

Unexplored villages of the Grisons

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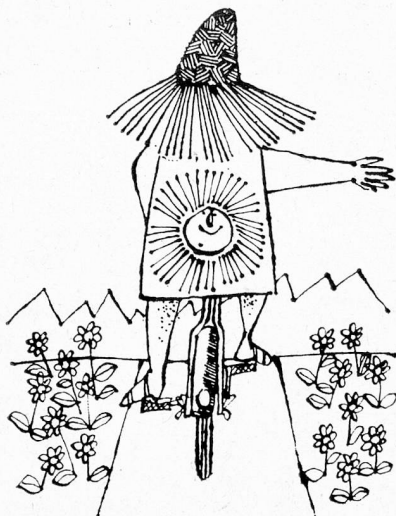
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UNEXPLORED VILLAGES OF THE GRISONS

By Lee Eugster

The Canton of the Grisons is one of those regions of Switzerland which deserves closer attention. In the quiet valleys of the northern part of the Canton, guarded by stern, green mountains, the people have little contact with the outside world, and as a result, much of their old culture and the traditions of long ago have been preserved.

In winter, the Swiss of the lowlands go to this section because the splendid slopes offer ideal ski-ing conditions. But few addicts of this sport take time out to study the cultural life of the inhabitants. So it is that few know of the art treasures hidden in villages off the great tourist routes. Foreigners visit the well-known sports centres of St. Moritz, Scuol, Klosters, Davos, Arosa and Lenzerheide, but they rarely go deeper into the Canton. So let me guide you through the green valley of Schams — Schons in Romansch — which is less than 20 miles long, but full of curiosities.

From Chur, the capital of the Canton, travel up the valley to Reichenau, where two branches of a great European stream meet. The Vorderrhein — the upper Rhine — has its spring in the St. Gotthard massive, while the Hinterrhein — the lower Rhine — gathers together the waters of several valleys running from south to north. At the junction of the two rivers near Reichenau, the Vorderrhein had to push its way through a narrow barrier of rocks after the glacial age, and it still roars wildly in its narrow boulder-strewn bed.

Turn South

At Reichenau, turn south into the valley of Domleschg, where the town of Thusis lies at the junction of several important valleys. Before the railways were built, this was a busy trading centre. Several pass roads which lead into the Engadine or to Lake Como in Italy, and also to Bellinzona in the canton of the Ticino, converge in Thusis.

At Thusis one finds the end of the Valley of Schams. But to get into it, travellers must go through a fearful gorge, the Via Mala — Bad Way. The post bus which serves the valley always stops in the Via Mala to let its passengers look into the deep slit in which the unseen maelstrom of waters roars and rages.

Soon after coming out of the Via Mala, one reaches Zillis. Its thirteenth century church is a jewel of the Romanesque style. For 600 years, the present church has remained unchanged, except for a fine Gothic choir which was added. The church's main attraction, however, is the splendid wooden ceiling, said to be unique in the world.

Eight yards above the floor, 153 pictures have been painted on wood and set between a honeycomb of wooden beams. These illustrate the bible from the time of King David to the moment when the crown of thorns was pressed on to Christ's head. But the Biblical scenes are interspersed with pictures of sea monsters, sirens, elephants and lions with fishtails.

Some miles farther up the valley, the traveller reaches the village of Andeer, whose houses are built in the particular style of the Engadine. The first is the Hotel Fravi, where guests can take mud bath cures against rheumatism. From one of the hotel's upper floors, a gallery crosses the road to the house opposite, so that the motor road enters the village under an archway.

Above the Rofla Gorge, the traveller can continue on the road to Splügen where two important pass roads branch off. One, the Splügen Pass, goes down through the valley of S. Giacomo to Chiavenna and Lake Como in Italy. The S. Bernardino Pass climbs through the beautiful Rheinwald Valley, then descends the charming Mesolcina Valley to Bellinzona, the capital of the Canton of the Ticino. At the height of the pass, the attentive traveller will notice the sudden change between two different landscapes. Leaving the sombre green valleys in the northern part of the canton of the Grisons, one finds in the Mesolcina the southern light of Italy, its exuberant vegetation and the villages built in the style of the Ticino. This is one of the two valleys of the Grisons where the inhabitants speak Italian.

The houses in the valley of Avers have a peculiarity found nowhere else in Switzerland. An opening of about 10 inches is cut into the house front above the small windows of the bedroom. It is said that the healthy race of tall Walsers is so loath to leave the world that they fight hard when their last hour strikes. The opening above the generally shut windows, called the Seelabalgga — soul — is there to let their souls escape.

(S.N.T.O. from the "Weekly Tribune", Geneva.)

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(Reprinted from "Swiss Observer" 29.1.1938.)