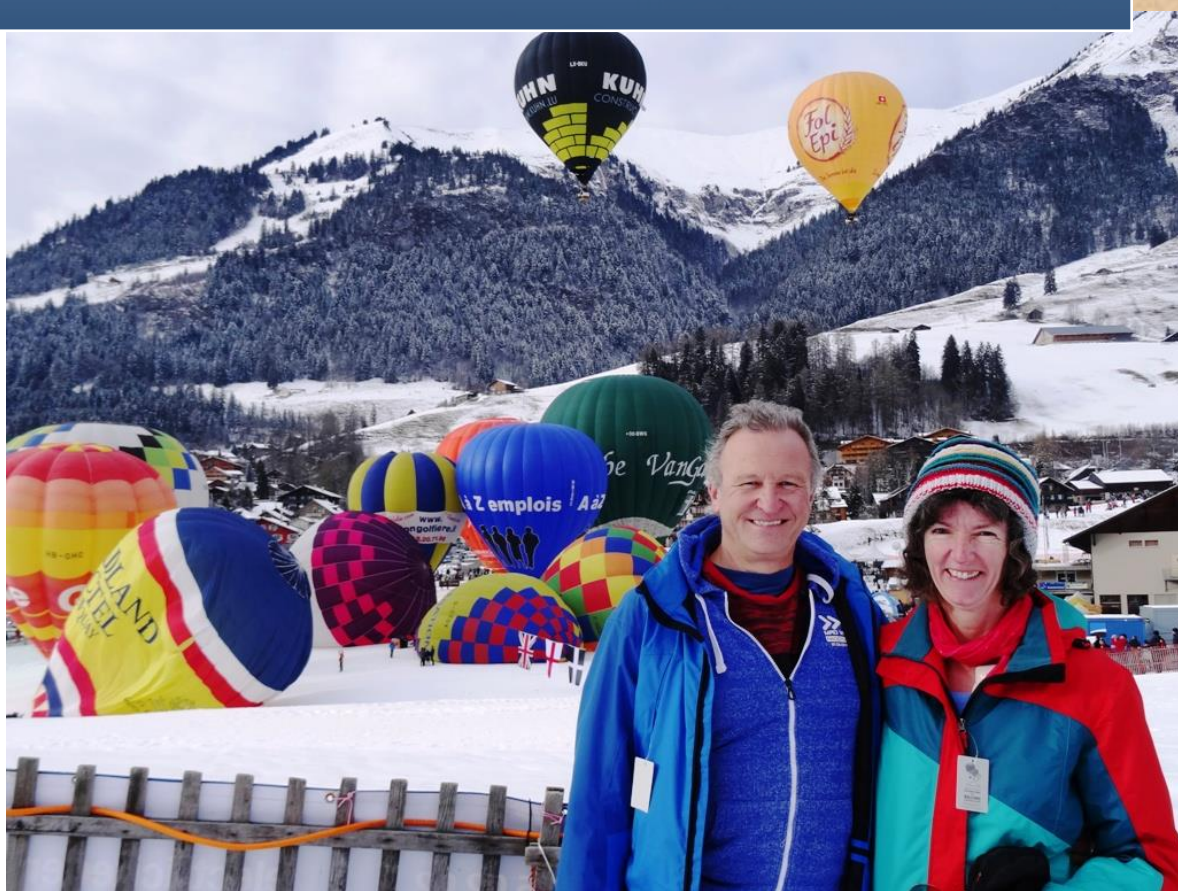


Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz

Warmly dressed in the mountains



Chapter 25, Part 1 of
Warmly dressed in the mountains - undressed on the sea
October 2013 - April 2014

Warmly dressed in the mountains

Again and again, we're curious to explore regions not well known to us in-depth. The coming year however, we were just looking for nice places to stay and to enjoy ourselves. During the cold time of the year, we wrapped warmly and rented some nice holiday flats in the Swiss mountains. During the warm summer months, by contrast, we were going to bare it all, mostly on the French and Spanish Mediterranean- and Atlantic coasts.



Switzerland: re-visiting our native country

Two years ago, during winter 2011/12, we've spent once more some time in our native country. Then, it was the first time after 12 years that we've visited Switzerland as tourists, and not just as visitors of our friends and relatives. By chance, we had then chosen two holiday-flats in the country's sunniest valleys. Then, we liked our stage so much, that we decided to spend another winter in [Switzerland](#). As we wanted to devote the chunk of the following months for brainstorming about our future, our homeland provided a logical choice, as it shouldn't distract us with too many unfamiliarities ...

How time flies! Even to us, it's mind-boggling that we enjoy already the 16th uninterrupted year of travelling slowly and joyfully to our favourite destinations around the globe. It was at the end of the last millennium, when we chucked our jobs and exchanged the security of a regular life, against a life in unlimited freedom. Then we thought, our savings would last for about 12 years, maybe 14, if we're lucky, or perhaps only 7, if things go wrong. We didn't worry, as we knew, whatever we get, it will be plenty.

We were quite shocked, when we learned that some couples in Switzerland and Germany pay every year for their health insurance alone, as much as we spend for 12 months of travelling in comfort. Instead of having spent all money for exaggerated security, we just enjoyed life and it still feels brilliant to have the benefit of our freedom, devil may care. As we live out every day to the fullest, we don't miss out on anything we'd need to catch up on tomorrow. Thereby, it gets irrelevant whether there will be still another tomorrow!

Until last year, it didn't look as if our funds would last for only 7, 12 or 14 years, but even for 16 years, more than we had ever hoped for. Maybe it's law of nature: if you don't worry, destiny rewards you with a particularly great deal and it got even better! About a resources would have could, totally inherit. That way, our accumulated again up size as it was, when in 1999.

Bingo, but now we to make the best of years with unlimited as an unexpected gift "would like to do, to see-list", we had dropped out, is above years as roving have the privilege to like to do, to see-list", to make the second part of our Therefore, we year mainly to places we know little destructions and impressions, we should have enough time to think, what suits us two connoisseurs of the art of living best.



year before all our been used up, we unlooked for, nest egg to about the same we dropped out

have to worry: how the many additional freedom, we just got of the deities? The experience and to compiled when we fulfilled after 15 spirits. So now, we write a new "would experience and to very best of the globetrotter lives. decided to stick this regions and naturist- rather well. With only few new

Sedrun: six weeks in the Grisons' Surselva Valley

After visiting some friends and relatives, we headed for our first retreat in the mountains. Travelling over Oberalppass, we arrived in [Sedrun](#) on Oct. 26, 2013. Here we shall stay for six weeks in a holiday-flat we had arranged a few months ago. It was actually a nice 55m² granny flat with two rooms in the basement of the owner's house. Here we found a perfect quiet location, all amenities we like and nice young Landlords in our age! Though the house was barely 30 years old, it was built in the traditional architecture of the [Surselva](#) Valley; a chalet style made of wood and plastered brick walls.

End of October, nature's colourful autumn display was at its best and the pass-roads allured us for drives to the surrounding valleys.

Thanks to Sedrun's good location and the splendidly constructed mountain roads, we reached the Valley of Uri, the Bernese Oberland, the Valais and the Ticino (Tessin), all within one day. Thereby, we passed Oberalp-, Susten- Grimsel-, Nufenen and Gotthardpass. Knowing that they were all going to close with the next major lot of snow, it was amazing, on how many spots workers were still busy upgrading roads with heavy machinery. Most of the day, we had splendid weather. Near Meiringen, the temperature was even up to an unreal 25°C degrees, due to the influence of foehn wind.

In the Valais' Obergoms Valley, we still had tea in an al fresco restaurant. However, as we approached the Canton of Ticino, it suddenly got rather cold and so foggy, we could hardly see the road before us. On the summit of Gotthard pass (altitude 2106m) we could not even see the lake we knew we were driving along. Soon thereafter, we were back in plain sunshine again and had the best view down to Andermatt.

There, an Egyptian investor is currently building a new top class resort that's being advertised as [Andermatt-Swiss Alps](#). Altogether, about € 1.5 billion are being invested to build six 4-5-star hotels, twenty-five mansions that go for modest tens of millions, several hundred luxury-holiday apartments, a golf course, indoor pools, spas and other sports facilities. The [Chedi](#), a five-star superior hotel had already been opened, other apartment- and hotel-complexes are under construction.

As part of the new resort, also the existing ski areas get a multi-million upgrade and become the so-called "Ski-Arena Andermatt-Sedrun". Sedrun is much more laid back than Andermatt, but obviously hopes for a boost in business as well, once ski lifts and cable ways are connecting the slopes on both sides of the mountains. The two villages are located 20km apart on either side of Oberalp pass-road which is open during summer only. A railway service commutes all year round and adds a few wagons to load cars, once the road closes.

Sedrun and the Grisons

From Sedrun, we also discovered many worthwhile destinations in the Grisons. Among them Disentis, with its bold

monastery, then pretty Vals, famous for mineral water and its legendary rocks. Another time we cruised up to the noble winter resort of Arosa. We also marvelled at the Gorge of the River Rhine (Rheinschlucht) with its eroded rocks on the river banks.

For pleasant hiking, on the other hand, it wasn't necessary at all to drive out, as Sedrun has plenty of great hiking tracks in cardinal directions. Some are flat, some are steep and we took advantage of the different possibilities daily. When meeting other hikers, many greeted in the local language Rhaeto-Romanic or Romansh. Unlike in the Engadin Valley, here almost everybody spoke Romansh. In remote mountain valleys like the Surselva, local languages and traditions are more likely to survive.



Modern city people come here for peace and quiet, but if it comes to shopping, they find possibilities are limited. Luckily, there are two small supermarkets selling all necessities. As they change their selection every few weeks, there is no risk dying of one-sided nutrition. However, for everything out of the ordinary, you need to drive to Ilanz or Chur, which is 40km or 70km respectively, on a rather windy road or with an ultra-low-speed train. Just a pity, if you have to bring your newly bought camera back because of malfunction.

During our stage, Sedrun felt neither dead nor lively. Its 1'500 permanent residents include all ages. On the other hand, holiday apartments are abound and now in late autumn most were empty... Actually, our Landlords were rock-solidly convinced, we are the only (...), renting a holiday apartment at this time of the year. So it's no surprise that hotels and restaurants closed one after the other, and sure enough, the best chefs could afford to go walkabout for two months.

Lucky us, we still didn't have to be without gourmet-meals. As we went very well along with our Landlords Ursulina and Pius, they invited us twice for a nice dinner. Ursulina would easily qualify as chef in an awarded restaurant. So once, they spoiled us with a delicious meal made of local deer and another time with something fishy, which we liked equally. In return, we invited them for dinner into their granny flat. We had lots of fun together and though their lives are quite different from ours, it was very interesting exchanging stories. Thereby, we learned that our rental-request for 6 weeks puzzled them at first, as normally nobody would rent at this time of the year and certainly not for so long. However, after seeing our homepage, they overcame their mistrust and got rather curious about us.



Unusual sauna habits

As holidayers in our home country, we had to re-adapt to Swiss customs and nuisances. In the community's own wonderfully designed wellness bath, we fell into a first sand-trap. We were pleased that sauna habits in (the German part of) Switzerland are much more natural than in Victorian influenced countries. However, we forgot about the Swiss keenness to reach consensus. To please both, Italian speakers from Ticino and Italy who make up for 50% of guests, and who are used to sweat in bathers, as well as German speaking Europeans, Sedrun's Sauna managers invented a unique system. Bathers are strictly banned all over the sauna area. Though, inhibited guests are allowed to wrap in a towel during sessions in the sauna and the Roman-Irish bath. In the attached chill-out room, everybody is obliged to wrap in a towel. Indicating signs with Sedrun's handbook of wellness-manners were banned, as they would be an eyesore to the exclusive ambience, the municipal administration had decided!

Well, we were behaving "correctly" visiting the saunas and hammams in the buff, only the Italian Lady in a bikini was being reproved. But while we cooled down on a sun-bed in the chill-out room however, still naked, using the towel only as padding, three other guests complained about us at the reception. Furthermore, we had the colossal cheek to speak, instead of saying nothing to each other. Now we were friendly told to wrap the towels around us and shut up whilst cooling - whether this makes sense or not. The nice manageress said, she only enforces the rules set by the municipality. Casually, she mentioned too that there had never been more than four guests at once, in the generous wellness section (3 saunas, 2 hammams, warm water pool, ...), since she took the job last June. This day, the last before their seasonal closing, was by far her busiest with 15 guests.

Well, Sedrun's sauna habits are strange. With the current regulation, apparently half of the Italian speakers back off, after they are told they shouldn't wear bathers. Ironically, when the wellness centre tried with textile days, almost all of the Italians and Ticinese backed off. Probably they wanted to come here to see, but not to be seen...

After 12 days in Sedrun, we got snow. It wasn't much, just enough for the roads to get slippery and for us to get some exercise with the shovel. After a few days, the landscape was green again and this "game" repeated again and again. The opening date of the ski season was set, but Mother Nature seemed to have invested her stocks elsewhere, but the local ski



resorts. Afraid this could happen, the Ski-Arena Andermatt Sedrun invested in an arsenal of snow canons, better than any fully comprehensive insurance were already working out in the ski resort was due to open. random, especially not if it's at the beginning, you couldn't see artificial snow piled up so high, wide sealed mountain road to Alp Milez. The road climbs to 500 metres above Sedrun.



against a lack of snow. Those canons green fields about a month before the Nowadays, mankind leaves nothing at efficient money-making-machine! On much of a result but after a few weeks, we couldn't even find our three metres anymore, on which we loved to hike up an altitude of 1900 metres, which is

In contrast to our visit to firstly stayed incognito, we had time. Therefore, a few came to Brigitte's parents were first, arriving for an afternoon, whereas Heinz' sister and brother in law Edith & Karl, as well as Moni & Bruno, each spent a winter-weekend with us.

Switzerland two years ago, when we informed friends and family ahead this visit, giving us plenty of social activity.

Our six weeks in Sedrun, where we enjoyed the transition from autumn to winter, were a perfect start to our stage in Switzerland. Thanks to our joyful hosts who provided us a nice apartment, we were given the feel good factor right from the beginning. We loved the many walking opportunities and the village, where most people know each other. There is still enough trust that the local baker sells his bread, sweets and other goodies, during off-season in a self-service store with honesty box. What a wonderful world - and how good that we could share it. What we experienced in the Surselva Valley has become an interesting part of our life story and we fondly remember our good times spent in Sedrun!

Brione: superb vistas from a holiday flat right above Lago Maggiore

On December 7th, 2013 we travelled over Lukmanierpass from the Grisons to the [Ticino](#), Switzerland's Italian part. It was rather freezing when we'd left Sedrun but as soon as we descended from the top of the pass, we came into much milder climate and the remaining snow and ice on our car melted quickly. A good two hours after departure, we reached the **Lago Maggiore** (literally Lake of Maggia). After a few kilometres along the lake, we ascended to the village of **Brione**, high above **Locarno**.

As our new Landlady led us into the holiday flat we had arranged a few months ago, we were instantly smitten by the bright living room with large windows offering unhindered views. We couldn't hide our excitement, in whatever direction we looked. Almost the entire south- and west-facing walls were glazed from floor to ceiling. We didn't need to go out to the balcony to enjoy the vast view that stretched from the Magadino Plain over Lago Maggiore, and over the towns of Locarno and Ascona to the mountains. At dawn, the picture changed but remained equally fascinating with a sea of lights that became ever more intense. Obviously, this is a "million-dollar-view". This flat, situated in a small apartment building with four holiday flats, was pure luxury to us. However, it was modest compared to most others in the neighbourhood. Many of the surrounding villas are indeed owned by lucky people, able to pay for a multi-million-Swiss Franc property with their pocket money.



Lago Maggiore's northern lakesides are so steep, there is no way to construct anything cheaply. On the other hand, those who have the cash to spare, don't mind the premium, as unhindered views are almost warranted due to the steep siting. As the hillside here consists of mainly rugged rocks honeycombed with seep water, building sites have literally to be blasted into the rock. Therefore, all houses get very solid foundations, though they need to be well sealed against humidity. One way to do so, is to leave space between the rock-face and the building; quite a challenge with such steep landscapes.

The entrance to our edifice was next to the garages and after climbing the stairs one floor up, we left again through a backdoor. From there, another stair led up to a three metres wide patio which was the backyard of our flat. Though, here

we were already five metres above road level, the backyard was framed by a nine metres high concrete wall to the hillside. This was nothing more than the foundation of a large 6-storey apartment building behind, resp. above it.

We were quite lucky, as our apartment had direct access from the village road and there was even a bus stop just in front of our door. However, many, if not most of our neighbours had small private “mountain railways” built, to carry themselves and their gear from the parking up or down the hill to their dwellings. The locals who have to commute, prefer the easy accessible housing options down in the towns. Uptown, on the sunny hillside, Brione, Orselina and the like, are dominated by second homes owned by German speaking Swiss, Germans and Italians.

The same bread is not the same everywhere

During our stage in Ticino, we were surprised about how often we were surrounded by German and Swiss German speakers. In the supermarkets however, the selection was clearly different from other parts of Switzerland. Specialities like Vitello Tonnato, a cold veal roast with tuna sauce, or chestnut products were abundant. Less delightful however, we found the bread. Most loafs were twice as big but only half as massy than the namesakes in Switzerland’s German part, including the “Tessinerbrot” (bread of Ticino), popular all over the country.



We don’t want to complain, as the lack of what we consider good bread was clearly improving Heinz’ fitness and health. The bread at Brione’s convenience store, located only 200m from our dwelling, was delivered from an award winning bakery. Well, we would award this convenience store’s meat counter but for bread, Heinz preferred to walk to the store in Orselina, which was a bit more than a kilometre away. That way, he killed two birds with one stone; we gained better bread and he better fitness.

Fitness was essential to take advantage of the many walking opportunities around our holiday apartment. Many appealing destinations could be reached on foot. Locarno for instance, was less than an hour and 286m in altitude away. A surprising number of narrow tracks and stairs was laid between the houses. Often, they led into wild wooded areas, intercepted with scenic rivulets and waterfalls. Alternately, we came through mansion districts with lush gardens full of palm trees, Kaki Persimmon trees and camellia, some of which even bloom in January. These plants can grow because the Ticino’s winters are rather mild.

Most of the time, it was sunny and some 8-15°C warm, better than in average winters, according to our Landlady. So it was very pleasant to hike these steep hillsides up and down but we think it must be hell in the summer heat. During our five weeks in Brione, we walked almost daily, be it to the lakeshores in Locarno, **Ascona**, **Minusio** or **Tenero**, be it to the pilgrims church **Madonna del Sasso**, the picturesque mountain valley **Valle Resa**, to the impressive **Verzasca dam** or just around the woods above the settlements. Most of those walks offered vast views, but those we enjoyed straight from our apartment were almost unrivalled.



Mogno: a chapel attracting different pilgrims

Having those great vistas and such extraordinary walking opportunities just at our door step, we sometimes had to motivate ourselves to jump into the car and go further afield.

One of those excursions brought us to that end of the **Verzasca Valley** we couldn’t reach on foot. In stark contrast to most of the Ticino district, it’s very sparsely populated. Only a handful of small settlements with traditional stone buildings are situated along the clear green river. The rough beauty is certainly the Verzasca Valleys drawing card and a nice change from the hustle and bustle of Ticino’s urbanised areas with their abundance of supermarkets, shopping centres, do-it-yourself and speciality markets.

Another excursion led us up through rather urbanized **Maggia Valley** to **Val Lavizzara**. In the almost abandoned hamlet of **Mogno**, we visited the small chapel. Nobody would talk about it, if it hadn't been destroyed by an avalanche and re-designed by a famous architect who turned this place of worship into a tourist magnet. Not even the narrow and



adventurous road hinders masses of "pilgrims" to get to see that little chapel, drafted by one of Ticinos famous sons: **Mario Botta**. Every commoner knows that even a tiny chapel costs lots of money, if designed by a star-architect. Therefore, the parish deposited a bundle of payment slips next to the offering box, facilitating hoped-for generous donations.

Talking about the architecture: we had read quite a bit of negative criticism about the colouring of the chapel and that it didn't fit into this alpine hamlet. Curious how we would like it, we were first and foremost surprised about how small it is. The chapel

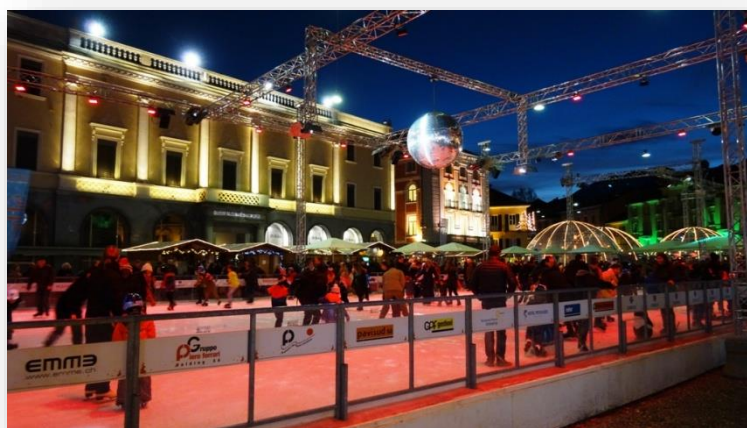
is entirely round, sort of an edged cylinder. Though the walls don't have windows, it's very bright inside, as the edged roof is entirely made of glass. The building features a colour mix created by alternating white marble and grey granite. The description of someone who said it remained him of Cordoba's Moorish design would suit it, we found. In many sections there are dark and bright stripes laid in different directions. Behind the altar, as well as at the entrance, the grey and white cubed wall is tapered off to a point, giving the illusion of a much larger room though it only seats 15 people. All in all, the little chapel is an impressive sight which has delighted us with its modern architecture.

Brontallo and other Excursions around the Maggia Valley

Back in the Maggia Valley proper, we visited the snug village of **Brontallo**. In this old stone village, the authorities must have taken care of the traditional appearance for a long time. Nowadays, most buildings are renovated and though many stables are converted into holiday houses, all retain the old outside appearance. This means, modern double- and triple glazed windows are hidden behind massive wood bars. Therefore, holiday house owners have modern but rather darkish cottages, whereas photographers are delighted about the picture perfect appearance of the village.



Thereafter, we paid a visit to the side-valley **Valle Bavona**. Now, during the shortest days of the year, the sun never reaches the mountain valley's floor, leaving the ground frozen. What a contrast to our sunny and warm place above Lago Maggiore. Here, in Valle Bavona, less than 40km away, everything was frost-covered and therefore, the meadows, stones and houses appeared in eerie pale colours.



On another day, we came back to the Maggia Valley and this time we ventured around the gorge of the green river near **Ponte Brolla**. Though the rock faces are not very high, they form a very narrow and impressive canyon. The stones have wonderful shapes carved and polished by water of the Maggia River.

Two weeks before Christmas, we felt like walking down to **Locarno**, having a good look around the small town, maybe checking-out some restaurants and steaming back uphill after a decent meal. We were a bit surprised, how lively

it was; almost too lively to stroll and look around. Soon we discovered the reasons for the crowds. An ice-rink, surrounded by stalls selling souvenirs, snacks and drinks, had been set up on the main square for a few weeks. Furthermore, a huge Christmas market was held in the charming old-town and it prove immensely popular. The different flavours, the nightly stalls and the Christmas lightings were magic. We found also several decent restaurants awarded by gourmet guides. There was just one problem; how to find back to the one we finally chose? The crowd was moving hardly more than a metre per minute and our internal GPS had problems coping with the many distractions. At least we were very hungry by the time we sat down in our chosen restaurant. We were lucky, the food was excellent and the walk uphill back to Brione helped digesting it.

Excursion to Italy

Beginning of January 2014, we made an excursion to **Morcote**, a bit south of **Lugano**. We know, during summer, this little lakeside village is very popular but right now, it was so dead, you could almost smell it rotting... Never the less, to us the tour was absolutely worthwhile, as Switzerland's only service point for our beloved Espresso Machine was on this route. Luckily, they had the desired spare-parts, - even a fair bit cheaper than expected.

Next, we continued to the nearby **Italian** market town of **Luino**. Well, during winter there are no tourists - and therefore no market. The only appeal we found in the whole place, was an overheated Italian ice cream parlour; irresistible and excellent. Some 20km further southwards along Lago Maggiore, we took the car-ferry from the pretty village **Laveno** across the lake to the town of **Verbania**. Now, we drove on to **Cannero Riviera** which turned out to be the Italian counterpart of Morcote: pretty, but pretty dead. Now we felt pity that we had neither stopped at Laveno, nor Verbania, which both had looked quite bustling and would have offered us a more authentic experience of Italian life.



Snow everywhere

The Ticino is famous for sun, but neither for rain nor snow. During most of our stage, we had sunny, and for the time of year, warm weather indeed. However, exactly when Brigitte dutifully wanted to visit her parents for Christmas, the area received more precipitation than ever in recording history. In the valleys, roads had to be closed because of flooding, and in the mountains, because of snow and damage caused by strong winds.

Luckily, we had seen the weather warning and postponed the 4 hour trip for a few days. As we wanted to bring a speciality from the Ticino, we bought a Panettone cake from a bakery. Well, what we got was certainly no advertisement for this priced speciality. Every Panettone we had ever gotten before from super discounters or supermarkets had tasted much better. By chance, we were invited to precisely such a cake upon our return. Our landlords Marlies and René didn't need to put in that much effort to do better than the baker, it was impossible to fail. However, another time they invited us for a delicious dinner and then René prove that he's a really good chef.



Around our holiday flat in Brione, it only snowed twice but soon the white powder melted away. Nevertheless, through our large panoramic windows we cosily watched the other shore of the lake, where snow was omnipresent during our stage. The poor guys over there live so close beneath the mountains, they never got a ray of sun during the shortest days of the year. We were ever so glad having ended up above the sunny northern lakeshore.

Mild climate can be very enjoyable, but it's also very pleasant to have a winter wonderland within reach. **Bosco Gurin** is a real fairytale village, only about 40 windy kilometres away from Brione. More than two metres of snow piled along the

road and almost as much on the roofs. Some small walking tracks were carved so deep into the snow, only a giraffe would have seen the beautiful landscape and the charming village around it. We hardly could get enough of the picturesque scenery and the lovely wooden houses. Bosco Gurin is a German speaking island within the Italian speaking part of

Switzerland. The folks who settled here in 1244 had come from Walser Valley in the Grisons, on the other side of the mountains. Therefore, the houses don't resemble the typical stone buildings of the surrounding valleys, but rather the wooden structures seen in the Walser Valley.



Bosco Gurin is situated in a shady spot on 1500 m above sea level and can therefore rely on snow, making it an attractive skiing destination, though quite low key. It's probably more the charm of the village that draws the crowd.

We felt our five weeks were over too soon. Despite having picked the Ticino's wettest winter in recording history, we were lucky enough that the weather at our place was exceptionally good during most of our stage. Somehow, most of the downpours, be it rain or snow, miraculously spared our paradise with the excellent view.

Six weeks in the Bernese Oberland

We left the Ticino on January 11, 2014 and proceeded quickly through the Gotthard- and many other highway tunnels to the [Bernese Oberland](#). Reaching the village of **Faulensee**, next to **Spiez**, we moved into a nice holiday flat right above Lake Thun (pronounced Doon). Again, we were spoiled with superb vistas, though the windows here, were a fair bit smaller than on our last place. On the other hand, with 94m², this was the largest flat we had been renting this winter. It had a very generously sized kitchen, as well as large living- and bathrooms, on top of two ordinary sized bedrooms.

Faulensee has a small Volg grocery store that stocks fresh bread. Furthermore, we could also reach larger supermarkets in Spiez, in less than half an hour's walk. The surroundings of our holiday flat offered ample opportunities for walking or hiking, with many starting directly from our house. Wonderful views of the lake and mountains could be taken for granted on all walking paths.



The tourist magnet of **Interlaken**, situated between Lake Thun and Lake Brienz, is only 15km away from our place. Interlaken is an excellent example how the tourist trade can change the appearance of a town. Twenty years ago, there were a number of sushi restaurants, because Interlaken was bustling with Japanese tourists en route to the famous mountain **Jungfrau** (meaning virgin - elevation 4158 m or 13,642 ft). Meanwhile, the big business is made with tourists from China. Sushi restaurants have disappeared, but modestly priced simple Asian restaurants of any colour have popped up everywhere. To us, this is only one of many positive aspects of foreign influence in Switzerland.

Now there are even more watch- and jewellery shops in Interlaken than before. Chinese staff give their clients the chance to buy Swiss quality in their mother tongue, in case the price tag doesn't render them speechless... Until late at night, jewellery shops are bustling with Chinese clients. Not only members of tour groups, but young individuals are generously spending their tourist bucks for expensive souvenirs. Every shop in town is keen to get a slice of the pie, from the candy store to the pharmacy or the hawker stall with hot chestnuts: all advertise in Chinese. It's gone so far that some shops mark that their staff also speaks German, the local language around here.

The world changes quickly. Twenty years ago, Chinese couldn't even leave their town of residence without a permit. In 2013, from no other country in the world, as many tourists were travelling abroad, as from China. For the far right wing parties, Asians probably represent the ideal of foreigners: they arrive to spend huge amounts of money, and leave within a few days. However, who wants to take advantage of foreigners must be willing to live with the disadvantages as well, but such would be serious politics and not simple populist arguing.

Hot air balloon festival in Château-d'Oex

Most of our excursions led us to the surrounding mountains, hills and valleys but for one special event, we went a bit further afield to the French part of Switzerland: after 15 years, we visited once more the [hot air balloon festival](#) in snow covered **Château d'Oex**.

It is a spectacular view when dozens of colourful balloons are being filled with hot air and raise from a snowy white field. Despite the good weather, the balloons entered a lull and therefore hung around the village and nearby mountains for quite a while.

Altogether, about 100 balloons from 15 different nations start annually during the 8 days festival. The weekend-programme is dominated by two mass starts daily, one for "ordinary", and one for "special shape's" balloons. Already the "ordinary" hot air balloons excited us with their many colours and sizes emerging and ascending almost at once from the snowy starting field.

Sure enough, the sponsors want to have their name perpetuated on the balloons, though this is naturally less interesting for spectators than the often funny and peculiar special shape balloons, of which only one had a recognizable sponsor. We've never seen such balloons elsewhere and they included a huge flying pig, chicken, duck, lion, even a lighthouse, a huge head of a cartoon figure, a sunflower and many witty more. It must be very demanding to sew such balloons that are so different from the usual drop-form and much more challenging to manoeuvre in the wind.



Culinary encounters

Another excursion away from the Bernese Oberland led us to the [Emmental](#), where the namesake cheese originates. For cheese lovers, it might be good to hear that "the original" is much more intense in taste than its copies manufactured around the globe.



Emmentaler Meringues are another speciality from that valley but they are probably only "world famous in Switzerland". [Kambly biscuits](#), in contrast, are exported far afield. The factory shop in Trubschachen draws the crowds. It serves the much loved purpose of a free "sampling station" and offers a well made multi-lingual multimedia show. About 100 different biscuits, savoury and sweet, can be

tasted or tested respectively. It's just a pity that most of them are so irresistible, you might be tempted to buy more of the handy 500 gram packets than you can carry! The choice is just incredible and there were many biscuits we had never seen on sale anywhere we had been.

We almost forgot to mention the reason why we visited the Emmental: because of its distinctive old farmhouses with their very big roofs. Farms, full of character are dotted around steep hills, now partly snow covered. Beautiful to look at!





Appealing Bernese Oberland

Our main reason for choosing Faulensee as a base was to visit the surrounding villages, valleys and lakes. Apart from touristy Interlaken, we also visited the charming town of **Thun** several times. Other excursions led us to **Frutigen**, where the new 35km long **Lötschberg** railway base tunnel ends. From there, we continued to beautiful **Blausee**, a tiny clear lake that can be admired for free during winter. The road ends in **Kandersteg**, from where car shuttle trains lead through the 15km long Lötschberg tunnel to the Valais. **Kandersteg** is nowadays a quiet but appealing ski resort which was currently covered in fresh snow.

Probably more famous, are the winter resorts of **Adelboden** and **Grindelwald**, of which we liked the latter much better. Low key and very pleasant was the village of **Lenk**, where we witnessed the descent of an avalanche. From a safe distance it looked like a white dusting waterfall thundering over a bare rock face before taking the snow field below with it. Luckily, no one was hurt but avalanches are a serious risk all over the Alps.

With more distance to the mountains, you often see more of them and this is certainly true for the hills called **Guggisberg** and **Gurnigel** (1600m above sea level). They both offered vast views over different lakes and mountain peaks, most prominently the famous trio **Eiger**, **Mönch** and **Jungfrau**.

Very pretty was also the valley of **Diemtigtal**. After driving up the lovely valley, we were rewarded with the view of bizarrely shaped mountains.



Winter didn't last long - it was one of the warmest north of the Alps. Already in February, spring flowers popped up everywhere and temperatures rose to reasonable 10-12°C. So it tempted us to drive around the lakes Thunersee and Brienersee. Especially the northern shores, with their small roads and lovely villages, like **Sigriswil** and **Brienz**, were charming. The southern shores, on the other hand, consisted of not much more than highway tunnelled rock faces.

To discover the beautiful landscape around Faulensee, we often went for long walks right from our holiday dwelling. On foot power, we went not only to Spiez, but also to Aeschi, Aeschried and Krattigen. Sometimes, we were accompanied by visitors, as Edith & Karl, Annemarie & Beat and also Petra & Otti spent weekends with us. It was great to have friends coming and sharing more than just a few hours.

Bern: the historic capital

During our last week in the Bernese Oberland, we spent a day in Switzerland's capital **Bern**. We parked our car at the modern **Paul Klee Museum**, where we had a look at the fascinating architecture. From the outside, the metal construction looks like three wave shaped buildings merged by glassed corridors. To the back, the three buildings appear to disappear in a field that covers the large rear section of the art gallery, making one big complex out of the three halls.



From the Museum Paul Klee, it was only 20 minutes' walk to one of Bern's landmarks: the so-called "Bärengraben" (bear's ditch), which has recently been converted into a more species-appropriate bear park, along Aare River. As the bears were hibernating, we soon proceeded over the bridge to the old town. It is surrounded by a sharp river bend that encompasses a hill with rows of charming townhouses of similar architecture. Most of the buildings, dating from the 15th and 16th century, have arcades on street level.



Smack in the middle of the cake is Switzerland's parliament, which is called Federal Palace, or Bundeshaus respectively, in German. All over Bern, embassies and vehicles of diplomats can be seen.



Right now, shortly after the Swiss voted in favour of immigration quotas, as proposed by the populist right wing party SVP, diplomatic activity around the Swiss capital was certainly on peak level, as such quotas violate the Bilateral Agreements with the EU. We don't really know, whether we shall be ashamed or feel pity for our compatriots, who fell into the trappings of populist advertisement! With populist arguing, the SVP made Swiss commoners believe, "mass immigration", especially from Germany and Italy, is to blame for high unemployment, low salaries, high rents, traffic-jams, overcrowded public transport and so on.

Well, high unemployment in Switzerland means 3.5%, which is presently among the lowest in the world! In 2013, unemployment in the EU countries ranged between 4.9% and 27.8%, or an average 12 % in the Euro-Zone.

Low salaries means: Swiss receive among the [highest salaries in the world](#) and during the last 10 years, Swiss salaries rose "only" twice as much as in the European Union! Less than 10 % of Swiss cross-salaries are below SFr 4'000 (€ 3'290) a month! In fact, Switzerland enjoyed astonishing economic growth since the Bilateral Agreements that include free trade and free movement of people, with the EU, were introduced.

Many international companies went to Switzerland, as they could now find enough qualified personnel and still take advantage of a secure environment, low taxes and almost no risk of strikes.

While the rest of Europe was enduring recession and financial crisis, Switzerland's GDP was growing and growing! It's true, the country's roads are jammed. However, would Swiss resort to their bicycles, foreigners could drive on near empty roads that wouldn't exist without the many foreigners who did the hard and dirty work, almost no Swiss would do! It's also true, public transport, though Switzerland's network is among the world's most efficient and most dense, is packed during peak-hour. However, without the many foreign employees like bus-drivers, public transport would come to a standstill. Further, most Swiss hospitals and care-homes wouldn't have the capacity to do much more than bare emergency treatments! Admittedly, a few foreigners (as well as some genuine Swiss) misuse the social security system, but in general, immigrants pay more into the system than they ever take out!

Well, we understand, everybody who has to deal with an unpleasant situation, be it unemployment, jammed roads or trains, or whatever, gladly takes an "offered" culprit. It's much easier than putting the thinking caps on and start evaluating "what can I do to change my unsatisfying situation".



The populist advertising machinery did a good job in spreading angst and fears. Mainly the regions with few foreigners voted in favour of immigration quotas. But those regions that have already a fair share of immigrants, refused the proposal of the populist right wing party SVP, as they obviously realized, foreigners are also a big benefit for the society! Democracy is actually a great invention, but it has also its limitations, as many electors are over-challenged by it. Italians regularly vote for Berlusconi, Dutch for Wilders, Turks for Erdogan, Egyptians for the Muslim Brotherhood and the Swiss decided, by popular vote, to bite the hand that feeds them! Free movement of people is just one paragraph of the Bilateral Agreements between Switzerland and the EU, and those are now at risk!

Democracy can only work properly with mature voters, and those are few and far between, even in countries with long democratic traditions. That's why the West shouldn't assume, democracy is the best system for all, and has therefore to be exported everywhere. Sensible dictators can be a better bet for a country than unreasonable, manipulated voters!

Hopefully, Switzerland's vote on "mass immigration" was a wake-up call for the rest of Europe, to stand together and make sure, populist arguments don't ever win again. Remember: even Hitler got to power by a popular vote!

Germany: an early spring month on Lake Constance

After six weeks on Lake Thun, we changed lakeshores and left Faulensee on February 23rd 2014 to Lake Constance. We had chosen the [German](#) shore and moved into a nice holiday flat in [Immenstaad](#), halfway between the popular tourist destinations **Friedrichshafen** and **Meersburg**. We stayed at Apfelhof, one of the regions many farms that cultivate apples. There, we got a modern, well appointed top floor apartment in the owner's house that offered us astonishing views over the lake to the Swiss Alps.

Our dwelling was perfectly located, with a bakery and the apple orchards right behind the building and the appealing village of Immenstaad to the front. A pleasant 5 minutes' walk led to the village centre and a further 5 minutes to the shores of Lake Constance.

In theory, it was still winter though, it felt rather like spring, with lots of sunshine and temperatures rising often to around 15°C. Snowbells had already faded but daffodils and even tulips were sprouting in many gardens.



We know, Germans are fond of Italian ice cream and some ice cream parlours stay open all year round. With such an early spring, many more popped up already now. As we expected some ice-cream crazy friends to visit us here, we had good reason to find the best “Gelateria” in the area. So the ice cream parlours we visited could be as good as they were - we still couldn't stop ourselves checking out whether we wouldn't find an even better one...



Heinz was very delighted to find that a so-called “normal portion” consists of 5 scoops, in what soon turned into our favourite parlour in Immenstaad. First came Beat (the craziest...for ice cream) with Annemarie and Echo (another crazy ice cream lover) to spend a weekend with us. All three really appreciated our hard work of sampling Italian ice creams, whereas we totally failed in the eyes of Andrea & Peter who visited next. They were much more fond of cakes and we couldn't recommend any tea room to go - only ice cream parlours that half-heartedly were selling some baked items too. As Andrea & Peter spent four days with us, we found ample time to rave of each other's globetrotter experiences.

Meersburg: picturesque village with a superb thermal bath

Not only for puddings, we went to **Meersburg** with all our friends, but because Meersburg is a treat in itself. The neat harbour village nestles to the hillside and has a picturesque old town with many half-timbered houses. Several stately buildings, like the new and the old Meersburg Castle, are overlooking the village and the lake. Currently, the alleys were decorated for carnival with colourful stripes of cloth or ties hanging between townhouses.

We regretted that we didn't try [Meersburg's thermal bath](#) earlier, as we had waited for the advertised fortnightly naturist-evening. On these evenings, the huge thermal baths can be used in the buff as well, whereas on all other days, only the sauna section is to be used naked. Seeing how big, varied and sophisticated this sauna section is, you could easily spend five hours there alone. Luckily, there is a small restaurant for a feed. If you want to use the big thermal bath or the big restaurant, you need to wear bathers unless you visit on a naturist evening. But the sauna section has various smaller pools too and on top of it, you can access Lake Constance for nude swimming or a dip after the sauna.



Most of the seven saunas and steam baths are not only big, but huge, sitting up to 60 people keenly sweating. Apart from the indoor sweating cabins, more sauna-huts can be found outside, resembling a pile dwelling village right on the lake shore. The regularly scheduled “pouring water over the hot rocks”-ceremonies proved very popular. At Meersburg

Therme, they do no ordinary ceremonies at all, but have a wide array of special ones, listed on the door to each cabin. We experienced an “ice-, salt-“, and a “sound-pouring water onto hot coals ceremony”. As we liked the ambiance of the place so much, we returned after a few days.

Ravensburg and other worthwhile sights

Another pretty town we visited more than once, was **Ravensburg**, some 40km from our holiday dwelling in Immenstaad. The place appeals with more than a dozen city gates and towers and a large pedestrian area. The bustling old town boasts quite a few attractive historic buildings and of course many shops and restaurants. Parts of the old city wall with its city gates are still intact and there is a castle hill to be climbed for great views.



Another excursion led us to Lake Constance’s hinterland to the hills around **Salem** and the appealing town of **Saulgau** with its half-timbered houses.

More attractive half-timbered houses could be seen around Allgau, where we visited the picturesque towns of **Wangen**, **Kempen** and **Immenstadt**, which is almost a namesake of Immenstaad, where we stayed.



Most days however, we didn’t move our car, but went for walks between the fruit orchards in our absolute surroundings, along the lake or past the nearby hamlet of Kippenhausen with its red hill-top tower overlooking a grape-yard.

On March 19, 2014 it was already time to sack and pack again and so we returned to Switzerland where we could stay with Heinz’ sister and brother in law Edith & Karl. From there, we took the chance to visit some more friends and relatives and organized a few things, before we got ready for our further travelling.

Final thoughts about our stay in Switzerland and Germany

One more time, we’ve spent winter in an area not famous at all for mild climate and one more time, the weather gods gave us the best one could expect. Again, we experienced a Swiss winter with lots of sunshine and mild temperatures, even though we didn’t resort to the country’s sunniest corners. To get to the snow, we needed mostly to drive or hike to higher altitudes. With the Surselva Valley in the Grisons, the Ticino, the Bernese Oberland and finally, the German shore of Lake Constance, we experienced again four attractive regions we hadn’t known so well before.

We had chosen those areas also to have some think tank and have a few thoughts about our future. But as all those regions proofed to be so overwhelming, we couldn’t help but go out and see more of it, whenever the sun shone, and it shone a lot!

Again, we indulged in Swiss specialities like cheese, sausages, chocolate and yoghurt - among many other delicious things we hadn’t had for a long time...

Of course, we are very fortunate that we realized how far our savings go, if we do without the so-called security. With so much time, we regularly see and experience things that those running the rat-race don’t recognize.

On one hand, it got very easy to us to see the best of any place we go, including our home country. On the other hand, the privilege of having plenty of time allows us to see behind the smiley faces and the picture perfect “showcase piece of the cake” the tourist industry wants us to make believe. That way, we realize lots of things that remain hidden to stressed city folks on a two-weeks holiday.

We’re very glad that we have some more years ahead of us to experience the world with “more time than money”. This privilege allows us to grasp and see things others don’t - be they positive or negative - it’s all a further bonus to our wealth of experiences.



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