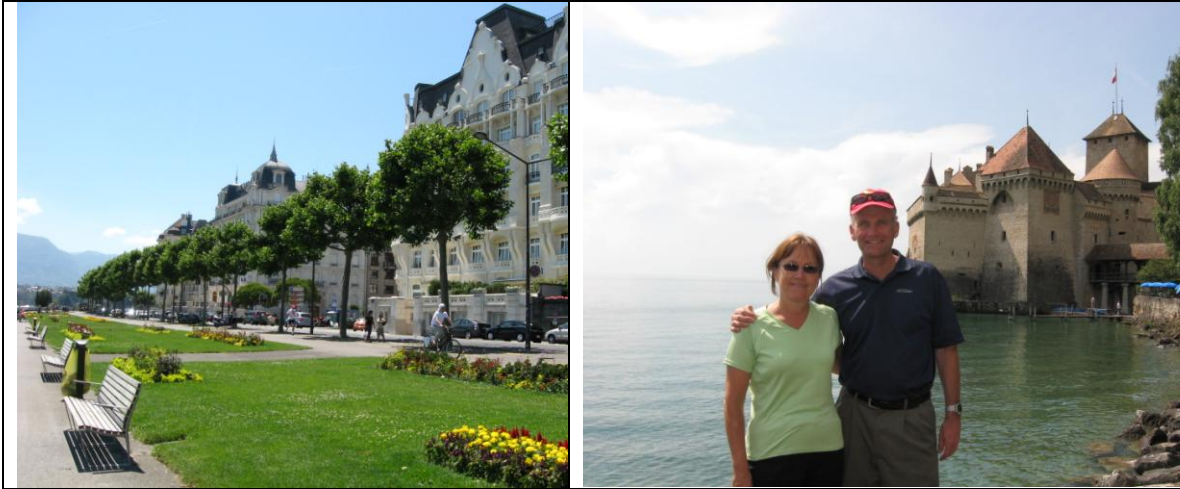


July, 2009

Our preparations for our trip to Switzerland began as they do for all of our trips. Two days before departure, Rich lays out what he wants to take in the spare bedroom. Then, late at night, the Packing Fairy visits. She folds the clothes and everything magically jumps into the suitcases! It's a great system.

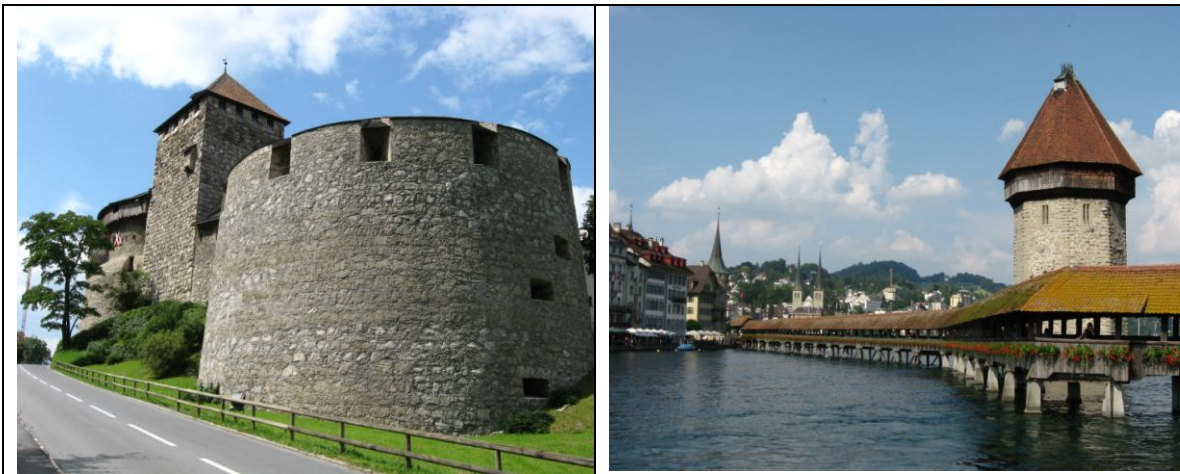


We flew to Geneva and rented a car for two weeks. We did brief city tours of Geneva, Bern, Lucerne, Lausanne, Montreux, and Zurich. Each had a carefully preserved Old Town and colorful promenades along lakes and rivers. We found the Swiss people to be organized, reserved, efficient, punctual and incredibly clean. During a trip to Italy we complained that the locals allowed their dogs to turn the sidewalks into obstacle courses. In Lucerne, we watched as a woman used a bag to carefully clean up after her dog. When she was done, she reached into her purse, pulled out a wipe, and delicately de-poopified her doggie's derriere! She disposed of everything in the designated green container that was whisked away in one of the world's coolest garbage trucks.



While we had been warned, the prices caused us to shudder and pause. Most things cost double the US price. Three-star hotels were \$175/night with no air-conditioning. There was a pay toilet in the Zurich train station that cost almost \$2. We could have bought eight ice cream cones last year in Ukraine for the price of one pit stop in Switzerland. We economized by holding it as long as possible and staying in two-star establishments.

Switzerland has no official language. The culture is a blend of Italian, German, and French. CNN was the only English language TV station at one of our hotels. We were looking for news of the GM bankruptcy, but became frustrated that the only thing they felt newsworthy was a helicopter flying over Michael Jackson's hearse on a deserted LA freeway. We found no real news or entertainment, but we could have watched live coverage of the funeral procession in any of five languages.



The fact that the Swiss live in relative harmony in a country with a long history of neutrality is an example of which many other countries should take note. Some of the prosperity is certainly due to the profits from secret bank accounts, but recent European agreements make them more transparent and probably less lucrative. Money launderers need not worry. It was an easy trip across the border to Liechtenstein which is full of "Private Banks". We didn't open an account, but we did stay long enough to hike up to the Prince's castle, buy some stamps and check Liechtenstein off of our list.



Our favorite portions of the trip were spent in the mountains. We hiked more than 100 miles on the well-marked trails. The first day out, Rich was looking for the two day packs the he had set out but could only find one. The intent was to split up the load of a picnic lunch, water, maps and rain gear. It appears that the Packing Fairy had left one at home. Everything had to be stuffed into one heavy pack for Rich to shoulder. Cheryl denied that she and the Packing Fairy conspired to have Rich carry the full load.



Some people look at the mountains and wonder why anyone would want to go there. Some see them as a challenge and attempt a climb. The Swiss think; "If I can build a lift up there, I can charge tourists \$50 to take them up there." There are dozens of lifts, gondolas, and cog-wheel trains to the high grounds. We rode a few lifts and used them as bases for hikes.



Swiss food is a wonderful blend of chocolate, cheese, French pastry, cheese, Italian food, and chocolate; all served with German efficiency. Cheryll found that the fondue tasted potent, with an overpowering liquor flavor from the cherry schnapps that was added to the melted cheese and white wine mixture. We have an unused fondue set leftover from our wedding. Maybe it will fetch \$3 at our next garage sale. She enjoyed Raclette which a Swiss marketing genius invented to get tourists to pay \$20 to melt cheese onto potatoes. We chose not to eat a \$12 Big Mac meal.

The Swiss get a little carried away with their technology. They do a good business with Swiss Army knives and luxury watches. Every church tower has a giant clock. The classic Swiss country house has a pasture with around a dozen cows. Rather than branding, the cows are fitted with bar-coded ear tags. Why on earth would anyone need bar codes to keep track of 12 cows?!? Maybe this is why fancy chocolate costs \$30/pound.





Our final stop was across the border in Chamonix, France. Prices were slightly lower, and the scenery was just as nice. Chamonix is an adventure center with people headed out to climb the serious mountains and then parasail down. We stuck to just hiking in the higher grounds. Almost everyone in Chamonix seemed incredibly fit. We saw families with five-year-old kids out on difficult five-hour hikes over boulders with ladders bolted to the sides in the steep sections. Many of them brought the 70-year-old grandparents along. There wasn't a Gameboy or Ipod to be found. We could get used to this lifestyle.

We absolutely loved Switzerland and the French Alps. We hope to be able to afford a return trip in the future.

