

# A Swiss Summer

Switzerland is usually associated with snow and skiing, but **Norman Wright** discovers it's equally enticing in summer

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS





Clockwise from main: Relaxing at 8,000 feet on Schynige Platte; The Bernese Alps stretch out behind the cogwheel train as it heads up to Schynige Platte; An icon of summer in Switzerland grazing in a sunny Alpine meadow; The Schynige Platte Alpine Botanic garden with a stunning array of flowers; Travelling using a Swiss Pass on the trains provides fast journeys and wonderful scenery



FROM MY perch among the flowers of an Alpine garden looking across the valley to the north face of the Eiger, the stories about ascents of the infamous mountain were as staggering as the views.

I casually asked our guide, Martin, how long climbers took to conquer the Eiger, which, incidentally, looked forbidding even from afar. The answer was usually two days, with the climbers spending a night suspended from the rock face in

their sleeping bags. The quickest is two hours 21 minutes!

The high-speed sort of ascent is achieved by daredevil free climbers who use no ropes but just have an ice axe in each hand, crampons on their feet – and their heart in their mouth, I should think. Neither method sounded ideal.

Unsurprisingly, we made our own ascent to Schynige Platte the easy way – on the cogwheel railway. No need for dangling sleeping bags either: if you want to stay overnight, there's a comfortable hotel. This

winding journey up through meadows of grazing cattle complete with cowbells, then traversing woods and skirting precipitous drops, summed up the glories of Switzerland in summer.

The trip up and down on a lovely day – an hour each way – was pure pleasure.

From 6811ft the views are sensational over towards the three mighty Alps: Jungfrau, Monch and Eiger – or the Virgin, the Monk and the Ogre as they are nicknamed locally.

They are all more than 13,000ft.

Beyond, the snow-capped Bernese Alps stretch away.

Immediately around my rocky seat amid the 600 species of the Alpine Botanic Garden at the top of Schynige Platte, lush green has replaced the deep snow that takes over in winter.

There's a moderate descent and

walk down through meadows to some farm buildings.

There are several marked walks for the more energetic. However, lots of us were happy just to wander around the garden, drink a Sunday morning coffee at the hotel and enjoy the mountain air and beautiful vistas before taking the train

back down towards our base in Interlaken. Descending provides the best view of the two lakes that give the town its name – Lakes Brienz and Thun. Brienz almost glows turquoise and emerald in the sun, while Thun is an impassive steely blue. Alpine rock fragments washed down into Brienz produces its iridescent colours.

The train terminates at the village of Wilderswil one short stop from Interlaken East station. Stay on the main train and the Jungfrau Railway gives a network of routes into the mountains. One branch

**“The winding journey up through meadows of grazing cattle complete with cowbells, then traversing woods and skirting precipitous drops, summed up the glories of Switzerland in summer”**



Clockwise from left: Wood sculpting using industrial tools, chainsaws and sanders on the lakefront at Brienz; Lakeside promenade in Brienz; More intricate finishing work requires the traditional wood carver's chisels; One of the amazing woodcarvings in the Jobin museum in Brienz

◀ tunnels through the Eiger and emerges near the summit of Jungfrau at the aptly named Top of Europe terminal.

Cable cars and ski lifts at various points along the lines will take you to viewpoints and walking routes. Along the way you can stop off at little towns like Wengen or enjoy a coffee at Grindelwald while you watch the climbers on the north face.

Back in Interlaken, the skies seem to be filled with the highly coloured chutes of paragliders circling and swooping to a gentle landing in a park in

the centre of town. These daredevils launch from the town's home mountain of Harder Kulm. You can reach the mountain by funicular railway from the centre of town – and when you get to the top you don't have to jump off.

You can enjoy the restaurant, viewing platform and more walking trails. The views across the Alps are wonderful, as well as giving the best view of the two lakes 4332ft below.

The lakes themselves are available to explore as well as the mountains. As

Interlaken is between the two waters, you do need to take a short train or bus hop to reach the ferries that ply their trade in some of the most spectacular scenery you will find anywhere.

We spent a bit longer on the train to get to the town of Brienz at the other end of the Brienzsee.

It's a quiet little town, renowned for its wood carvings evidenced by the carved decorations on house, shops and public places. As we walked around the shore path towards the ferry jetty, the sound of chainsaws

floated across the mirror-calm water. Just around the bend we found out why.

A dozen or more wood carvers were set out along the promenade attacking huge lumps of tree with a selection of differing-sized chainsaws and chisels.

The results were impressive. Anything from reclining nudes to intricate face studies were emerging from the local wood as we watched. Going from artist to artist and watching their work could have kept me amused all morning.

Earlier, we visited the woodcarving

workshop of Jobin, founded in 1835 and now being run by the fifth generation of the family. The sculptures they produce there are amazing and the exhibits in their museum show the long tradition of carving in the area.

School parties who go to see the workshops and museums can try their hand at painting a small carved wooden cow which our little party had great fun trying for ourselves. One member of our group said he was himself a woodcarver so they gave him a blank of the cow to do

himself. I noticed that the result soon went into his bag to be finished later!

There were more crafts on display at the Ballenberg open-air museum a short bus ride from Brienz. This 163-acre site has more than 100 old buildings moved from different parts of Switzerland and faithfully restored.

You can look around the rooms, see a whole range of country crafts and even have a go at blowing a 20ft-long Alpine Horn. The museum features farm animals, many of them rare ▶



Clockwise: The peaks of Monch (left) and Jungfrau from the Schynige Platte summit; Ferry pulls away from the Geissbach jetty on the translucent Lake Brienz; Touring the Ballenberg open air museum by horse transport



◀ traditional breeds. We enjoyed a horse-and-cart ride around the park that took us from a litter of day-old piglets to a chocolate-making kitchen via a traditional Swiss lunch complete with brass band entertainment.

Then it was back to Brienz to board a ferry to head for the scene of a dramatic and mysterious moment in fiction, when Sherlock Holmes and his arch-enemy Professor James Moriarty struggle and fight near the edge of the upper Reichenbach Falls, above a 300ft drop, as

the white foaming cataract falls twisting and roaring to the rocks below.

In his short story *The Final Problem* Sir Arthur Conan Doyle leaves aficionados of the famous detective thinking that Homes and Moriarty have perished when Dr Watson finds evidence of a furious struggle at the edge of the precipice but no signs of either rival.

Sir Arthur's initial thought may well have been to kill Holmes off but he relented later and brought him back, Holmes claiming to have staged his

**“Brienz almost glows turquoise and emerald in the sun, while Thun is an impassive steely blue”**

own death. In real life the falls are dramatic but nowhere near as broodingly dangerous as the literary version.

The full series of falls is some 820ft, which you can see briefly from the ferry as it pulls in to the rocky jetty at Giessbach at ▶

The magnificent Geissbach Grand Hotel seen from the top of the Reichenbach Falls where Sherlock Holmes almost met his death

Stately main street at Interlaken



### Passport to Interlaken

#### Getting there

■ Thomson Lakes offers a week's half-board at the four-star Hotel Interlaken from £725 per person. The price includes flights from Heathrow to Zurich and train transfers. Regional airports are available at a supplement from £20 (Birmingham) and £40 (Manchester), tel: 0871 230 8181, website: ([www.thomsonlakes.co.uk](http://www.thomsonlakes.co.uk)). Hotel Interlaken, Höhweg 74, CH-3800 Interlaken, tel: +41 (0)33 826 68 68, e-mail: ([info@hotelinterlaken.ch](mailto:info@hotelinterlaken.ch)).

#### Getting around

■ We used the immaculate Swiss railway system to travel from Zurich and to get around in the Interlaken area. Swiss Pass tickets are the most cost-effective way of enjoying a great service and stunning scenery from the network's observation-friendly rolling stock. Swiss Pass rail, website: ([www.switzerlandtravelcentre.co.uk](http://www.switzerlandtravelcentre.co.uk)).

#### Find out more

■ For more information on Switzerland, see the websites ([www.myswitzerland.com](http://www.myswitzerland.com)) and ([www.swiss.com](http://www.swiss.com))

■ For more on Interlaken, see the website: ([www.interlaken.ch](http://www.interlaken.ch)).

**“Immediately around my rocky seat amid the 600 species of the Alpine Botanic Garden at the top of Schynige Platte, lush green has replaced the deep snow that takes over in winter”**

◀ the foot of the cliffs. A vintage wooden funicular railway hauls you towards the top to alight at the Grand Hotel Giessbach. It certainly lives up to its name – grand in every sense, from the ballroom and restaurant to the terrace with a fabulous view across the lake. Taking tea here or sipping a beer with the lake and mountains stretching away and the crashing of the waterfall in your ears is a moment you never forget.

Refreshed, you can then return to catch a ferry or investigate the falls

further by climbing to the top or crossing lower down. Then there is a very pleasant walk down through the woods to the village of Iseltwald, one of the ferry stops on the way back to Interlaken.

Dinner at Iseltwald on the terrace at the water's edge, as the light finally faded and removed the iridescence from the lake, was another magic moment.

It was just one of a hatful of special moments provided by summer Switzerland at Interlaken.