

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
LOLA AKINMADE ÅKERSTRÖM

Lucerne's Center Stage

BY CHRISTOPHER P. HILL

A CITY OF MUSIC, BRIDGES, AND MEDIEVAL TURRETS IN THE HEART OF SWITZERLAND, LUCERNE IS AMONG THE COUNTRY'S MOST POPULAR STOPS, AND IT'S IMMEDIATELY APPARENT WHY. WHETHER YOU'RE VISITING FOR THE FIRST TIME OR EVEN THE FIFTH, YOU'LL FIND CHARM TO SPARE — AND, JUST A SHORT BOAT OR TRAIN RIDE AWAY, MORE THAN A FEW MOUNTAINS TO CLIMB.

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A cobblestone passage beside Lucerne's old 17th-century town hall leads down to the Reuss River and the Neustadt ("new city") area beyond.

Fischmarkt
von 7.00 - 12.00 Uhr

While sojourning in Weggis

during the summer of 1897, Mark Twain declared the lakeside village to be “the charmingest place we have ever lived in for repose and restfulness.” I know this because it’s inscribed (albeit in paraphrased form) on a commemorative plaque at the base of an ancient oak tree where Twain is said to have spent many hours smoking his pipe and gazing out at the placid blue waters of Lake Lucerne. Whether he’d recognize the place today I can’t say; Weggis has evolved into a bustling little holiday resort with a vertigo-inducing cableway that carries hikers and sightseers three-quarters of the way up the mountain that looms behind it, Rigi. But restful it remains, at least compared to the tourist-packed streets of Lucerne, a 40-minute boat ride away.

I don’t hold Lucerne’s popularity against it, by the way. I’ve visited the quintessential Swiss city twice now, and each time has been transporting. Surrounded by an amphitheater of mountains on the shores of its glittering namesake lake, it’s a town of medieval towers and gable-roofed bridges and palatial lakeside piles that has inspired visitors for more than a century and a half—from Leo Tolstoy, who wrote that the view from his room at the quayside Hotel Schweizerhof “literally dazzled and overwhelmed me,” to Queen Victoria and Richard Wagner, who composed the last act of *Tristan und Isolde* here.

Still, we’re talking about a city of 80,000 inhabitants that these days welcomes as many as five million visitors a year. Beguiling as it may be, sometimes you’ve just got to get out of town. And the options for that are plenty. Nature is everywhere on Lucerne’s doorstep, or at least a short boat ride away. For starters, there’s Mount Pilatus, the highest peak in these parts. One popular half-day excursion is the Goldene Rundfahrt, which admittedly sounds more appealing in translation (“golden round trip”). This takes you up to the mountain’s craggy summit by gondola and cable car, down the other side via the world’s steepest cog railway, and back to town by steamship. Or there’s Rigi. While not as tall as Pilatus, the views from its main peak, Rigi Kulm, are stupendous, encompassing a dozen lakes and countless mountains all the way to France and Germany. To quote again from Twain, who took in the sunrise at Rigi Kulm after a leisurely

three-day hike up from Weggis, “We could not speak. We could hardly breathe. We could only gaze in drunken ecstasy and drink it in.”

These days, signposted trails enable a fit hiker to climb the 1,400 meters to Rigi Kulm in under five hours. Alternatively, you could do what most people do and either hop aboard the cogwheel train in nearby Vitznau for a ride on Europe’s oldest mountain railway—in operation since 1871—or take Weggis’s cableway up to the resort area of Rigi Kaltbad (where a Mario Botta–designed spa overlooks green cow pastures) and meet the train there for the rest of the ride to the summit. Walk back down if you have the time and energy: the route takes you through forests and meadows seemingly plucked from the pages of *Heidi*.

But don’t head back to Lucerne—or Luzern, as its mostly German-speaking residents spell it—just yet. One bus stop away from Weggis is Haldi Hof, a seven-hectare farm and orchard perched prettily above the lake. Here, Bruno Muff, his wife Rebecca, and their son Julian produce organic gin, schnapps, aquavit, mustards, and a variety of vinegars and preserves, all made with very local ingredients. They’ll happily show you around their year-old distillery, clad in Rigi pine and filled with shiny copper fermenters and boilers; but it’s the on-site shop, housed in an old farm building, that’s the main attraction. The shelves and tables here groan with the Muffs’ impressive range of products, each a perfect souvenir. These include handmade soaps, wool scarves from the farm’s alpacas, and a line of small-batch spirits infused with herbs and flowers from the slopes of Rigi, without a single foreign chemical or additive. Julian calls their philosophy “producing with nature instead of against nature.”

I’m sold. Purchasing a flask of kirsch labeled Wanderwasser (“hiking water”), I sit out on the farm’s café terrace and knock it back—the cap conveniently doubles as a shot glass. Chickens scratch in the dirt nearby, and a peacock unexpectedly struts past. Cowbells clang in the distance. And the views are sublime, stretching across the glinting surface of Lake Lucerne to the wooded flanks of Mount Pilatus, its peak shrouded in wisps of cloud. I suspect Twain would have approved.

Back in Lucerne, I’m staying at Hotel Schweizerhof, a grand old family-run hotel across the road from the lake. I urge you to stay here too. The neoclassical landmark has been around for more than 170 years and has hosted seemingly every famous personage who has come through town, from Tolstoy and Wagner to Winston Churchill, B.B. King, and Claudio Abbado, the late, great Italian conductor who was instrumental in the revival of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. Such laurels wouldn’t count for much if the place wasn’t so genuinely hospitable and—thanks to a recent refurbishment—supremely comfortable. Step out of your modishly furnished room and into the hotel’s marble-columned lobby, however, and you’ll feel transported back to the gilded age of the Grand Tour.

It’s also an easy walk from the Schweizerhof to pretty much anywhere you’ll want to go. The heart of the Old Town area is just steps away, and while its cobblestone streets and colorfully muraled Renaissance squares throng with snap-happy tour groups, only

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Riverfront facades in Lucerne’s Old Town; a room at Hotel Schweizerhof; a vendor at the Saturday morning farmer’s market along the River Reuss; the iconic Lion Monument.



CHRISTOPHER P. HILL (TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM LEFT)



Left: Gin for sale at the Haldi Hof farm shop. Below: A guide at the visitor center atop Mount Pilatus. Opposite: Chapel Bridge at night.



a curmudgeon wouldn't want to spend at least an hour strolling around the area. When you tire of that, the quiet residential lanes behind the more touristed stretch of town lead up to the old city wall, which extends 800 meters from the River Reuss to somewhere behind Hotel Schweizerhof. If walking along medieval ramparts is your thing, you won't want to miss this. Four of the nine towers along the wall are open to the public, including the must-see Zyt Tower, which houses the oldest clock in the city—a hand-wound contraption that has been ticking since 1535.

On the other side of the Reuss in the Neustadt district, there are plenty of quieter sites to explore. One is the Ritterscher Palace, built 460 years ago in the Florentine Renaissance style. Today housing the cantonal government offices, it's off the radar of most sightseers, which leaves you pretty much alone—barring the bureaucrats who work there—to admire both its handsome inner courtyard and the haunting, seven-piece *Dance of Death* canvases by 17th-century Swiss painter Jakob von Wyl that hang upstairs. Near at hand is Lucerne's Jesuit Church, just downriver from the covered medieval Chapel Bridge. By all means venture inside; the baroque beauty's hushed, light-filled nave was updated to the rococo style in 1749 with wonderful wedding-cake detail, including ornate side altars and an elaborately frescoed ceiling. Take a pew and look up—the central painting depicts Francis Xavier on a chariot pulled by an elephant and a pair of camels.

And there are museums to explore—10, at least, that can be

accessed over two consecutive days with the Lucerne Museum Card, a steal at 36 Swiss francs per person. Among them are the family-friendly Swiss Museum of Transport, a sprawling attraction on the outskirts of town that charts the development of travel by rail, air, road, and water. It's also the most popular museum in the country, so be prepared for crowds. A decidedly more sedate alternative is the stately lakeside villa in Tribschen where Richard Wagner lived and composed between 1866 and 1872. Or for lovers of post-impressionist and modernist art, there's the Museum Sammlung Rosengart, which I eagerly revisit on this trip. Housed in an imposing former bank building on Pilatusstrasse, it's a three-story trove of works by Cézanne and Chagall, Matisse and Braque, and especially Klee and Picasso. Art dealer Angela Rosengart, now in her eighties, was a close friend of Picasso's, and he left her with more than 100 of his sketches and paintings, including some of Angela herself.

Another day, another mountain to conquer. This time it's Titlis, a 3,238-meter summit—the highest in central Switzerland—



TOP LEFT: CHRISTOPHER P. HILL



A view of the western end of Lake Lucerne from the quay in front of Hotel Schweizerhof, with Mount Pilatus in the background. Opposite: The Pilatus aerial cableway.

THE DETAILS

Where to Stay

Hotel Schweizerhof Luzern
Schweizerhofquai 3;
41-41/410-0410;
schweizerhof-luzern.com;
doubles from US\$482.

Where to Eat

Burgerstube
Hotel Wilden Mann,
Schulstrasse 1; 41-61/
901-5717; hotel-wilden
mann.com.

Zunftrestaurant

Pfistern
Kornmarkt 4; 41-41/
410-3650; restaurant-
pfistern.ch.

Scala

Hotel Montana,
Adligenswilerstrasse 22;
41-41/417-3541; hotel-
montana.ch.

What to See and Do

Haldi Hof

Weggis; haldihof.ch.

Mount Rigi

rigi.ch.

Mount Pilatus

pilatus.ch.

Mount Titlis

titlis.ch.

Museum Sammlung

Rosengart

Pilatusstrasse 10;
41-41/220-1660;
rosengart.ch.

Richard Wagner Museum

Richard Wagner Weg 27,
Tribtschen; 41-41/360-
2370; richard-wagner-
museum.ch.

Schaukäserei Kloster

Engelberg

Klosterhof, Engelberg;
41-41/638-08-88;
schaukaeserei-
engelberg.ch.

Swiss Museum of Transport

Lidostrasse 5; 41-41/370-
4444; verkehrshaus.ch.

that straddles the cantons of Obwalden and Bern. It's a different world up here, and yet just 50 minutes by express train from Lucerne. At the end of the line is Engelberg. What was once a remote monastery village has morphed into a mountainside mecca for winter sports, though there are plenty of summertime attractions as well: hiking, walking (including a barefoot track), braving Europe's highest suspension bridge, and trekking on the Titlis Glacier, which you can reach via a rotating gondola.

Down at Engelberg again, there's the monastery to see—a 12th-century abbey (most of which was rebuilt in the 1700s) that is still home to about 30 Benedictine monks. It also houses the Schaukäserei Kloster, a cheese factory with a modern “show dairy” where you can watch the cheese-making process unfold behind a circular wall of glass. Its most distinctive product is a brie-style fromage called Engelberg Klostersglocke, which takes its shape from the old church bell sitting in the monastery's courtyard. Book a hands-on tour, and the young blue-eyed owner Walter Grob will show you the proper way to slice up a blob of curd. It's more fun than it sounds.

All that fresh mountain air gives me a keen appetite for dinner, and once I'm back in Lucerne, I know just the spot: Burgerstube, at the Wilden Mann hotel. Lucerne has no shortage of atmospheric old-world restaurants—another favorite of mine, a wood-paneled tourist magnet called Zunftrestaurant Pfistern, occupies an old bakers' guild house on the north bank of the Reuss—but this one seems more authentically local than most. Under low wooden ceiling beams emblazoned with heraldic shields, the tables during my visit are occupied by a group of card-playing old men and smartly dressed younger couples on date night. The food is solid Swiss fare—fried farmer-style bratwurst with onion sauce; veal



and rösti—and the candlelit room is warm and cossetting. Amazingly, the place turns 500 years old this year. How's that for history?

On my last day in town, I stroll up to the Löwendenkmal—Lion Monument—to have a look at what Mark Twain once described as “the saddest and most moving piece of rock in the world.” Carved in relief into the face of a low sandstone cliff, the sculpture commemorates the regiment of Swiss Guards who died defending Paris's Tuileries Palace during the French Revolution. Perhaps ironically, the monument is regularly besieged by tourists. From here, it's a 15-minute walk to the Art Deco Hotel Montana, a century-old hillside property whose name tells you all you need to know about its architectural style.

Lunch awaits on the terrace of the hotel's elegant Scala restaurant. The Mediterranean-accented food is terrific, but the real reason you come here is for the views. All of Lucerne is laid out before you, from the distant bulk of Rigi to the Bürgenstock plateau right around to the twin spires of St. Leodegar church and the Old Town beyond. Directly across the water from where I'm sitting is the train station and the Lucerne Culture and Congress Center, a strikingly modern building by French architect Jean Nouvel whose vast, cantilevered roof shelters one of Europe's premier concert halls. Lucerne old and new, natural and urban, all gathered around this celebrated Swiss lake. Who knows? It just might be enough to lure me back a third time. ☉