



*A travelogue
from Switzerland*

By **Dini Martinez.** »

The day I arrived in Geneva I didn't know much about Switzerland beyond mountains, cheese and chocolate, which is somehow a beautiful position to be in. Everything that lay before me was new and mysterious and exciting. I had never heard of place names like Bitsch, Wankdorf, Bubikon, Gross, Les Arses, or Moron before. Neither had I heard of words like 'quelheuretly' (a Swiss-Germanised French word), 'hurrageil' (a quite obscene yet commonly-used word with German origins) or Choocheechashlee (must win worldwide contests for the trickiest word for kitchen cupboard – *ch* pronounced like the last desperate exhalation of a dying walrus). More things new in my world included weighing down your stomach with a kilo of white bread dipped in the smelliest melted pot of cheese and a country where everyone was at the very least tri-lingual from the word go.

A glimpse of history and culture

Switzerland is renowned for its neutrality in international affairs. It was one of the last widely-recognised countries to join the UN in 2002, leaving only The Vatican behind. Switzerland was also the last Western republic to grant women the right to vote, with the last Swiss canton, Appenzell Innerrhoden, only forced into approving this in 1990.

Switzerland's unique traces of direct democracy are also most fascinating for a politically interested traveller like me. For instance, by gathering 50,000 signatures within 100 days, any group of citizens may challenge any law passed by Parliament. The same goes for constitutional amendments. Whilst their democracy might be quite direct, the Swiss themselves are rather diplomatic – which maybe a side-effect of being a federation with no culture or language in common and thus the need for constant compromise and tolerance.

Geneva bordering France and the world

Back to my arrival in Geneva: it was a late summer afternoon and after work all the locals, as well as the innumerable expats from 185 countries, seemed to be rolling down towards the edge of the sparkling lake, like marbles thrown down a steep hill. I briefly wondered whether the warming up of one of the largest of Switzerland's 1,500 lakes would have an effect on the six per cent of drinking water that this country supplies to Europe, but was quickly taken away from more ridiculous reflections.

My flat-mates took me down to Bains des Paquis, where we had a refreshing splash and chill-out on the packed little beach. When they suggested dinner across the pontoon in a bustling rustic bar I hesitated at first. My meagre student budget didn't quite cater for restaurant outings. BeCALMED by their reassurance that it was nothing fancy, we grabbed a delicious – and indeed inexpensive – bite to eat at a place whose daily specials and non-sumptuousness would attract me more often than any other.

Later that evening, we went to a lawn near the university grounds where more unconventional bars popped up out of nowhere. Faces from all walks of life across the green with drinks in their hands were chatting away in the warm light of dusk. Snippets of conversation reflected fascinating international issues: the latest debrief from a posting to an African aid project, the most recent Red Cross trip to the Orient, the cutting-edge scientific breakthroughs of the locally situated CERN or the hottest gossip from the UN headquarters. Soon after sunset, a salsa band started playing. As vivid discussions turned into shimmies on the dance floor, I knew I was going to like this place. These people couldn't only talk, they could also let loose!

Laupen in Bernese lands

Several weeks into my UN contract I had the opportunity to catch a Swiss train. Swiss trains are a bit like the tube in London – everyone takes them, on time, all the time and everywhere. Within a few hours I found myself in what looked and felt like a different country. Instead of French, everyone spoke the weirdest kind of German I had ever heard. Instead of baguette and croissants, the bakeries served dark German rye bread and discussions somehow turned more around national Swiss politics. Rather than international dilemmas, things like 'six weeks of vacation for everyone', 'state's gambling earnings to be used in the public interest' and 'sex boxes with special parking space in Zurich' were debated before rounds of Jassen, the national sport – aka card game – turned dusk into dawn on a regular basis.

In Switzerland's German part, standard German words like käsekuchen ('cheesecake') turn into chächuchelee, cafe into chäfelee and chocolate into schöggelee. Everything seemed a bit 'chlee', ie 'small and cute', including the half-timbered houses and Bernese chalets looking as if they were out of a Heidi film set. My architectural admiration, over a delicious drop of local semi-white, seemed to mirror the locals: both reflect the Swiss tradition of discretion. The most admired constructions do not include any of the world's tallest or most expensive buildings. Instead, every major trend in Europe is reflected somewhere in a modest way. I settle my bill with a young waiter looking like a blend of Roger Federer and the little rose-cheeked boy on every Zwieback pack: simply adorable!



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Ticino near Italy

A few weeks later, on another weekend trip, the scenery was completely different as a colleague took me to her home in Ticino. On the way we passed places whose names I so far had only related to cheese, not mountainous green geography, like Gruyere and Emmental. Delicious!

When we arrived, I thought we'd sneaked into Italy

skipping the official border. Apart from the Italian language and typical stone houses, there were gelato stands everywhere, proper pizza made in stone ovens and vast piazzas on and around which town life bustled. In a café lining one of the town squares, a Saturday afternoon sipping Campari on ice turned into an evening of entertainment, watching the observed and the observers strolling past, like life at a Milan fashion show. People talked more with their hands than in the German and French parts and the traditional stone houses bore no resemblance to mountain chalets.

All in all, I felt I got three countries in one, yet all of them were neither pure French or German or Italian, let alone Romansch (the country's forth official language), but had the added benefit of Swiss charm to them. Some things you'll find in every canton, such as soul-caressing chocolate fondues, a to-die-for variety of delicious cheese, some variation of *raclette* and friendly, polite and welcoming people. These days, whether it's for skiing in the mountains, hiking in summer or visiting friends by the lakes – my heart always fills with joy when I find an opportunity to travel back to the mountains. 🇨🇭

From Malta, there are regular flights to various Swiss airports, including Geneva, Lugano, Basel and Zurich.