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Swiss Watching

Written by Dicco Bewes

Published by Nicholas Brealey Publishing

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SWISS WATCHING

INSIDE EUROPE'S
LANDLOCKED ISLAND

DICCON BEWES



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For Gregor

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A WORD ABOUT NAMES

In a quadrilingual country, there's bound to be some confusion over place names. For example, the city called Geneva in English is known as Genève, Genf, Ginevra and Genevra in the different languages of Switzerland. Luckily, Geneva is an extreme case of multilingualism; other places in Switzerland make do with two or three variations rather than five.

Unlike countless examples in Italy, most Swiss cities escaped the English habit of anglicising the names. In general the British preferred French to German, so it's Neuchâtel not Neuenburg (and certainly never Newcastle), Valais not Wallis, and Lucerne not Luzern. I have stuck to that rule throughout the book, except where the German version has always been used, such as Zug, or where it's become old-fashioned to use French for somewhere in the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

The Swiss tourist board and most English guidebooks now use the German spellings for Bern and Basel, possibly because it's the majority language in both cities. Similarly, Aargau, Thurgau, Graubünden and St Gallen have replaced the hopelessly antiquated Argovia, Thurgovia, Grisons and Saint Gall, all of which are rarely seen in modern publications. It's not a Bombay/Mumbai bout of political correctness, more trying to make it easier for everyone to understand where they are. In English, the most daring thing we do now is leave the umlaut off Zürich; not that any British ear would hear the difference anyway.

For other official names, such as the houses of parliament, I have given only the German version, as it's the one used most often. For the German words in the book there are usually French and Italian equivalents, which I have omitted to list, but that doesn't mean they don't exist.

STYLISH PEOPLE



THE 'BIG CANTON'



OLD PEOPLE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every book has to begin somewhere, but this book had more than one beginning, each of them needed to reach the end.

Its first beginning was getting a job at *Holiday Which?* magazine. They took a chance on me and helped me become a travel writer. Everything that has gone into this book I learned there; without that, these pages would be blank.

Its second beginning was when I met Gregor and became a regular on easyJet flights between London and Switzerland. A long-distance relationship did nothing to improve my bank balance or my dislike of airports, but it gave me the chance to fall in love with another country.

Its third beginning was endless illness and my doctor telling me to leave work, leave London, get some fresh air and get better. Goodbye Britain, hello Switzerland! No lakeside sanatorium or exclusive clinic for me; instead I moved to Bern and never looked back.

Its fourth beginning was after arriving in Switzerland. Armed with both free time and a railcard, I explored the parts I'd never even heard of before. And I began to realise there was more to the country than I'd thought. An awful lot more.

Its last beginning was in a writers' workshop in Geneva. I wrote down a sentence that had been swimming around in my head, and it became a paragraph. Months later the paragraph had turned into a chapter, which secured me an agent, who found me a publisher, who signed me up to write a whole book. So I guess this all began with a girl named Heidi and a man called Ronald.

Now, here's the real beginning.

INTRODUCTION

Close your eyes and tell me the first thing you associate with Switzerland. Chances are you'll say cheese. Or chocolate. Or mountains. Or banking, cuckoo clocks, skiing, watches, the Red Cross, snow or Toblerone. Those were the top ten answers when I asked 100 non-Swiss people to do just that, and every single person said something. No one doesn't know or passes. What was clear is that everyone has something in mind when they think of Switzerland. This small mountainous country at the centre of Europe has captured a place in the imaginations of millions of people.

It's not as if the Swiss themselves are so famous. Let's do that test again, but this time try to name a famous Swiss person. Much harder, isn't it? Of the same 100 people, a quarter couldn't think of a single celebrity from Switzerland; they obviously weren't tennis fans. How odd it is that the Alpine republic has managed to make its products famous the world over but hasn't produced many well-known citizens. Are the Swiss so busy making things and being inventive that they have no time to be famous? Or do they just stay out of the limelight? It seems that while we all have our preconceptions of what Switzerland is like, we don't know much about the people who live there.

Then again, what do we know about the real Switzerland, the enigmatic one behind those clichéd images? The truth might surprise you. Its clean and polite reputation hides a country where graffiti and cigarette ends are commonplace, where queueing is an alien concept, and where recycling is forbidden on Sundays. As for the Swiss themselves, they can be conservative (and yes, even dull), but they have an unexpectedly liberal attitude to drug use and assisted suicide, and are amazingly creative when it comes to technology and

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innovation. In fact, the Swiss are a nation of contradictions held together by a capacity and the desire to overcome them. How else could they conquer their mountains, repel their enemies and survive for over seven centuries?

This book won't tell you where to eat in Zurich, what to see in Basel or how to use the trains. What it will do is take you behind the scenes and beyond the stereotypes on a journey into the heart of Switzerland and the minds of its sometimes quirky people. I'll show you how the breathtaking scenery helped shaped a nation not just a tour itinerary, and why tradition is as important as technology. We'll see that the Swiss have more power than their politicians, but can't speak to one other in the same language. You'll meet some famous Swiss people, even if two are fictional, as well as discover what makes the rest of them tick.

But we'll begin with the basics: what has made the Switzerland we know today. The first five chapters show how the country is the product of its geography, history, religion, politics and wealth. Then we move on to what Switzerland has created. A journey around and across the country reveals the real Switzerland behind the Red Cross, watches, cheese, chocolate, trains and Heidi.

By the end, you'll be able to go behind the stereotypes and will have a complete insight into the Swiss identity, and you'll possibly know more about the Swiss and their country than the Swiss do themselves.

ONE

THE LANDLOCKED ISLAND

Switzerland is a country with nine names, and that's not including the English one at the start of this sentence. While it's logical for somewhere with four national languages to have four names, two very Swiss traits make this more complicated: their love of formality and their need for consensus. The former means that there are two levels of politeness in Swiss society, with people using either first or last names; so of course the country also has its own equivalents of formal and informal names. The latter resulted in the ninth, the name that's reduced to the letters CH on the back of Swiss cars.

Let's start, just as the Swiss would, with formal introductions. The Swiss love nothing more than the formality of surnames. People can live in the same building or work together for years and never get past using them. This is changing slowly with the younger generations, but even they write and say their last name first and first name last; a quick look on Facebook or a Swiss credit card will show that. Or a phone call. Ring a Swiss person¹ and the phone will be answered with one word: a surname, possibly in case you've forgotten who you're calling. But it's not just the names, it's the pronouns that go with them. Whereas English now only has one word for you,² German, French and Italian have two levels of formality. With strangers and people older or more important, you stick to surnames and use the formal *Sie*, *vous* or *lei* to mean 'you'; with family, close friends and children, you can switch to first names and the more familiar *du*, *tu* or *tu*.

It's the same with the country itself. Any country worth its salt has to have a formal name, and since in Switzerland salt

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is worth a lot (it's a state-controlled monopoly so there's no free market, only two producers and it's subject to tax³), the country has four. In German, the language of the majority,⁴ it is *Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft*, which is as hard to translate as it is to say. The closest in English is Swiss Confederation, the phraseology also used by French, Italian and Romansh, the other three national languages: *Confédération suisse*, *Confederazione svizzera* and *confederaziun svizra*. In reality *Eidgenossenschaft* means something more like 'the brotherhood of men who stood in a field and swore an oath of eternal cooperation and friendship'; confederation is a lot simpler. *Eidgenosse* is still used by the German-speaking population to refer to the real Swiss, the ones from the original heart of the country.

These formal names are all a bit of a mouthful, so it's no surprise that the Swiss use a much more informal version in everyday life: *Schweiz*, *Suisse*, *Svizzera* and *Svizra*, all of which are the equivalent of being on first-name terms. However, with eight different names floating around, half of them far too long to be used in Eurovision Song Contests or football matches, it's no wonder that the Swiss decided to have one official one – not just to make things easier but to have a name acceptable to all the national languages, so that no one could argue that one was being favoured over another. Finding a solution acceptable to all is the Swiss way of doing things, and is perhaps the biggest reason they have managed to overcome their historic divisions. It's all about consensus, but the challenge was reaching one. The solution? Use a long-dead language.

Drive along almost any motorway in Europe and you'll soon see a car with a CH sticker on the back. If you watched too many episodes of *It's a Knockout* or take part in too many pub quizzes, you might know that CH is the international registration code for Switzerland. But what if you were asked

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what those two letters actually stand for? You mentally glide over a map of Europe, searching for a logical answer. There's a flicker of hope when you realise that the codes are abbreviations of a country's name in its own language or in English, so D is for Deutschland and E for España, but FIN is for Finland and GR for Greece. Nevertheless, CH doesn't fit into either; it's in a class of its own.

The answer is not cheese or chocolate, though you'd be surprised how many people could believe that, but *Confoederatio Helvetica*, Switzerland's ninth, and official, name. There can't be many modern countries that have a Latin name, but then again there aren't many countries like Switzerland. The name is derived from the Helvetii, one of the local pre-Roman tribes, and the literal English translation is the Helvetic Confederation. But for a country that prides itself on accuracy – and not just in its train timetables – it's ironic that its official name is technically incorrect.

Until a rather civil civil war in 1847, Switzerland was indeed a confederation, or a loose alliance of autonomous states who more or less cooperated with each other. It was barely a country, in the modern sense of the word, but was definitely more than the sum of its parts. The new state created in 1848 was a federation in everything but name. Despite having a shiny new federal government, the Swiss decided to keep their old title. It might have been inaccurate but it made them feel better about the new-fangled structure, which seemed so centralised and therefore very un-Swiss. And, more significantly for the Swiss, using the old name gives them an unbroken link to their past, something which is fundamental to every Swiss person.

Ask a Swiss man where his *Heimatort*, or place of origin, is and he won't necessarily tell you where he was born but where his ancestors came from, probably a little village halfway up a mountain. It may well be that no one in his

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family has lived there for generations, but it is this, not the place of birth, that is written in a Swiss passport. In Switzerland knowing where you came from is as important as knowing where you're going to, and that applies as much to the country as its people.

If the paradox of having an official name that doesn't reflect the actual country seems odd, to the Swiss it's normal, because Switzerland itself is a paradox. For this is a country that shouldn't really exist. It defies nature, both Mother and human, with borders that make no geographic, linguistic, religious or political sense.

AT THE HEART OF EUROPE

European countries, unlike many American states, tend not to have straight-line boundaries that march across the map without bothering about complications like rivers and mountains. But even by European standards, Switzerland is a decidedly odd shape. Its borders wiggle all over the place, following rivers then leaping them to create bulges on the other bank, or zigzagging over lakes so that a simple boat trip has you crossing and re-crossing the lines. Essentially, the country looks like a horribly misshapen jigsaw piece, uncomfortably locked into its neighbours. And at times, it can seem like the missing piece, the last one needed to complete the puzzle; one look at a modern map of Europe and you'll notice a Switzerland-shaped hole in the middle of the European Union.

Nevertheless, look at that same map another way and Switzerland changes from a hole in the heart of the continent to an island in the middle of a vast sea of deep blue. It is surrounded on every side by the EU, with Austria, France, Germany and Italy⁵ all flying the blue flag dotted with gold

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stars. This mountainous country isn't huge (at 41,285 square kilometres,⁶ it's roughly twice the size of either Wales or New Jersey), but it would be Europe's fourth largest island⁷ – and easily its most unusual, not least because it has no coastline. Welcome to the landlocked island!

For most of its history Switzerland has been an anomaly at the centre of Europe, an Alpine republic encircled by monarchies and empires, dictators and generals. Occasionally the tide of history has washed across its borders, bringing Europe's conflicts and ideas into the farthest mountain valleys, but Switzerland has always managed to restore its island status, one it still relishes today. The Swiss have long recognised that their country is often as isolated as any dot of land in the middle of the open sea, and have used their location to their advantage. While historically this was achieved by controlling trade routes or making the most of being surrounded by great powers, the Swiss are still doing it today. For an example, we can look at duty-free.

A duty-free shop is not normally the place to discover how a nation sees itself. In among the stacks of Toblerone, Smirnoff, Chanel and Marlboro you might find a few overpriced 'authentic' souvenirs or delicacies, but such shops are rather like Hiltons or Starbucks: you could be anywhere in the world. At Swiss duty-free shops there was, and periodically still is, a poster that said as much about Swiss business sense as it did about the national mentality. It appeared after duty-free shopping was abolished within the EU⁸ and showed Switzerland as a palm-covered island in a sea of very blue water. No matter that, even duty-free, the cigarettes, perfume and alcohol were probably still more expensive than in a supermarket in Milan, Munich or Manchester. The message was clear: this was the last place for tax-free shopping in Europe, the last-chance saloon for anyone gasping for a drop of Johnnie Walker Red Label.

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The poster revealed how well the Swiss can grasp an opportunity to capitalise on their position at the heart of Europe, and in the not-so-distant past there have been less charitable examples. Business opportunities aside, the poster also shows how the Swiss see their own country. Eurosceptics might prefer to view Switzerland as a welcome oasis of sanity in the desert of pan-European unity, but the Swiss themselves are more likely to see it as a desert island, albeit one with mountains and glaciers instead of palm trees and ice creams (though they can be found together in Switzerland as well).

Desert islands, both real and imagined, need three basic characteristics to live up to their name: sand, sea and solitude. They offer an escape from the outside world, where you can lie back and let the day slip by to the sound of gently lapping waves, or even a few favourite records. Or perhaps they are a last hope of survival for castaways washed ashore in tattered clothes, with only dates for company. Either way, such islands don't normally have the world's most used train system, highest level of computer ownership and (arguably) best chocolate. Then again, this is a desert island like no other, not least because it's 200 kilometres from the nearest stretch of seaside.

Although Switzerland may not physically have the three requirements of a desert island, it has long acted as one. It has been both a retreat from the outside world, for those who can afford it, and a lifeboat in a storm, for those who won't rock that boat too much. In fact, the Swiss Family Robinson didn't need to be shipwrecked to find their desert island; they could have just stayed at home. The island status is a mental, not physical one, with inhabitants choosing to isolate themselves from the outside world and, until recently, very often from each other.

The Swiss are very much a product of their geography. Separated by mountains, the valley communities developed

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in semi-isolation, as shown by the many distinct dialects and customs still in evidence today. It was a case of local things for local people, helping your neighbours, being wary of foreigners and trying not to be different. Some Swiss, particularly those on the right, see that as a lost ideal; for others it's an outdated view that belongs in the past. The funny thing is, they don't always realise that today it's largely true for Switzerland as a whole, though in a much watered-down form. But keeping yourself to yourself, either as an individual or as a community, is very Swiss – and it's all down to the Swiss being a bunch of coconuts.

LIFE'S A PEACH, OR A COCONUT

In her book on Swiss culture, *Beyond Chocolate*, Margaret Oertig-Davidson uses an interesting fruity analogy to describe the differences between the Swiss and English-speaking societies. Fittingly enough for desert islanders, the Swiss are coconuts. This doesn't mean that they are all small, brown and hairy, though some might be, but that they make a clear distinction between public and private spheres of their lives. Breaking through a coconut's outer shell isn't easy, just as it can be hard to get onto first-name terms with Swiss people, or even to get to know them at all. For the Swiss it's clear that most people belong in this outer shell, where surnames are used and private details are not shared. The inner part is reserved for closest friends and family, who use first names and whose relationships last a lifetime. This private sphere often includes the home, which is rarely opened up to strangers, rendering a Swiss home more fortress than castle. All this can make the Swiss seem cold and distant, but what to outsiders appears unfriendly is actually them respecting personal space and taking time to get to know someone.

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In contrast to those cautious coconuts, societies in the English-speaking world are all peaches. In the soft, fleshy outer part every stranger is a potential friend, first names are more readily used, the home is more open to all and everything is a lot more relaxed. And since friends can come and go throughout your life, the much smaller inner core is essentially your immediate family, the ones you can't choose or lose. Perhaps the peach works best for Americans, whereas the British are possibly more like pineapples, a little prickly at first, though easier to get past than a coconut shell. Then comes the large, softer part where work colleagues, neighbours, friends and acquaintances all mix without much formality. Last, the family makes up the firmer centre.

While the coconut analogy clearly can't work for everyone, as a general picture it's quite accurate. The Swiss are polite and friendly, but not exactly forthcoming with newcomers, and they certainly like to bunch together. Break through that shell and it's a different story – a Swiss friend is for life, not just for a Christmas party. But the Swiss and the British are probably more alike than either realise. Both societies are ruled by unspoken etiquette and red tape, and outsiders might find it hard to make friends or become fully integrated. Added to that, both share a reluctance to commit to European federalism, have a common distrust of the Germans and want to keep their own currency.

Of course there are differences too. For example, there is no state religion in Switzerland and there is never likely to be, as the country is evenly split between Catholics and Protestants. And Switzerland is a republic, one of the world's oldest, but Britain a monarchy, though both countries are similarly made up of disparate parts held together by a common will. The fact is that many Swiss are Anglophiles and Brits have always come to Switzerland, with the Swiss tourist industry practically being created just

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for the English. And, after all, pineapple and coconut together make a great piña colada.

If the Swiss can be seen as coconuts, then Switzerland itself is much like its people, only bigger. On this scale it's the mountains that act as the shell, protecting its inhabitants and stopping outsiders from getting too close. To the rest of the world these mountains are the face of Switzerland, which isn't too surprising given how much they dominate the landscape. It might have to share the Alps with all of its neighbours, but with 48 peaks over 4000 metres, Switzerland can justifiably be called the Roof of Europe. Almost two-thirds of the country is taken up by the Alps, with the Jura range in the northwest making up another 10 per cent of the surface area. And in this land of countless mountains, one stands out: the Matterhorn.

CONQUERING THE MOUNTAINS

There are no world-famous Swiss monuments or buildings: no Taj Mahal or Eiffel Tower or Opera House. Instead there are mountains, and possibly two of the best known in Europe. With its forbidding North Face the Eiger gets more starring roles in books and films, but it's the Matterhorn that is the real Swiss icon. This singular, triangular wonder with a slightly crooked peak is known around the world, though not always at home. None of the 16 candidates for the 2009 Miss Switzerland title could put a name to the photo of the Matterhorn⁹; apparently, winning that crown really is only about looks. For most other Swiss, however, the Matterhorn is an instantly recognisable symbol of their country, even if they do have to share it with Italy. The mountain lies not in the middle of Switzerland but in the middle of nowhere, down on the Swiss-Italian border. That means that getting there is

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no picnic: from Bern, for example, it takes three trains, each smaller and slower than the last, to make the trip up the ever-narrower valleys to Zermatt and beyond. But it's worth it. For one simple reason – the view.

The Matterhorn literally stands out from the crowd. Not because of its size, though at 4478 metres it's more than a pimple, but because it sits in solitary isolation, uncluttered by neighbouring peaks. That's why it looks so majestic, because you can see the whole mountain from bottom to top. And that's exactly where one Englishman went. In 1865 Edward Whymper led the team that scaled the Matterhorn for the first time, though four of them died in the process. Most visitors today are happy to stick with the view from the train or from the end of the line at Gornergrat. From there the panorama includes the Matterhorn, the mighty Gorner Glacier and snowy Dufour Peak,¹⁰ Switzerland's highest. Looking at all that it's hard to believe that, as the crow flies, it's only 70 kilometres to Switzerland's lowest point in Ascona¹¹; that's equivalent to having a height difference of over 4400 metres between Leeds and Sheffield. Such extremes so close together show how compact Switzerland really is, but also the possible obstacles to even the shortest journey. Then again, the Swiss were never ones to let a few mountains stand in their way.

If there's one date that proves the Swiss commitment to conquering their landscape, it's 25 June 1930. That marks an event that, in the scheme of Swiss transport history, isn't so momentous. It wasn't the opening of the Gotthard Tunnel or the completion of Europe's first mountain railway; it was the inaugural journey of the Glacier Express from Zermatt to St Moritz.¹² The joining of two upmarket ski resorts may not seem like much until you look at the map: the two are at opposite ends of the country and separated by rather a lot of mountain. It's almost as if someone just decided to join the dots in spite of what was in between. With two altitude

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changes to overcome, each of 1400 metres, the line resembles a long roller-coaster, though not in speed. It is possibly the world's slowest express train – glacial is a good adjective – but that slow pace, and the glass-roofed panorama cars, means that it's a great ride for seeing the Alps.

The thing about the Glacier Express is not its 291 bridges or 91 tunnels,¹³ or even the fact that it runs all year round despite the snow. It's that nowhere along its route is particularly big enough to warrant building such a line. The two largest towns, Brig and Chur, are connected to the rail network by mainline routes, meaning that the Express serves a few villages along the way, as well as tourists wanting the experience. And that's the crucial part. Regular trains run along the same route, stopping at every hamlet, but it's the tourist trains which make the line feasible. In high season you have to reserve well in advance to get a seat, and there's no standing allowed (not that you'd want to for 7½ hours).

From the base of the Matterhorn at Zermatt the train chugs down to the Rhone valley, which is flat enough for it to practically race along to Brig. Then it's up and over the Oberalp Pass – cue splendid craggy peaks softened by lush green meadows, or in winter a white wonderland – before dropping again to the Rhine gorge. It's rather amazing that two of Europe's largest rivers have their sources so close together, with each flowing in a different direction: the Rhine northwards to the North Sea, the Rhone west- then southwards to the Mediterranean. Not forgetting that just over another mountain the Inn begins its eastward journey to the Black Sea, making a triple watershed at the heart of the continent. Include the 1500 or so lakes, Europe's largest waterfalls and a few glaciers, and it's easy to see how Switzerland accounts for 6 per cent of the fresh water in Europe.¹⁴ No wonder over half of the country's electricity comes from hydroelectric stations.¹⁵

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It's perhaps only on the last part of this epic train ride that you really notice the engineering involved. To manage the climb from Chur up to glitzy St Moritz, the line has to curl round on itself repeatedly, going up through loop tunnels blasted in the rock. To cross the ravines it uses towering arched viaducts sitting on stone stilts, and bridges that seem to hang on thin air. All quite enough to give you sweaty hands if you look down at the tumbling waters below.

The Glacier Express shows that for the Swiss the mountains are a challenge rather than a barrier, there to be tunnelled under and driven over. They are also a playground, to be walked up and skied down, as much as a defence against the outside world. They are, in essence, the Swiss equivalent of the sea, the soul of the country and the reason it is the way it is, beautiful and inviting yet defensive and unwelcoming. And, like the sea for any island, they affect the weather. The big difference is that while the Swiss love their mountains, the weather rarely gets a look in.

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

Ask any Swiss person about the weather and... In fact, don't ask a Swiss person about the weather. It's not something they talk about as willingly as other nations, particularly the British. That's partly to do with the Swiss dislike of small talk, but also because for them it's a pointless conversation. Here's a typical British-Swiss chat about the weather:

Brit, coming in from outside: 'Brrr, it's so cold out today.'

Swiss: 'It's winter.'

Whereas the opening line could be a cue for an exchange about the weather, purely as a way of breaking the ice or mak-

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ing conversation, the Swiss sees it as a statement of fact, and not a very bright one at that: it's winter, therefore it's cold, therefore there's nothing left to talk about. Never mind that last week it was still T-shirt weather, or that the forecast is for 30 centimetres of snow by the weekend, or that it's not nearly as bad as last year (any or all of which could be a natural response in British small talk). This Swiss habit of being direct and stating the facts can give the impression they are either rude or uninterested in you, when in fact they are neither; well, most of them anyway. They're just not used to others wanting to talk about trivia or divulge personal information, particularly with strangers. For a Swiss person, standing beside someone watching the rain in silence is more comfortable than talking about it. The ironic thing is that Swiss weather actually is worth talking about.

Living in the shadow of Europe's highest mountains means that the weather can be both remarkably static and extremely changeable. Systems can sit over Switzerland for days, roasting or freezing its inhabitants, but then something shifts and temperatures change twenty degrees overnight. With all those the mountains and no sea nearby to cool the summer and warm the winter, Swiss weather can reach both extremes: its coldest and hottest recorded temperatures, -41.8°C and 41.5°C respectively,¹⁶ are figures more readily associated with Siberia and Libya.

There is one weather feature that the Swiss love to claim as their own and will happily chat about: the *Föhn*, pronounced roughly like Inspector Clouseau saying 'phone'. Mention that and you won't be able to get a word in for the next few minutes. The *Föhn* is a wind that comes from the south over the Alps, typically in April–May but also in the autumn. It generally brings warm, dry air, hence its name; *Föhn* is German for hairdryer, though who knows which came first. But this can be quite some hairdryer, with wind

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speeds regularly over 100 kilometres an hour¹⁷ and dramatic temperature changes. It's not unusual for it to be 25°C where the *Föhn* is blowing and 6°C a few valleys away.

Perhaps it's this atmospheric disturbance that makes the *Föhn* an ill wind for the Swiss, blamed for causing migraines, suicides and generally unsettling everyone. More likely it's just an extrapolation of the Swiss hatred of draughts in any shape or form. What to you and me is a breath of fresh air to many Swiss is the cause of every illness known to man. Most houses are hermetically sealed to avoid draughts creeping in; no need for sausage-dog draught excluders or heavy curtains in Swiss homes. Despite that, for a few minutes each day windows are thrown open to let out the stale air; apparently that's not a draught, that's healthy. As for opening a train window on anything less than the hottest day of the century, forget it.

It's late July, the sky is blue, the thermometer is nudging 30°C and the sun is streaming in through the train windows. With the carriage feeling like a mobile sauna, you're dripping and your neighbours are turning beetroot; there's no choice but to open a window. You barely manage more than three gulps of mountain air before a Swiss woman comes over and suggests in no uncertain terms that you shut it. She even pulls her scarf tighter round her neck for added effect, though not tight enough for your liking. It seems the draught is annoying her, even though she is sitting four rows in front; must be a mighty strong draught to go against the motion of the train and whoosh across half the carriage. Everyone is watching with bated breath, possibly because of the lack of air, so you compromise and semi-close the window, earning periodic hard stares from the draught lady for the rest of the journey.

Of course Swiss newspapers and television have weather forecasts, usually in the form of a simplified map. And that in itself is enlightening. One look at a Swiss weather map and

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you can instantly see how the Swiss view their own country, at least in geographic terms.

NORTH AND SOUTH

A typical Swiss weather map is reduced to two halves, north and south, which doesn't mean either side of the Alps. In Swiss shorthand, north means the bit where all the people live and south is where they all go on holiday; that is, the mountains. The latter might be the soul of the country, but modern Switzerland's beating heart is to be found elsewhere, in the flatter foothills known as the Swiss Plateau. With so much wild open space you might not think of Switzerland as crowded, but the inhabited bit is, because everything – people, houses, factories, farms, transport – has to fit into the narrow arc of land between the Alps and Jura mountains. The Plateau stretches from Geneva, across Romandie¹⁸ (the French-speaking part) to Bern, then past Zurich and on to Lake Constance. It hosts all the major cities and two-thirds of Switzerland's 7.7 million people, making it one of the most heavily populated areas in Europe, with 450 people per square kilometre.¹⁹ That's a bit more densely populated than South East England²⁰ and quite a lot more than the Netherlands.²¹ Strangely enough it doesn't feel that overcrowded, possibly because many people live in flats rather than houses, so urban areas are less sprawling. But the fact that most Swiss are squished together might help explain why they keep a little distance; when living space is in short supply, private space is even more important, something to be cherished and protected.

The Swiss Plateau is high but not flat. It's actually an undulating landscape of hills, rivers, lakes and valleys, all of which in many, flatter countries would present enough natural

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obstacles to hinder the building of an effective transport system. In Switzerland they had bigger problems in the shape of the Alps, but they conquered those as well with roads and railways that are the envy of the world. Ever since the opening of the Gotthard Pass in the thirteenth century, Switzerland has sat at the crossroads of Europe. And it still does. A high-speed corridor of intercity trains and motorways running through the Plateau intersects with the crucial transalpine routes tunnelling under the mountains. It may not be a member, yet, but ironically enough Switzerland is at the heart of the EU's transport network. And all because of those mountains, which are the real north-south divide in Europe.

This Swiss concept of north and south is easy to grasp until you bring in the idea of up and down. For many English speakers up is synonymous with north, and down with south; you go up to Scotland or Canada and down to Devon or Florida. For the Swiss it's about gradient not direction, making up short for uphill or upstream, which is logical for a mountainous country. So the Bernese talk about going down (north) to Basel but up (south) to Interlaken. With most of the country lying in or north of the Alps, the only part that is truly down south is Ticino, the Italian-speaking region; no wonder its residents feel cut off and sidelined from the rest of the country. But Ticino is positively integrated compared to Graubünden, the largest, least densely populated and most isolated canton. Sitting high in the eastern Alps, it is neither north nor south but has a place central to the Swiss view of their country.

Unless you like skiing in posh St Moritz or Klosters, or attend the World Economic Forum in Davos, you probably haven't heard of Graubünden. Whereas most foreign tourists head for the mountains of central Switzerland, many Swiss go east for their holidays, to the wilderness (rel-

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atively speaking) of the Engadine and Switzerland's only National Park. Nevertheless, as beautiful as it is, Graubünden is more interesting for linguistic reasons, because it's the only trilingual canton, thanks to a living descendant of Latin: Romansh. Only about 35,000 people use Romansh as a first language,²² but even then it manages five different dialects. Since a referendum in 1938 it has been classed as a national language, though this being Switzerland, where nothing is uncomplicated, Romansh isn't always an official language.

In a typically Swiss hair-splitting definition, it is only an official language when officialdom has to communicate with Romansh speakers. Federal laws and other official acts don't have to be in Romansh, and outside Graubünden you rarely see or hear it. At a national level, twice as many people use English as their mother tongue as Romansh,²³ but it does at least have a modern seal of linguistic approval – since 2007 Romansh speakers have been able to *tschertgar cun* Google and use Microsoft Office in their own language.²⁴

Graubünden is, in many ways, like a mini-Switzerland, with its different languages (but German spoken by the large majority) and a clear but cordial religious divide. Until it consented to become part of Switzerland,²⁵ Graubünden was once as fiercely independent as the whole country is today, and many of its inhabitants still call themselves *Bündner* before saying they're Swiss. Then again, it is a fairly common Swiss trait to put canton before country. It doesn't matter that your canton has fewer inhabitants than spectators at a Second Division football match, it's your home canton and therefore a source of immense pride. So what exactly is this most Swiss of creations?