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A GIRL'S GUIDE TO SWITZERLAND

Heidi Leonard



Mr. Grill

Today's Special:
Vegi Burger
Caramel Burger
Hot Dog



Interlaken West: Integrated travel at its best. Trains, buses, taxis, horse-drawn carts and boats. There's even a nice looking grill open well into the evening.

PHOTOS: Heidi Leonard, May 2008

It was, I thought, a cunning plan! Me - a Ferrari loving, Michael Schumacher fan, who only usually takes holidays to go to motor racing events in the UK, and my father - a Swiss railway enthusiast who frequently holidays there. I could just tag along on one of his trips and while we were there we might as well just pop down to

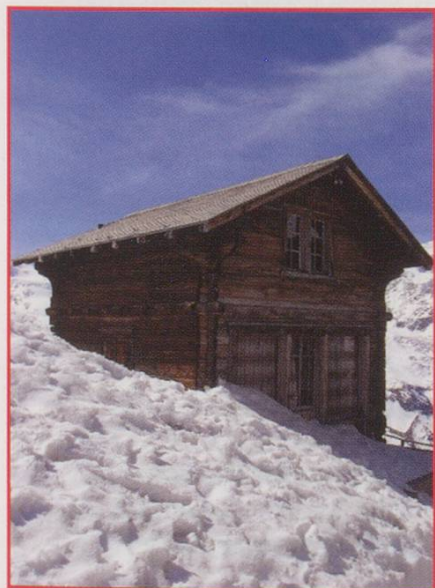
Maranello - the home of Ferrari. Well it would be rude not to!

If I'd only put a little bit of thought into it I'd have realised that as Schumacher had worked in

This chalet on the Gornergrat did not have the name "Peter" on the door, but one can dream!

Maranello for 12 years and decided to live in Switzerland, it might just be quite a 'nice place'. I had heard all the usual rumours about Switzerland; how 'Chocolate Boxey' the scenery is, how efficient the public transport is and how expensive it is to visit.

Well they were right about the stunning scenery. No photos, paintings or DVDs can show the sheer size and beauty of the mountains, the brightness of the snow or the magnificent colouring of the lakes and rivers. I can only remember proper drifting, snowman creating, deep snow of any substance falling once near my West Country home in my whole life, yet here there was an abundance of it, all white and crisp and glittery! How could you not 'love' it? Better than that, you don't even need to be Sir Edmund Hillary to get to the top of some of the mountains to enjoy the view; they have trains that take you. How cool is that! I still can't see the attraction of strapping lolly sticks to your feet and





Brig: A contrast between the old (FO HGe4/4 No 36) and the new MGB railcar at Brig.

hurtling downhill to certain doom, but each to their own.

The villages were quaint, the towns busy but friendly and the cities modern yet still historical. How wonderful it must be to live in the shadow of a beautiful mountain, surrounded by lush green flower strewn meadows, in a traditional wooden chalet. Or else in a stunning castle overlooking a shimmering ice blue lake. I've already started learning German and saving every spare penny in my attempt to escape!

The Swiss railway system is unbelievable. In all we travelled nearly 3,500 miles (including the journey out and back, and down to Modena) in 15 days, and I swear I didn't go on two trains the same in that time. From the uber-cool German ICE, to the quaint MOB with its toilet that just sloshes onto the track when you flush, they

all ran with Swiss precision, and were immaculately clean and beautifully maintained. The buses too were fabulous, clean, expertly driven (on sometimes perilously narrow winding roads) and conveniently always at the railway stations shortly before the trains arrived. The transport system was truly integrated, reasonably priced and obviously very well used. The comprehensive websites all make journey planning in advance

straightforward and the easy to follow information on the platforms and bus stops means if you have a spare hour and a Swiss Pass you can just hop on and have an adventure.

As for Switzerland being pricey, I'm sure it could be for a less bargain orientated visitor. I quickly found

that both Migros and Co-op have lovely cafés and restaurants where you can get coffee and various delicious pastries and sweets for special offer prices. For lunch we feasted on sandwiches and yet more yummy cakes plus reasonably priced chocolate from Co-op or Denners. There are always plenty of benches available overlooking spectacular views, as well as a never-ending supply of sparrows to Hoover-up after you. In the mountain areas there are handy



Such window displays do not help a girl's diet.



Murren: Walk a few hundred metres beyond the Schilthorn cable car at the end of Murren, you're rewarded with views like this.

fresh water fountains to wash down your lunch and the gooey fondant off your hands.

My father also managed to save me a fortune by 'accidentally' planning our itinerary so we visited towns when they were either closed for lunch, early closing or just for the gap between the seasons, (The designer boutiques in Gstaad, for example, close for weeks!) One of the most important things I learnt was that you can buy big bars of Swiss chocolate at a reasonable price OR you can buy gorgeous, creamy, mouth watering smaller bars of Swiss chocolate for a bit more!

I loved everything about my first holiday in Switzerland, especially the efficiency and cleanliness of the country. I'm beginning to think that there must definitely be a chalet with my name on it somewhere perched on the side of a snow-topped mountain. It'll probably be owned by a goat herder called Peter! I'll have to keep an eye out for him on my next trip in January 2009.

My top tips for your next trip:-

- Buy a Swiss Pass and each morning use the station ticket machine to see how much you save during your stay by doing so (we saved about £300).
- Trust that if a bus turns up at a railway station, the train won't be far away.
- Take a store location list from the Migros and Co-op websites
- Check out the early or seasonal closing times and dates for the places you are visiting - only necessary if shopping is important to you!
- And finally, if you are on a train and a huge tour party of Brits gets on clutching their packed lunches, keep quiet. They'll assume you are local and you won't be tarred with the same brush!

MIDDLE: Lauterbrunnen to Wengen: The line up to the Jungfrau has some of the best views in Europe.

BOTTOM: Wengen: Why can't all stations have a view like this?



Kleine Scheidegg: Who needs to "climb every mountain" when you can go by train.

