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Swiss Review

The magazine
for the Swiss Abroad



Cycling through Jura, the rebellious canton

Switzerland's multi-billion motorway investment –
excessive or the end of congestion?

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For a sustainable future for the Fifth Switzerland



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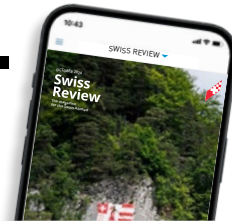
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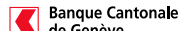
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Cover photo: Jura flag above Moutier, the Bernese town set to join the canton of Jura in 2026. Photo: Keystone

Cycling through Jura



Time for some history. Let's go back to 1815, the end of a tumultuous era that saw Napoleon redraw the map of Europe. The French had invaded Switzerland, establishing the short-lived Helvetic Republic. After Napoleon's defeat, it was the turn of the victorious European powers to redraw many of the continent's borders at the 1815 Congress of Vienna. The territory of Jura was added to Switzerland – or the canton of Berne, to be precise – as part of the Vienna settlement.

Many people in Jura soon felt they belonged to Switzerland – but not to Berne, for linguistic, religious and cultural reasons. Berne did nothing to help itself in this regard. Its politicians mostly looked down on their canton's new French-speaking pendant, calling it the 'wretched attic'. The 'Jura question' remained unresolved for the next one and a half centuries. Relations over the mountains got worse instead of better, and the threat of violence increased in the 1960s. For a while it had all the ingredients of a civil war.

Thankfully things turned out differently, and the years of strife are over. The decisive moment came in 1974, exactly 50 years ago, when Jura's three northern districts decided to split from the canton of Berne and form their own canton, culminating in the birth of Switzerland's youngest canton only five years later. Since then, Jura has had the right to shape its own future like all the other cantons in our country's federal system (see our lead article on page 4).

This owes much to the determination of people in Jura – but also to those outside Jura who increasingly wanted a just solution for all involved. An overwhelming 82 per cent of Swiss voters endorsed the new canton in 1978. And even in a Berne ceding half of the territory it won in 1815, the yes vote stood at almost 70 per cent.

These days, its Bernese neighbours regularly infiltrate Jura from across the mountains. Mainly at weekends and during holiday periods. Not to reclaim old cantonal territory, but because they love Jura and everything it offers. From dark forests and wide expanses, to steep cliffs, deep gorges and a proud, freedom-loving people with a rebellious streak – Jura is worth a visit. Our intrepid reporter cycled through Jura to investigate.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

“Swiss Review”, the information magazine for the “Fifth Switzerland”, is published by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad.



The freedom to

In 1974, Jura voted to split from Berne and form its own canton. Fifty years later, what makes the most defiant corner of Switzerland the place it is now? The author got on his bike to find out.

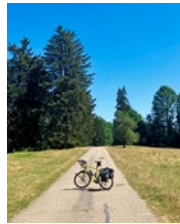
JÜRIG STEINER

Clinique Le Noirmont in the canton of Jura sits like a castle on the hill above the village from which it takes its name. Behind the building, the terrain drops steeply into the deep gorge of the River Doubs that separates Switzerland from France. In the other direction are the tree-topped highlands of Franches-Montagnes – one of Switzerland’s more thinly populated regions.

Wedged in on the border, Clinique Le Noirmont is the biggest national rehabilitation centre for patients with cardiovascular disease. It is a good point from which to begin a tour of Switzerland’s youngest canton, a place where the people have long worn their heart on their sleeve.

The canton has a history of defiant activism – one that inspires outsiders who recognise the generous, dissenting, freedom-loving instincts of the people who live there. Jura serves as a romantic counterpoint to efficient, precise, competitive Switzerland.

Bike at the ready; A stunning snapshot of Jura: Les Breuleux on the left, Le Noirmont somewhere through the mist on the right. Photos: Jürg Steiner (top), Keystone (below)



Fifty years since the high-water mark of Jura separatism, how much of this rebelliousness is now myth and how much still reality?

To find out, I set off on my bike from Le Noirmont and headed east to Jura’s capital Delémont – a fitting thing to do. The canton of Jura came into being through people battling the political headwinds that came their way. And cyclists are buffeted by plenty of headwinds on the gusty Jura plateau.

Marginalised and resentful

Sunday, 23 March 1974 turned out to be a historic day when the referendum results were announced. “Il pleut la liberté [It’s raining freedom],” Roger Schaffter, one of the main figures of Jura’s separatist movement, said poetically on the balcony of Delémont’s town hall as it began to rain.



be different

A narrow majority of voters in the seven districts of Jura had just decided that their canton would split from Berne, correcting an arrangement that dated back to the downfall of Napoleon and the 1815 Congress of Vienna, when the territories of the Prince-Bishopric of Basel in the Jura mountains were assigned to the canton of Berne. Jura was a form of compensation for Berne, which had had to give up its territories in Aargau and Vaud.

Little Jura – Catholic and French-speaking – now found itself part of the big, Protestant, German-speaking canton of Berne. Longing for territorial autonomy and self-determination, many in Jura felt marginalised and resentful. Political experts now say that the strife surrounding Jura before the historic 1974 vote could even have led to a civil war.

This is no exaggeration. From the 1960s onwards, the separatist movement *Rassemblement Jurassien* and its young militant group *Béliers* often sailed close to the wind during a resistance campaign against Berne that was as furious as it was effective. In 1969, young demonstrators from Jura gathered at the *Bundesplatz* in Berne to burn the controversial “Civil Defence” booklet that the Federal Council had distributed to every household in Switzerland. Activists also stormed the National Council chamber in 1968. And radical splinter groups even carried out arson attacks.

Jura eventually voted for self-determination peacefully and democratically in June 1974, but in doing so created a new bone of contention: only Jura’s northern districts – *Franches-Montagnes*, *Porrentruy*, and *Delémont* – wanted to establish a new canton. Its southern districts opted to remain with Berne.

What democracy can do

Hence, Jura was divided in two when the eponymous canton was born and became part of the Swiss Confederation in 1979 – a hard pill to swallow. Battle lines remained and became even more entrenched in people’s hearts and minds. Acts of vandalism and provocation followed, including the audacious theft of the legendary *Unspunnen Stone* in Interlaken. The stone, which weighed 83.5 kg, was traditionally thrown in competition at the *Unspunnen Festival*. But a lot of water has passed under the bridge since then, with the district of *Moutier* due to switch allegiance from Berne to Jura in 2026 – increasing Jura’s population



Anti-Berne protests by Jura’s separatists were loud and fierce. Pictured here: members of the separatist *Béliers* group on the streets of Berne in 1972, calling for an independent canton of Jura.

Photo: Keystone

by an extra 7,500. Maybe this will be the last piece in the Jura puzzle.

In an interview to mark 50 years since the 1974 plebiscite, Federal Councillor Elisabeth Baume-Schneider – who lives in the Jura village of *Les Breuleux* not far from *Le Noirmont* – said that Jura’s birth as a canton was a reminder of what democracy can do. “The right to freedom and self-determination is something that Jura and its people hold dear.”

Cycle through the remote *Franches-Montagnes* countryside in the direction of *Saignelégier* (against the headwind naturally) and you will notice that Baume-Schneider’s definition of a free and unfettered Jura extends further than just politics.

Actor *Shawne Fielding* and the *Unspunnen Stone* in 2001. Separatists stole, hid and defaced the stone in 1984. After its whereabouts remained unknown for many years, the object was delivered, randomly, to Fielding, the then wife of the former Swiss ambassador to Berlin. Photo: Keystone



Switzerland has a population density of 214 people per km². The canton of Jura has an average of only 88 inhabitants per km². Jura has very decent road connections, yet still more than enough space for people to live far enough from each other to tolerate differences of thought or deed.

Café du Soleil in Saignelégier village square is steeped in the spirit of nonconformism. In 1980, the year after Jura became a canton, a group of like-minded friends transformed this old venue into a cultural hub. Their aim as stated in the founding manifesto was to create a “space conducive to critical analysis and to freedom”, where people would “reclaim autonomy for themselves and for their region as a whole”.

Today, Café du Soleil has lost some of the edginess that set it apart in those early days. On the menu, you can order vegetarian spring roll followed by a 200-gram rib-eye steak. Cultural events consist of exhibitions and concerts. Nonetheless, places like Saignelégier epitomise how Jura’s rebellious image persists to this day.

A progressive constitution, way ahead of its time

Saignelégier’s camping site, situated not far from the stunning Etang de la Gruère lake reminiscent of the Scandinavian lake districts, is one of the few camping sites in Switzerland with no marked spaces or electrical access points. Or any booking system for that matter. There is enough space for everyone. “C’est ça la liberté,” say the site attendants.

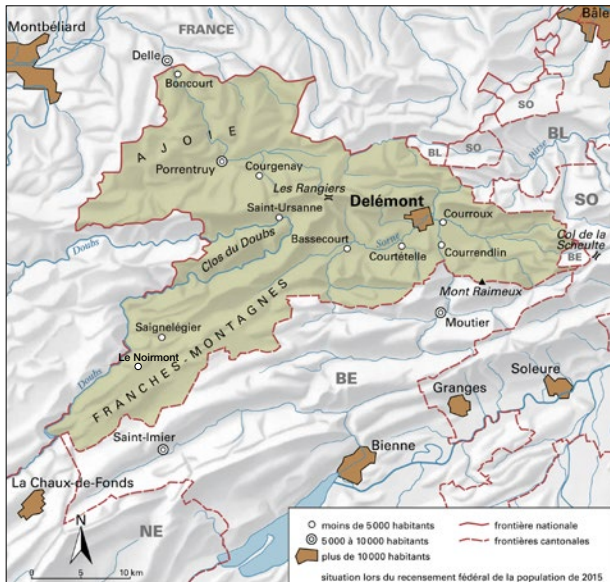
I ride a little further before reaching the ostensibly sleepy Franches-Montagnes village of Les Genevez. Local mayor Anael Lovis, aged 23, is the most exciting thing going for Les Genevez these days. But the small municipality made a name for itself decades ago when its residents opposed the



Many Swiss associate Jura with wetlands like the famous Etang de la Gruère lake pictured here. Photo: Keystone



Café du Soleil in Saignelégier is a cultural hub steeped in the spirit of nonconformism. Photo: Jürg Steiner



Jura in its current form. The canton will increase in size at the beginning of 2026, when Moutier – situated on the map between Delémont and Grenchen – switches allegiance from Berne to Jura.

construction of a nearby military base that had long been in the pipeline, viewing the proposed complex as a threat to wetlands like the Etang de la Gruère. “A very important episode in the Jura psyche,” says Baume-Schneider.

And very important in affirming Jura’s progressive credentials in German-speaking Switzerland. Jura’s ambitious 1979 constitution, which was way ahead of its time (and the rest of Switzerland), helped to consolidate the canton’s forward-looking reputation, enshrining the right to strike, the right to work, the right to housing, the principle of gender equality, and the establishment of an office for women’s affairs. Non-Swiss residents in Jura are also allowed to vote in cantonal elections and referendums.

The A16 motorway

The long ride down from the Franches-Montagnes highlands gives me time to take in the scenery. The weather-worn road has barely enough room to negotiate the



Members of the Béliers group wanted to block the entrance to Bern's city hall in 1971, but the police had other ideas.

Photo: Keystone



deep and narrow Pichoux Gorge. Warm air blows into my face, rising from the more densely populated, intensely farmed stretch of plain between Bassecourt and Delémont, where I discover a different type of Jura. One that is a little less bolshie and more business minded.

Ahead of me I see the A16, an 85-kilometre-long motorway that traverses the Jura, starting in Biel in the canton of Berne and ending in Boncourt on the French border. Also referred to as the 'Transjura', the A16 cost 6.6 billion Swiss francs to build not only because of Jura's complicated geology but also on account of the many bridges and tunnel portals aesthetically designed along the route by Ticino architect Flora Ruchat-Roncati. Construction began shortly after Jura's inauguration as a canton. It finished in 2017. The A16 was a federal project to connect the underdog border region with the vibrant economic hubs of the Central Plateau, or Mittelland.

There is no real statistical evidence to prove whether the Transjura now serves its original purpose. Switzerland's

The mood was fractious in November 1969, when young Jura separatists burned hundreds of copies of the controversial red "Civil Defence" booklet in front of the Federal Palace.

Photo: Keystone

population is booming, whereas Jura's is more or less stagnating. With higher-than-average unemployment, Jura contributes less to the Swiss economy than most cantons. The canton's finances are less than rosy. It makes you wonder whether the physical lifeline of the Transjura has actually encouraged a sort of brain drain.

Jura historian Clément Crevoisier would probably say it has. Crevoisier has been studying his canton for decades. Jura's linguistic and geographic isolation is a big problem, he says. Its population doesn't even feel much affinity with the rest of French-speaking Switzerland. Young people move away to university – often never to return.

But Crevoisier also believes that decades of separatist thinking has created a mental block that prevents Jura from realising its full potential. "Unfortunately, the ideological urge to view everything in black and white ignores Jura's multicultural roots."

More myth than reality?

Jura's former cantonal government minister Jean-François Roth also worries about the inertia that has beset his canton. "Jura has calmed down quite a bit," he said on the 50th anniversary of the historic 1974 vote. "I'm not convinced our canton still embodies the idea that people had when it was founded."

But is that idea more myth than reality nowadays, buffeted by the crosswinds of economic growth? I arrive in Jura's capital Delémont and leave my bike in a small, unassuming pedestrian precinct opposite the station.

Writer Camille Rebetez is based in Delémont. Until recently, he was working as the art mediator at the ambitious Théâtre du Jura. His parents helped to open Café du Soleil in Saignelégier. Rebetez co-authored a comic called "Les Indociles" (The Troublemakers), which was adapted last year into a series of the same name for Swiss television.

"Les Indociles" follows the exploits of three friends in Jura's Franches-Montagnes district who, from the 1970s onwards, unshackle themselves from societal constraints to create a community based on equality. Their idealism makes painful acquaintance with reality and the frailties of humanity. "My characters are at the mercy of liberal economics," Rebetez told the press when the last comic was published. "They must learn how to lose without losing hope. They are unable to save the world but keep fighting for their chance to do so."

Fifty years after the 1974 vote, the same could be said about Jura.

Susanne Wille



Susanne Wille will take on what is probably the most difficult job in Swiss broadcasting when she becomes director general of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) on 1 November – with responsibility for 7,000 staff around Switzerland. The public broadcaster comprises four regional companies: SRF for German-speaking, RTS for French-speaking, RSI for Italian-speaking and RTR for Romansh-speaking Switzerland. SRG SSR also includes the swissinfo website, which provides news and background reports from Switzerland in ten different languages for an international audience.

Funded by a licence fee, SRG SSR faces an uncertain future. The “CHF 200 is enough!” initiative is due to be put to voters in 2026, its right-wing supporters aiming to reduce the annual radio and television licence fee for private households from 335 to just 200 francs – and exempt companies from the levy entirely. Approval of the initiative could spell very frugal times ahead for SRG SSR, which hopes that Susanne Wille is the person to avert the worst and convince the electorate to vote no. Wille, who used to front television programmes and currently heads the SRG SSR cultural department, is a popular journalist best known for her work in German-speaking Switzerland. She said she wants a public broadcaster “that listens and belongs to everyone”. The 50-year-old has instant appeal and is considered favourably by those who want SRG SSR to remain a strong public broadcaster despite a drop in audience share. Yet the new director general has no option but to cut costs, given that the Federal Council wants to meet the SVP initiative halfway by reducing the SRG SSR licence fee to 300 francs. Wille will have some unpopular decisions to make.

THEODORA PETER

Political outcry over OASI miscalculation

The federal government admitted in August that it had miscalculated its financial projections for Switzerland’s old-age and survivors’ (OASI) state pension scheme, saying that an incorrect calculation formula at the Federal Social Insurance Office had caused it to get its sums wrong by 14 billion francs. It turns out that OASI is in better financial health than previously thought. The erroneous forecast also has political ramifications, especially because it was a key argument in the popular vote of 25 September 2022 on raising the retirement age for women. These overly pessimistic figures were even included in the material sent to voters ahead of the plebiscite, which eventually saw a narrow majority of 50.5 per cent approving an increase in the retirement age. The Swiss Green Party, in particular, is now calling for a rerun of the vote. Its president Lisa Mazzone has already said it will take the matter to Switzerland’s highest court, the Federal Supreme Court. The Swiss Social Democratic Party, meanwhile, immediately demanded that the voter-endorsed 13th OASI pension payment now be introduced ahead of schedule, from 2025 onwards, arguing that there is indeed money in reserve. Centre-right and right-wing politicians have also reacted strongly, their main message being that the botched calculations have eroded public confidence – precisely at a time when the federal government is actively warning of drastic cost-cutting measures ahead (see also page 9).

(MUL)

Paris Olympics – Switzerland wins eight medals and narrowly misses out on nine more

Chiara Leone (26) was the Swiss hero, taking home gold in the women’s 50-metre rifle three-position event. Julie Derron (triathlon) and Steve Guerdat (individual horse jumping) collected silver, while Swiss competitors also won five bronze medals: Zoé Claessens (women’s BMX racing); Audrey Gogniat (women’s 10m air rifle); Roman Mityukov (swimming, men’s 200m backstroke); Roman Rössli and Andrin Gulich (rowing, men’s pair); Tanja Hüberli and Nina Brunner (women’s beach volleyball). Swiss Olympic achieved its medal target, but satisfaction at this result is tempered slightly by the fact that Swiss athletes finished fourth in nine disciplines, narrowly missing out on the podium. Switzerland also finished further down the medal table than usual, in 48th position.

(MUL)

See “Swiss figures” on page 19 for details of a Swiss exploit of a different kind at the Olympics.

Billions at stake in the federal budget

The armed forces are to receive more funding. But Berne also wants to save money amid a looming budget deficit. The fight for federal money has begun.

SUSANNE WENGER

Finance Minister Karin Keller-Sutter (FDP) said at the beginning of the year that Switzerland's finances were "out of kilter". She has been issuing similar warnings ever since. Before the summer recess, Keller-Sutter presented a budget for 2025 that will save the government over two billion Swiss francs – thanks to a series of short-term measures that include across-the-board cuts applying to all government departments (including "Swiss Review", see page 33).

With tax receipts also expected to rise, the proposed budget – 85.7 billion francs in revenue, 86.5 billion francs in spending – only shows a small deficit. Yet the cost-cutting has only just begun, according to the finance minister. Government projections show a structural deficit of 2.5 billion francs from 2027 onwards. Structural deficit is that part of the deficit not related to the state of the economy. Nevertheless, Keller-Sutter says such a deficit would fly in the face of the voter-endorsed 'debt brake' that the Swiss government introduced in 2003.

Cut costs – but where?

The looming debt is down to what Keller-Sutter calls "a sharp increase in expenditure". The government needs to tighten its belt. But where can cuts be made? Two thirds of federal expenditure is bound by law, and influential lobbies in parliament are well versed in fending off cuts in the sectors they represent. Furthermore, politicians disagree on how stringent the debt brake should be. The centre-right and right-wing parties advocate rigid compliance, while the left believes there is scope for interpretation.

Switzerland's debt ratio – or national debt in relation to GDP – rose again during the pandemic. Yet in the 20 financially stable years that preceded Covid, debt was not only avoided but even paid off. Switzerland's debt ratio remains low by international standards. And while government spending may have increased, Keller-Sutter's critics point out that this is a price worth paying for social stability and good infrastructure.

Expected cuts in development aid

All this has been the subject of heated debate for months in Berne, with hasty manoeuvring and horse-trading in parliament. The implications are particularly significant with regard to international security and cooperation. With the war in Ukraine already making the world a riskier place, a majority in parliament want the government to increase the defence budget by the planned four billion by 2030, irrespective of the finance minister's cost-cutting

targets. The Council of States would like half of this quicker-than-planned increase in expenditure to be offset by development aid – the consensus being that money for development aid has increased in recent years, and not all aid projects have been effective.

As if taking money from the poorest of the poor and giving it to the armed forces were not enough: the Federal Council intends to siphon off development aid to fund part of its aid budget for Ukraine over the next four years. The



Finance Minister Karin Keller-Sutter has warned of cost-cutting ahead, saying that Switzerland's finances are "out of kilter".
Photo: Keystone

decision taken by the Council of States in June attracted widespread criticism – not only from development agencies and left-wing politicians, but from other quarters including the Swiss Foreign Policy Society and the State Secretary for Economic Affairs. Objectors argue that development cooperation should also be an integral part of a farsighted security policy, and that Switzerland's global solidarity is at stake.

Everything to play for

The National Council was due to vote on the defence budget in its autumn session this September (after the editorial deadline of this edition of "Swiss Review"), with an external group of experts commissioned by the Federal Council also primed to deliver proposals on getting the public finances in order. Since spring, the group has been conducting a review of all areas of public spending including subsidies. A series of round-table talks will follow, with key decisions to be made during parliament's winter session in December. There is everything to play for.

This article reflects the situation at the time of our editorial deadline on 20 August 2024.



What our readers say about "Swiss Review" on its 50th anniversary

The first-ever edition of "Swiss Review" arrived in people's letter boxes 50 years ago. Half a century later, the Swiss Abroad have written to us in droves to tell us about their own unique relationship with the magazine.

No birthday cake. No bubbly. When a magazine like ours celebrates its anniversary, feedback from our readers – positive and negative – is the best gift we can receive. And the pleasure is double at the moment. Firstly, we have received thousands of responses to our readership survey. We will evaluate these submissions in the weeks to come. Secondly, many readers from around the globe have written in to tell us about their feelings and attachment towards "Swiss Review". We have included a small selection of these messages in this edition. Visit revue.link/testimonials to read more.

What is particularly gratifying is how many people regard "Swiss Review" as we also like to regard it ourselves: not only as a source of information, but also as both an emotional and – in the case of the print edition – tangible, tactile link between the "over here" and "over there" that have shaped the lives of Swiss Abroad around the world.

The first "Swiss Review" was published in 1974. What changes has it gone through since then? Visit revue.link/jubilee50 to read about the magazine's evolution over the years.

To mark our 50th birthday, all editions of "Swiss Review" have been converted into digital format in all the relevant publication languages, allowing readers to browse back in time. This archive collection has been made possible by the Swiss National Library in cooperation with E-Periodica, the ETH Library's platform for digitised Swiss journals: www.revue.link/review50

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



"I am a Swiss from Lausanne in Vaud, and also a Canadian from Blainville in Quebec; two nationalities with one origin – Switzerland. From my home in Quebec, the 'Swiss Review' provides a constant connection to the country close to my heart. It is like Cenovis or Thomy mustard: I can't live without it!"

PHILIPPE MAGNENAT, QUEBEC, CANADA



"The 'Swiss Review' is one of my active interfaces with Swiss who live abroad. Maintaining this link is important to ensure that Swiss citizens around the globe are never 'out of sight, out of mind'. Your magazine deserves our thanks."

LAURENT WEHRLI, NATIONAL COUNCILLOR, GLION, CANTON OF VAUD, SWITZERLAND



"For a long time, the magazine was my only connection to Switzerland. I am currently studying political science, so articles on Switzerland's domestic issues interest me in particular these days. But 'Swiss Review' not only provides information, it also brings people together. I took part in a youth camp in 2016 – an experience that changed my life and made me appreciate my family roots even more."

ANA SCHNEEBELI, 19 YEARS OLD, ARGENTINA



"I was born elsewhere, but I am legally and emotionally Swiss. I devour the 'Swiss Review' in the same way that I used to eat Ragusa chocolate. Reading it helps me span an imaginary bridge between my time in Switzerland and the here and now. I always have the magazine on my desk among my books and paintbrushes. And after I have read it, I use it as a tabletop protector – to absorb even more colour and emotion along the way. The Swiss Review has entered the fabric of my life."

IOANA LAZAROIU, FRÉJUS-SAINT RAPHAËL, FRANCE



“My journey with the ‘Swiss Review’ began during my preschool days. I have vivid memories of poring over the printed version, captivated by the vibrant and creative pictures, before I could even read.

This nostalgic experience creates a deep connection for us as readers. Each edition brings a wealth of knowledge and insights. The ‘Swiss Review’ remains an essential link to our Swiss heritage, providing a sense of continuity and community that is invaluable to Swiss Abroad around the world.”

FRANCOIS SCHWALB, MOOKETSI, SOUTH AFRICA



“I’ve been an avid reader of the ‘Swiss Review’ for as long as I can remember. Ever since I settled in the USA 33 years ago, this publication has been a constant in my mailbox. What keeps me turning its pages are the captivating articles about Switzerland’s rich cultural and political landscape. But what I enjoy the most is reading about the various Swiss clubs across North America. These glimpses into their vibrant activities and celebrations of Swiss culture inspire me. It’s nice to see how actively Swiss people abroad stay connected to their heritage, making the ‘Swiss Review’ a cherished link to our homeland.”

HEDWIG VICKI BURKHARD, FORT MYERS, USA



“The ‘Swiss Review’ has always given me a connection to a part of my roots. This magazine from a faraway country has been part of our lives here ever since I can remember, containing articles and photos that tell not only of Switzerland’s social and economic well-being, but of its unparalleled beauty too. It serves as the perfect window to picture-perfect Switzerland.”

MICAELA BERTUCHE, ARGENTINA



“The ‘Swiss Review’ is excellent in every way. Dear editors, please know that I rate your magazine a strong 20+ out of 20! Regards to you and to our beautiful country.”

ETIENNE MAFFEI, FRANCE



I’ve been a loyal reader of the ‘Swiss Review’ for quite some time now, and I must say, it’s been a delightful journey. As someone who appreciates a good read, the ‘Swiss Review’ has never disappointed me. It’s a carefully curated window into the Swiss way of life, culture, and current affairs. It’s like having a little piece of Switzerland delivered right to my doorstep, without the need to climb the Alps or yodel for it. Each issue [makes] me feel more connected to my heritage and the wider Swiss community. One of the things I love most about the ‘Swiss Review’ is its ability to strike the perfect balance between serious journalism and light-hearted storytelling.”

RUTH KAMIENECKI-BRASCHLER AND FAMILY, USA

Alain Berset puts Switzerland on the European stage

Alain Berset is the first Swiss to become secretary general of the Council of Europe, an institution that he wishes to strengthen. Berset's appointment is also likely to enhance his home country's profile across Europe.

EVELINE RUTZ

In the heart of Europe yet somehow detached from it all – Switzerland is something of an anomaly. When European heads of government meet, the Swiss are usually absent. Surveys consistently show that the majority of the Swiss population are sceptical towards the European Union (EU). Political efforts to align more closely with the EU are not generally well received, outweighed by fears that rapprochement will endanger sovereignty and prosperity. The majority seem to be happy for Switzerland to play a bit part in European politics.

lives in a beautiful Strasbourg mansion. With over 1,800 staff and an annual budget of some 625 million Swiss francs, Berset is responsible for strategic planning and for representing the Council of Europe as an organisation. Predecessor Marija Pejcinovic Buric of Croatia was a relatively cautious general secretary, but Berset looks set to lead from the front and drive the agenda. He says he wants to bolster the organisation, which aims to protect human rights and is also home to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Berset's appointment is also likely to im-

someone at the top of a leading organisation," she says. Switzerland is not an EU member, so this position of authority means something. In her opinion, Alain Berset has everything it takes to give the Council of Europe greater credibility.

This interpretation is widely shared. Berne's mediating role has been strengthened, says SVP politician Alfred Heer, who heads the Swiss delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and has noticed how other members now afford him and his colleagues greater respect. "It always helps when you have a compatriot in the top job." But Heer is keen to emphasise that the secretary general has a duty to serve the Council of Europe as a whole – that means all 46 member states. He thinks that Berset coming from a non-EU country is an advantage. "With Alain Berset at the helm, I sincerely hope the Council of Europe can again play a more active role in resolving conflicts."



During a visit to Switzerland in September 2023, the secretary general of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejcinovic Buric, met the then President of the Swiss Confederation Alain Berset – who is now her successor. Photo: Keystone

It was remarkable, therefore, to see political parties unanimously pushing earlier this year for former Federal Councillor Alain Berset (SP) to become secretary general of the Council of Europe. Politicians from left to right agreed that filling this important position constituted a rare opportunity for Switzerland. Their unity paid off: Berset, who left the Federal Council at the end of 2023, started his new job on 18 September 2024. The 52-year-old now

prove Switzerland's profile across Europe. Not by bringing Swiss interests to the table, but by representing a nation that mediates in conflicts and is proud of its tradition of 'good offices'.

Switzerland's role in Europe

Helen Keller, who is a law professor and former judge at the ECtHR, believes that Switzerland will become less isolated in Europe. "We now have

Berset's priority: Ukraine

Berset has already stressed more than once that he wants to prioritise support for Ukraine. "Reparations need to be paid for the damage inflicted on Ukraine," he says. To calculate future reparation payments, the Council of Europe wishes to document the impact of the Russian invasion. Berset also wants to strengthen

Selfie time – Alain Berset meets four sumo wrestlers during a state visit to Japan in 2018. Photo: Peter Klaunzer, Keystone





the organisation as a whole. He intends to push back against media manipulation and disinformation, which has taken on a new dimension through AI. After being elected, he talked of the big responsibility he was taking on, noting that the Council of Europe was committed to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. “These are the values that make our continent stable, and we must fight for them every day.”

No stranger to the limelight

Charismatic, eloquent and self-assured, Berset is very much at ease on the international stage. A former junior 800-metres champion, the French-speaking Swiss from Fribourg was an accomplished athlete when he was younger. Single-mindedness on the running track seems to have rubbed off on his political career. Berset was elected to the Council of States in 2003, becoming the youngest member of the smaller chamber at 31. He was voted onto the Federal Council in 2011.

As head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, Berset was notably responsible for health and social policy. He was the president of the Swiss Confederation in 2018 and 2023, representing the federal government at the highest level – and enjoying the limelight that this afforded him. From welcoming French President Emmanuel Macron to Berne on a state visit, to rubbing shoulders with Donald Trump and Olaf Scholz, Berset has earned a reputation as ‘Switzerland’s



The future of Ukraine is the main priority, said Berset even before being elected as general secretary.
Photo: Keystone

Rarely seen outside without his Borsalino – the Alain Berset that Switzerland remembers well. The hat became Berset’s trademark particularly during the Covid pandemic.
Photo: Keystone

statesman’. This helped him in the race to become the next secretary general. His rivals for the post, Indrek Saar (Estonia) and Didier Reynders (Belgium), lacked such experience.

Berset also knows about crises, having been the face of the government’s Covid response from the outset as health minister. He, and the rest of the Federal Council, were widely praised for Covid restrictions that were relatively measured compared to those of other countries. But he also came in for fierce criticism from those who were against rules like social distancing and the wearing of face coverings.

Berset made headlines in government when an alleged former lover reportedly tried to blackmail him. And in summer 2022, he was intercepted by two military aircraft after flying his rented Cessna 182 into restricted French airspace. The media had a field day, but the SP politician batted off awkward questions with aplomb. His nonchalance, as critics called it, may have rubbed some people the wrong way, yet Berset’s approval ratings were largely unaffected. During his last year in office, he was still viewed by the public as the most influential member of the Federal Council.

It appears that the Council of Europe was also looking for someone like Berset. You should never forget where you come from, Berset told the “*Tages-Anzeiger*”, noting pointedly that he was a federal councillor from Fribourg who was joining the Council of Europe as a Swiss national. Incidentally, Berset rejects criticism of the ECtHR for its verdict on the ‘climate seniors’ case (see “*Swiss Review*” 4/2024). Switzerland ratified the European Convention on Human Rights and is obliged to implement rulings by the Strasbourg judges, he said. “We lie in the heart of Europe and share Europe’s values.”

Harmful expansion or efficient highways? Switzerland's motorway debate

Switzerland wants to invest 5.3 billion francs in motorway expansion aimed at cutting traffic congestion. Opponents argue this will encourage even more traffic onto the roads. On 24 November, voters will decide whether to approve the contentious plan.

THEODORA PETER

Switzerland has been criss-crossed by motorways from east to west and from north to south for the last 60 years. The A1 at Grauholz near Berne is one of the oldest sections of Swiss motorway. Around 16,000 vehicles a day used to pass over this stretch of tarmac in the 1970s. This has since increased to a whopping 100,000, meaning congestion at rush hours. The section was widened to six lanes in the 1990s. Now the federal government would like to extend it to eight lanes – in one of six road projects to be funded by a national credit of 5.3 billion Swiss francs. Other projects include motorway expansion near Lake Geneva, a new road tunnel under the Rhine in Basel, and additional tunnels near St. Gallen and Schaffhausen.

A 40-strong alliance of environmental organisations and political parties has called the projects excessive. The group has managed to initiate a referendum opposing the parliament-approved funding, which is why the matter will now be put to voters on 24 November 2024. “The notion that you can prevent traffic congestion by building roads is a relic from the last century,” says the Green na-

tional councillor for the canton of St. Gallen, Franziska Ryser, who co-chairs umverkehR, a group campaigning for a rethink on motorised travel. Instead of investing in “fossil-fuel mega projects”, public money would be better spent on shifting traffic from roads onto railways, she adds.

A case of chicken or egg

Opponents of the expansion view motorways as climate killers. Not only is road traffic responsible for around a third of carbon emissions, but the vast amounts of concrete and steel needed for big projects like these generate harmful greenhouse gases too, they say. Then you have noise pollution and the loss of valuable green space. The Bernese Farmers' Union has also spoken out against the Grauholz expansion, which it says will destroy several hectares of agricultural land.

The core message of the No campaign is that more and wider roads can only bring brief respite. By expanding motorway capacity, you are creating the wrong incentives and, therefore, causing more congestion in the long term. The question of whether more roads actually lead to

more traffic is difficult to answer, say experts. For Carsten Hagedorn, who is a professor in traffic planning at the Eastern Switzerland University of Applied Sciences, it is a classic case of the chicken or the egg. “What came first, the traffic or the roads?” Ultimately, we build roads where there is a demand for these roads, Hagedorn told Radio SRF. And new roads shorten the time we spend travelling. “Travel times are an important factor in deciding whether to take the car or a different mode of transport. Road expansion can therefore make the car option much more attractive.”

Congestion is costly

For supporters of the Yes campaign, the expansion is solely about relieving congestion. Traffic infrastructure

The six-lane Grauholz section of the A1 motorway is to be widened to eight lanes. This expansion will encroach on the agricultural land that you can see in the background.

Photo: Keystone

The Grauholz section of the A1, Switzerland's oldest stretch of motorway, was opened on 10 May 1962. Crowds braved the rain to greet the first motorists. No one had installed crash barriers.

Archive photo: Keystone



built over 60 years ago no longer meets the current needs of people and businesses, says Thurgau SVP National Councillor and businesswoman Diana Gutjahr. “Workers stuck in traffic jams are unable to

“The notion that you can prevent traffic congestion by building roads is a relic from the last century.”

FRANZISKA RYSER, NATIONAL COUNCILLOR FOR THE GREENS (CANTON OF ST. GALLEN), FROM THE NO CAMPAIGN

work.” And they can’t just commute by train instead, she argues. Some 48,800 hours of congestion were recorded across Switzerland’s national road network in 2023, 22 per cent more than in the previous year. According to Gutjahr, traffic congestion generates costs of around 1.2 billion

francs a year. When goods and services take longer to get from A to B, they become more expensive.

Another argument put forward by the Yes campaign is that the projects will provide relief to residential areas, with free-flowing traffic on Switzerland’s main arteries helping to reduce traffic on alternative routes. If commuters have fewer traffic jams to worry about, they will be less inclined to make detours onto local roads or neighbourhoods. And this will improve quality of life for people in towns and cities.

Three other proposals will be put to the electorate in November (see box). For Swiss Abroad who own and let property in Switzerland, votes on two bills affecting landlord/tenant rights are of particular significance.

Yes campaign:
www.zusammen-vorwaertskommen.ch
No campaign:
www.autobahnwahn.ch



Overview of all the votes on 24 November 2024

Credit to increase motorway capacity

In 2023, parliament endorsed a formal step to increase national motorway capacity: a credit of 5.3 billion francs to fund six different projects that will see the construction of additional lanes as well as new tunnels on heavily frequented sections of motorway. A 40-strong alliance of organisations and parties opposes the projects, calling them harmful, expensive and pointless. Centre-right and right-wing politicians who support the bill say that the projects are solely about relieving congestion (see main article).

Landlord/tenant rights I: Stricter rules on subletting

Tenants who wish to sublet an apartment or room will in future require written consent from the owner – and will also have to provide more information on the intended subletting. Verbal consent has been sufficient until now. Tenants who break the rules could have their rental agreements terminated. The Swiss Tenants’ Association and the left-green parties oppose the changes.

Landlord/tenant rights II: Termination for personal use made easier

Parliament has approved a bill that would make it easier for landlords to terminate tenancies if they want to set aside their property for personal use. Until now, landlords have had to prove that they need their property “urgently” for personal use or for use by close relatives in order to terminate an existing rental agreement. The left-wing parties call the bill a “brazen attack by the landlord lobby” on tenants’ rights, while centre-right and right-wing politicians think the changes are fair.

Standardised health insurance funding model

Every area of the healthcare sector – outpatients, inpatients, and care – is currently subject to different funding regimes. By introducing a standardised funding model, parliament hopes to incentivise cost savings, e.g. more outpatient treatment instead of expensive hospital stays. Potential annual savings would total 440 million francs per annum. Switzerland’s public services union (VPOD/SSP) opposes the reform, saying it will lead to a decline in healthcare working conditions and in the quality of care provided.

A bell called Susanne

The Grosse Glocke in the Bernese Minster is a big church bell. Also referred to as “Susanne”, it weighs almost ten tonnes and has a beautiful singing voice. There is no shortage of bells in Switzerland, but Susanne is the largest of them all.

DÖLF BARBEN

Look at a map of Switzerland through squinted eyes – don't you think it looks a little bit like a hotel reception bell? The canton of Schaffhausen is where you press at the top for the bell to sound.

Maybe this was meant to be, given that Switzerland is well known for its bells. You can hear them everywhere. There are thousands of bells in the towers of cathedrals, churches and chapels around the country. Even more hang around the necks of cows, sheep and goats.

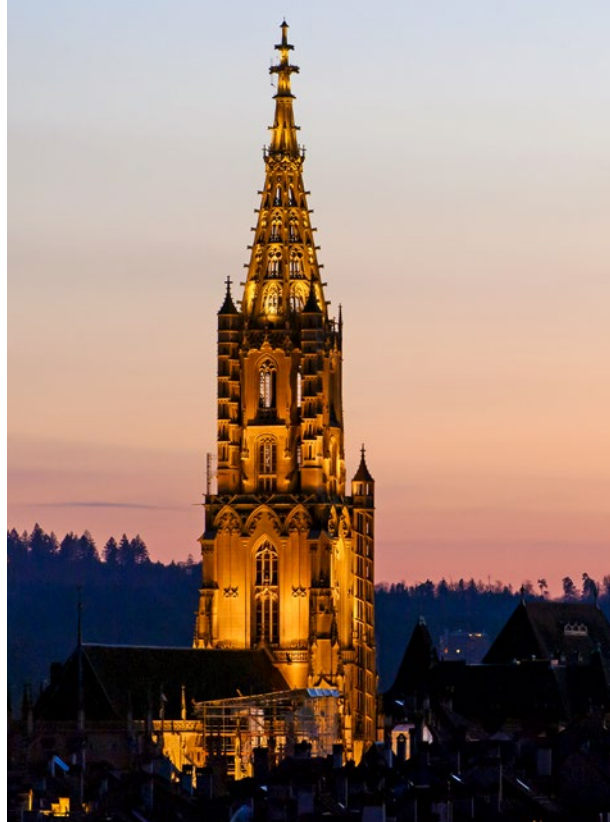
And if that's not enough, people carry bells around with them too. Like the Trychler groups with their ear-splitting processions, not to mention strident political views of late. Think, too, of the well-known children's picture book "A Bell for Ursli" by Selina Chönz and Alois Carigiet – the story of a boy who wants to ring the biggest bell at Chalandamarz, the Grisons spring ritual to chase out the evil spirits of winter.

It's all in the acoustics

Bells reign supreme. But what makes them so special? Why don't churches hang up plates of metal to hit instead? Matthias Walter knows why. The 46-year-old architectural historian from Berne is one of Switzerland's most sought-after experts on bells.

"Knock on the side of a metal oil tank with a hammer," he says. "All you will hear is a boom and a clang. That's the difference." Walter is standing in the lower bell tower of the Bernese Minster – the perfect place to talk about bells.

Above him hangs Switzerland's biggest bell. Called the Grosse Glocke but also referred to affectionately as "Susanne", it is 413 years old, weighs almost ten tonnes, and is tuned to E. Walter hits the bell with the palm



Berne has never had a bishop, so the Minster and its bells had to look very important instead. Photos (left and above): Keystone

of his hand. You hear the impact, but then a very faint, beautiful sound. "You won't get that with a plate of metal."

Nor with a traditional rounded cowbell forged from brass. "It makes a sound, but you wouldn't call it music as such." Church bells, on the other hand, are cast. They are usually made of bronze, which is a mixture of copper and tin. "Bells can sing."

Thickness matters

People have been making bells since time immemorial, but it was only in the Middle Ages that bells took on their classical form, i.e. thicker at the bottom, which, according to Walter, is the secret behind getting a good clear strike note.

A bell will actually produce around 30 additional notes, some of which are barely audible. First you get the high pitches imparting various dissonances, which then create the characteristic chime. "Despite the discord, bells can sound beautiful," says Walter. The Grosse Glocke is a fine example. It has quite a velvety timbre and no real din as such. "It sounds noble and calm."

Susanne and five other bells at the Bernese Minster ring for every Sunday service. On feast days, the Grosse Glocke rings on its own. It never sounds like it's being struck, en-

thus Walter. "It's a continuous incantation."

The bells ring in unison once a year

The Bernese Minster has seven bells in total – three in the lower bell tower, four in the upper bell tower. They can be rung in many different combinations. Only once a year do they all ring at the same time: before service on the first Sunday of Advent.

What applies to individual bells also applies to the sound of the bells in unison. There will be imperfections. The bellmakers knew there were a few variables – such as diameter or thickness – that affect the pitch, i.e. how high or low the sound is. It is the same principle with wine glasses, says Walter. "They make a deeper sound the bigger and thinner they are."

But bells often didn't come out precisely the way the bellmakers wanted, he explains. Some churches



Higher, farther, faster, more beautiful? In search of somewhat unconventional Swiss records

This edition: Listening to Switzerland's biggest church bell

The Bernese Minster bells

The different bells in this recorded peal at the Bernese Minster come in one after the other at the following times (in seconds):

Silberglocke	0'
Betglocke	4'
Armsünderglocke	9'
Predigtglocke	12'
Mittagsglocke	17'
Grosse Glocke / Susanne	22'

You have to listen carefully to pick out the Grosse Glocke in this recording. Its bass remains in the background and fits seamlessly into the peal as a whole – belying the size of the actual bell.



www.revue.link/susanne

have bells that don't go well together. "And yet the sound can still be pleasant."

The seven bells of the Bernese Minster are "pretty well harmonised", according to Walter. Rung together, they produce "one of the most majestic and historically significant peals in all of Europe". The Grosse Glocke, for its part, is "a true gem of world renown".

My bell is bigger than your bell

Wouldn't every church dignitary have wanted a bigger bell in their tower, just to say that they had the largest? Walter laughs and nods. Berne has never had a bishop, so the Minster and its wonderful bells were an "impressive way to compensate".

Technically speaking, casting even bigger bells would not be a problem – bigger bells have indeed been made. "But it really wouldn't make any sense," he says. Giant bells also produce high tones, while the really low notes are very hard for humans to pick up. "It just results in a cacophony."

Dancing with Susanne

During our conversation, it occurs to me that Walter has only referred to the big bell as Grosse Glocke, not "Susanne". He says the latter name only came into use a few decades ago. Apparently, a bell-ringer once said that working the Grosse Glocke was about as hard as leading his wife Susanne in a dance. The name eventually stuck.

Getting Susanne to swing from side to side was indeed far from easy back in the day. Eight ringers were needed. You can still make out the positions in which they stood in the bell tower to pull on the ropes. Since 1944, the bells in the Bernese Minster have been rung by an electrical mechanism.

Walter has an answer to every question. He explains how sturdy wooden beams help to neutralise the



The bell striker dictates how the bell sounds – and how loud the bell is. Specially designed bell strikers are used these days to reduce the volume.

Photo: Keystone



"Bells can sing," says Matthias Walter.

Photo provided

tremendous force exerted by the swinging of the bells, diverting it downwards. A bell swinging in synch with the natural swaying of the tower is more dangerous, he says. "The swaying can get worse. Like when people walk over a bridge in lockstep." Ironically, the second-smallest bell at the Minster is "the most dangerous of them all".

Parishes experiencing problems with one or all of their church bells often come to Walter for advice. At the Minster, Walter suggested over 20 years ago that the Armsünderglocke (or poor sinners' bell) be rung again as a solitary bell. It was an awkward subject to broach, because the Armsünderglocke used to be the Hengersglocke (or executioner's bell), which was sounded 65 times between 1735 and 1861 to herald hangings. The Armsünderglocke now rings every evening.

Taming the bells

Walter is also the man to call when neighbours complain about the 'noisy' bells. He has developed bell strikers that don't have to swing as much because they are extended on both sides in the two directions they move. This more or less halves the volume. The specially designed bell strikers have another effect, and a quite remarkable one at that: shrill-sounding bells suddenly begin to sing like Susanne at the Bernese Minster. Not only is Matthias Walter a bell expert, he is a bell tamer.



Interlaken, Schlosskirche

Photo: iStockphoto

The sound of Swiss church bells

Church bells ring in the following Sunday every Saturday evening at 5.20 p.m. on Swiss radio (SRF). The "Glocken der Heimat" is an institution. However, the collection of some 300 different peals has not been expanded for a good few years. Bell expert Walter, who contributed many of the recordings, says people still listen to the radio programme. However, a lot of peals can now be found on other platforms like YouTube.

The recordings of 300 or so selected peals are available on the SRF website, as is information about the history and set-up of the bells used in each peal.

www.revue.link/bimbam



Swiss National (Holi)day

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This year's Swiss National Day on 1 August was a public holiday. But it has only been a holiday for the last 30 years. In 1994, the far-right Nationale Aktion party had its never-to-be-repeated 15 minutes of fame when it launched a referendum to make 1 August a nationwide day off work. Almost 84 per cent of voters approved the proposal – no other popular initiative has ever garnered as much support.



Photo: iStockphoto

8.11.1307

But they took the Rütli Oath on 1 August, didn't they? No, they didn't. According to historian Aegidius Tschudi (1505–72), the oath was taken on 8 November 1307. This is why 1307, not 1291, is the year engraved on the plinth of the William Tell monument in Altdorf.

1899

Maybe you're thinking: it doesn't matter whether 1 August is a holiday or not, the main thing is that we celebrate Switzerland's birthday. Well, 1 August isn't even Switzerland's birthday. It was in 1891 that a “federal celebration” first took place on this date. Not until 1899 did the Federal Council specify that church bells be rung on the evening of 1 August. The day was to be marked “simply and gracefully”.

6,400 m²

The Federal Council may have advised people to celebrate “simply and gracefully” back in the day, but now there are more ambitious ways to mark the occasion. The world's largest Swiss flag – measuring 6,400 square metres and weighing 700 kilograms – was again unfurled on the north face of the Säntis mountain this year. Around 20 workers abseiled down the cliff face, taking

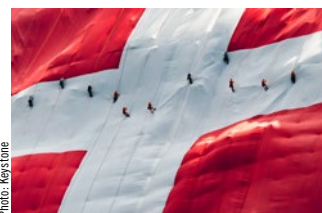


Photo: Keystone

three hours to unfold the flag.

2



Plenty of smaller Swiss flags were waved at this year's Paris Olympics (see News, page 8). From 1912 to 1948, Olympic medals were also awarded in literature and the arts. Swiss competitor Alex Walter Diggelmann pulled off the unusual feat of becoming the only Olympian to date who has won two medals in the same discipline at the same Games. In 1948, Diggelmann won both silver and bronze for two different entries in the “Painting, Applied Arts” category. Diggelmann was a prolific artist who would have had enough works in his portfolio to have won all three medals that year. www.revue.link/diggelmann

The journalist who explores Switzerland on foot

Thomas Widmer has been hiking around Switzerland on a weekly basis for many years, writing accounts of his walks that are as entertaining as they are detailed. His adventures make him happy – as they do millions of other people around the country.

SUSANNE WENGER

Leaf through a Swiss hiking guide and you will probably expect the book to focus on the famous mountain regions. Thomas Widmer, on the other hand, likes to recommend less well-known routes. Hägendorf in the canton of Solothurn, one of the insider tips in his new book, is an unassuming village at the southern foot of the Jura mountains. Widmer stumbled upon an area on the slopes above Hägendorf called Amerikanerblätz, a name that piqued his interest.

“Blätz” in Swiss German dialect means a piece of land. The municipality cleared this spot of trees in 1854, using the sale of the wood to cover the cost of paying for 128 villagers to emigrate to America. These were poor people, and Hägendorf wanted to get rid of them. A plaque marks where the villagers are said to have begun their long journey. “Every part of our countryside has its own stories and memories,” says Widmer.

The most popular national pastime

According to German news magazine “Der Spiegel”, Widmer, 62, from the canton of Appenzell, is Switzerland’s very own hiking guru. Widmer has a horde of followers who read his daily blog posts. He has also spent the past 20 years writing a popular column, which now appears in the magazine “Schweizer Familie”, the publication at which he works. Widmer uses the column to describe his weekly or twice-weekly walks, rain or shine.

The same friends accompany Widmer on his Saturday hikes. “Walking with others means sharing the enjoyment and getting more out of it,” he says. Many in Switzerland have the same passion. Something that broader sections of the population only really took up in the second half of the 19th century is now the most popular national pastime. According to the Federal Office of Sport, almost 60 per cent of people who live in Switzerland, or around four million, hike regularly.

Enshrined in the constitution

There has been a hiking boom in the last ten years, with a more diverse range of people taking up walking. More young people, more women, and more expats. According to a survey, people hike because of the health benefits and the enjoyment of being out in nature rather than the pursuit of sporting achievement. Switzerland is a hiker’s dream, with some 65,000 kilometres of signposted walking trails. This network has been protected in the consti-

tution for over 40 years. No other country has safeguarded its hiking routes in this way. In 2023, hiking was also added to Switzerland’s national inventory of living cultural heritage.

Widmer thinks these developments are the reason why people like to read his publications. “Anything on the subject of hiking has a ready-made audience, provided you manage not to write complete drivel.” A self-effacing assessment, to put it mildly. Widmer writes beautifully, cheerfully and cleverly, sharing lots of information. He visits all corners of Switzerland and is always able to dig up something new and interesting, taking the reader with him on every adventure.

For pleasure, not pain

Peculiar names like Amerikanerblätz are not the only things that inspire him. Antiquarian books do too. Or he will travel by train, then on the spur of the moment decide to walk to one of the destinations shown on the ubiquitous yellow hiking trail signpost that you see at every station. The “Basler Zeitung” has playfully referred to Widmer as Humboldt, a prominent explorer of the Romantic period.

For his part, Widmer sees himself as someone who walks essentially for pleasure. “The era of deadly serious, elbows out, is over.” Not that Widmer is afraid of hard walking. He can go for hours, maybe with the odd scrape



“A hike is like a psychodrama,” says Thomas Widmer. The sign next to him says “Cross the bridge at your own risk”.

Photo provided





here or there. “A hike is like a psychodrama,” he says. But for him, walking for pleasure also means “visiting an outdoor installation or lingering at a beautiful church”. Stopping by at the local inn is also part of the experience, not least because he wants to support the people who work there.

Hiking as therapy

Widmer got into hiking while reading Islamic studies in Berne, where he missed the rural scenery of his home patch. He now sees hiking as a sort of therapy to cope with the stresses and strains of modern life. On foot, time moves at a different pace. “I breathe better and my senses are heightened with every hour. I smell the flowers and the trees. Or a beautiful butterfly or deer will catch my eye.” In his opinion, the best hikes are the ones when he returns home extremely tired but happy.

He believes that escapism is the reason why more and more people like to hike. “Tranquillity and space have become rare luxuries in our densely populated country.” However, the hiking boom has now brought Switzerland’s oft-discussed problem of overcrowding to the fore on hiking routes also used by a growing contingent of mountain bikers. Public transport connections in the Alps are excellent these days, attracting the throngs. BMX trails, bouncy castles and loud music greet visitors at the top of mountains.

Escaping the hordes

Widmer takes a pragmatic view. Anyone who has used a mountain railway or eaten at a mountaintop restaurant should accept a bit of responsibility and not complain too loudly, he says. Widmer actually finds “the stark difference between highly commercialised tourist areas on the

one hand and secluded areas on the other” quite practical. That’s the thing with tourism: you can escape the hordes by not following the herd.

A “simple detour off the beaten track” is often all it takes to find quiet, he adds. Like going up a popular mountain from the ‘other’ side. Or staying close to home. “Head to wine country north of where I live on a misty New Year’s Day, and you won’t meet a single soul.” Widmer resides in Zollikerberg near Zurich.

Beauty and reality

On his walks around Switzerland, Widmer sees a country of great beauty. But he also recognises the looming reality of urban expansion or the threat to mountain villages. He mentions the recent storm event in Val Bavona, which branches off the Maggia Valley and is populated only in summer. Earlier inhabitants of Val Bavona made the inhospitable terrain their ally by topping boulders with soil to create extra arable space called “hanging meadows”. “I find human activities like these moving.”

On a positive note, he mentions how the farmers have started selling their produce directly. He calls buying local produce at farm shops, bee honey or ice cream for example, “one of the biggest joys of hiking”. The same applies to traditional Alpine farms. “I can buy the finest cheese at Alp Siez to take home with me from the St Gallen Alps. It’s a taste of where I’ve been. Isn’t that great?” Widmer wants to continue hiking for as long as he is able. He has a growing list of walks to do. “I already know I won’t manage all of them in my lifetime. Sad but true.”

Widmer’s hiking tips for the “Fifth Switzerland”:
www.revue.link/wanderer
Blog: widmerwandertweiter.blogspot.com

Hikers on Bütschel-egg mountain (canton of Berne), with the Mönch and Jungfrau in the background. “Walking with others means sharing the enjoyment and getting more out of it,” says Widmer. Photo: Keystone



THOMAS WIDMER
“Neue Schweizer Wunder. Ausflüge zu kuriosen und staunenswerten Dingen”, Echtzeit Verlag 2024. 232 pages in German, CHF 28.00

In the future, millions of cars will combine their batteries

Car batteries, connected to a single network, can create power grids. This will enable solar energy to power electric cars. Mobility, the Swiss car-sharing company, has carried out a full-scale test of the technology.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

The Swiss love their cars, but the fact is that the country's approximately 4.8 million passenger cars spend most of their time immobile. They are parked for up to 23 hours a day, with their battery cut off from the world. In the future, cars – which will soon all be electric – will be interconnected via intelligent electrical networks. They will form storage facilities, as when water is stored in a dam.

“Thanks to bidirectional charging which allows cars to either send or receive energy, Switzerland has a massive power reserve at its disposal,” says Volker Fröse, a consultant cited by car-sharing specialists Mobility. In the evening, at dinner-time – when demand for electricity peaks – computers will tell the connected batteries to supply current to the grid. During the day, solar panels will feed power into the cars, treating them like mobile batteries. The entire

system will be an example of the vehicle-to-grid (V2G) principle: a network of bidirectional batteries that can receive, store and supply electricity within a local or global network.

Recharge your battery overnight

“The average car battery can hold 60 kilowatt-hours (kWh), whereas a stationary battery in a house equipped with solar panels holds only 6 kWh. Many people have solar panels but no battery for them. The benefits of using your car as an electrical battery are therefore obvious,” explains Valais engineer Arnaud Zufferey, a graduate of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (EPFL). A 7 kW charging station takes only one hour to charge ten percent of a battery. “This allows you a lot of flexibility when topping up your battery: you can do it at lunchtime, when

solar energy production is at its peak, or overnight, when charges are low,” he says. So, when will Switzerland, with its love of cars and solar panels, usher in this revolution? Mobility ran a full-scale test between autumn 2022 and spring 2024. The car-sharing company connected up a fleet of 50 electric cars, each fitted with a bidirectional battery. The test involved rolling out these cars all across Switzerland – where they had to be available at any time – and connecting them to different electricity providers, as Mobility explained. During the 18-month test, around 7,000 people drove approximately 800,000 kilometres. When stationary, the cars ‘sold’ electricity to the grid, generating up to 2,000 Swiss francs in revenue per vehicle per year, according to Mobility, although they admit that running a V2G system is not viable for a car-sharing company under current circumstances. “The era of bidirec-

To conduct the trial, Mobility had to use vehicles that not only charge from the grid but also feed it with electricity. Currently, the list of electric cars that offer bidirectional charging is limited. Photo: Mobility



tional electric cars is imminent, but it will take another few years before this technology becomes widespread,” the company states. “Bidirectional charging is not a sales argument, because the system is not ready yet,” Zufferey confirms. Indeed, there are hardly any bidirectional electric vehicles in Switzerland today, says the Swiss Association for Transport and Environment. Although Valais engineer Zufferey does drive a solar-powered car, his vehicle is not intelligent. For example, his car’s battery cannot return energy to the grid when demand is at its highest – and when the price for repurchasing current is also higher.

Trade war over virtual factories

The pieces of the puzzle are all in place, but we still need operators and systems to bring the different strands together. “Currently, I have a brand X car, a brand Y charging station and a brand Z energy supplier,” Arnaud Zufferey says by way of illustration. This emerging market is making ma-

for manufacturers salivate. VW, for example, is working on a system that encompasses solar power, charging stations and cars. Tesla is already offering its customers an integrated

Electric cars connected together on the grid can store latent power in much the same way as the water in dams that provide electricity.

solution. Each brand will be aiming to unite thousands of electric cars to form virtual factories. The operator will manage the charging stations remotely and will balance out the power grid. The batteries will be connected to the system via the internet, and will distribute energy locally as required. In the winter, tourist resorts like Crans-Montana will need more electricity, whereas this will not be neces-

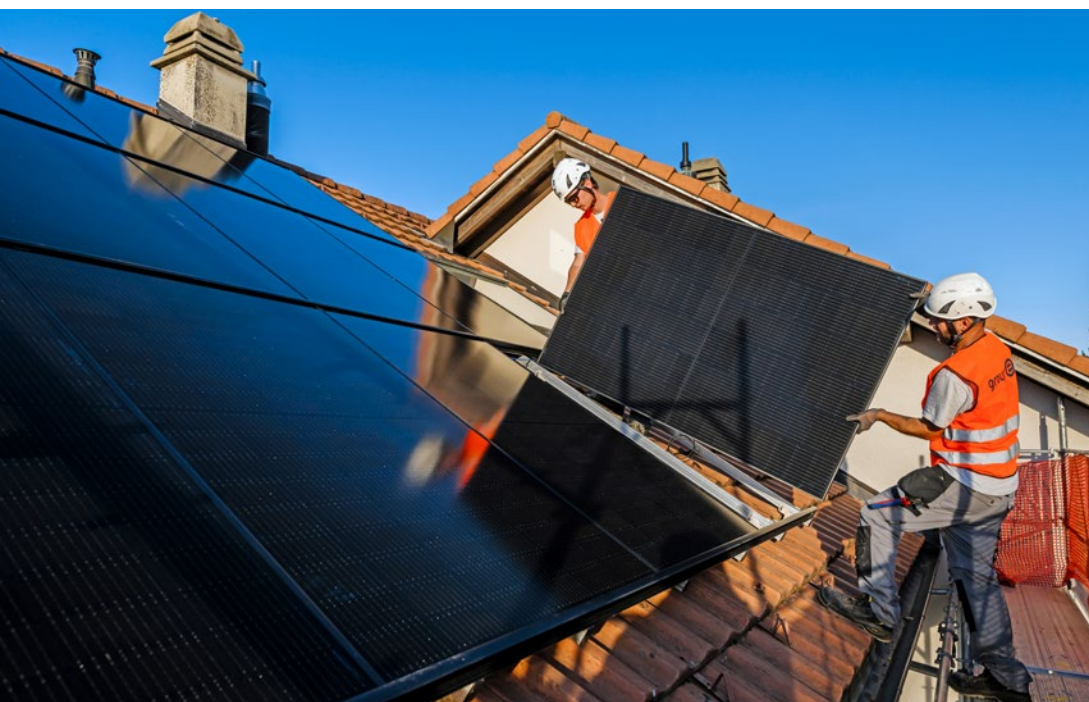
Solar panels can charge your electric car during the day. The car can then act as a battery for your house at night.

Photo: Keystone

sary in locations equipped with wind turbines or a hydroelectric power station. A spike in demand for electricity in a block of flats could be met by the cars parked outside and connected to the system. At the same time, those cars could recharge themselves fully from the network overnight, when the price is low.

The issue of energy traceability

The new federal law on electricity, adopted in June 2024, already sets out some developments that will facilitate V2G. The changes include a rule that will prevent customers having to pay twice for energy transfers to and from their cars. Converting cars to virtual power plants also means that the energy tracing system will have to be adapted. “In any given grid, operators and customers want to know whether the electricity comes from a nuclear power station, solar or wind,” explains the Valais engineer. “We are leading the charge for innovation in Europe,” affirms Fabien Lüthi, spokesman for the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications. He adds that the Swiss Confederation is working closely with the European Union to establish mutually compatible standards. Battery cars will be introduced in stages. Firstly, the current between solar panels and car batteries will need to be managed dynamically, in order to allow electricity to be stored instead of pouring power into a grid that is already overloaded or tapping a car for energy when you are cooking dinner. Secondly, V2G must be able to handle supply and demand at a neighbourhood, urban and cantonal level. This whole system will rely in part on the energy produced by solar panels, whose popularity in Switzerland is growing exponentially.



Contentious paintings withdrawn from Zurich museum

The new extension to the Kunsthaus Zürich has been home to an impressive collection of French art since it opened in 2021. However, a shadow hangs over the illustrious works, which the private Bührle Foundation has loaned to the publicly funded museum on a permanent basis (see “Swiss Review” 2/2022). Industrialist Emil G. Bührle (1890–1956) made his fortune through arms sales to buyers that included Nazi Germany. A keen collector of art, Bührle acquired paint-

ings that Jews had previously been forced to sell for financial reasons as the Nazis closed in. Criticism of the Kunsthaus has been unrelenting ever since the permanent loan of Bührle’s paintings began. There was hardly any let-up even when the Kunsthaus began providing a more candid account of the exhibition’s historical context in 2023. Critics continue to lament what they believe is an inadequate appreciation of the perspective of the victims of National Socialism.



In June, the Bührle Foundation took the highly unusual step of removing five paintings from the rooms of the Kunsthaus Zürich. These were works (see captions on the right) that previous Jewish owners had originally sold under duress during the era of Nazi persecution. The Bührle Foundation now aims to find a “fair and just solution” with the legal heirs of the former owners. “The Dinner” by Claude Monet remains on the exhibition wall. Photo: Keystone

The saga took a surprising turn in June 2024, when the Bührle Foundation withdrew five paintings from the collection. Efforts are ongoing to reach a “fair and just solution” for these works with the legal heirs of the former owners, it said.

Two options include returning the paintings or paying monetary compensation. The masterpieces are currently in storage. Explanatory notes explain to visitors why there are gaps on the museum wall. A sixth painting

– “Young Woman in Oriental Garb” by Edouard Manet – remains in the exhibition, but the heirs of the painting’s previous Jewish owner are to receive a “symbolic settlement”.

This has done little to dampen the controversy. An independent report by historian Raphael Gross has found the Bührle Foundation’s provenance research to be inadequate, saying that the foundation’s published findings relating to a total of 205 works fall short of current stand-

ards. Gross and his team discovered that significantly more works were in Jewish ownership than previously thought: 62 instead of the 41 noted by the foundation. Further inquiries still have to ascertain how many of these paintings belonged to Jews who were pressured to sell amid Nazi persecution.

THEODORA PETER

[revue.link/emilbuehrle](https://www.revue.link/emilbuehrle)



“The Sculptor Louis-Joseph Lebœuf” (1863) by Gustave Courbet was formerly owned by the Ullsteins, a German publishing family. In 1941, Elisabeth Malek-Ullstein parted with the painting – her last remaining financial asset – to start a new life in exile. She may have used the proceeds of the sale to fund the voyage to New York.



“Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec” (1891) by Georges-Henri Manuel and “The Old Tower” (1884) by Vincent van Gogh were formerly owned by the Jewish art dealer Walter Feilchenfeldt. Fleeing via Amsterdam, Feilchenfeldt eventually found himself in Switzerland, where he was able to settle but not permitted to work. He sold both works to keep his family financially above water.



“Monet’s Garden at Giverny” (1895) by Claude Monet also used to belong to the Ullsteins. Had the family not been affected by the Nazi boycott of Jewish businesses, they probably would not have had the painting moved to Switzerland or offered for sale.



“The Road” (1884) by Paul Gauguin belonged to German businessman Richard Semmel, who fled from the Nazis to New York via Switzerland. Emil Bührle bought the painting in 1937 at an auction in Geneva, where Semmel had submitted the work for sale.

The man behind the wheel



MICHEL LAYAZ
"Louis Chevrolet"
Book
Translated into German
by Yla M. von Dach.
Verlag die Brotsuppe,
Biel 2023. 168 pages,
29.00 CHF

The first cars ever made at the turn of the 20th century were typically named after their inventors – men like Gottlieb Daimler, Carl Benz and Henry Ford. But in the case of watchmaker's son Louis Chevrolet, who was born in 1878 in La Chaux-de-Fonds and died in the car capital of the world, Detroit, in 1941, the man has always been overshadowed by the famous brand that took his name. Louis Chevrolet developed a taste for speed early on in life, inheriting the urge to be mobile from his parents, with whom he moved to Burgundy in 1887. He was attracted to the bicycle, on which he competed in amateur races as a young man. Unsurprisingly, Chevrolet was soon diverting his gaze to the nascent car industry across the pond. It came as no surprise when he eventually moved to the United States in 1900 to make his mark.

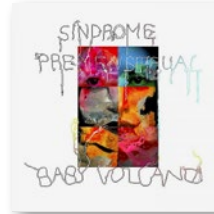
Michel Layaz has written a book on Chevrolet, in which he describes how ambitious mechanics and engineers set the tone for the automobile revolution. The audacious Louis Chevrolet, who stood a dashing 1.85 m tall, soon became one of the pioneers of this euphoric era. Chevrolet earned the nickname "the daredevil Frenchman" for his breakneck exploits as a racing driver, winning his first race in 1905. But "Chevrolet not only loved four-wheel machines", writes Layaz, "he also had an exceptional understanding of how they worked." Chevrolet played a keen role in developing the cars that he drove, renowned for engineering as much as racing.

Adored by the masses for his spectacular, near-reckless driving style, Chevrolet also enjoyed an excellent reputation as a designer, attracting the attention of exponents like Billy Durant, the founder of General Motors. He and Durant had a love-hate relationship. This culminated in 1914 with Chevrolet walking away from the company that both he and Durant had established, and, as Layaz explains, giving Durant exclusive rights to the Chevrolet name. "Hard to believe but true," notes the author.

Maybe herein lies the disconnect between Chevrolet the brand and Louis Chevrolet the person. Writing in short chapters, Layaz offers an unvarnished account of Louis Chevrolet's life, finally giving the man behind the wheel the attention he deserves.

BEAT MAZENAUER

Baby Volcano



LABEL RAPACE
"Sindrome Premenstrual"
2021

Jura is the birthplace of versatile artist Lorena Stadelmann, known by her stage name: Baby Volcano. There are no limits for this multifaceted musician, born to a father from Jura and a mother from Guatemala, a country studded with volcanoes. "They can create and destroy landscapes at the same time," enthuses the 27-year-old singer, who studied dance and performing arts in Argentina.

Lorena Stadelmann, who began her career as a performer, takes her inspiration from anything and everything. Her (very polished) music videos present a crazy, disturbing visual and musical blend of dancing, singing and even whimsical artwork. Baby Volcano's first opus, released in 2021, showed the originality of this now internationally renowned artist. Each song on "Sindrome Premenstrual" refers to a part of the human body. "Swiss Anxiety (Solar plexus)" thus refers to the solar plexus.

The song itself is about luxury hotels in Geneva and love with both genders. The music's mood is trippy and bruised. "I am chaotic and juicy and I like the symbol of the zombie kitten," the artist laughs in a short documentary about her by France 2. With her long black hair and the deep red lipstick she sometimes wears, the Jura native, who lives on a farm on the border between Jura and Solothurn, is a little reminiscent of Frida Kahlo. She even cites Chavela Vargas, a Mexican artist, as one of her sources of inspiration. Baby Volcano uses a mix of styles ranging from hip-hop, trap and electro to lyrical and Latin music.

The lyrics switch seamlessly from French into Spanish, where we can hear the characteristic "ch" of the Argentinian accent. The singer is comfortable in all repertoires, as shown in her slow and expansive cover of "Le Baiser", the beautifully nostalgic and sensual track originally by French artist Alain Souchon, where her murmured lyrics are accompanied by Jura musician and producer Louis Riodel. Baby Volcano is signed to nonprofit label Humus. She has toured in North America and is set to perform at a series of concerts in Europe this year. A second EP is on the cards for 2025.

STÉPHANE HERZOG



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SwissInTouch.ch
The app for the Swiss abroad



swissintouch.ch



Federal votes

The proposals submitted to the people are set by the Federal Council at least four months prior to the voting date.

The Federal Council decided at its session on 26 June 2024 to submit the following proposals to the people on 24 November 2024:

- Federal Decree of 29 September 2023 on the 2023 Expansion Phase for the National Highways (BBI 2023 2302)
- Amendment of 29 September 2023 of the Code of Obligations (Tenancy law: sub-letting) (BBI 2023 2288)
- Amendment of 29 September 2023 of the Code of Obligations (Tenancy law: termination for personal needs) (BBI 2023 2291)
- Amendment of 22 December 2023 of the Federal Act on Health Insurance (HIA) (Standard funding of services) (BBI 2023 31)

All information on proposals submitted to the people (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by the parliament, Federal Council etc.) can be found at www.admin.ch/abstimmungen or in the Federal Chancellery VoteInfo app.



Popular initiatives

The following federal popular initiatives had been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for signatures in brackets):

- For Switzerland to accede to the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (initiative for the prohibition of nuclear weapons) (2 January 2026)

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in French, German and Italian at <https://www.bk.admin.ch/> > Politische Rechte > Volksinitiativen > Hängige Volksinitiativen



Please note

Provide your Swiss representation with your **email address(es) and mobile phone number(s)** and/or any changes thereto and register at the online counter (link on FDFA homepage www.eda.admin.ch or via www.swissabroad.ch), to select your order of “Swiss Review” and other publications. If you encounter any problems registering, please contact your representation. You can read and/or print the current edition of “Swiss Review” as well as back copies since 2006 at www.revue.ch. “Swiss Review” (or “Gazzetta Svizzera” in Italian) is available electronically (via email, free of charge) or in print for all Swiss Abroad households, or through the iOS/Android app.

The birth of Switzerland's consular network

If a Swiss loses her ID in Cuba, she will go to the Swiss consulate. If a Swiss couple in Australia become parents or a Swiss in Kenya needs support, they will also get in touch with the relevant Swiss representation abroad – benefiting from a diplomatic network that can trace its beginnings as far back as 1798, when Switzerland's first-ever consulate opened in Bordeaux.



The French port of Bordeaux offers indirect access to the Atlantic and was an important hub for international trade and European emigration overseas. Painting by Pierre Lacour, 1806. Photo: Alamy

Swiss representations now have an established presence around the globe. Based in almost every country, they act as the first point of contact for Swiss Abroad in need of help and support. But this has not always been the case. The network of Swiss representations abroad grew gradually during the course of the last two centuries, starting in Bordeaux in 1798.

People carrying out duties of a diplomatic or consular nature on behalf of individual cantons were already stationed in

friendly countries before 1798. But no one actually represented the country as a whole. This is because the Old Swiss Confederacy – Switzerland before Napoleon's invasion – amounted to nothing more than a loose collection of states with few common interests.

The ideals of the French Revolution shaped Europe at the end of the 18th century. And the new values of 'liberty, equality, fraternity' also circulated around Switzerland, leading to increasing protests and

unrest as early as the 1790s. The French invaded the Old Swiss Confederacy in March 1798, establishing the centralised Helvetic Republic on 12 April 1798.

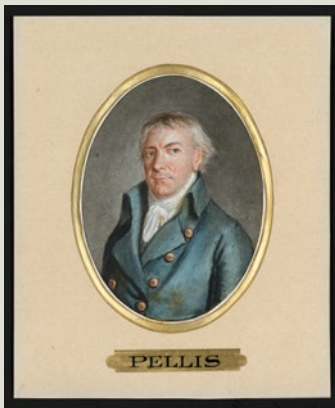
As soon as there was a stable political environment again, key priorities fell into place for the Helvetic Republic at national and international level. As economic links around the globe grew stronger, representing Swiss interests abroad became more important. On 25 August 1798, the Helvetic Republic appointed Marc-Antoine Pellis as its inaugural

consul – assigning him to Bordeaux, where Switzerland’s first-ever consulate was subsequently established.

Marc-Antoine Pellis, the first Swiss consul

Marc-Antoine Pellis (1753–1809) from Vaud was a senator and politician during the Helvetic Republic. After spending time in other parts of Europe, Pellis returned to Switzerland as the ideas of the French Revolution were taking hold. In Vaud, which was still governed by Berne at the time, he took part in open-air political ‘banquets’ in support of revolution and against Bernese rule. When Berne put a stop to these banquets in June 1791, arresting the ringleaders and putting Vaud under military occupation, he was forced to flee.

Pellis settled in the French city of Bordeaux on the Garonne River in 1793, establishing himself as a merchant. The Helvetic



Marc-Antoine Pellis, originally from Romainmôtier, was appointed Switzerland’s first-ever consul in 1798.

Picture source:

Atelier de numérisation Ville de Lausanne, Margot Roth

Republic, a centralised state modelled on the French Revolution, appointed him as consul in 1798. Three years later in 1801, he stepped down as consul and returned to Switzerland, where he became a member of the legislative assembly and the senate. Pellis went on to play a political role in both Vaud and the Helvetic Republic.

For business and community

Following Bordeaux, consulates were also established in Marseille, Genoa, Nantes and Trieste. It is no coincidence that major Eu-

ropean seaports were home to the first five consulates, as economic interests were the main reason behind the Swiss consulates. At a time when steamers, railways and telegraphs had not yet revolutionised international trade, direct relationships at the point of sale were of crucial importance. These port cities served as international trading hubs and as the starting points of routes connecting Europe with destinations overseas including colonies in Africa and Asia.

Economic interests were the primary reason for setting up the first consulates,

Switzerland’s consular network assists Swiss nationals with a wide range of administrative formalities and offers subsidiary support, subject to the principle of individual responsibility and certain other requirements.

but not the only reason. Diplomatic missions were necessary to cater for notable numbers of Swiss who had settled in the aforementioned cities – expat communities consisting of merchants and traders. To a certain extent, these cities also served as



Urs Badertscher, the last Swiss consul general in Bordeaux (2005–2008), gives a speech to mark the closure of the consulate on Cours Xavier Arnozan.

Photo: Jean-Michel Begey

reception points for people wishing to emigrate overseas. Switzerland had been a country of emigrants since the mid-16th century, with poverty, underemployment, and population pressure forcing young Swiss to leave the country. Mercenaries, teachers, artisans, scientists and academics also began to settle in numerous European cities in addition to the merchants and traders, before venturing further overseas from the 19th century onwards. Due to demand, the first Swiss overseas consulate was established in 1819 in the Brazilian coastal city of Rio de Janeiro. A consulate in New York was then established a few years later in 1822.

For the most part, the honorary consuls who worked at these representations were Swiss nationals already living locally. It took a long time before their remit was clearly defined – consuls had to ascertain their duties by correspondence or through formal briefings. Responsibilities included sorting out passports, reporting back to the Helvetic Republic on how its citizens were conducting themselves abroad, and monitoring adherence to bilateral treaties.

Or, as the Swiss consul in Marseille, Vincent Perdonnet, wrote in a letter to the then foreign minister, Louis François Bégoz, in 1799, “extending a fraternal hand to those in unfortunate or unfair hardship as well as protecting others from the disastrous and appalling consequences of hate and deceit”.

Serving the “Fifth Switzerland” for over 225 years

Switzerland’s consular network has been a fixture since Marc-Antoine Pellis’s appointment in Bordeaux as the first-ever consul all those years ago. The network has continually expanded, and today there is a clear delineation of diplomatic, consular and economic responsibilities. It is also a network that continues to evolve and keep with the times. But the core function of consulates remains the same: to be the first point of contact for Swiss nationals around the world.

LUCA PANARESE, FDFA

What happens to my occupational benefit plan when I move abroad?

Question: Relatives have asked me for tips on moving abroad. They want to know what happens to the money accumulated in their pension fund (Pillar 2), but I am unable to give them a satisfactory answer. What are the options?

Answer: The first option is to leave your occupational pension savings in Switzerland and put them in a vested benefits account or a vested benefits policy, for example.

Alternatively, you can ask for the money to be paid out to you. However, this is only possible if you leave Switzerland for good. The pension scheme into which your money was paid will check whether this is indeed the case. If you emigrate to a country outside the EU/EFTA area, you are entitled to have your assets paid out to you in full. On the other hand, a crucial restriction applies if you move to an EU/EFTA member state: the statutory minimum amount, i.e. the 'mandatory portion' of your pension fund assets, cannot be withdrawn and will instead remain in a blocked vested benefits account or vested benefits policy in Switzerland until you reach the age of 60, five years before you reach the statutory retirement age. Only the 'non-mandatory portion', i.e. the money saved over and above the minimum amount, will be paid out.

You can also apply to use your Pillar 2 assets in full to help buy your own home abroad, provided the property in question is to be your primary residence and not a second or holiday home.

You can remain in your Swiss occupational benefit plan, under certain conditions. Doing so also involves making continued contributions to the old-age and survivors'

insurance (OASI) and disability insurance (DI) scheme on a mandatory or voluntary basis. Therefore, continuing in the compulsory OASI and DI scheme allows you to remain with your occupational benefit plan on a mandatory basis, e.g. if you continue to work for a Swiss employer abroad. Paying into the OASI/DI scheme on a voluntary basis is only possible if you emigrate to a country outside the EU/EFTA area. Provided you fulfil all the prerequisites, you can also make voluntary contributions to Pillar 2 – either through your most recent pension scheme in Switzerland or through the Substitute Occupational Benefit Institution. But it is important to check whether the rules of your pension scheme allow this. Another decisive factor is whether Switzerland has concluded a social security agreement with your country of domicile, whereby you may be subject to the rules on social security in the country of employment.

Therefore, the option you choose will always depend on your individual circumstances. For further information, please refer to the notes on occupational pension provision that have been published by the Federal Social Insurance Office (see link below).

STEPHANIE LEBER,
OSA LEGAL DEPARTMENT

www.revue.link/bsv164



You can use your Pillar 2 assets to help buy your own home abroad, provided the property in question is to be your primary residence and not a second or holiday home. Photo: iStockphoto

Language skills open doors

Understanding and speaking several languages is not only a personal enrichment, but also helps with education or training and later when looking for a job.

Among the many inquiries from all over the world that educationsuisse staff answer every day, one question comes up again and again: Can I study at university or do a training programme in Switzerland without knowing a national language?

The answer is obvious: a good knowledge of the language of instruction is generally required and this varies depending on the language region: German, French or Italian.

Universities, the ETH and universities of applied sciences usually require very good language skills (C1) in the language of instruction. There are only a few bachelor's degree programmes, the three-year basic course, purely in English. On the other hand, more master's programmes are offered in English.

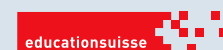
The level of language skills required for a three- or four-year vocational training programme that combines theory and practice is lower. Depending on the chosen profession, an intermediate language level (B1 - B2) is demanded.

Language competence is assessed worldwide according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This assessment scale comprises six levels from A1 to C2 (basic knowledge to native speaker level): Level C1 means very good knowledge of both text comprehension and the use of the language. Level B corresponds to an intermediate level, i.e. understanding the content of longer texts and speaking independently. Level A means low proficiency with elementary use of the language.

How do you learn a language? As early as possible, playing, during school, lifelong. (Online) courses, language apps, books, podcasts, and films can help. Regular practice, speaking and immersing yourself in the language are important. A language study trip can be helpful but is also associated with costs.

We recommend acquiring good language skills and the corresponding recognised certificates in your country of residence. If you have any questions on the subject of education in Switzerland, please contact us!

RUTH VON GUNTEN, EDUCATIONSUISSE



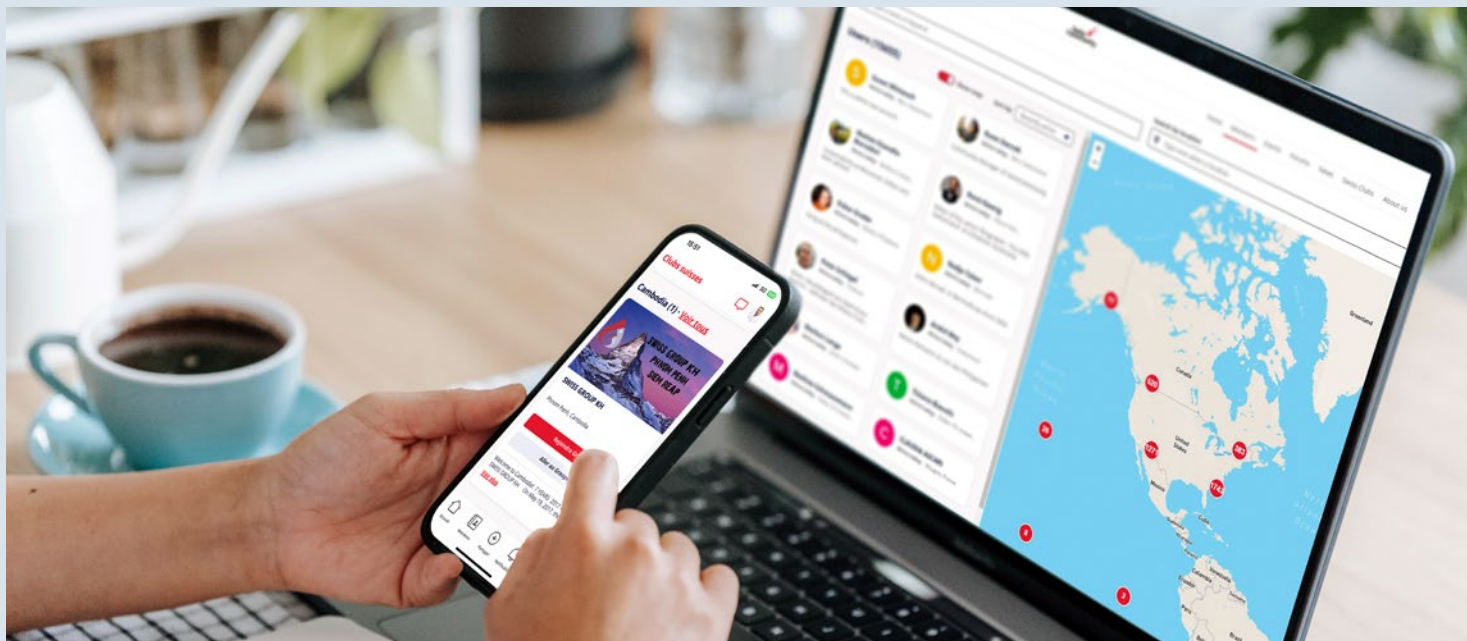
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“SwissCommunity” – staying connected across borders

Interact, discuss, share, or simply stay connected.

Be part of the biggest online network dedicated to Swiss Abroad.



Counting over 17,000 members already, the “SwissCommunity” platform is the biggest online network dedicated to Swiss Abroad.

Reasons for living abroad differ as much as the relationships that people can have with their native country. “SwissCommunity” offers you the chance to connect with Switzerland in whichever way you want.

An interactive platform for the “Fifth Switzerland”

An interactive world map showing where Swiss Abroad live around the globe forms the centrepiece of the “SwissCommunity” website. Users can filter searches by country, name and interests in order to connect and interact with like-minded people. Members of the Council of the Swiss Abroad, referred to as the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland”, are also represented on the platform. The discussion forum offers tips on moving abroad or returning to Switzerland, and there is a list of the recognised Swiss associations abroad that you can contact.

A connection to home

After Facebook, Instagram and X, do we need yet another web community? Yes, because “SwissCommunity” is different. As an

Your contact person

I am responsible for managing the “SwissCommunity” platform and ensuring that users adhere to our community guidelines. As such, I am the first point of contact for any community members or Swiss associations with questions or queries. If you are unsure about posting content, creating association profiles, or anything else, please feel free to contact me. I look forward to hearing from you.



ROMI OERNEK

exclusive social network, it is tailored to the specific needs of the Swiss Abroad. You, the user, can decide whether to play an active part in the community. You can even turn off all the app notifications, if you wish. Whatever your preference, “SwissCommunity” provides a connection to Switzerland and to the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) which runs the platform.

Benefiting Swiss associations abroad

Any OSA-recognised Swiss association can create its own profile on the “SwissCommuni-

nity” platform free of charge, making itself visible across the “Fifth Switzerland” to expatriates, managing its members, sending mailshots and creating events. “SwissCommunity” also contains a chat function, a job portal, a live feed, a news feed and a discussion forum – all of which can be easily accessed via the navigation panel. And if your own association website is no longer fit for purpose, the “SwissCommunity” platform can essentially take its place – without any domain costs involved. If your association website already has all of the above functions, your “SwissCommunity” association profile can still act as a “business card” – helping you to extend your reach and redirect users to your website.

ROMI OERNEK



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Council of the Swiss Abroad – e-voting to be made available in numerous countries for the 2025 election

To improve and modernise the process of electing candidates to the Council of the Swiss Abroad in 2025, an online voting system will be made available in 13 electoral constituencies. This will enable significantly more Swiss Abroad to vote – and make the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland” more representative as a result.

The Council of the Swiss Abroad (CSA) is the “Parliament of the Fifth Switzerland” and the highest body of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, SwissCommunity. Among other things, the CSA plays an important role in representing the interests of the Swiss Abroad in their dealings with the Swiss authorities.

Convening twice a year in Switzerland, it makes decisions, formulates opinions and lays the foundation for effective engagement. The CSA has 140 members, of whom 120 represent expats in countries and groups of countries around the world. Its remaining 20 members live in Switzerland, forming a domestic contingent to help ensure good dialogue with Swiss politics, society and business.

The CSA’s voting system is far from perfect, given that voter turnout is low in some countries or groups of countries. That is why the CSA’s direct elections working group has been looking to improve things ahead of the 2025 election, focusing in particular on developing a secure and reliable e-voting system (see “Swiss Review” 4/2024).

13 electoral constituencies

As a result, a total of 13 countries or groups of countries (electoral constituencies) intend to conduct direct elections in 2025, which would enable all registered Swiss nationals to elect their local delegates through e-voting. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs supports this pilot project, which, crucially, will allow many more Swiss Abroad to cast their vote in just a few clicks, thus giving CSA delegates greater legitimacy – and making the CSA much more representative.

As it currently stands (on 15 August 2024), direct elections will take place in the following countries and groups of countries (electoral constituencies):

- **Europe:** Germany, UK, Netherlands, Türkiye, and the Spain/Portugal/Andorra country group
- **North and South America:** Canada, Peru, USA, and the Mexico/Belize country group
- **Asia:** Japan, Singapore, and the Central, West and South Asia country group (Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Georgia, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Maldives, Nepal, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Yemen)
- **Oceania:** The Australia country group (Australia, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu)

Who can stand for election?

The CSA elections will take place in spring 2025. “Swiss Review” and www.swisscommunity.org will publish the exact dates for every country nearer the time. Any Swiss citizen aged 18 or over can stand for elec-

tion, provided they are registered with their local embassy or consulate and speak at least one of Switzerland’s official languages. Being a CSA member involves putting in a few hours of voluntary work every month as well as attending two to three CSA meetings a year (including travelling to Switzerland once a year to do so in person). Anyone who lives in one of the above-listed countries and is interested in standing for election can contact the direct elections working group directly at workgroup.osa@outlook.com.

Who can vote?

Likewise, any Swiss citizen aged 18 or over in one of the above-listed countries is entitled to vote, provided they are registered with their local embassy or consulate – and, crucially, registered under a valid email address. This is because invitations to vote will be sent by email. We therefore advise anyone who hasn’t done so already to provide their local embassy or consulate with an up-to-date email address by the end of 2024.

And what about everyone else?

In countries that are not taking part in the e-voting pilot project for the 2025 election, the respective umbrella organisations and Swiss associations will coordinate the ballot in the same way that they have done previously. Anyone who wishes to should feel free to encourage the parties representing their country of domicile to introduce direct online voting in time for the 2029 CSA election. Finally, please note that the latest information on the CSA election is available at www.swisscommunity.org. (AF/MUL)



The direct elections working group at this year’s July meeting of the CSA in Lucerne: Noel Frei, Tobias Orth, Antoine Belaieff, Andreas Feller-Ryf, Monique Heymann and Ernst Steinmann. Photo provided

List of all current CSA members:
www.revue.link/asr



“Swiss Review” – more regional news despite cost-cutting

“Swiss Review” is to strengthen its regional coverage, starting from next year. Every edition will include a regional supplement. At the same time, subsidy cuts have forced our hand, meaning “Swiss Review” will appear five instead of the customary six times a year, from 2025 onwards.

Rising production costs and, in particular, the sharp increase in mailing costs since the Covid pandemic are a huge challenge for our magazine. To compound matters, the federal government is cutting subsidies in many areas next year – including funding for “Swiss Review”.

Additional costs combined with less revenue have prompted our publisher, the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, SwissCommunity, to make important changes. From 2025 onwards we will produce five editions of the magazine a year instead of six as at present. As regrettable and unavoidable as this step is, it is mitigated by more positive news: every future edition will now contain a regional supplement. To date, regional supplements have only featured in four editions every year.

For many readers, the regional supplements are important sources of information on Swiss community life in their part of the world, reflecting events on the ground within the “Fifth Switzerland”. The parent magazine, on the other hand, has the primary role of covering the latest news from Switzerland and, in particular, addressing the issues at stake in upcoming popular votes.

Editorial teams at regional level are currently responsible for producing 14 different regional supplements. These publications represent one of our magazine’s unique selling points and will gain further prominence as a result of this strategic realignment.



Five instead of six magazines a year, but a regional supplement with every edition. Notwithstanding our decision, we want to continue improving our magazine and are ready to make further changes where necessary. The next few weeks will see us evaluating the many thousands of submissions that we received in response to our 2024 readership survey. “Swiss Review” 1/2025 will cover the results, outlining your feedback and the improvements that you, our readers, would like to see.

FILIPPO LOMBARDI, OSA PRESIDENT
ARIANE RUSTICHELLI, OSA DIRECTOR

Our 14 regional supplements: www.revue.link/regional

Ensuring the future of “Swiss Review”

“Swiss Review” is blessed with an experienced editorial team well-versed in giving their independent journalistic take on the latest burning issues in Switzerland and making this content relatable to readers in the “Fifth Switzerland”. Through your donation, you can support independent, quality journalism directly. Given that printing and mailing costs are so prohibitively high at the moment, we are particularly grateful for donations towards our print edition.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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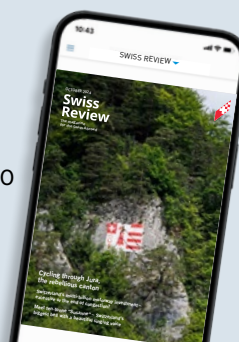
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Getting impatient waiting for your printed copy of “Swiss Review” to arrive? Pick up the magazine on your **tablet or smartphone**. The app is free of charge and contains no advertising. You can find the app by searching for “Swiss Review” in your App Store.





FYSA camp participants on a hike in the Diemtig Valley (canton of Berne). Photo: Luca Hess, pixofluna.com



Playground scene at one of the FYSA camps.

Photo: Luca Hess, pixofluna.com



There is never any shortage of OSA youth camp participants willing to help in the kitchen. Photo: OSA Youth Service

The 2024 holiday camp season was a summer of joy and adventure

For the children and teenagers attending the holiday camps run by the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad (FYSA) and the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA), summer 2024 was unforgettable. After a rainy start, participants between the ages of eight and 18 enjoyed bright sunshine and warm weather for the remainder of their time in the beautiful Swiss countryside.

The FYSA hosted a total of nine camps for children, while the OSA Youth Service ran four summer camps for teenagers. The camps took place at various locations in Switzerland, including St Gallen, Locarno, Montreux, Lausanne and Lucerne as well as many smaller, picturesque localities (as shown on our website).

It is fair to say that this year's FYSA and OSA Youth Service summer camps were a great success, not only offering participants the opportunity to discover their home country and make new friends, but also creating valuable memories that will last a lifetime.

MARIE BLOCH, OSA YOUTH SERVICE
DAVID REICHMUTH, FYSA

For more information on future activities and offers for young Swiss Abroad, visit www.swisscommunity.org and www.sjas.ch.



OSA youth camp participants in Engadine – discovering the beautiful Swiss countryside is part of the experience. Photo: OSA Youth Service

Discussion

Switzerland's farmers have a powerful lobby in parliament, normally giving them the upper hand when important issues are decided at the ballot box. Still, many Swiss farmers are at the end of their tether. As we reported in the last edition, they feel powerless and unappreciated. There was a lively response to the article from our readers.



Foto Keystone

Powerful farming lobby, powerless farmers

GELI KILCHÖR, FRANCE

Working too much for too little is one thing. Farmers also have too much red tape to negotiate and barely any free time. Then you have crop thieves. Or poor weather making work more difficult and destroying the harvest. Few people know how it feels to work every single day of every year. Farming is no laughing matter these days. Alas, it's all about the survival of the fittest – and money.

PETER SCHWERZMANN, PATTAYA, THAILAND

Because Swiss-farmed produce is so expensive, many people have no option but to buy cheaper imported produce from their supermarket. Remember that many people are barely able to make ends meet in Switzerland either. From healthcare, to housing, to food – everything is becoming more expensive. Farmers moaning about their situation won't help anyone.

PAUL JUD, STÜHLINGEN, GERMANY

There is no such thing as 'the farmers'. You have the multinationals, then medium and small farmers. The multinationals are the beneficiaries. They have the biggest lobbies in parliament, helping them to generate the biggest possible profit. Naturally, this attracts even more money from investors around the world. These multinationals also include the big retailers and the chemical giants.

DANIELLE ABDULLAH, SOUTH AFRICA

This was a good article offering food for thought and debate.

WALTER J. TRACHSEL, FRANCE

You wrote that "intensive agriculture leads to nitrogen run-off into groundwater and drinking water, and harms biodiversity through its reliance on pesticides". Of course, but there is another big problem. No one has found an alternative to pesticides. Organic farming is declining because it is too expensive. And it also involves questionable products.

MANUEL LEHMANN, EGNACH, SWITZERLAND

Agriculture is about economies of scale. Bigger farms are more likely to survive. The Swiss Farmers' Union knows and supports this. Do the powers that be actually want to ensure that all farms survive?

JEAN PIERRE MAIRE, FRANCE

The money for farming subsidies comes out of people's taxes, i.e. consumers have to pay even more for the produce they buy. The profits go to the middlemen, whose profit margins are sizeable to put it mildly. Farmers, meanwhile, are saddled with debt to pay for their oversized equipment. The market is distorted to feed the capitalist machine. Someone needs to go around with a chainsaw to stop the exploitation and make everything more transparent in terms of the actual costs involved.

"Swiss Review" on its 50th anniversary



"The 'Swiss Review' is a lifeline to my home country, Switzerland. It is also concise, authoritative, up to date, engaging, valuable, informative, indispensable, refreshing, exciting, substantive, stimulating, essential, enriching, vibrant, first-class, discerning, fascinating, inspiring, comprehensive, in-depth, enjoyable, varied, insightful, important, diverse, entertaining, and at times quite humorous. In a nutshell, I look forward to every edition and read it as soon as it is available on my PC."

THOMAS ARN, WEST VANCOUVER, CANADA



"I have greatly enjoyed 'Swiss Review' for over 20 years. I seriously appreciate your work on all levels, particularly your strength of in-depth reporting and thorough research into a subject."

FRANZISKA SCHMIDLIN, NEW ZEALAND



"Swiss Abroad are the voice and face of Switzerland abroad. This is no easy thing, demanding great courage, responsibility and flexibility. The 'Swiss Review' is a valuable aid in this regard, giving expats a piece of home and a positive sense of attachment to Switzerland."

ELISABETH SCHNEIDER-SCHNEITER,
NATIONAL COUNCILLOR, BIEL-BENKEN, SWITZERLAND



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