, along motorways, along buildings, and in the forests, along the roads and paths, honeysuckle and blackberries and Old Man's Beard, thick and full of seed-heads, ready to be blown off. I mentioned it to my Swiss friends – and they explained that what I considered to be weeds were not weeds at all, but an expression of biodiversity, nature revitalized. A gardener of the Winterthur City Council was more precise: For the last few years the city's policy was not to use poison and let nature take its course. And as to Old Man's Beard and honeysuckle: Those are indigenous plants in Switzerland; I didn't find out whether Nielen were still especially popular with youngsters...

Switzerland is full of crows.

Crows are much more conspicuous than they were twenty years ago. They live in the middle of cities, in squares, in parks, in gardens. When I mentioned it to friends, they said numbers had grown because crows weren't shot anymore. Crows are highly intelligent and might adapt to a changing environment more quickly than other birds.

Storks can be seen in many places.

In July and August the storks were still in Switzerland, around Lützelsee, Sempachersee, Bodensee and probably in many other places, too.

All in all, I had a wonderful holiday, and I'm very grateful to my friends in Switzerland who were so generous with their time (and their spare beds). I enjoyed blending in; nobody asked me where I came from when I opened my mouth, and it was a joy to be surrounded by Schwizertütsch. And yet: I enjoyed coming home – to a good friend who picked me up from the airport, to a well-stocked fridge and even to a weeded garden! And now I'm getting ready to welcome friends from Switzerland here again.



Aarau - old town