

Roundabout Switzerland

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ROUNDAABOUT SWITZERLAND

by Derek Meakin

Zurich may be a good centre for excursions, but it is not a holiday town. On my latest visit I stayed a day and was glad to get away.

To reach the station I have to take an early-morning walk along the Limmatquai and stop for a moment by the Wasserkirche, one of Zurich's many churches, outside which a larger-than-life statue of Zwingli appears to be looking with stern approval on the bustling, business-like crowd.

The austerity that seems to pervade the city has also affected the weather. As the train leaves for Coire thick fog blankets the countryside, cutting off all sign of the lake — the sixth largest in Switzerland — the bathing beaches and castles.

It is not until an hour later that the fog begins to clear. First the shadowy outline of a mountain can be seen, a dark mass silhouetted against the dull grey clouds of mist.

The sun makes valiant attempts to pierce the semi-darkness, but remains a faint yellow disc hovering in the sky, and the land bordering the railroad looks cold and damp and uninviting.

Suddenly we find we are almost surrounded by mountains, travelling in a narrow valley that is hemmed in by big frowning slopes, mantled by mists that hide their peaks from view. Then, sweeping round a bend in the line, the atmosphere clears so surprisingly quickly that there are gasps of amazement as passengers look on white summits probing a pale blue sky.

By now we are in the Rhine Valley, passing through villages with their solidly-built stone houses and narrow streets. The people in this region seem to have passion for vivid colouring, for here are homes painted violet, leaf green and pink, crowded round a simple stone church with its square tower surmounted by a golden cupola. The sun is with us again, and happy at being once more master of the scene, lights up the distant snowy peaks with a crimson glow.

At Landquart we leave the efficient Swiss Federal Railways and take our seats in one of the spotless green coaches of the equally efficient Raetian Railways, whose narrow-gauge electric track stretches over 245 miles of valleys that furrow the rugged Canton of the Grisons.

This privately-owned railway can quite legitimately claim to cover the Roof of Europe, for at times it is humming through rock tunnels and over giant viaducts at an altitude of nearly 6,000 feet — which is 1,500 feet higher than Ben Nevis, Britain's biggest peak.

With Davos 31 miles away and another 3,000 feet

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higher, the powerful little train starts to climb from the moment it leaves Landquart. As it cuts its way into the Prätigau valley, passing under towering cliffs, the track is lined by stout wooden fences as a protection against avalanches, a reminder of the dreadful dangers that every winter face these hardy mountain people.

Soon we are up above the snow-line and the scene changes to one of fairy-like grandure. This, then, is the snow that melts into gold for the people of Klosters and Davos and the other winter sports resorts further on.

And here are the trappings that go with it — a horse-drawn sledge carrying a load of timber, a little girl on skis expertly flashing down a mountain path on her way to school, her satchel hanging from her shoulders, three postal sledges painted the distinctive yellow of the Swiss postal administration drawn up on the platform of a country station, and, of course, plenty of those nut-brown chalets that always seem to be dotting the snow slopes.

The first sight of Davos, however, is enough to make anyone cry: "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!" In the gathering dusk the cloudless sky is swiftly turning from blue to violet. Leaving the thick forest of larch and pine the train skirts the Davos lake, in whose waters can be seen the reflection of a semi-circle of white-topped peaks. And from the houses strung along the valley a multitude of orange-coloured lights twinkle gaily.

* * *

Next — Davos for Sports — and spies!

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