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Fun Tips Wallis

Cows have right of way

The resort of Bûrchen, also known as 'Birkendorf' has devoted itself entirely to the birch trees, after which it is named. Along the Birch Trail you can learn everything there is to know about this native tree. Because the climate here is so dry, farmers in the Augstbord region, as in many other areas in the Valais, have constructed irrigation channels. There are now foot-paths along these so-called 'suonen'. After spending the day out grazing, more than 100 cows return to the barn on the Moosalp each evening so that they can be milked. To reach the barn they have to go on the road and this holds up all motorised traffic for about 30 minutes. Many of the cows that spend the summer on the Moosalp are of the Eringer breed. This is a pitch black cow famous for cow fighting in canton Valais. Today, Eringer cows are almost exclusively found in Valais. Driving the cows is a colourful event that draws crowds of onlookers from near and far every day.



Photos taken by Henry Werfelli



© myschweizerland.com

Let the best cow win!

Right after winter season is up and the flowers start blooming the cows are cut loose and the fighting begins. In Valais there is this unusual tradition when people put cows to face different kinds of challenges. Cow fighting began in the 1920s and has drawn as many as 50,000 spectators in a year. The winner is called La Reine des Reines ("the queen of queens") and increases dramatically in value. At the end of the year, a grand final is held in Aproz, where the six best from seven districts do battle in six weight categories.

Cows naturally fight to determine dominance in the herd, and this is the behaviour that is exploited in cow fighting, using cows from the local Herens breed. With their horns blunted, the fights are mainly a pushing contest. Any cow that backs down from a fight is eliminated until one cow is left standing in the ring. It sometimes happens that the cows in a fight refuse to engage in physical contact with each other at all. Each fight can last up to 40 minutes.

By Tanja Latham-Zurbrugg

Swiss Gold – Saffron from the Village of Mund

Have you ever wondered where saffron, that delicate spice almost worth its weight in gold, comes from? The village of Mund, high above Brig in the canton of Valais, is one of the few places in the world where the precious crocus plants, the source of saffron, have been cultivated since the 14th century.

The statement "Saffron is almost worth its weight in gold" is not far off the truth: a kg of saffron has a going rate of about NZ\$20,000, while a kg of gold is worth about NZ\$50,000!

Saffron originated in Greece and has been cultivated for over 4,000 years for a wide range of medical purposes, as a spice, and for religious offerings, dyes, perfumes and body washes. Alexander the Great liked to take a saffron bath to

tend to his battle wounds. Buddhist monks have traditionally worn yellow saffron robes – although these are mostly dyed with turmeric these days to save money. No Spanish paella would be quite the same without a smoky pinch of saffron!

Saffron is so precious that a 12-week saffron war erupted during the Middle Ages, when saffron was in great demand as a remedy for the plague which raced through Europe. When finally a method was found to grow crocus bulbs in the city of Basel in Switzerland, the situation was remedied (and Basel grew wealthy). Saffron derives from the stigma (the female part) of the crocus flower. Picking the stigma is painstaking and laborious work, and is the main reason why saffron is so expensive. Crocus plants thrive only in limited areas – preferably on sandy, sloping soils exposed to the sun, receiving plentiful spring rains but remaining hot and dry during summer. Saffron growing in the village of Mund is a century long tradition. As with many mountain villages in Switzerland, the draw of modern entertainment and better employment elsewhere caused the saffron industry to nearly collapse. But the threat of an unsightly road to be built through the traditional crocus

fields in the late 1970ies catalysed the citizens of Mund into action. In a very short time, they revived the village's tradition of crocus growing and created a Safranunft or saffron-grower's guild. They did not manage to avert the road, but saved the heritage of their village in the process. The saffron harvest in Mund takes place during two precariously short weeks in late October on the steep, sandy slopes below the village. Winter rye is grown between the crocus plants to help stabilise the fragile soil.

The village of Mund even has a Saffron museum documenting the history and cultivation of saffron. It is located in an ancient "Spycher" (barn) built in the year 1437, one of the oldest wooden buildings in Switzerland. Mund also offers a Saffron trail, allowing you to access the saffron fields under your own steam and perhaps even venture into the nearby romantic Gredetschtal located within the Jungfrau-Aletsch UNESCO World Heritage Site.

By Susie Wood



Photo: Velela, commons.wikimedia.org

Crocus flower with stigma



Mund Saffron Museum ©www.valais.ch

Fun Tips Wallis

Getting around

When you see a yellow bus, your first thought is often the PostBus or PostAuto. The colour of the Postbuses makes them special, as does the sound of the traditional post horn, the friendly PostBus staff and the company's unique history. Each of these special elements stirs up emotions. These distinguishing features and the unique PostBus attitude to life have been summarized in just three words: "The yellow class".



PostBus/PostAuto has a special bus ticket valid until April 2015 for the Valais. With the Valais Central Pass, you're entitled to free travel on Martigny (Vernayaz-Dorénaz) to Gampel /Steg (Goppenstein) public transport, offering you a network of over 700 km in total, with no extra fares! This card is valid for three days of travel, and is to be used over a period of one week. Prices: Adult tickets CHF 48.00 and holders of the Swiss half-fare travel card and children pay only CHF 38.00.

Visit www.postauto.ch for bus timetables and more information.

Open Air Gampel

Summer in Switzerland is all about the outdoors, music, partys and camping - even if it occasionally includes a lot of mud! Where do you find that all in one place? At any of the Open Airs Festivals around Switzerland. The Gampel festival is one of the most popular for music festival enthusiasts and has been an annual occurrence since 1986! Gampel Open Air is held in mid-August and attracts over 80'000 visitors over the 4 days! On the line up for 2015 is a variety of international stars like: Marilyn Manson, Frank Turner and the Sleeping souls, Die fantastischen Vier and national stars like Krokus, Pegasus and Ritschi. The next time you visit Switzerland in summer, you should seriously consider experiencing an open air festival!

www.openair

Healing Herbs

In Ausserberg plant enthusiasts will find a carefully landscaped garden of medical plants. Around 40 medicinal herbs are grown here. The garden is like a natural pharmacy, where plants and plant products are used in tinctures, teas, herbal oils and salves. The herb

garden is a short 15minute walk from the train station Ausserberg.

www.sonnige-halden.ch to find out more information.

Bisses

Bisses are the historic irrigation channels of the Valais. These channels consist of open ditches delivering precious water from the mountain streams - often by daring routes - to arid pastures, fields, vineyards and orchards. Many bisses are still in use today and so are carefully maintained. Numerous trails accompany these historic watercourses, inviting visitors to varied hikes on historic trails.

www.valais.ch/en/experiences/group/bisses

Raron

is a municipality in the canton of Valais. The settlement became abandoned during the Roman Era. In the Middle Ages the hills to the west of the Heidnischbiel were fortified. The Viztume (tower house) was built on the hill. This tower later served as a jail and the town hall. The location of the town in proximity to Visp through the St German pass contributed to the prosperity of Raron. The 20th century saw the growth of residential and commercial buildings throughout the valley.

Heidnischbiel, the Church of St Roman, is part of the Swiss Heritage Site of National Significance.

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke is buried in the cemetery of the old church. Rilke was an Austrian poet who spent his later years in life in Switzerland. More than 400 poems were written in French and dedicated to the canton of Valais. The majority of his poetry was in German. He moved to Switzerland to avoid the post war chaos in Germany. Rilke passed away on 29 December 1926 due to leukaemia.

Being along the Rhone River, the whole area is ideal for vineyards. Every year the Culture Path Walk takes you through the wine making village of St German. From beginning to final bottling the entire process is done in this village.

Next time you find yourself in Switzerland and in this part of Valais, be sure to stop by this lovely village.

By Alexandra Beskid and Sabine Wyss



Traditions

The «Chlausezüüg» adorns many Christmassy living room in Appenzell Innerrhoden and is a tradition older than the Christmas tree. Originally this was a pyramid made of baked goods known as «Filinge» and «Filebrote» (baked dough rings and bread), onto which «Chlausebickli» - colourful, hand-painted pieces of gingerbread - were attached with wooden nails. Even to this day, the «Bickli» are popular gifts for godchildren and grandchildren during Advent.

Today the «Chlausebickli Züüg» (goodies decorating the pyramid) are attached to a wooden frame with six sides, which tapers out at the top. The pyramid is erected in a milk bowl, which is filled with dried pears and nuts. Red apples and beautifully painted «Devisli» (decorative images made of a white sugar dough) are also part of the «Chlausezüüg». A small Christmas tree is placed atop the pyramid.

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continued on page 24