

## 12 Days in Switzerland (or do you want cheese with that?)

On my 2014/15 holiday in Ethiopia there was “the six” comprising myself, a Dave who was British, Aga and Britta who were Polish and German respectively and who both lived in Zürich and Petra and Christian a Swiss couple who lived in Bern. We all got on brilliantly and kept in touch after going our separate ways. Aga made a throwaway comment about her guest accommodation which I responded with an equally throwaway comment that she should expect a visit from me. What then transpired was two weeks in Switzerland catching up with four of the six as Dave was somewhere near Lake Baikal taking minimalist photos of the snow and ice.



The six in front of the world's worst toilet in the world's hottest desert

Boxing Day started with my usual hangover and after some attempt at recovery, I headed out for another long haul flight and arrived in Zürich midday on Tuesday 27 December. Britta met me at the airport and we went for a walk around the lake, many Swiss cities are built on lakes and rivers. It is the chestnut season, so of course we enjoyed some. We then met up with Aga and went to Neuenhof near Baden, this is a little village where Aga and Marco live in a very nice three bedroom apartment. I got to experience incredible efficiency of the Swiss rail system.

Unfortunately my mobile phone seem to be unable to get a signal, I didn't know whether to curse Telstra or my own cheapness for having such dodgy handset. Putting the Sim card in other handsets also didn't work; consequently I spent the entire holiday without a mobile phone. A mobile is particularly useful when you need to organise yourself in conjunction with other people. I realise that if I lost contact with anyone I would then have to find a payphone and try and ring them, this meant that I tended to follow everyone around like a little shadow. It also made me feel somewhat like an ageing “grandma” who hadn't kept up with technology.



The Art Deco building was amazing



Notice the Rook flying past



One of the more decorated buildings in Luzern

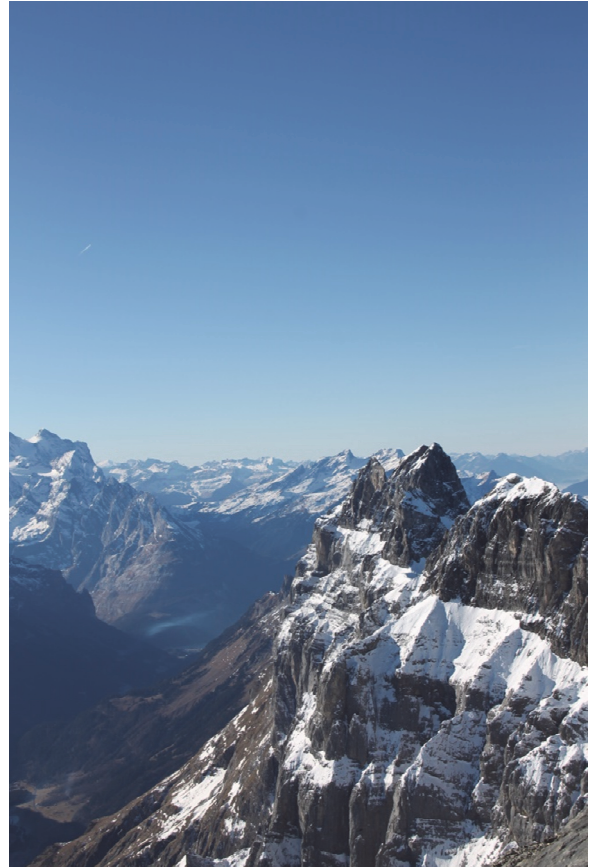
The next day, Wednesday, Aga and I took the train to Luzern and then the gondola to Pilatus (2,120 metres). The weather was fantastic, clear and sunny, and we had amazing views of the Alps. We could not have asked for more brilliant weather, after enjoying a hot chocolate we made our way down to Luzern which is (also) on a lake. We went to a modern art gallery which featured local Swiss artists plus we experienced some more chestnuts. Many Swiss cities are incredibly picturesque, and although it was past Christmas the decorations were still up and it looked amazingly festive.

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For dinner we had raclette, which is a traditional Swiss cheese dish. Traditionally it is made with a round cheese which is then melted and served with potatoes, sausages and other things. The Swiss have designed a way of having individual little pans with a special appliance where everybody makes their own raclette so it was all very convivial.

The next day, Thursday, Marco, Aga and I drove to Engelberg and took the gondola to Titlis (3,239 metres), another amazing peak. Unlike Pilatus this had ski slopes so there were many very stylish skiers also on the gondola. There were a large number of Chinese tourists, what was really interesting was the Swiss watch shop at the top of the mountain, and although it wasn't stated, it was definitely Chinese only.

There are a couple of walks on the peak including a clifftop walk which was a suspension bridge. This was somewhat scary particularly when there were others on the bridge which made it bounce around a little. Given that you are looking at something close to a sheer drop it was one of those activities that you feel compelled to do, however the adrenaline was still pumping afterwards. There was also, the Glazier Walk, a tunnel under the glazier which had been drilled through solid ice, it was amazing and had been decorated with frozen flowers. We then had a wonderful lunch sitting on a very sunny area enjoying the view, the weather was "clear and bright".



The glacier cave

We then went down to the little village at the base of the mountain, Engelberg. There was a cheese factory in an old monastery; a feature of Switzerland is that every local area has their own special cheese of which they are immensely proud. The Swiss produce an enormous variety of local cheeses, in Australia we tend to only hear of "Swiss" cheese (Emmental), there is a huge variety of other types. We made a few purchases for a fondue that evening plus had a look around. Cheese also featured at breakfast, with a selection of local cheeses plus local bread, plus the Swiss love their coffee.

On Friday Aga and I took the train to Basel, we made an error of judgement here and considered that we could pretty much see everything in the morning and then come home for the afternoon. That was a significant mistake, as there is an incredible amount that you can do in Basel with the very picturesque old town plus other activities. We could have spent entire day in the Art Gallery alone which in addition to the collection had a Jackson Pollock retrospective.



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Bridge over the Rhine



Interior of the Münster

Glühwein is a traditional Christmas drink and it was still being served after Christmas so of course we enjoyed some in a little place overlooking the Market Square. That evening I took Aga and Marco out to dinner at a wonderful restaurant which had views across Baden. I had excellent wild boar salad followed by venison; a feature was that all the game meats were locally wild hunted.



Covered bridge on the Limmat River



View from the castle

Saturday was New Year's Eve and we intended to go into Zürich to see the fireworks so Aga and I spent part of the day in Baden which is a lovely little old town on the river. Like many Swiss cities there is an old town which can date back many hundreds of years surrounded by new suburbs further out. The old towns are built in traditional style with notable regional variations. The Swiss have local planning guidelines which dictate certain styles on particular locations.

While we were walking around we saw another place to get Glühwein, however we felt that 11 AM was somewhat early to start drinking so we kept looking at all the buildings in the old town. After finding an interesting craft shop we were given directions to get to the ruins of a little castle which involved a fairly steep walk.



We then found a lovely little cafe where you could sit and talk, plus they sold interesting locally designed items. After a bit more



Glühwein

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walking around we then felt that as it was early afternoon was a good time to start drinking Glühwein, everyone was getting ready for New Year so we bought some cakes for dinner that evening

New Year's Eve was loads of fun, a work colleague of Aga's came round for dinner which was another type of fondue where meat was cooked in bullion. We sat around talking and listening to fireworks in the distance, which was vaguely reminiscent of mortar fire. We then took our champagne and headed into Zürich on the train. The fireworks were due to start 20 minutes past midnight (go figure) so we got the terrace at the hospital where Aga works. The evening was very foggy and we figured there might be a better location somewhere else so quickly walked to a park however the heavy fog made watching rather difficult. The overall effect was somewhat reminiscent of a very loud ground level aurora. However given that everyone was letting off fireworks around us and all the church bells were pealing, it was exciting. Aga later informed me the news pictures had pretty much the same visuals that we were seeing, that is blurry colours through the fog. Heavy fog and fireworks just don't work.

After an acceptable sleep in, I travelled to Bern to meet Petra and Christian on New Year's Day. The annoying bit about not having a mobile phone is that you can't call people and tell them what you're doing consequently everybody had to organise things for me. Aga took me to the railway station, got me on the right train and then texted Petra and Christian to expect me at a particular time. She also included a photo of me so they could spot me at a distance. This was really making me feel somewhat like an elderly "grandma" who gets put on public transport and told to get off at X where someone will be meeting them. Everyone then crosses their fingers and hopes grandma doesn't forget the instructions, take a wrong turn or just get lost.

Bern is the capital of Switzerland with the Houses the Parliament, main civic institutions plus the Reserve Bank. Petra is very knowledgeable about Bern; it is a very historical city and is located on a bend in the river which obviously made it easy to defend in mediaeval times. There are also local planning guidelines which require all houses facing the streets to be made of local pale green sandstone. This gives a very uniform appearance to the town making it look very neat and tidy. Another feature of the old town is that houses have covered arcades, this means that shopping can be done in all weather. This also seemed to attract a lot of little design retailers; I could have spent a lot more money.



Traditional cheese making



Spot the cheese

Some parts of Switzerland had Monday 2 January as a public holiday while others were open. So we went to the small town of Affoltern to see where Emmentaler cheese is made. The cheese factory has a number of display areas showing cheese made using current technology plus more traditional methods including those in use around 1700. It was all very interesting is the actual technique hasn't changed just the equipment and machinery has. Naturally of course a souvenir shop had a quality selection of cheese plus a delicious smoked sausage.



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We then went to the town of Burgdorf. Switzerland hasn't had a monarchy so there are no palaces or other such buildings. It was run by merchants so many of the town centres and buildings reflect this sober Protestantism. We found a Butchers Guild building which had a nice little cafe where we had hot chocolate and coffee. There were a group of older men enjoying a game of cards, they looked like regulars. Burgdorf has an old castle which dates were around 1100. Unfortunately the inside wasn't open and we walked around the outside of the castle and inspected the moat. Moats weren't usually like Hollywood movies and full of water, they are generally a large ditch which accommodated people of low socio-economic status and smelly industries like tanneries.



We then went on to Solothurn, which has beautiful Baroque architecture plus (another) rather nice Kunstmuseum (art gallery). It was here that we experienced a moment of confusion there was a painting of The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb by Hans Holbein. Is a very powerful and well-known painting which we also saw in the Kunstmuseum Basel. I know I saw it in both places and have been trying to work out whether the Solothurn painting was a reproduction or a derivative work. So if you know more about art than I do some information would be appreciated.



The weather was quite cold and icy which made everything very picturesque. Coming from a land where there is very little snow and ice to see everything white was quite amazing, the novelty never quite wore off. I also discovered that when you shake ice covered trees all the ice falls on you.



Tuesday 3 January look like having the best flying weather while I was in Bern; I had been in contact with the flying school and this looked like being the day. Christian and Petra drove me to Bern airport, even more obligingly they were willing to hang around several hours while the fog lifted<sup>ii</sup>. I flew in a Cessna172 with Eva my flying instructor. Although Bern airport is small it does have international capacity given Bern's status as the capital of Switzerland. After waiting for the fog to lift, and taking photographs of scenery and snow and ice we started proceedings around 11 AM.

Following the flight briefing we then proceeded with the pre-flight checks, while we were doing this a Swiss air force plane took off (24 seater), I was later told this plane was Switzerland's equivalent of Air Force One.



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We took off on runway 014 and then tracked southward over Thun. The airport is at an altitude of 1,673 feet however the first part of the flight involved climbing to 10,000 feet (“we climb, we climb, we climb”). This is actually the highest that I have flown (excluding commercial flights). Australia being incredibly flat, there aren’t many reasons to go above 3,000 feet.

Getting a brief view of the Matterhorn we then tracked over Wengen then Grindelwald before heading west and tracking up the valley which gave us an excellent view of the peaks Jungfrau, Monch and Eiger. The north-west of the Eiger is well regarded for being a challenging climb and from the air you can see pretty much why. The weather was fantastic “clear and bright” zero turbulence and winds around 5 knots, this was the sort of weather that you don’t dare hope for as you don’t want to tempt fate. I could not have asked for better weather, it was unbelievably perfect. At the top of the valley we passed over Meriringen with Brienz to our West. We then turned west past the low mountains north of Interlaken and rejoined our outward path at Thun. It was an amazing high and I had hoped for a flying lesson, to achieve one in perfect weather had been too much to wish for.



Thun from the air



In the afternoon we went to Murten which overlooks a small (by Swiss standards) lake. After looking around and finding a cello maker we chilled in a delightful little cafe full of interesting things.



Traditional cello making



You just have to think of a name for each one



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Petra and I spent the next couple of days looking around Bern and Basel (again). The symbol of Bern is a bear, this dates back to an event where a merchant brought a bear cub back from a trip to northern Italy. The bear and successors became a feature of Bern and are a symbol of the city. Not only are bears an official symbol, they also feature in many decorative features including statues and fountains.



Courtyard of the Rathaus in Basel

views across the lake and the city. Again the light dusting of snow made everything look rather picturesque.

There is a delightful little madeleine available in a variety of flavours which has been baked in a small bear shaped pan. Unfortunately the baking tins are not available for purchase so you will have to go to Bern to get one of these.

I had enjoyed Basel so much last time with Aga and I still hadn't seen the whole art gallery, Petra and I went to Basel. After approximately 2 ½ hours we had managed to complete approximately one floor of the Art Gallery. This comprise the old masters with the copy of Christ in the Crypt by Holbein mentioned earlier. We then went for a walk around Basel, it was snowing which made you appreciate being able to duck into little cafes and enjoy something warming like Glühwein.

The trip back to Zürich followed the similar procedure. Christian got me to the train then sent the obligatory text to Britta telling her when to expect me plus a photo of what "grandma" looked like. On arrival Britta and I went for a walk around the old town of Zürich plus climbed the belltower of Grossmunster. This was an old-style belltower with numerous steps and comprised a considerable effort which we paid for in the next few days. The weather was clear and bright and the view was amazing with excellent



Saint Peters Kirche



View from the Grossmunster

The weather had got colder, the next day it was particularly cold getting close to -10°C, Britta and I walked along the lake to the succulents Museum. This had an interesting collection of succulents from Africa, South America and Madagascar. This made me remember bits of Australian history where there will be a reference to X "a Swiss scientist" with regard to some natural history. You start to appreciate the impact of a number of these Swiss scientists on the general knowledge pool of the country. It's a bit like finding the other side to a story when you only know the piece that happened in your country.

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On my last full day it was snowing when we woke up however the temperature was warm the snow turned to marsh quite quickly. This meant you had to watch for when the temperature dropped again as streets would become very icy. We went to a local farmers market which had suppliers from Switzerland and northern Italy. There were many excellent cheeses plus bread and fruit and vegetables.



After a relaxing breakfast Britta and I went into Zürich to the Landesmuseum, this is a historical museum which details the history of Switzerland back to pre-historic times. I had thought of Switzerland as always being a very wealthy country, however the Industrial Revolution was considerably later (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) and it wasn't until the Second World War where neutrality plus the growing finance sector really contributed to Switzerland's wealth. Previously the country had been predominantly agricultural and while there is some particularly good land there are definitely marginal areas. Consequently hunger was a constant problem predominantly in mountainous locations.

I did a lot of amazing things in Switzerland and really enjoyed myself. What made it absolutely fantastic was being able to stay with friends and I can only thank Aga and Marco, Petra and Christian plus Britta and Markus for such a wonderful time.

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<sup>i</sup> The world's hottest desert is a technicality; it is Dallol which has been classified as the world's hottest continually inhabited place a.k.a. town/village. It was damn hot.

<sup>ii</sup> General aviation is like this – you spend one hour in the air and several faffing about on the ground