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Surrein - the last Swiss village without streetlights

Direct democracy kept the people of one Swiss alpine village in the dark for over 40 years. What made them finally see the light?

There could be someone standing just in front of me, but if there is, I can't see them. The night in the village of Surrein is pitch black. There are only a couple of tiny orange-tinged lights blinking in the distance - warning lanterns from a construction site. Otherwise, it's dark. Silent too, except for the gentle gurgling of the river running through the valley.

Surrein, with a population of 250, is the last Swiss village without streetlights. But this will soon change, bringing the village and its people into the modern world. The few streets in the village have been dug up to make room to lay power lines in the stony ground. By the end of the year, the work should be complete - each street illuminated with the latest generation of lighting. The first time in its history that the village will be lit up at night.

This has taken nearly 40 years. In 1977 the people of Surrein, a Romansh-speaking commune, voted against installing lamps. They thought the electricity costs would be too high, the light fixtures too ugly, and the lampposts too bare.

The villagers returned to the voting booth in the 1990s, but the same arguments won the day. The night remained black. A new argument was put forward in the 2000s: everyone was talking about light pollution. The night sky would disappear. Once again, the people voted "no".

Eventually, this spring - nearly four decades after the first vote, there was finally a change of heart at the ballot



box. The final tally: eighty four in favour, three against.

"It was about time," said Ottoman Deplazes, chief councillor of Surrein, and also a light proponent. He thinks it is time for the remote village of Surrein to look forward towards the future.

"We wanted the darkness in order to be different," Deplazes says, adding that for him, it was nothing but a waste of time. He says no one will have to carry a torch again in order to avoid stepping into potholes or stumbling over snow drifts. "I won't miss that at all," he says.

One of the opposing voters was Simon Jacomet. The artist and ski designer lives at the end of the village and is building his second house. The windows in his new home will be several metres high, affording him views of the surrounding peaks and at night, a starry sky.

"It's staggering to see the sky from Surrein as it is now. That'll soon be gone," he laments. "People from Zurich would pay for the kind of darkness we have here."

He believes the locals no longer wanted to be seen as hicks, that's why they voted in favour of change. "If the media had only reported on the story earlier, then maybe the outcome would have been different." In his opinion, people would have been more aware of the advantages that come with the dark - peace and quiet.

From August, when the first lights are turned on, the nights will be a little bit

brighter. The lamps of the energy-efficient fixtures will be dimmed after 10pm, only turning higher when someone approaches.

In the rustic bar of Surrein's only inn, manager Claudia Maissen says she's pleased the village will finally see the light. The reason she says the lamps will only burn bright after 10pm (10:10 to be precise), is to allow enough time for the church choir to get home since practice ends at 10pm.

She's also happy for herself, to help her find her way home - even if it takes less than a minute. "I think the light will make me feel safer." www.swissinfo.ch



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