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EMMENTAL - THE EMERALD OF SWITZERLAND

BY ROBERT TYRRELL

If one were compelled to describe the Emmental in one word, it would be "green" — green fields, green forests, like cool, Gothic cathedrals, green hills and green-shuttered houses.

The valley of the river Emme is an extremely beautiful one of some 2,000 square kilometres, situated between Berne on the west and Lucerne on the east and best known to the world for its renowned Emmentaler cheese, 80 per cent of which is exported. But it has many other claims to fame.

The first thing a visitor will notice is the well-balanced proportion of forests to fields. From a vantage-point of 1,000 metres the countryside looks as if it has been carefully landscaped by some giant celestial hand. In fact, it was the Swiss themselves who did it.

The Emmental was first settled in about the year 1100, when it was practically all forest, but, with astonishing prescience and regard for the ecology, the people decided from the very start only to fell sufficient trees to open up enough land for farming, whilst leaving plenty of pines to feed a future wood industry.

The Swiss Ministry of Forests still controls the cutting and planting of all trees and the Emmental boasts the tallest

pines in all Europe, some of which are over fifty metres high and more than 300 years old. Today, all forests, even those privately owned, are open to the public for walks and picnics but there are stringent penalties — rigorously enforced — for any damage done.

The next especial characteristic of this region is the construction of the farmhouses and inns. Each has its "Haube" or bonnet-shaped roof which acts as an umbrella. It protects the building from sun in summer and from rain, hail or snow in winter. Whatever the weather, one can sit outside one's front door, fully protected, due to the generous overhang of the roof.

Another interesting building in most Emmental farms is the "Spycher", a small, pretty, wooden house which used to be a kind of reserve-larder, stocked with ham, fodder and family valuables. The centre of this beautiful green valley is Langnau im Emmental. Although it has a total population of some 10,000, it stoutly refuses to be called a town, preferring to be known as a village. Langnau exemplifies one of the most intriguing paradoxes of Switzerland — that ability to blend the antique and the modern without clashing. For example, Langnau is served by fast electric trains

from Berne and Lucerne: it also has its own local paper the "Emmentaler Blatt" — with a circulation of over 40,000 — printed on the very latest type of presses, yet the newsprint is delivered from the station by horse and cart.

Of course, this valley is not mountainous by Swiss or Austrian standards but many of the upland farms comprise fields with slopes of up to 45 degrees. It is impossible to till these by either horse or tractor so the Swiss have hit on a modernised version of the old "steam-ploughing" that was to be seen in England many years ago.

Farming has its paradoxes, too. Whilst a man may possess the latest model of combine-harvester and hay-baler, he often sows his seed two-handed from a tray in the classical, biblical manner. Moreover, chemical fertilizers are considered unnecessary as the fields are liberally dressed with home-produced liquid or solid manure.

The other main local industries are linen and pottery and fine examples may be seen in the local museum in Langnau. This remarkable wooden building, dating from 1600 and known as the "Chüchlighaus", was formerly the old village hall. Like all wooden houses here it sports red geraniums and white petunias the summer and autumn through. It also has a permanent exhibition devoted to a famous local character, Michel Schüpbach, an 18th century apothecary who was far in advance of his time and who made many near-miraculous cures amongst local people and foreign visitors.

In the nearby village of Lützelflüh there is a charming little museum to Jeremias Gotthelf (1797-1854) a local pastor who became a well-known writer, portraying a fascinating cross-section of the peasant life of his day. Like other parts of Switzerland the Emmental has won its prosperity by hard work, but the Emmentalers play hard, too; the mens' sports are most physically demanding. Two of the toughest are wrestling (well known elsewhere) and the game of "Hornussen" (see *Swiss Observer* — May issue) which is exclusive to this part of the country. First recorded in 1625, it is something of a cross between golf and cricket but its intricacies demand an article to themselves. It is almost never seen by tourists but by local enquiry one can discover where this astonishing game can be watched, but spectators should keep at a safe distance.

What else has Langnau im Emmental to offer the visitors? Above all



The Ragischwand area in the Emmental is not yet as well known as it should be to hikers and walkers. The photograph is by courtesy of the Swiss National Tourist Office.

peace, beauty and a rhythm of life based on the immutable laws of Nature. Next, no other part of Europe offers such an unlimited choice of inviting country walks or "Wanderwege", as they are called. These are all officially signposted with the destinations and the duration in hours and minutes so that it is almost impossible to get lost, even without a map. Many of these routes end at a "Gasthaus" where the traveller can refresh himself in a shaded garden in summer or a cosy "Stübli" in winter. This region is recorded as the second sunniest part of the whole country, first place going to Davos.

Berne, the beflagged and flower-decked capital of the Confederation, with its shops in mediaeval arcades, is less than an hour away. So, too, is Burgdorf, with its beautiful castle perched high on a rock and its memorial to Johan Heinrich Pestalozzi, saviour of thousands of neglected children from all lands. He opened his first school here as a young man in 1799.

Almost equally within reach lies Lucerne, with the large lake of the four Cantons. Wagner's house of exile (now a museum), associations with Austria-Hungary's last Emperor Karl, Europe's first mountain railway up the Rigi and the finest transport museum and planetarium in the world.

Then, Langnau is proud of the new swimming pool which is set in a spacious sun-trap of lawn and shaded by trees, there are outdoor and indoor pools, a sauna and, of course, a restaurant.

For the discerning visitor, there are old inns, beautiful and steeped in history, immaculately clean, cheerfully serving superb wines and food and having a small proportion of rooms with private baths or showers. English is spoken at Langnau's four principal hotels — Bären, Emmental, Hirschen and Ilfisbrücke — and in each, as in the best French restaurants, the "Patron" is chef de cuisine.

Finally, every visitor must climb on foot or go by car to the neighbouring hamlets of Kammern, Rämis or Lüderalp. From these vantage points, some 1,000 metres above sea-level, on a clear day there is an unparalleled panorama of the



A view of the beautiful village of Lützelflüh in the Emmental. The photograph is by courtesy of the Swiss National Tourist Office.

Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau plus a score of other Bernese Oberland peaks as well.

It would be difficult nowadays to find such a stretch of country where the majestic beauties of nature and the

comforting delights of civilised living have been so successfully combined. Such is the achievement of Switzerland's magic carpet — green in summer, white in winter — the Emerald Emmental.

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