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SWITZERLAND FOR HEALTH

Over the years my husband has become a devoted VITA Parcours "fan" and I thought that some readers might like to hear of a possible holiday activity in Switzerland which costs absolutely nothing.

FIT FOR ANYTHING

by Christopher Hill

As a regular attendee at a piped-music gymnasium in the City of London I share the fashionable preoccupation with health and fitness without ever reaching the point of deciding to get *really* healthy or fit. So, having a natural disposition to have that extra slice of toast or a gin and tonic rather than a jog, I still find myself gazing sadly at a paunch in the mornings and wondering whether my summer lightweights will ever fit.

But when we go to Switzerland I look forward to a fortnight or three weeks when I will be able to sweep away all the scales of city life, lap up all the proverbial champagne air and return to England rejuvenated and fit for life. It does not usually work out that way exactly, but I do find that one of the natural advantages of Switzerland is the easy proximity of areas where one can take exercise in agreeable surroundings. After all, nobody can seriously pretend that

jogging around suburban London is actually enjoyable, however much good it may be doing you — assuming you get up early enough to escape the fumes.

Where Switzerland scores is that all towns, even those not in the mountains, have well planned Wanderwege close at hand with signposted indications of the length of a walk and its relative ease or difficulty. On various summer holidays my wife and I have had some splendid walks — some leaving one with a sense of achievement (such as up to the Lac des Vaux above Verbier which is approximately 3,000 metres) — others leaving one with the feeling of at least having earned a glass of beer at the end.

There is also the feeling of "occasion" about walking along Wanderwege in Switzerland. Whereas the English are inclined to go walking in shabby anoraks and old boots (army surplus) the Swiss equip themselves splendidly with the proper knee-breeches, socks, boots, sticks, hats and jackets. Then they stride out purposefully to *walk* rather than to *stroll*. I find this peculiarly appealing and remember feeling that I had really arrived as a walker when I bought myself a pair of "proper" boots, having suffered

rather badly the previous day with suede shoes. From then on I also found that the people we met on Wanderwegen would greet me cheerfully rather than casting doubtful stares at my feet.

Not that the quality of a walker can always be judged by what he wears. The most impressive walker we met in the Bernese Oberland was a khaki-shorted Englishman of the distinctly "mad" variety, who strode off in the morning of his first day and returned in the evening, glowing red but undaunted, having walked up and down the Schilthorn. This was in some contrast to the band of German tourists in the same resort who set off merrily each morning with all the gear (including knapsacks), took the train to the lift, the lift to the top of the selected mountain, ate cakes and drank beer and thus returned invigorated by lift and train to their hotel. I think that with a bit of persuasion I might have walked up the Schilthorn, but would have then been happy to join the German party and to take the lift down.

But whatever standard of walker you are it is nice to find that the walking is organised. Sometimes I have thought of going walking in England (we live in suburban Kent) but although there are plenty of signs saying "Footpath to Little Upchurch" or whatever, they always seem to lead across fields only to peter out at stiles or fences. There is also never anywhere to park at the start of a walk. The Swiss make it all so much easier.

Most people like walking but "circuit training" is quite another thing. As I have mentioned, in England I go to a gymnasium where I lift weights around a circuit to the sounds of Victor Sylvester and pay dearly for the privilege. Here again the Swiss score by providing free circuit training facilities near more than 270 towns under the name of "Vita Parcours". For those who have not experienced the joys of a Vita Parcours, it is basically a prepared track to enable people to get fit and stay fit. There are 10 points on the course at which notice boards indicate that you should do various things like jumping up and down, lifting logs or swinging from ropes. There are also instructions about how hard you should push yourself — for example, the "athlete" would run between all the stages while the "family" would merely walk.

The first Vita Parcours I encountered was at Davos, set just out of the village a little way into the forest. Against all advice, I ran round like the athlete I would like to be and was



UP AND AWAY

so stiff the following morning that I was unable even to sit up in bed. Since then I have taken it easier and have sampled many different Vita Parcours in various parts in what are to me the early hours of the morning (7 a.m.).

You might think that one would be relatively alone at that time of the day (at least I would), but invariably I have encountered dedicated Swiss scorching by me and have also been pursued by large dogs, delighted to have a fleeing figure to chase. Such are the perils of athleticism, but the joys include the smug satisfaction of sitting having breakfast after a shower, talking loudly about how much one has enjoyed early morning exercise. Another less praiseworthy pleasure is deciding the following day that the weather is really too bad even for the keenest of people and that it would be more sensible to stay in bed.

VITA TRAINING COURSES – A NEW IDEA FROM SWITZERLAND

What seemed to the Romans, with their philosophy of "mens sana in corpore sano", to be an eminently desirable goal should surely be at least equally important to contemporary human beings suffering from

the "benefits" of civilisation. A wide range of physical disorders, which result in appreciable losses in terms of the national economy, are becoming increasingly widespread, especially among the inhabitants of highly-industrialised countries. It is common knowledge that one of the principal causes of this pernicious development is the lack of bodily exercise. The VITA Life Insurance Company of Zürich, which naturally has an interest in maintaining the health of the population, found in this very problem the inspiration for a completely novel idea. It saw, in its VITA Training Courses, a way of maintaining health and physical well-being by combining leisure and sport. What exactly is a VITA Training Course? It consists of a running track up to a mile long laid out through a wood or forest with a generous number of "training stations" spaced out along it at regular intervals, where gymnastic equipment is available for use by anybody and everybody. Signboards provide diagrammatic, easy-to-understand explanations of the exercises to be carried out. VITA Training Courses, designed by acknowledged experts, make it possible for people of all ages to regain and to maintain a feeling of physical well-being.

Following the opening of the first five "tracks", VITA Training Courses have embarked on what amounts to a triumphal invasion all over Switzerland. More than 270 towns and communities now consider themselves very fortunate indeed to have such a "fountain of health" right on the doorstep. A new national sport is making its bow — unique in that it crashes all barriers of nationality. The new sport can be taken up just as easily and with just as much success by visitors from abroad as by the "locals". The training courses are open at all times to every enthusiast.

The Swiss countryside is particularly suitable. Extensive, well-cared for areas of forest stretch right up to the outskirts of urban regions, providing a "lung" for cities and towns. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that every day right round the clock thousands of people of all ages and from all kinds of jobs make for the VITA Training Courses where, in the healthy air of the forests, light-hearted exercise brings both relaxation and a new lease of life.

This information (with pictures) on Vita Parcours facilities in Switzerland was provided by the Swiss National Tourist Office.



ALONG THE TRAIL