



BURT WOLF
TRAVELS & TRADITIONS

WINTER IN THE LAKE GENEVA REGION

Switzerland is divided into states called cantons. The canton that runs across the northern and eastern shores of Lake Geneva is known as the Canton of Vaud. The general area is known as the Lake Geneva region and it offers some of the best locations in Europe for a winter vacation.

During the late 60's, I lived in this part of Switzerland and spent my vacations right here. The area has all the winter sports you'd expect and comfortable accommodations. One of the things that makes it special is that unlike many of Europe's winter resorts that are designed for the rich and famous, most of the towns in Vaud are set up for families, or couples who are considering becoming families.

CHATEAU-D'OEX

Ah, the thrill of true love, like a balloon it lifts you to new heights. And the Lake Geneva region is a perfect spot for balloonists or people who just want to take an amazing ride. The microclimate in the town of Chateau-d'Oex creates ideal flight conditions and has made it a world center for ballooning. Each year during the last week of January, hot air balloonists



from all over the world come to the area. Over 80 balloons from 15 different countries take part in a week of mountain ballooning, and 60,000 spectators come to watch.

Hot air ballooning was introduced during the late 1700s by the Montgolfier brothers, who were responsible for the first flight with passengers. You couldn't actually call it a manned flight, because the passengers were a rooster, a lamb and a duck. But a year later in 1783, they were responsible for the first manned flight—it was over Paris, lasted 28 minutes, and carried a pilot and a passenger. Hot air balloons depend on the lifting power of hot air, which is lighter than cold air. Accordingly, ballooning in the cool winter air of the Swiss Alps has a particular advantage.

There is no propulsion system; and a hot air balloon can't be steered. The pilot controls the height by dropping the weights attached to the balloon. He can add more hot air to increase the balloon's height, or let some of the air out, which will lower it. The direction of travel is controlled by locating

and catching air currents heading in the direction you want to go.

The longest balloon flight, both in terms of distance (25,361 miles), and time (20 days straight), began here in Chateau-d'Oex. It's still the world record, and it's held by a local Swiss psychiatrist named Bertrand Piccard and his British co-pilot and balloon designer, Brian Jones. In 1999, they completed the first round the world flight, and because they were locked together for 480 hours, they also get credit for the first successful lighter than air psychoanalysis.



THE ALPINE CHALET

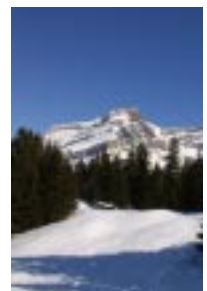
The wind currents took us into some of the more remote valleys and above some of the more traditional chalets. Originally the word chalet described a small dwelling used by sheepherders in the Alps of Switzerland, Bavaria, France and Italy.

Eventually it was used to refer to any small house on the side of a mountain or in a mountainous region. Chalets are made from heavy planks of timber that are framed together like a log cabin. The sidewalls often extend past the corners, forming private sheltered porches and the balconies are detailed with carved railings. The windows are small and the shutters are decorated. Roofs are low and slanted to deal with the heavy snow they must support. The most traditional roofs are made from hand cut wooden shingles.

VILLARS-GRYON

One of my favorite areas in Switzerland is Villars-Gryon—it's where my sons learned to ski when they were little. The main area fans out over a sunny bowl with runs for beginners, intermediates and advanced skiers. There are 75 miles of downhill runs that can be reached with 45 lifts, 27 miles of cross-country trails, and lots of off-trail terrain.

The cross-country trails are also used for snowshoeing. If you're just getting into winter sports, and you're not ready to learn to ski, snowshoeing is a great activity -- excellent cardiovascular exercise.



THE GP-24 HOURS OF VILLARS

The ultimate calorie burner in the neighborhood is the GP-24 hours of Villars—a charity race that got started in 1998. It's a team relay race, where each team tries to accumulate as many miles as possible during a 24-hour period. There are two easy downhill runs. The first one is used during the day; the second one is used at night. The team that covers the greatest number of miles wins and each mile for each team raises money for the charity, with individuals and businesses donating the funds.



HANDICONCEPT

The Lake Geneva region is also the home of an organization called HandiConcept. It's devoted to increasing the range of sporting and recreational activities for people with special physical needs. Trained instructors and modified equipment allow people to participate in sports that had previously been inaccessible.

Claude-Alain Hofer worked for the Swiss Association for Paraplegics, taking groups on trips throughout Europe and eventually decided to open a business that created outdoor activities for the people he had been working with. During the wintertime they have uni-skis, which are designed for use by paraplegics or amputees. They also have dual-skis which are used by quadriplegics. Finally, there is a foto-ski for people who are severely handicapped—the passenger sits on the foto-ski and Claude-Alain does the driving. During the summer they offer mountain biking, with three-wheel bikes, and bikes that are operated completely by hand.

RESTAURANT PEPPINO

Claude-Alain Hofer's work with physically challenged people has begun to change Villars-Gryon's sensibilities. The entire town is becoming aware of what nature offers, and how to make it available to everyone, and in areas that are quite surprising. An example is the restaurant Peppino in the Eurotel. The chef, Joel Quentin was born in France, and came to Villars one winter to cook for the season—twenty years later he's still in the kitchen. A while back he took a course with a local botanist and discovered that there are dozens of edible plants in the woods surrounding Villars. Almost every day he heads out into the forest and returns with a selection of herbs and plants that end up on diners' plates. Bear in mind however that Joel is an expert and knows what's safe to eat and what's not. I definitely wouldn't try this on your own.



The meal he prepared for me started with a tomato flan with garlic leaves and baby ivy. The main course was roasted lamb with an Alpine thyme cream sauce, baby carrots and

sautéed wild mushrooms. Dessert was geranium ice cream, a small forest, and an herbed flavored cookie.



LEYSIN

While I was in the Lake Geneva area I stayed in the town of Leysin. Its history goes back to the year 515 when the Royal Abbey of St. Maurice was founded. The Roman Empire had fallen, and robbers were pillaging the valley. Leysin was built high up and behind a hill, which kept it hidden. For the next 1200 years not much happened. From time to time a priest would come up from the valley to bless the cows who'd become very religious and that was pretty much it.

In 1789, however, Thomas Malthus, the great British political economist, studied the life expectancy of the people in Leysin and compared it to the life expectancy of the general

WHAT TO DO IN THE LAKE GENEVA REGION

CENTRE PAR ADVENTURE

JEAN-FRANÇOIS BLASER — PARAGLIDING SPECIALIST
RUE DE LA GARE
CH — 1865 LES DIABLERETS
TEL: +41 (0) 24 492 23 82

CHATEAU D'AIGLE

AIGLE
TEL: +41 (0) 24 466 21 30
WWW.CHATEAUAIGLE.CH

HANDICONCEPT

CH — 1882 GRYON
TEL: +41 (0) 24 498 10 28
WWW.HANDICONCEPT.CH

PIERRE TURRIAN — COPPERSMITH

LES BOSSONS
CH — 1837 CHÂTEAU D'OEX
TEL: +41 (0) 26 924 75 29

SKY EVENT (HOT AIR BALLOONING)

XAVIER FEAL — BALLOON PILOT
CASE POSTALE 68
CH — 1837 CHÂTEAU D'OEX
TEL: +41 (0) 26 924 25 20
WWW.SKYEVENT.CH

Winter in the Lake Geneva Region

population in Europe. He decided that people lived longer here because of the healthful climate and the isolation. And he published that information in a book that became famous—and that was the end of the isolation.



Clinics began popping up and the place became a major international center for people recovering from assorted diseases. Dr. August Rollier came to town, and presented his theory—sunshine was the great cure. He believed that everyone should do everything in their underwear, so your body would get as much sunlight as possible. Children would attend class outside in their underwear.

When antibiotics took over the curing business, Leysin turned itself into a winter sports resort, and everyone put their clothing back on. Today it offers ski slopes for intermediates and beginners, skating, curling, ski bobbing, snow boarding, cross country skiing, and an amazing assortment of underwear shops.

In the center of town there's a restaurant called La Fromagerie, which means "The Cheese Farm." The building was put up in 1687 and was the home of a cheese maker.

WHERE TO EAT IN THE LAKE GENEVA REGION

LA FROMAGERIE

CH – 1854 LEYSIN
TEL: +41 (0) 24 494 22 05
E-MAIL: FROMA@BLUEWIN.CH

LA PINTÉ DU PARADIS (PINT OF PARADISE)

PLACE DU CHÂTEAU
AIGLE, SWITZERLAND
TEL: +41 (0) 24 466 94 22

PEPPINO

EUROTEL VICTORIA VILLARS
CH – 1884 VILLARS-SUR-OLLON
TEL: +41 (0) 24 495 31 31
WWW.EUROTEL-VICTORIA.CH/VILLARS



WHERE TO STAY IN THE LAKE GENEVA REGION

LEYSIN PARC HOTEL

TEL: (FROM U.S.) +41 (0) 24 493 08 08
WWW.LEYSIN-PARC.CH

Eventually it became the center for a farmers' co-op and finally a restaurant, which specializes in dishes that use cheese as a primary ingredient. The starring dish is a cheese fondue designed for big dippers. The children's menu has one for little dippers. They also serve raclette, which is melted cheese and steamed potatoes; tomme Vaudoise, which is a disk of grilled cheese over beet, cabbage, and carrot salad, and rosti au fromage, hash brown potatoes with melted cheese on top.

In the center of the room is a giant fireplace in which cheese is actually being made. It's made from the milk of local cows, and tastes like a Gruyère. They make cheeses that are semi-hard and hard. When the restaurant opened, the owners decided to turn the upstairs rooms into a museum, and invited people from the area to donate their historic farming tools, cooking equipment, and other antiques. It illustrates what life was like on an Alpine farm in the early 1800's.



PIERRE COPPERSMITH

The Swiss have a deep respect for their agricultural heritage and often use the most traditional equipment. Pierre Turrian is a local coppersmith who builds and repairs the giant cauldrons used to make farmhouse cheeses. He also shapes the bells that hang from the necks of the cows that lead the herd up into the mountain pastures each spring. He's one of the three cauldron makers left in Switzerland and for those of us who don't make cheese in giant cauldrons, or own a lead cow, Pierre hand makes copper kitchen utensils.

SWITZERLAND'S COWS

The domestication of animals began about 10,000 years ago with the reindeer and the dog. But it wasn't until hunters and gatherers decided to stay put, growing crops and living in one place, that animals were bred in captivity and put to use. That was about 7,000 years ago. Many people assumed that the domestication of cattle took place for economic reasons, as a source of milk and meat. But that was not the only reason. It looks like the first cattle to be domesticated were important because of their symbolic value in the rituals of the moon goddess cults. Keeping large beasts in captivity, and then

getting them to reproduce in captivity, insured a supply of animals for cultic purposes.

The amazing variety of cow art in Switzerland may be more about respecting ancient cultic values than anything else. Bernard Bard lives in Leysin and like many of the town's



inhabitants, started out in the cheese business. But health problems forced him to change careers. Not wanting to go too far from his beloved cows, he started making wooden cow

sculptures that have become a major example of the local folk art. They're made from linden wood, and each take about 15 hours to produce. The primary shape is cut out with an electric saw. The details are carved by hand and finally the figure is painted.

THE CASTLE OF AIGLE

It looks like people have been living in Leysin with their cows, both real and sculptured, for at least 1500 years. But just down the road, in the valley below Leysin is an even older settlement—the town of Aigle where people have been living for over 4000 years—many in the same rent-controlled apartments. A good example would be the Castle at Aigle.

The present structure was put up in the 1200s and still exhibits the architectural features that were so popular at the time: twelve-foot thick walls that could repel cannonballs, conveniently placed beveled slots for shooting arrows at your enemies, a pleasantly situated overhang for pouring boiling oil on unwanted guests, a 100-foot high tower for those months when you just wanted to be alone. And like all castles, it has always come with a complete selection of local peasants who were trained to take care of those bothersome household chores.

These days the Castle is a museum with a series of displays commemorating Aigle's long history as an area for the production of fine wines—the first vineyards were put in place by the ancient Romans.

There's an exhibition that illustrates the evolution of wine bottles, and explains that it was impossible to conduct business



wine from a distant vineyard, and you expected the big bottle, because that's what people used in your neighborhood, and you ended up with a little one, because that's what they used

two valleys over, you had a problem. In the late 1700's, France introduced the metric system, based on the meter, which is one ten millionth of a quarter of the world's equator. The French clearly understood how much more convenient one ten millionth of a quarter of the equator was than a foot.

But the people of Vaud did not want to give up the foot and

so they standardized it at three tenths of a ten millionth part of the equator. They also introduced the hand, which they standardized at four hundredths of a millionth part of the equator. Of course, at the time people were not totally convinced as to the proper length of the equator, and so often there was a 2.0115 correction one way or the other. Are you getting this down?

The unit of measurement for wine became the liter, which is a volume measurement based on the meter. Attempts to understand this system, led to an outburst of heavy drinking, which in turn resulted in Aigle producing some of the finest wines in Switzerland. They have a light bouquet, a nice balance of fruit and acidity, and the more you drink, the more you think you understand the metric system. The Chateau has a charming little restaurant called the Pint of Paradise, where you can have an excellent lunch and test your comprehension of the metric system.

PARAGLIDING

It will, however, take more than a bottle of Aigle to get me to go paragliding, but I'm beginning to understand why it's attractive to many people, and why they come to the Lake Geneva region to learn to paraglide, or just take a ride with an instructor.



Basically what you're doing is flying a parachute shaped like a wing. There's no rigid frame, just a series of fabric tubes with openings at the front edge. The wing is launched like a kite. The pilot runs down from the top of a mountain, until he reaches a speed of about 12 miles an hour, at which point the wing is inflated, and takes off. The pilot is suspended in a harness, and controls the wing with a series of ropes connected to the front edge. The sport got started in the mountainous parts of the United States, France and Switzerland. At first mountain climbers saw paragliding as just an easy way to get down, but it soon became a sport on its own. Skilled pilots can use rising air currents to carry them over considerable distances—flights of 100 miles are not uncommon. The world record for straight distance is over 200 miles.

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www.SWISS.COM