

Switzerland

Riding the William Tell Express

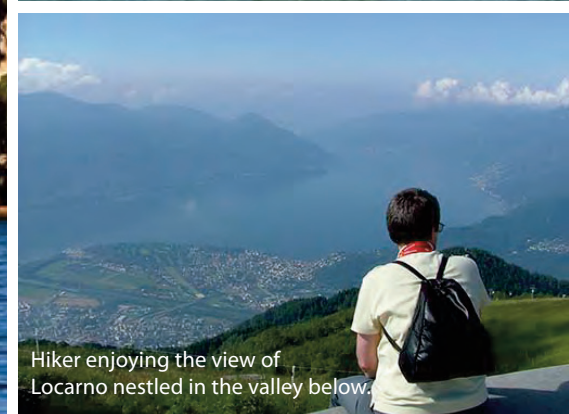
BY WENDY & ROB LINDSAY



Brusino Arsizio at Lake Lugano, Canton Ticino. In the back Mt. Bre and Mt. Boglia (1516 m). (Right top) Bellinzona, with two of its three castles visible on distant mountain tops.



Circa 1900 paddle steamer, restored for use on the first leg of the William Tell Express (WTE).



Hiker enjoying the view of Locarno nestled in the valley below.

Filled to the brim with dramatic mountain scenery, pristine villages, sparkling clear lakes and Europe's most delectable chocolate shops, Switzerland is also home to the best travel system in the world.

As much as the Swiss are renowned for world-class timepieces, their transportation system runs like clockwork, too. A seamlessly integrated network of trains, boats and PostBuses — all covered by the Swiss Pass — carries you to even the smallest mountain village. In fact, the rail map arrives with your

Swiss Pass before you leave Canada. Resembling a fine red spiderweb, the map covers every bit of Switzerland. Rail travel is easy and definitely the way to go.

After landing at Zurich Airport, we validated our Swiss Passes, which must be ordered ahead while in Canada. Next we travelled, complimentary luggage cart and all, down the escalators to the airport rail station. We simply took a train into the city and onward to our destination of Lucerne, where we would catch the William Tell Express. Speeding

smoothly along the shore of Lake Zurich was a relaxing, hassle-free introduction to Switzerland. There we were, within an hour of landing, enjoying fabulous mountain scenery from the large windows of the upper lounge on a double-decker intercity train.

Lucerne, like Zurich and Geneva, is located at the end of a clear blue mountain lake with majestic snow-capped peaks rising along the shore. However, unlike the other two bustling commercial centres, Lucerne has a more leisurely pace. It's a beautiful city whose

architecture bears both Dutch and French influences. Walking is really the best way to see Lucerne. Remnants of the old city wall, with its nine towers, are an easy half-hour walk. The city's most famous landmark, the Chapel Bridge, which claims to be the oldest covered bridge in the world, spans the Reuss River right in the heart of downtown Lucerne.

On warm summer evenings, Lucerne's narrow cobblestone streets come alive with the crowds, street entertainers and sidewalk cafés. It's like a joyful

celebration of life, with music and laughter floating in the air as heraldic banners hanging from old buildings flutter in the breeze. It would be easy to spend a week in Lucerne and do something different every day. During high season, there are over 40 different excursions, including the Rigi, a brand new hotel and spa on top of Mount Rigi.

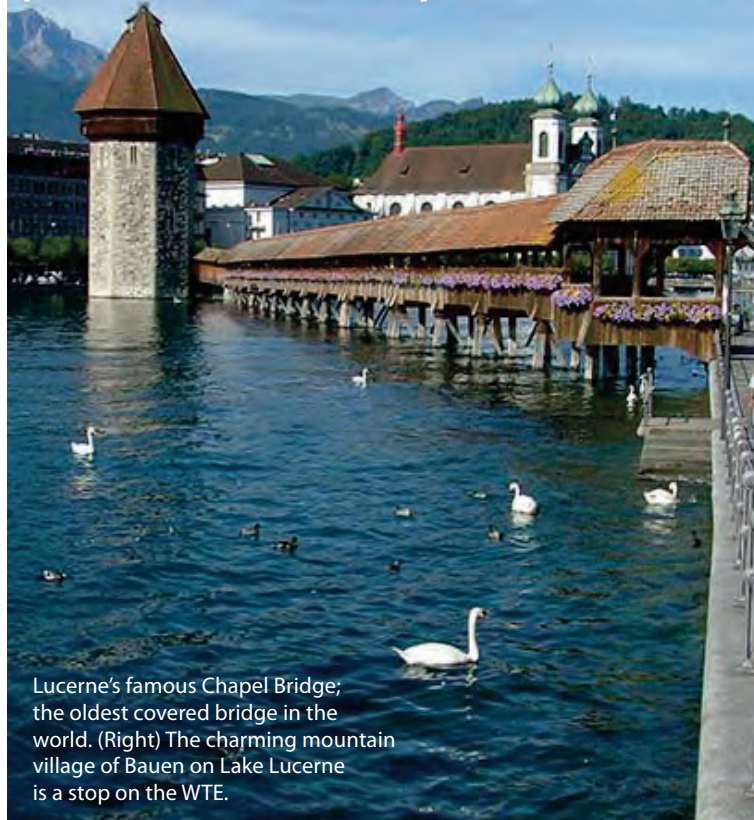
The beautifully restored paddle steamer we boarded the next morning at the Lucerne docks would be only the first leg of the William Tell Express. It's a historic journey into both railroad

and Swiss history, running daily from May to October. Our ship had been used before 1900 to link the small villages along Lake Lucerne with the rail system; now it was refurbished and back at work gathering passengers from hotels and resorts along the lake. The surrounding mountains reflected off the mirror-like water while picture-perfect villages dotted the shore. The ship stopped near famous Rütli Meadow where — according to legend — Switzerland was formed when an alliance was forged among three founding cantons to become the

Photo, (this page) Roland Gerth/Switzerland Tourism

Photography, Lindsay Editorial

[SPECTACULAR NATURE]



Lucerne's famous Chapel Bridge; the oldest covered bridge in the world. (Right) The charming mountain village of Bauen on Lake Lucerne is a stop on the WTE.



An early morning ferry plies Lake Lucerne.



Swiss Confederacy. The guide also told of the heroism of William Tell, whom legend credits with solidifying Swiss resistance to occupation by shooting an apple off his son's head with a crossbow. A building on the site holds a copy of the first constitution. The guide had barely finished speaking when two groups of schoolchildren aboard erupted into happy cheers, their young voices echoing off the cliffs. Everyone was silenced by the beauty of the moment.

THE GOTTHARD PASS

When the paddle steamer reached the end of the lake in Flüelen, the first stage of our memorable voyage ended. A first-class panorama train waited to carry us all on the second leg — the spectacular journey through the Gotthard Pass. As we took our seats in air-conditioned comfort, it was hard to believe that this was the same spot where travellers, before the opening of the rail tunnel in 1882, had to unload their belongings from a lake barge onto pack mules for the long, dangerous trek through the pass. Soon our pollution-free electric train was gliding through wooded mountains while the hostess took

orders for drinks and snacks. Built over 125 years ago, this unique transalpine route features engineering achievements that still impress today. As it descends from the snow-capped peaks of Central Switzerland into Ticino, it crosses 13 viaducts and uses 32 tunnels, seven of them spiral ones. However, in the blackness of the tunnels, it was hard to tell if they were spiral, until we approached Wasser, that is. There, the little church provided a great reference point. First we were above it, then, one tunnel later, level with it, and finally, after popping out of the next tunnel, far below it.

We were soon out of the mountains and into the canton of Ticino, where the countryside gradually sloughs off its alpine roughness and transforms into a luxuriant Mediterranean landscape. As the train headed toward Bellinzona, the capital of Ticino, we took in vineyard-covered hillsides and the broad Ticino Valley stretching out before us. Here, three mountain valleys converge. Not surprisingly, three mighty castles, now UNESCO World Heritage Sites, were built to control this strategic spot. You can catch a quick glimpse of them before

the train pulls into the station, or glance back as it leaves. We were now in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland and had to make a choice. Would we journey on to Lugano or Locarno? Both cities are like jewels amid the mountains, shimmering beside their own palm-fringed lakes.

LUGANO WINS OUT

The Rio de Janeiro of the Old Continent, Lugano is the most southerly city in Switzerland, surrounded by Italy on three sides. It enjoys a Mediterranean climate that draws tourists for the weather alone. The city also has a beautiful setting — spread out along the shore of Lake Lugano between the peaks of Monte Brè and Monte San Salvatore. A magnificent view of the city and the surrounding mountains awaits anyone riding to the summit of either of these two peaks. It comes as a surprise that behind the laid-back facade, Lugano is actually the third-largest financial centre in Switzerland.

However businesslike, Lugano still has an eye for beauty. The historic centre of town by the old city hall has been closed to traffic to create a wonderful



The spectacular Matterhorn, iconic symbol of Switzerland and the most photographed mountain in the world.

Trip Planning

Swiss Tourist Board
480 University Ave., Suite 1500
Toronto, Ont. M5G 1V2
416.695.3496
myswitzerland.com

Swiss Rail Pass
swisstravelsystem.ch

PostBus / postbus.ch

The Rigi / rigi.ch

plaza. Beds of bright red blossoms enhance the old stonework, a fountain splashes in the sun, and people seem content to stay and chat. At night the plaza comes alive with sidewalk cafés and wine bars. Many of the older streets have also become “pedestrian precincts.” Here, free from traffic, you can window-shop for the latest Italian fashions, let your nose lead you into cheese and sausage shops, enjoy the vibrant colours of fruit and vegetable stands, or follow the ever-present aroma of chocolate to a nearby shop. Even sitting under a palm tree in one of the lovely lakeside parks watching windsurfers flit across the lake is fun in Lugano.

One warm day we spur-of-the-minute decided to catch the ferry to



Small villages blend together as they cling like lichen to the cliffs above Lake Lugano.

Gandria. We simply showed up at the dock, Swiss Passes in hand, and boarded the next passenger ferry. The sunlight sparkled on the waters of Lake Lugano as we neared Gandria, the former fishing village that has become the haunt of artists. The village clings like lichen to the sheer rocky cliffs above the lake. There’s a Mediterranean feel to the place, with its tiled roofs, pastel facades, and arcades that offer shelter from the noontime heat. Steep, winding pedestrian-only streets, in places narrowing to only one person wide, link the houses and numerous specialty and craft shops. This tiny gem of a place is unique, with restaurants cantilevered out over the blue waters of the lake.

This seamless travel pass offers many options. For example, going by train and returning by PostBus, or vice versa, makes for two entirely different trips. The bright yellow road coaches, all with new Internet access on board, glide along high alpine roads with views of mountain peaks, picturesque valleys and pretty villages. Our passes also gave us free access to city transit buses and a selection of over 400 Swiss museums — perfect for a rainy day. Seats can also be reserved on the special excursion trains, something we did for a portion of the spectacular Glacier Express to visit the mountain village of Zermatt. A small supplement was required to top up our

Swiss Passes, but when we stepped off the little cog railway train at the observation station and found ourselves overwhelmingly close to the snowy splendour of the iconic Matterhorn, we knew that it had been worth every penny. Like that moment on the William Tell paddle steamer, it was a magical Swiss memory we’ll never forget.

PRE-BOOK LUGGAGE

Swiss Rail also offers the option of booking your luggage straight through from one Swiss destination to another at any train station in the country. The nominal price per bag was well worth the convenience, especially when we were planning on a lot of walking or making a number of train transfers during our day. Also, 24 hours before departure on our last day, we checked our luggage at the train station, sending it directly to Zurich Airport. This freed us to spend our last day walking in Bern, exploring the historic part of the town, with its medieval fountains and unique arcades, unencumbered by baggage.

Between Bern and Zurich, we had our first experience in a “silent car.” Some high-speed trains, especially commuter trains, have cars with signs prohibiting loud conversations and the use of cellphones and personal music systems. We wonder if the idea will catch on in other countries. ■