

Serendipity Travels

Return to Europe

Switzerland.

5 September 1999

After two solid weeks of serious touring, we decided to kick back today. In the morning we read our books and in the afternoon we ventured out to explore [Leysin](#). The town is an interesting collection of winter sports areas, convention facilities, international schools, and curative facilities. We visited the train station and learned about the system. We learned how to catch the cog tram that descends into the valley and connects to the main train to Lausanne and Geneva – knowledge that we would put to use the next day.



6 September 1999

Today we would test the Swiss [train system](#) to see if it really ran like clockwork. We walked to the local railway station and purchased tickets to Geneva from the ticket master. This trip would require us to ride the cog railway from Leysin down to the town of Aigle, and then connect with the train to Lausanne and Geneva.


Right on time, the train pulled into the Leysin station (actually, one of four in this mountain hamlet). We boarded and found seats. Since the train would, at times, be on a slope in excess of 20 degrees (my estimate), the seats had near-vertical backs and seats that were canted to keep you from sliding off. Not really comfortable, but

quite serviceable for the 20 minute or so ride. Most people chose to sit on the downhill side of the train.



To see more pictures of the final week of the trip, overlaid on a map, click: [Switzerland 1999](#)


Once aboard, off we went. Normal trains have very little traction, which is why railroad lines have little slope to them. To gain traction, and prevent us from hurtling down the mountain at bobsled speeds, this train had a cog (gear) wheel that engaged with a rack (set of teeth arrayed in a linear fashion) set between the tracks. It is noisy, but comforting. The ride itself was very picturesque. The first part is through the woods, then opens up as the train traverses several vineyards on its way to Aigle. The descent is about 1000 meters in 5 KM. When the tram reaches the town, it lifts the cog wheel and acts like a normal streetcar. After a few stops it arrives at the Aigle station.

Switzerland has three official languages – French, German, and Italian – so many official documents and signs are in multiple languages. For instance, the national railroad uses this logo:  SBB CFF FFS You get extra credit if you can tell me what each of those stands for in the native tongues and what they all translate to in English.

As expected, the train to Geneva arrived and left from the station on time. The route took us past the Castle of Chillon (more on that tomorrow) and cities of Montreux, Vevey, Lausanne, and ultimately Geneva. The Geneva train station is close to the heart of town.

We had no particular agenda for our visit. More ambitious tourist will find a lot of information at [Geneva Tourism](#). Some of you might want to visit [CERN \(European Organization for Nuclear Research\)](#). Without one of their inventions, you would not be here today. Do you know what was invented at CERN? [Answer](#).

[Geneva](#) is on the western end of Lake Geneva (Lac Lemman to the locals). The Rhone River flows into the lake near Aigle and out of the lake at Geneva.

 We walked from the train station to the lake, pausing at a few shops on the way. Across the lake, we could see the *Jet d'eau*. Originally designed to relieve pressure on municipal waterworks, this fountain has become a symbol of the city. You see a stylized version of it in the tourism logo of the city.

We meandered through the city, crossing the Rhone and walking into the oldest part (after a detour through a very modern downtown shopping mall). Near the Hotel d'Ville (city hall) we





found Rue Calvin. My mother (and my daughters and I) are direct descendants of the father and brother of [John Calvin](#), who did most of his famous theological work while he lived in Geneva.

Eventually, our wandering path through town leads us to a sidewalk cafe, where we had lunch, and later in the day, to another where we found liquid refreshment. We walked back to the train station and made the return trip to Aigle and Leysin without incident, and, of course, on schedule. Tomorrow, we had an ambitious drive planned.

7 September 1999

Our trip took us to many new places, but we also visited a few old favorites. One of those old favorites is the Castle of [Chillon](#), just a few kilometers down the road from Leysin. Today was to be our “Swiss Castles” day. (There are a lot of castles in Switzerland, to learn more about them visit the [Swiss Castles Site](#).)

We got an early start today and arrived at the Castle of [Chillon](#) shortly after it opened. Good idea – lots of tourists visit this place and it can become quite busy. In my distant past I remember reading “The Prisoner of Chillon” by Byron. Here you can see the pillar to which Bonivard was chained and Byron’s name where he etched it into the pillar. We explored the castle from the dungeon to the highest ramparts.



Leaving Chillon, we drove north to [Romont](#). Here, a castle sits in the middle of town. We parked, took a look at the castle, and then found a sidewalk cafe for lunch. Adjacent to the cafe was a computer store. Like many small stores in the US, it carried an assortment of software, hardware, and interface cards. Much of the inventory looked familiar. I did a few quick price checks – most of the stuff seemed more expensive than in the US.

We had two more stops in our planned itinerary, so off we drove to [Gruyères](#). Before we went to the city and castle on the hill, Meredith checked out the factory store in the valley. She did not find any cheese that she wanted to buy, so we drove up to the town parking lot.



Many of the castles in Europe have artwork from the past displayed, and Gruyères was no exception. What was exceptional about Gruyères was the *modern* art on display. It was colorful and somewhat abstract, to say the least. One of our photos gives you a sample of one of the tamer pieces.

As the afternoon wore on, we left Gruyères and drove to [Fribourg](#), an ancient walled city. We got there about 5 PM, just in time to experience a rush hour. Yes, the Swiss do have a lot of cars and they do drive them, especially at quittin' time. We drove through town, took a couple of pictures, and headed back to Leysin. Tomorrow, our path would take us from one corner of Switzerland to the other.

8 September 1999

Imagine a map of the United States. Now, place yourself in Arizona, say Tucson. Next, visualize going to Buffalo, NY, in one day. That is today's trip in Switzerland which, fortunately, is much smaller than the US so it could be done in one day.



With only two full days left in our vacation, we needed to leave Leysin and motor towards Munich. Our path would take us across the southern part of the country then north. We departed after checking out of the condo and drove up the Rhone River valley past Martigny, Sion, and Sierre. Beyond Sierre, the autobahn ended



but we were on a wide highway with excellent signage and visibility. We stopped at a grocery market in Brig and Meredith bought provisions for a picnic lunch. We passed a train depot at Oberwald where we could have loaded the car, and ourselves, on a train and taken a tunnel ride under the mountains before us – but we don't do

tunnels, remember? The road continued to climb as we drove through Gletsch, but it was still in good shape, wide and not too curvy.

[Gletsch](#) is at the intersection of two roads, one leading north to Grimselpass and the other east to Furkapass. We continued east, and the road became less accommodating (as you can see in our pictures). Near the top is a pull out where one can get a closeup view (about 200 meters) of the glacier from which the Rhone River descends. Just a little bit farther and you come to the summit (2431 meters – about 8000 feet). We parked, took several breaths in the rarified air, and had our lunch. In the picture above, you see our trusty vehicle which has brought us all these kilometers.



The road from the summit of Furkapass to the east is even more fun than the road up from the west. As we were creeping down, we noticed the car ahead of us stop and back up. We wondered “What the ...?” Our question was soon answered – the car had backed up to let a tour bus come around the bend. (See picture.) We were happy to be on the inside – uphill – as we sat frozen in place while the bus went by.



All good mountain roads eventually arrive in valleys and this was no exception. We stopped at the Hotel Rossli in Hospental for an appropriate beverage. While there I promised Meredith that I would never again bypass a tunnel in favor of a mountain pass.

The remainder of the day's trip was interesting, but not dramatic. At one point, the road passes Urner See (lake) that leads to Lucerne, and we crossed Zurichsee near Rapperswil. We avoided both Lucerne and Zurich, however.



We arrived in [Stein am Rhein](#) in late afternoon and found a room in the Hotel Schiff, just inside the city walls and right on the Rhein (Rhine) river. Here we had a few beers and a delicious German-style dinner. While we were dining, we saw several pleasure boats in the river. The one that really caught our eye was one that looked just like *Playpen* – that’s right, a Bayliner on the Rhine!



9 September 1999

Our day began with a walk through Stein am Rhein. This is a very compact town and we toured the main street in short order. Most of the buildings have names (e.g., the “Red Ox”) and corresponding artwork from the middle ages. Lots of flowers were in bloom. Truly a place worth visiting.

But, it was time to leave Switzerland and see but a few more places before our time in Europe came to an end. We traveled along the shore of the Rhine to where it exits Lake Constance at Kreuzlingen. Here we crossed the border into the German town of [Konstanz \(Constance\)](#). After a brief drive through town, we found the ferry landing.



A short ferry ride across the western arm of the Bodensee (Lake Constance) brings us to the town of [Meersburg](#). This is another one of our favorite places. The town is set on the shore of the lake, has a picturesque wall and castle, and is very tourist friendly. We parked on the outskirts and walked into town. After lunch and some sightseeing, we retrieved the car and drove on.

Traveling east along the shore of Lake Constance brought us to [Lindau](#), another tourist-friendly town. We parked near the harbor and took a stroll onto the breakwater. We saw a few interesting docking jobs before it was time to leave.



Finally, we returned to Munich. We

“saved” 10 DM by not buying a map, and tried to navigate using the freebie that the auto rental place had given us. Fortunately, the Germans have good road signs and we found our way into the city and out the north side, towards the airport. We exited at [Oberschleißheim](#) and found the Gasthof Blauer Karpfen. Once settled in, we walked about ½ KM to the S-Bahn station (S stands for *schnell*: fast). We purchased our tickets, validated them, and soon boarded the train for downtown Munich.



Debarking at Marienplatz, we wended our way to *the* place in Munich: [Hofbräuhaus am Platzl](#). Here, the beer is served in liter mugs, the Bavarian Band plays, and you’re likely to sit with people from all over the world. At our table were a couple from Brazil, two guys from Vienna, a mother and son from Germany, and a couple from California. At regular intervals, we all sang “In München steht ein Hofbräuhaus.” [\[click me to see a short movie\]](#) A few liters and a wurst and sauerkraut dinner later, we retraced our route to the Blauer Karpfen.

10 September 1999

Departure day, but the challenges were not yet over. We had to return the car full or pay about twice the normal price for fuel. Gas stations are not as prevalent in Europe as they are in North America. We drove all the way to the airport before we found one. Once full, we had to find the rental car return. Fortunately, the sign was in both English and Deutsch, because we did not have a clue what a *mietwagen* was until we saw it paired with “rental car return.”

Once relieved of our Audi – which had served us well in our journey of 4885 KM – we found the Canada 3000 check-in and (after an hour in line) checked in for the return flight. We were scheduled to leave at 15:00 and land at 18:10 the same day (only 3 hours?).



Twelve hours later, we landed in Vancouver, claimed our bags, and were met by Shannon who graciously drove us back to the USA. People drive so slowly



here, and the roads are so wide. It will probably take a few days to get used to North American driving.