

PURE SWISS

A BRILLIANT FUSION OF CULTURES

BY ROCHELLE LASH

SWITZERLAND'S MANY LANGUAGES ARE AS NATURAL AS THE COUNTRY'S THREE-CHEEK KISS.

That's right. Not one kiss and language, like Edmonton, or two like Québec City, but three kisses—and four or more languages.

True, the iconic attractions of Switzerland speak a universal language and appeal to all comers: the crystalline lakes and splendid Alps, starring the Matterhorn, the world's most photographed mountain; an unrivalled Swiss transportation system accessible with a Swiss Pass; enviable quality in hotels and spas; and superb cuisine, from outdoor grills to Michelin-starred temples of food. Those fabulous Swiss highlights flourish throughout the compact country of approximately eight million people, regardless of their dialect. Still, Swiss-German, Swiss-French, Swiss-Italian and Romansh, the four official languages of Switzerland, have their own luxuriant cultures, colourful histories and distinct regions.

SWISS-GERMAN TRADITIONS

Flying non-stop from Montréal via SWISS, we landed in Zurich where Swiss-German traditions have ruled for millennia and have fostered big-time banking, world-class culture and power shopping. I relived a little of the Middle Ages exploring Zurich's charming Old Town with a visit to the Romanesque Grossmünster Cathedral and a stroll through the charming, tiny tangle of streets bubbling with some of Europe's oldest shops and bakeries.

But the city also has a burgeoning, über-hip side for the young and restless. I was wide-eyed investigating Zurich West, a large-scale ware-





background: The Swiss financial city of Zurich is also rich with romance, culture and cuisine.

top right: Overlooking Lake Geneva in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, the Lavaux Vineyard Terraces are a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

right: A beloved St. Bernard rests in front of the Jungfrau massif in the Swiss Alps.

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house district magnificently transformed into swish hotels, stylish boutiques, trendy restaurants and cool breweries, all newly packaged in wildly inventive, avant-garde architecture.

My favourite indulgences in Zurich are the culinary treats, many in unique settings and many affordable in spite of the city's reputation for high prices. I created my own insider's list: luscious sausages grilled at Vorderer Sternen, an open-air kiosk; tender veal and *roesti* at Zunfthaus zur Waag, in one of Zurich's ornate, medieval guild halls. I would not leave town without a train lunch from the mouth-watering butcher Kauffmann on Bahnhofstrasse. And my gifts for home always are precious artisan chocolates from Merkur or Sprüngli.

FRENCH INSPIRATIONS

My mission was to experience Switzerland's varied societies—at least three of four—so I rode the impeccable Swiss rails to the enchanting French-speaking region. Along Lausanne's grand promenade facing Lake Geneva, *crêperies* dish out sizzling waffles and kiosks sell *journaux* and *tabac*. Lausanne's trendy hot-off-the-griddle neighbourhood Le Flon is bursting with sidewalk cafés and unique boutiques. Here, the teeny, contemporary LHOTEL loans out electric bikes so its guests can conquer Lausanne's scenic hills and celebrated sights, from the thrilling Olympic Museum situated way down on the waterfront to the venerable, 1,000-year-old Gothic cathedral high atop a parapet.



Where there is French life and language, you can bet on glamour, gastronomy and grapes, this time *à la suisse*. A string of exquisite towns along the Montreux Riviera on Lake Geneva embodies all three, with a stunning backdrop of snow-tipped Alps. I used my Swiss Pass to hop on and off the railway, stopping at Lutry, an exquisite medieval village; Vevey for its vast, colourful marketplace; and Montreux, where the casino and the annual Jazz Festival foster five-star restaurants and a glitzy party atmosphere. The Swiss Riviera even operates a Wine Train to the spectacular terraced vineyards of Lavaux, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, because of its precious soil and fragile microclimate.

LA DOLCE VITA

Packing a souvenir bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon, I said *au revoir* to French Switzerland and headed south to *La Dolce Vita*, Swiss-style. The regions around Lake Locarno and Lake Maggiore, the Italian sectors of Switzerland, are alive with *carnevale* and *marketa* filling village squares, as well as coveted resort fare such as golf 365 days a year. Here my thoughts turned to pizza and pasta, gelato and grappa in intimate *trattorias*. The prestigious Locarno Film Festival, one of the most influential in Europe, has rocked with celebrities and cinema every summer for 65 years.

The darling Italianate village of Ascona is the centre



of resort life along Lake Maggiore. Visitors and locals stroll a waterfront esplanade as sailboats and yachts cruise by. The superb lakefront Hotel Eden Roc does the high life to the max, with an indulgent spa, swimming pools, gastronomic cuisine and plush suites. Its new “baby sister,” Albergo-Caffè Carcani, is a boutique hotel with a tapas, wine and coffee bar, all that is hot and trendy in a town that has not changed much of its Swiss-Italian heritage in hundreds of years.

In Switzerland, you can say *guten tag* in German, *bonjour* in French, *ciao* in Italian or *allegra* in Romansh. You can say hello, of course, but it’s so much better to go local with the Swiss three-check kiss. ■

top: *Carnevale* is a festive time in Bellinzona, Ticino, the Italian region of Switzerland.

left: Aletsch is located in the Romansh-speaking part of Switzerland.

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SWISS flies daily from Montréal to Zurich and Geneva. The progressive Airbus 330-300 is a lower-emission, lower-fuel jet with a high-tech entertainment system, more legroom in Economy, an air-cushioned bed in Business and privacy panels and office facilities in First Class. SWISS also has a new full-service Business lounge for arriving passengers.

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