

# Swiss Abbeys

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for hardly more than 2.5 per cent of the gross national product.

### **Federalism, and ideal scarred by time**

A final reference should be made to federalism. Federalism, neutrality and direct democracy not only make up the foundations of Switzerland as a State, but also as a people. The fact that, apparently against all logic, a French-speaking Swiss probably feels closer to a German-speaking compatriot than to a Frenchman is the unique consequence of the community of political beliefs and ideals shared over the centuries by two people of different language, culture, and temperament.

Although federalism would seem to be a dissociating factor, it has in fact helped to strengthen the institutional cohesion of the Swiss by preserving the individual identity of each canton, and hence their mutual respect. The ideal is still very much alive today among the grass roots, but the extension of urban living and increasing financial dependance on the Central State have nibbled at its vitality. The facts of modern life have inevitably led to a growing control of the provinces by Berne at the expense of regional governments. But Switzerland is fighting to keep its federal structure (which is reflected in every aspect of cultural life) failing which she would find herself losing her historical personality. This, of course, is probably inevitable. But the Government and the Swiss establishment intend to fight a vigorous rearguard action and defend federalism by

carefully not overstepping federal prerogatives, by giving cantons a chance to settle their differences by intercantonal agreement and by consulting them on every new important item of legislation.

Federalism, neutrality and direct democracy are political options which have been enhanced into the values without which the Swiss as a nation would begin to question their identity.

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### **A WALK TO THE MADONA DEL SASSO**

If you take the road leaving off to the left from opposite the central post office of Lacarno, you will soon reach the cantonal main road. To the left of it you will find the ancient Capucine Convent. It was founded in 1602, but serves today as an institution for deaf and dumb patients and as a boarding school for weak children. To the right, you will see the high wall of the enclosure of the Sainte Catherine Monastery, founded in 1616 with an Augustine Abbess. The building was completely destroyed by fire in the 16th Century.

Above this monastery, which is in at the heart of picturesque surroundings, towers a secondary school for girls built in 1894 with its beautiful garden and superb exotic plants. Starting from the main road to the left of this establishment, a path leads up the hill to the celebrated monastery of the *Madonna del Sasso*. The ever-changing scenery and the splendid view, which is a delight to the

eye of the stroller, makes the charm of this beautiful region.

In 25 to 30 minutes, one arrives to the church. It is built 355 metres high on a rock between two wild ravines. The edifice is surrounded by an imposing colonnade. The interior is heavily decorated with ornaments and gilt objects.

Inside the chapel and to the right can be admired Bramantino's "Flight into Egypt". In the other chapel on the left the visitor is profoundly moved by the "Burial of Jesus", a masterpiece by the painter Antonio Ciseri (1821-1891) of Ronco (near Ascona), and one-time professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence.

Thousands of pilgrims, Italians mostly, come every year to kneel in front of the Madonna. Capucine Fathers officiate at the pilgrimage.

The Monastery can also be reached by the Locarno-Madonna del Sasso funicular railway.

*Pierre Savoie*

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