

Title:

Scenic Wonders - Swiss Alps & Italian Lakes

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1243

Summary:

Switzerland and northern Italy are everything you imagined with snow-capped alps, crystal lakes, emerald forests, traditional villages and trendy towns. The Old World European ambience is found in its outdoor cafes and cobblestone streets. July is the best time to go when these countries come to life with every summer activity imaginable. Enjoy the local food, wine and warm hospitality throughout. Most spectacular will be the finest alpine views your eyes can behold. Every turn will be a Kodak moment.

Keywords:

Article Body:

Planes, trains, motorcoaches, boats, cable cars, gondolas, lake steamer, funicular, cog wheel train and ferry were our modes of transport. We were 62 singles with 124 bags who came, who saw, who conquered Switzerland & Italy. Aside from the traffic delays of high holiday season, it went without a hitch. No lost passports and no one lost. It was a whirlwind vacation but my theory has always been "carpe diem per dollar", that is to squeeze in all experiences possible enroute of any journey. After all, travel is intensified living as we attempt to absorb the maximum thrills per minute. (When I compare this to my "Suzy's Taste of Europe" trip 11 years ago, this was easy. We then did 6 countries in 7 days, like The Amazing Race.)

In charming Lucerne, we were led on a walking tour of Old Town followed by a welcome dinner of Swiss fondue. There was a folklore show which provided us the opportunity to blow an alpine horn. At the end of the evening was a yodeling contest where the bold wailed out like dying cows into the mic. We enjoyed a real alpine adventure up to and over the 7000' Mt. Pilatus which legend says is infested with dragons. From here we boarded a paddle steamer and sailed across a crystal lake to meet our motorcoach in Fluelen.

Our driver, Peter was super-human as he transported us 7 days over narrow mountain roads in our Super-Size-It double-decker bus with a luggage trailer hitched in tow! At times local farmers would peer out chalet windows in awe of

such a feat. We stopped to visit the Merlot Del Ticino Winery set in cliffside vineyards. So simple, so pure. The family owners stated we were their largest group ever. As we imbibed on 3 fine vintages, Peter spends a half hour trying to turn the coach around with help from dozen locals. Finally we arrive in Lugano. Is it Switzerland or Italy? You Google it. We unpack for 3 glorious nights at Hotel De La Paix.

If it's Tuesday, must be Italy. We set out to tour the lush lake district which sprawls dreamlike as a watercolor painting. This is the "Rio of the Old Continent." In Tremezzo we view the famous Villa Carlotta Gardens and water taxi over to elegant Bellagio. The town has fallen asleep for it's 3 hour siesta. Nothing to do but "manga" so I amble up the cobbled streets for my third pistachio gelato of the day. A shopping stop is scheduled in Como. Some women don't even glance at the mirrored lake lined with palm trees. As if on steroids, they march forward armed with Euros, Swiss francs and a MasterCard. Their motto on this 2 hour marathon is "if the shoe fits, charge it." Our day ends with a visit to Alprose Chocolate Factory. The tour is disappointing, but offers good buys on sweets.

Our evenings are totally free and we disperse in mini-groups to discover the best local cafes. Seafood is ultra fresh here but on my budget in this land of a weak dollar, I settle each night for Pizza Margarita, paper thin with slabs of buffalo mozzarella. On Wednesday, half the group defects to explore the region on their own. Some do nature trails, boating, Mt. Bre, the fishing villages and even Milan in a day. A few others lounge poolside at our hotel sunning like lizards . We are graced with perfect weather up to departure. The other half of the group join me with our wonderful guide Isabelle. (She has an obsession with George Clooney whose villa faces Lake Como.) We begin at the Ponte Tressa market where Europeans flock for bargains, but depart early as it resembles a giant garage sale. We ferry from Lavino along with our monster bus across Lake Maggiore to Intra and then drive to Stresa. Now here's a place I'd like to linger for its Mediterranean feel. From here, some visit the Borromean Islands.

Time to check out and head to Switzerland on one of the worlds most diverse rail journeys. The Bernina Express corkscrews its way up and over the Alps with a Kodak moment at every turn. We pass 3 glaciers and Lake Bianco named for its "glacial milk." In 3 hours we arrive "on top of the world" to glitzy St. Moritz. Our hotel was upgraded to the 5* Hotel Kempenski Grand, according to our driver "the finest hotel in Switzerland." We quietly enter the chandeliered lobby in T-shirts and denim shorts as if we too are part of the rich and famous. This is as elegant as it gets. I don't want to leave my suite with its marbled tub and feathered duvet. The designer boutiques in town are closed now. We scatter on nature trails towards the lake. For dinner, some splurge at the hotels world

class restaurant on fresh lamb enveloped in herbed crepes and deserts of spun sugar. Twenty of us enjoy an outdoor BBQ of organic local products. Later I take advantage of the complimentary spa with a swim and 4 treatment rooms.

I've always said that if I was forced to trade my passport with another country, I'd choose Switzerland. Even the cows with their bells are happy here. It's the purest air and purest food. It's the efficiency. Like the Boy Scouts, Swiss count neatness, punctuality, cleanliness and hard work as virtues. It's the serenity in the verdant hills where one feels safe. And it's the beauty in the rugged geography of rocks, bubbling brooks, clean lakes and snow capped mountains.

The highlight for me was our morning excursion by 2 gondolas ascending to a lone restaurant 9000' high. Here we are greeted with a private champagne toast on a sun drenched terrace. Some of us hiked down through the Ice Palace, a grotto-like cave in sheer ice. The majesty of this mountain humbled me. (See "On top of the world" photo.)

Peter must drive us to Zurich over a seemingly insurmountable mountain pass before reaching the highway. In 27 years, he's driven tour buses over 3 million kilometers and tells me he hates driving this road. We pass cows mating and villages with populations of 12. After a lunch stop in Heidiland, we arrive safely in Zurich. It's raining now as if Mother Nature mimics the sadness of our departure. I overnight here with a solid 9 hours sleep and reminisce another journey well done. Perhaps I'll repeat it again in a future September during the festival of cows in costume which come down from the mountains to make cheese.

Every AFS trip is vastly different. I concern myself with my groups over the destination and extremely impressed with the politeness and the fortitude of this one. They were clueless to the daily movements that had to be precision timed to the accuracy of a Swiss Swatch. Through the hills and valleys of this particular journey, they kept up like true travel pro's and win the AFS award of my most on time group ever. For some, it was their first trip abroad. I learn most from them as I look at the sights through their passionate and inquisitive eyes. Through the years I've been so blessed with good clients who can appreciate different cultures as they follow me around the world. I hope we will make an effort to stay in touch. Friendship is the most prized souvenir any trip can provide.