

The New York Times

PLACE 35

The 52 Places Traveler: In Lucerne, Kindness Trumps the (Stunning) Views

Lucerne, Switzerland, is best known — rightly so — for its mountains, lake and views. What sticks with me most, though, is the pervasive sense of hospitality and human kindness I found there.

By Jada Yuan

Sept. 18, 2018

Our columnist, Jada Yuan, is visiting each destination on our 52 Places to Go in 2018 list. This dispatch brings her to Lucerne, Switzerland; it took the No. five spot on the list and is the 34th stop on Jada's itinerary.

If you're going to lose a laptop on the streets of a European city in the middle of a downpour, let it be in Lucerne, Switzerland.

I'm not quite sure how one of the biggest crises of my yearlong 52 Places trip happened. But I do remember the feeling of coming back to my hotel from a lovely dinner on the banks of the Reuss River — where I'd been writing **an article** on said laptop — only to realize that the bag containing my most important, most expensive piece of electronic equipment was gone.

Rain was coming down in sheets. I retraced my steps, frantic and drenched, but came up empty. I could go to the police in the morning, my hotel receptionist told me, but more likely, I'd be lucky. Swiss people were very honest, she said. If they find something, they usually give it back.

I was skeptical. But sure enough, I woke to an early-morning message in my Twitter inbox. Had I lost something? Within 10 minutes, a Lucerne resident named Anton Meier had shown up at my hotel by bike, bag in hand. "I saved it from the rain and from thieves," he said. While I gave him a reward, he seemed far more interested in hearing how my travels had been going and in recommending his favorite spots in his picturesque, alpine hometown.

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And was there anything not to recommend, other than the high prices? I felt like I'd been granted a genie's wish to build my own wonderland of natural treasures. I rode on boats or cable cars nearly every day, enjoying vistas so beautiful they looked like they had already been Photoshopped. What sticks with me most, though, is the pervasive Swiss sense of hospitality and human kindness, from Lucerne passers-by, fellow tourists and good people like Mr. Meier — all of whom went out of their way to help a solo traveler avert disaster and feel a little less alone.

Exploring the starfish

Lake Lucerne, or Vierwaldstättersee, as it's known in German, looks like a four-legged starfish on a map: sharp tendrils of water twisting through narrow valleys in every direction. In person, the effect is even more unreal, as if a Hollywood effects studio made a diorama of a perfect, tree-covered mountain range and then spilled a Blue Hawaiian cocktail all over it.

Most international tourists pop through Lucerne's medieval city center on their way to racking up adventures all over the country: Interlaken! Bern! The Matterhorn! I arrived and was immediately overwhelmed with Lucerne alone. A short walk along the lake to the city's renowned Swiss Museum of Transport on a rainy afternoon took me at least an hour and a half, over which I took probably 300 photos.

And I hadn't even gotten to the mountains.

Logistics made far more sense once I gave myself over to the best organized and most helpful tourism department I have encountered in all my many months of travel. The ladies behind the counter steered me to a three-day Tell-Pass, which for 210 Swiss francs (about \$216), gave me unlimited transportation on boats, trains, buses and cable cars in Central Switzerland — and helped with my general sense of sticker

shock. Considering that most mountains cost \$100 to get to, and get up and down — and even beer in Switzerland can set you back \$10 — it was an unequivocal steal, even for someone moving at the quite reasonable pace of one mountain a day. I made it up four, for a saving of some \$200.

The friends you meet on mountaintops

All I'd heard coming to Lucerne was that I needed to go to the top of Mount Pilatus, the area's signature peak, that, according to legend, was once home to a dragon with healing powers, and may or may not contain the grave of Pontius Pilate. All I'd been hearing from the tourism office during my first few, very rainy days, though, was that the summit would be shrouded in clouds and not worth my money and effort.

Restless to get out of the city, I finally took my chances on the lower-elevation Mount Rigi, which was hardly a downgrade; it promised a glorious morning boat ride to Europe's oldest mountain railway, and a hiking trail lined with wildflowers. On the way up, I had spotted an intergenerational trio of American women travelers who seemed to be having a ton of fun. I tried out my go-to pickup line for making friends on mountain summits: "Hey, would you like me to take your picture for you?"

Within minutes we were bounding off to a lookout point, making plans to get a beer at a ski lodge cafe and debating whether or not we felt sorry for the cows grazing on the slopes with bells ding-donging on their necks, as if being followed by Will Ferrell in that Blue Öyster Cult "Saturday Night Live" sketch.

One member of the group, Minnie Nguyen, who goes by Nhi, told me she'd gone up to Mount Titlis the day before — another mountain I had wanted to see but had vetoed because of bad weather. She couldn't see a thing, she said, but how incredibly glorious it was to walk out on a suspension bridge in a canyon in the middle of a cloud: "It was like flying in an airplane without any windows!"

Communing with dragons

It took me another two days to get to Mount Titlis, the area's only publicly accessible glacier, at an altitude of 9,900 feet. And while the views were as spectacular as promised, the experience felt like going through a tourism obstacle course. You step off a rotating cable car into a blue-lit ice cave, walk across the suspension bridge, go

up and down “the Ice Flyer” (a ski lift) and go home — more engineering than nature. As a snowboarder, the winter wonderland of mild sledding slopes didn’t appeal. But for families, it’s perfect. I nearly cried watching two young boys from Goa touch snow for the very first time.

Spurred on by Ms. Nguyen’s “rain or no rain” sunny attitude, I also headed to Mount Pilatus on an iffy weather day, ascending via the world’s steepest cogwheel railway (48 percent gradient). It really did look like the realm of dragons, with views of 73 neighboring peaks from barren cliffs at the top of the world. On a platform, a trio of musicians played wooden alphorn wind instruments, which stretched the length of two people, stacked one on the other, and echoed to the top of every lookout.

A well-planned day, as that one was, left room to maximize my Tell-Pass with an extra boat and cable car to Bürgenstock, one of the closer mountains to Lucerne, and home to a newly opened \$500 million resort of the same name, with four restaurants and a high-altitude spa with infinity pools overlooking the lake. The local trick, a woman from the tourism office told me, is to buy a sunset cruise, available after 3:15 p.m. for 36 francs, which includes a drink at one of the bars. That gets you up the mountain for half price, with time to hike its stunning Cliff Walk to The Hammetschwand Lift, Europe’s highest outdoor elevator.

Because of the resort, Bürgenstock is the only mountain with boat service until 11:45 p.m. I used my Tell-Pass for a spontaneous second visit on my last night. Having a wine at sunset with unobstructed views 2,900 feet above the lake definitely felt worth it. (Note: almost all the restaurants have dress codes.)

Surfing on air

Had Ms. Nguyen and Erika Brown, another member of that group of women travelers, not raved about paragliding, it wouldn’t have crossed my mind to go. “It was expensive, but worth every penny,” Ms. Brown had told me, and the sentiment stuck. I called up their instructor, Zacharias Konstandakis of Paragliding Lucerne, and booked a flight (170 to 240 francs, depending on duration, plus 30 francs for pictures and video).

Mr. Konstandakis is from Crete and has been paragliding for 30 years, I learned as he drove me through a lush farming valley to the village of Engelberg at the base of Mount Titlis — worth seeing even if you don't leave the ground. After we rode the cable car up, he strapped us together with a tandem harness, gave me two simple instructions — “run, run, run” and “don't sit” — and then somehow, without having a chance to get terrified, I was surfing on air high over herds of sheep and clusters of mountain cottages, in front of a glacier, with a dozen other paragliders twirling around beside us.

In the parking lot, we had met a couple in their mid-50s — Britta Hagemann, originally from Germany, and Jürg Zwiefel, from a nearby Swiss town — who knew Mr. Konstandikas. They were also, I soon found out, newly reunited and in love after having spent half of their lives apart.

Six months ago, after ending her marriage, Ms. Hagemann said, her 25-year-old daughter had asked her about her first love. Ms. Hagemann started talking about Mr. Zwiefel, whom she had met at a French-language workshop one summer near Monaco when she was 19 and he was 21. “At that time there was no WhatsApp, no Facebook,” she said, “so even living between Germany and Switzerland was like a long-distance relationship.” They wrote letters, which they recently found in a basement, but couldn't keep it up.

At her daughter's encouragement, Ms. Hagemann reached out to Mr. Zwiefel on Facebook. He happened to be divorced, too. “It was by accident we were both free,” he said. “Then we met, and it was like there were two weeks in between.”

In their lifetime apart, he had become a paraglider. But since he and Ms. Hagemann have reunited, he always takes her with him. She's a nature photographer and is planning an exhibition of photos she has taken while high above Lucerne. “Since then, I am not flying alone anymore,” Mr. Zwiefel said.

We said goodbye on a mountaintop, though only after Ms. Hagemann offered to let me stay with her any time I come to Zurich. I didn't see them paraglide, but I think about them often, and the monumental leap they took.

Practical tips

Transit The Tell-Pass worked for me because I didn't leave Central Switzerland. Those traveling all over the country should consider the Swiss Pass (cheapest version: 225 francs for three days), which gives unlimited travel on trains, buses and boats, but only a 50 percent discount on cable cars — usually the most expensive part of going up a mountain. Mount Rigi, an exception, is fully covered.

Lodging I loved my hotel, Drei Könige, outside the center but in walking distance of everything. Anyone who books at a local hotel gets a free Lucerne Visitors Card for using city transport and abundant Wi-Fi hot spots.

Clothing Mountains and boat rides are cold, even in summer! You'll want a jacket, sturdy shoes, perhaps even a hat and gloves.

Food and drink I had lovely, if pricey, dinners at Nix's in der Laterne on the Reuss (eat all the lake fish) and Stern Luzerne, in a boutique hotel, which serves tapas in Mason jars and brews its own beer. The two-franc cheese tarts at the cheese paradise Chäs Barmettler in the Old Town were frugal lifesavers. But my favorite spot was Neubad, a restaurant attached to a cultural center that hosts performance art in a refurbished swimming pool. I found my way there in the company of Felix Bänteli, a musician who founded the artists' collective Labor Luzern, and his friends. Fittingly, my first night in town, he'd seen me looking lost outside the train station and walked me 10 blocks to my hotel.

Jada Yuan is traveling to every place on this year's 52 Places to Go list. For more coverage, or to send Jada tips and suggestions, please follow her on Twitter at @jadabird and on Instagram at alphajada.

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 - 14: Seattle
 - 15: Branson, Mo.
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 - 18: Buffalo, N.Y.
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 - 30: Tangier, Morocco
 - 31: Road Trip in Western Germany
 - 32: Ypres, Belgium
 - 33: Belgrade, Serbia
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- Next dispatch: Südtirol, Italy

Correction: September 18, 2018

An earlier version of this article stated incorrectly that Vierwaldstättersee is the German name for the city of Lucerne, Switzerland. It is the name for Lake Lucerne; Lucerne is known as Luzern in German.

Jada Yuan is the 52 Places Traveler. She spent over a decade at New York Magazine and its websites as a contributing editor and culture features writer. Her cover stories and features have appeared in Cosmopolitan, Vogue, Elle, Glamour and Bloomberg Businessweek. @jadabird

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