

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1984)

Heft: 1816

Artikel: A thing of beauty

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689635>

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A thing of beau

... is a joy for ever. Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.

John Keats, a century and a half ago, could have said this about the Swiss mountains.

I was strongly reminded of this on perusing the latest issue of "Switzerland", a superb art periodical published several times a year by the Swiss National Tourist Office in Zurich.

It has articles and essays and a lot of text in German, French, Italian and English, as well as a calendar of events and a lot of information and also some useful advertising.

The June issue is largely devoted to the Val Bregaglia, the Bergell, which lies on the southern side of the Rhaetian Alps, between St. Moritz and Chiavenna. It is part of the Italian-speaking Grisons, together with three other valleys, the Puschlav, Misox and Calanca.

The difference in altitude of more than 1,000m means that the Bergell shows very distinct climatic and botanical differences. Grapes and chestnuts on the sunny southern side, whilst at Maloja only bilberries and cranberries can ripen.

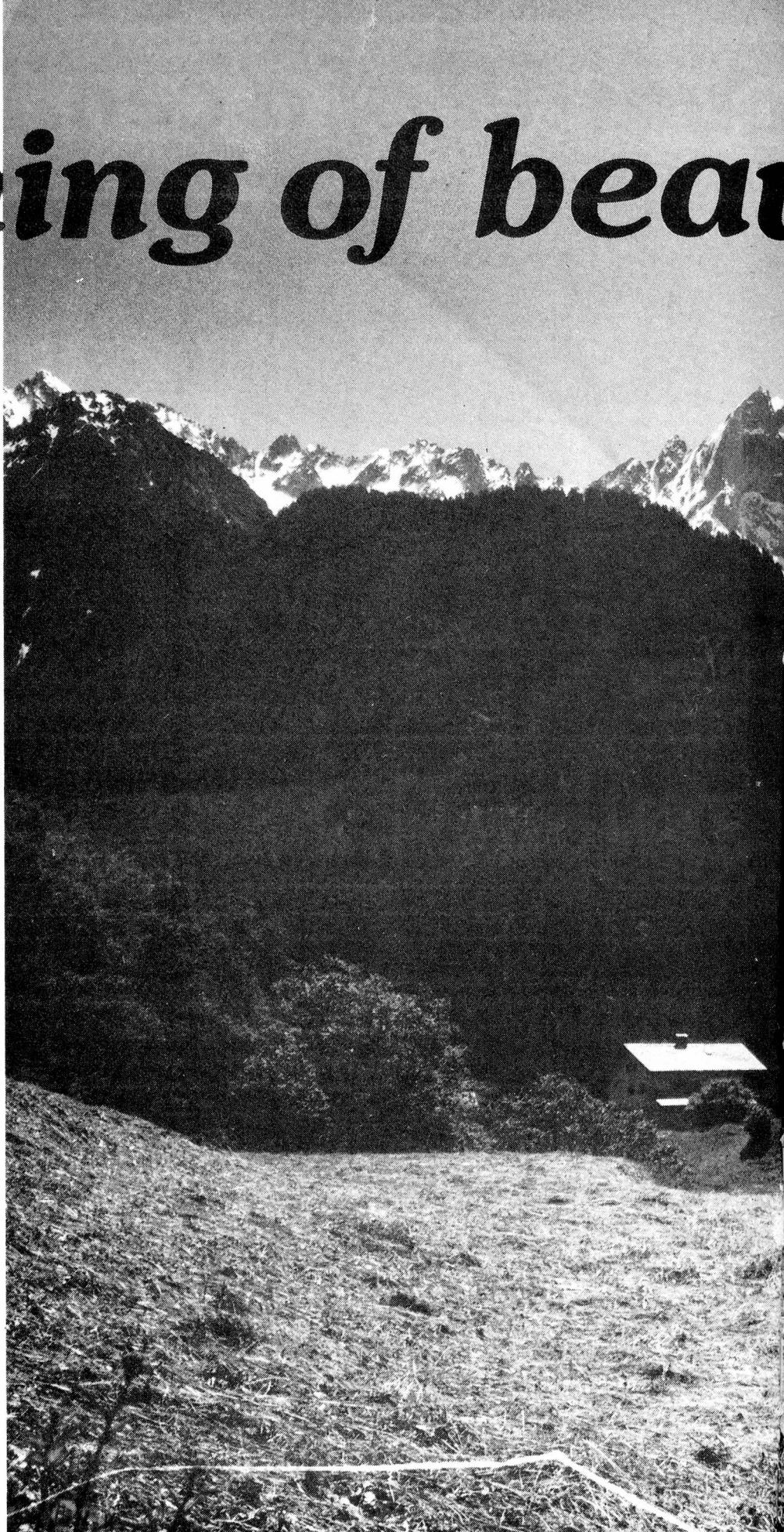
The Bergell is well-known for some special features: for instance 36 glacier mills, left behind by the Ice Age, which were discovered in 1884, when Belvedere Castle was being built to the north-west of Maloja. They are under nature conservancy.

A second geographically important aspect is the watershed on the Lunghin. The Gotthard and the Lunghin are among the most important watersheds in Europe: the waters from the Lunghin flow into three seas, the Inn to the Danube and the Black Sea, the Maira to the Mediterranean, and those from the Northern side to the Rhine and the North Sea.

Historically, too, the region is interesting with its two passes, the Maloja and Septimer. Records go back well before Christ. In fact, tools have been found dating to the Bronze Age, not to speak of Roman remains.

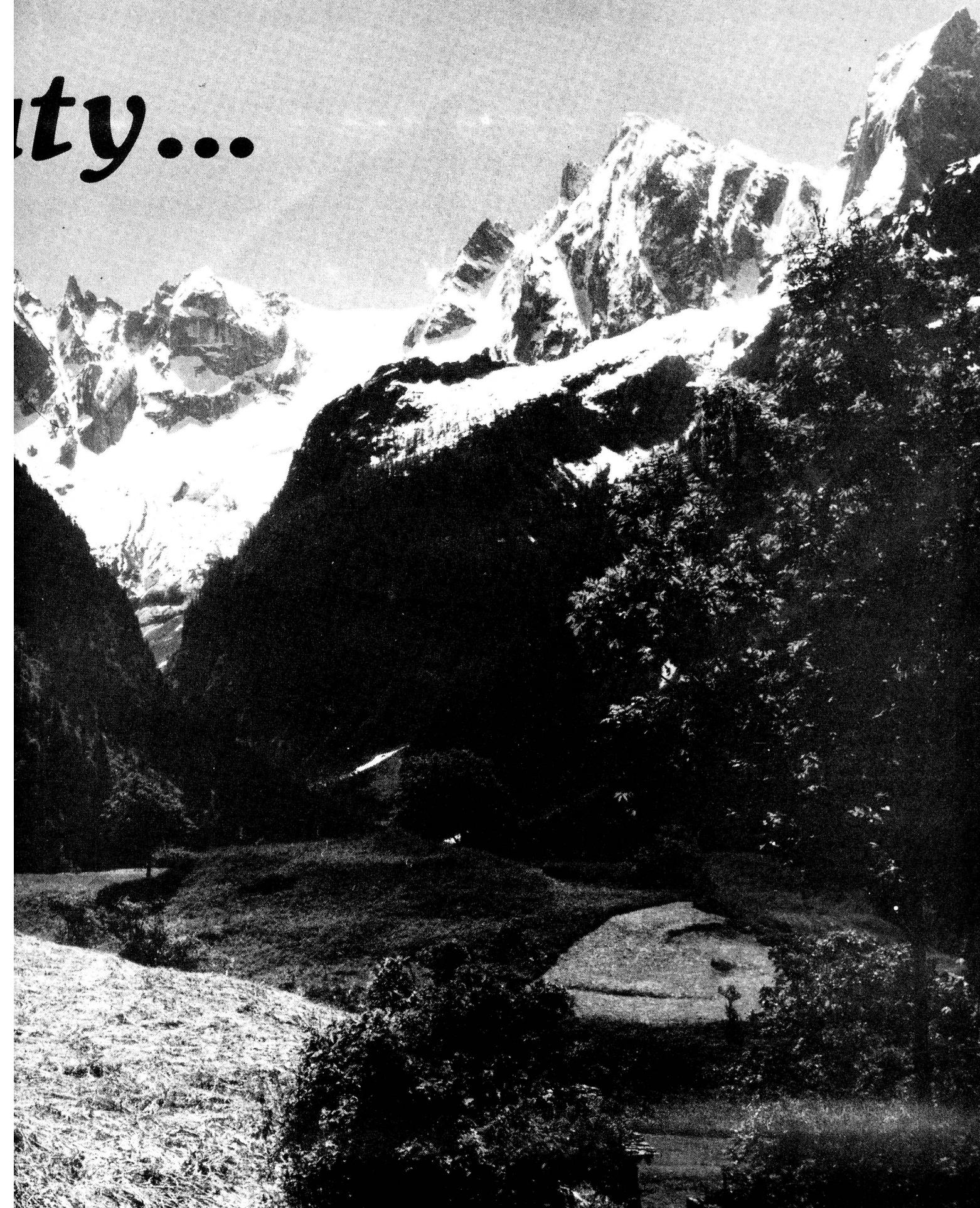
The Romans built one of their most important pass roads through the valley. These retained their importance right through the Middle Ages. It was only in 1882, when the Gotthard Tunnel was opened that the Val Bregaglia route lost its significance.

After the Reformation, the Valley was in the centre of rival interests between Spain and



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Suglio with its 14th Century church

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Austria on one and France and Venice on the other side.

The Bergell region consists of five Communes, but these are only sparsely populated. In 1900, there were 1826 inhabitants, in 1980 only 1,395. Agriculture is problematical, and if it were not for the water taxes the Valley receives from the town of Zurich for the harnessing of the Bergell's water for hydroelectricity, the Bergell might now be deserted.

The Bergell is the home of notable artists: Giovanni and Augusto Giacometti, and the former's son Alberto. All three famous artists were born in Stampa and are buried at San Gorgio near Borgonovo.

Other artists resident in the Bregaglia were Giovanni Segantini and Varlin.

Other citizens of the Bergell contributed to the cultural life of the Valley. Giovanni Andrea Maurizio was the author of "The Witch", a book in Bergell dialect, in which customs and usages of the 16th century were pictured.

Andrea Scartazzini studied theology and wrote a noted comment on the "Divina Commedia" by Dante. Zaccaria Giacometti was an eminent professor of state law at the University of Zurich.

And many were the citizens of the Bergell who emigrated abroad. In the 13th century, they went to Venice and had a hard life as tradesmen and bakers. They were the first to offer the newly introduced coffee (1645) in the coffee houses.

Nobody knows why Bergeller settled in Cracow and Lemberg, in Vienna and Prague. In 1735-8 several families emigrated to North America to the British Colony of Carolina.

Emigration continued to Poland, Hungary and France. Many ran coffee houses and bakeries. In Germany, too, people from the Bergell settled. A well-known coffee house in Hamburg and a marzipan factory near Castle Koenigsberg were under Bergeller management. There were also bankers and artists who made their mark.

But back to the Val Bregaglia: to its beauty from the Lake of Sils – the boundary runs straight down the middle of the lake to the snow-covered mountains, from the Albigna dam belonging to the electricity works of the town of Zurich, to the prosperous-looking village of Vicosoprano with the von Salis Tower dominating the white houses.

Unspoilt beauty all the way, the glittering white of the Bondasca Glacier, the tall dark forests – a real paradise for ramblers and mountaineers, an unspoilt, peaceful landscape not far away from the many hotels in the Engadine.

Mariann Meier



Castelmur Palace which is now Bregaglia Museum



The Commune Hall of Vicosoprano. Note the neck fetters on the wall