



## QUIET ROOMS, NOISY TRAINS

# Switzerland is haven of peace, chocolate

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Switzerland is a magical kingdom — a peaceful Alp-filled country that still reflects the haven that it was during World War II, when everyone was fighting on all sides.

As history and literature (books like "A Farewell to Arms") reminds us, pilots downed in enemy territory walked, swam or crawled to freedom through the woods to Switzerland.

Switzerland is also a land of chocolates, where train stations are wall-to-wall chocolate bars in bright wrappers. In fact, the chocolate bars are the only colors I can remember in the cavernous, noisy train station at Zurich. The train remains something out of one of those old black and white war movies where trains huff, puff and whistle as people run to get in and out of them.

I took that train what seemed like a zillion times during the 10 weeks I was in Switzerland researching a book about Hannes Keller, a noted (maybe notorious) Swiss mathematician living outside Zurich who is to the underwater world what Neal Armstrong is to space.

### Incredible feat

Keller had dived to 1,000 feet in 1962 using an exotic mixture of breathing gases which allowed him to descend and surface rapidly. It was an incredible feat, because in 1962, such a thing was completely unheard of.

Keller's dive was termed a success, because he lived through it, but two other divers died in the process and Keller had received considerable negative publicity — including some remarks from Jacques Cousteau, who said that Keller should turn his formulas over to science. However, Keller and Dr. Albert Buhlmann, a Swiss doctor of "lungerluncktion" who worked up the dive program, stood to make a lot of money from Shell Oil for the formula, and so they were not exactly shouting what they knew from the rooftops.

No one was able to repeat Keller's feat for another 13 years, and that's why a New York publisher was, at the time, interested in the guy who would try such a thing.

### Mountain village

Keller lived in Entershausen, a little mountain village about an hour outside Zurich by train, near Winterthur, and when you get into the suburbs and villages of Switzerland, you're in a world quite different from the well-worn places most tourists see.

The typical Swiss country home is a curious thing — the main entry is usually on the basement level, just a place to kick off the shoes and hang the coat, and the living room is usually on the second floor, behind a door that is usually kept closed.

In fact, as you move around a typical Swiss house, you close yourself in each room by shutting the door. Americans used to glass walls and wide open spaces might die of claustrophobia with this practice, and over here, the Swiss would feel overexposed — or at least shake from worry about the heating bill.

### Spirit varies

The spirit of the Swiss people varies between east and west, and in Zurich you'll find people more serious, in Geneva a bit more lively.

I have found this distinction in northern and southern parts of other countries. Typically, it seems to me the south of countries like Italy, Germany, Spain, France is lighter in mood, more festive, where you're apt to see people sitting out in street cafes and having a good time. The northern parts, by contrast, seem industrial, more serious.

Zurich, with its winding cobblestone streets, elegant tea houses around the Lake of Zurich, the fondue houses and pubs, is a joy to behold, but still, there is a certain restraint. Going further east, to Winterthur, there is even more seriousness in the air, and a person whistling on a street can be stared at as if he's gone over the edge.

Lausanne and Geneva are happy places — and in Geneva I got to participate in what turned out to be a Great Watch Caper.

### Gold nuggets

My writing partner had brought to Switzerland a bag of gold nuggets he'd mined from the rivers of California's Mother Lode, and he had this idea that he could convince the Rolex factory in Geneva to make him a gold Rolex out of the nuggets in a straight-across swap.

To our surprise, Rolex could hardly wait to see us. They sent a limousine to the Geneva airport, which took us to the Rolex factory, where we were met by one of the directors of Rolex, Monsieur Rene Jeanneret.

Now this man could only be described as a Swiss Maurice Chevalier — charming, full of spirit, and he could hardly wait to accept the challenge of making a gold Rolex out of a bag of nuggets.

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He pulled out a 28-pound ingot of gold for us to play with, telling us that Rolex normally made their gold watches out of gold bars, and he took us through the factory, where mounds of gold shavings piled up underneath the lathes where workers tooled watch cases.

## Rolex limo

At the end of the day, we all got back into the Rolex limousine, which took us across the Swiss/French border to a charming bistro-cafe at the foot of an Alp, where I had quenelles de brochet for the first time. Years later, Jeaneret remembered my reaction to these little fish things and sent me a recipe for the quenelles, along with a note that he had retired from Rolex and was now living in Paris.

Back in Zurich, we returned to a

more simple life — less gold and quenelles and more bread — as we continued the research on the Hannes Keller book. Happily, we found that everywhere in Zurich there were little, inexpensive fondue houses, full of character and tucked away in obscure places along the lake. For overnight stays, there were wonderful attic rooms in pension-type hotels that may not have had baths in the rooms but had big feather comforters on lumpy beds, uneven floors and garret windows overlooking a winding cobblestone street below.

These latter days in Zurich convinced us once again that when it comes to travelling in Europe, the less expensive way is often the more adventurous, creative and colorful.

Information: A hotel guide is free from Swiss National Tourist Office, 520 Stockton St., San Francisco 94108.