

BACKROADS OF SWITZERLAND 2012

We had been looking at a tour from AFC Travel called “Backroads of Switzerland” for quite some time, but wanted to tie it in with a river cruise. This is actually a misnomer as there are no roads to the places we visited. Since neither Kathy nor I had been to Switzerland, we thought we could tie a Swiss tour in with a river cruise like we did with our Baltic cruise in 2010. That way we would do two tours and only have to do one Atlantic crossing.

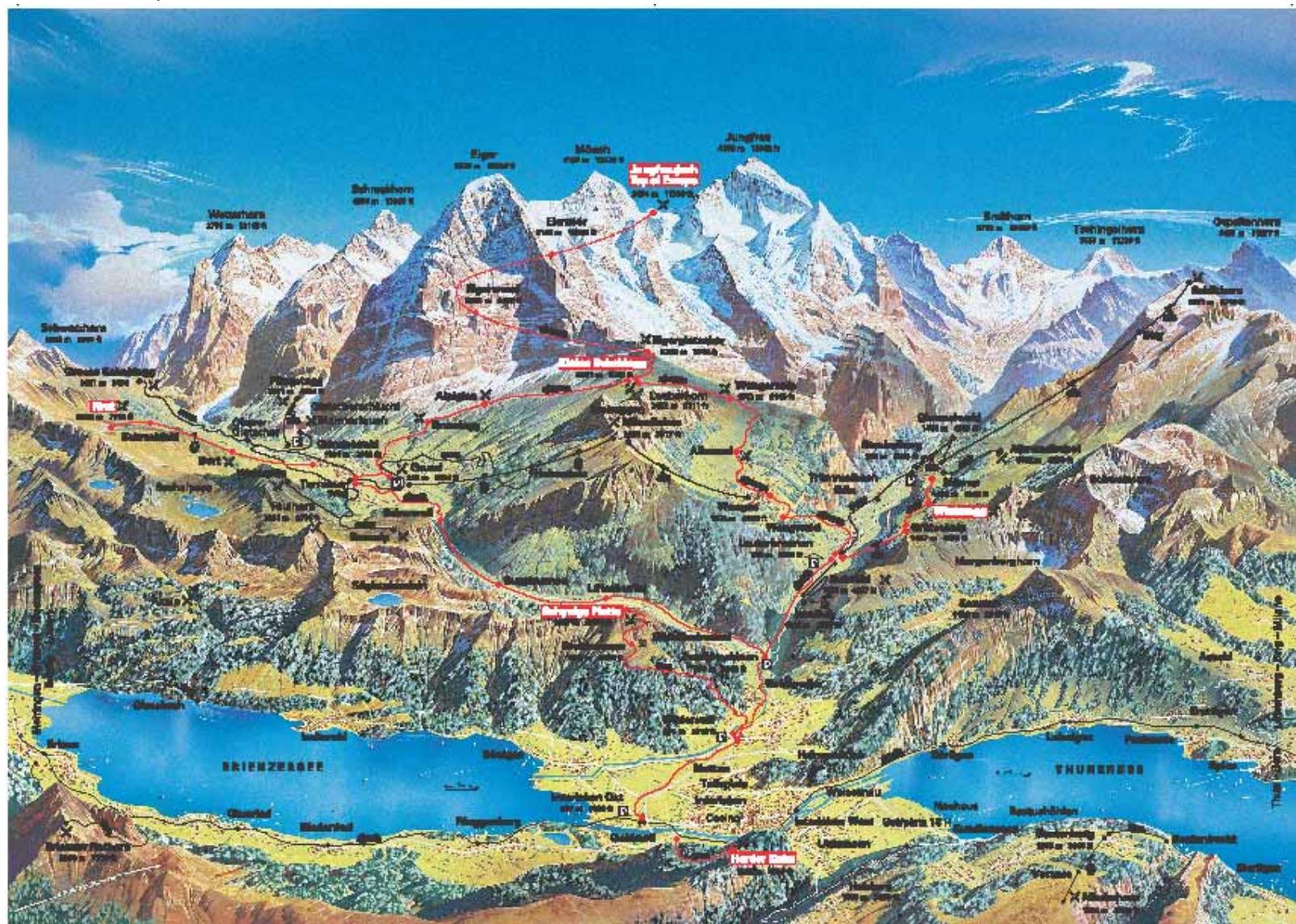
Our task was to coordinate both trips so there are no overlaps. We found a French Waterways river cruise that fit the criteria and booked that also. That story is also on our website

www.stevkathytravels.com as French Waterways 2012.

The AFC tour date did not meet our schedule, but we had the AFC itinerary for the Swiss trip, and Kathy in her wisdom said, “Why don’t we do it ourselves and not have to follow the yellow umbrella?” Thank goodness for the Internet, because I got all the train and hotel information, and laid out the trip schedule.

We planned to have an extra day in Nice, but I found out the hotel the river tour was putting us up in was in Monte Carlo, which is on Kathy’s “bucket list”.

The picture below shows all the trains and trams in the Bernese Alps, and Wengen is at the center of the map.



To get from Switzerland to our river cruise, we will have to take the train from Wengen to Monte Carlo, changing in Basel and Geneva, but if we could make it from Wales to the Lake District in

England changing twice, this should not be a problem. The difference was there were 5 changes of trains instead of 2! We were resigned to only taking 2 suitcases and 2 carry-on's for this 22 day trip. While visiting my mother before this trip, I suddenly had an idea! I could put the 2 carry-on bags back to back, and strap them together with a luggage strap, reducing our bags to four. I called Vantage Travel and requested a reroute of our flights and also requested Business Class on British Airways. After our experience last year flying Business Class, we have gotten so spoiled by it, that we will (gulp) pay the extra cost. We feel that as we are not getting any younger, and 10 hours sitting up even in Economy Plus each way is too much for our bodies. The picture below is what Business Class looks like on British Airways.



We booked seats on the upper deck of the 747, and Kathy had 4 windows to look out, plus some storage spaces and a footrest that dropped down. She loved it!



Since the upper deck was right next to the flight deck, I went in and introduced myself as a pilot and mentioned the company I had worked for made the engine fire detection units for the 747. I chatted with the pilot briefly, and excused myself as they were working on their checklists and routing. We slept on the plane, and when I awoke, I found the pilot had left me a copy of their routing chart and a note inviting me back to the flight deck after we landed.

ZURICH

Because we had an overnight flight and would arrive in Zurich about 3 PM (midnight in California), we felt it would be wiser to stay overnight in Zurich and head out the next day. The hotel we picked was near the main Zurich train station, and was not too far from the airport. Getting to the hotel was an experience, as none of the traffic lights in Zurich seems to be synchronized. The hotel was very nice, but the restaurant was extremely expensive (\$25 for a hamburger). I went out in the area and found a small kebab restaurant and brought back some gyros and salad that were great! The next morning we awoke refreshed, and took a taxi to the train station.

LAUTERBRUNNEN / WENGEN

Upon leaving Zurich we boarded the first of 3 trains and traveled through the rolling Swiss landscape past sparkling lakes up into the massive Swiss Alps. We had to take a train from Zurich to Bern, then one from Bern to Interlaken Ost (East), then one from Interlaken to Lauterbrunnen. This was reminiscent of our Ireland trip, where it was taxi, ferry, 3 trains and a taxi!

As the trains rolled, the scenery is increasingly spectacular as we skirted Lake Thun, one of 2 lakes in the Bernese Alps



We arrived in Lauterbrunnen, with its towering cliffs and fantastic waterfalls. It was very reminiscent of Yosemite, but without Half Dome. We also met the cog rail train that we would be riding many times during our visit.





We then transferred by the cog-rail to the enchanting village of Wengen. On the way up the train stopped for the engineer to chat with the one going downhill. We could look back and see the valley we just left. We were taken to our hotel by a little electric jitney along with our luggage. We selected this hotel because it was very close to the train station, since all our travels will be by train using a rail pass.

Upon arriving in Wengen, we discovered we could look down on the beautiful Lauterbrunnen Valley with its cliffs, waterfalls, and charming Swiss chalets.



The picture on the left shows how close our hotel with the red roof is to the train station. The view from our balcony was great, but as we looked at the hotel up the hill from us, we saw a group of travelers dragging their bags up the three tier zigzag to the hotel. We really felt sorry for them, as their hotel was probably advertised as near to the train station.



We checked into our hotel, and while checking the TV stations, found that one channel had webcams of the weather on all the places we wanted to go.

The first order of business was to buy our Berner Oberland Passes. The pass was good on all the trains, trams, cable cars and buses in the region. By the end of our visit, we had used them so much that the ink wore off. The stationmaster complained about that, and I told him he was the one who issued them to me in the first place.

The second order of business was to buy some softer toilet paper. The paper in the hotel reminded us of blank newspaper on a roll. I went to the market next door, and in sign language asked for the softest toilet paper they had. The clerk looked at me strangely, but my point was made. One of the true luxuries of the USA is our toilet paper.

LAUTERBRUNNEN VALLEY AND SCHILTHORN

The weather at the Jungfrau was overcast, so we boarded the cog-rail for an excursion to the glacier carved Lauterbrunnen Valley. We then continued by bus to Stechelberg to take the cable car to Murren. From there we took two more cable cars to get us up to the Schilthorn, to go to a revolving restaurant called Piz Gloria at the "top of the world" for lunch. It was featured in the James Bond movie, "On her Majesty's Secret Service".

On the way up we passed another beautiful waterfall.



The picture on the left is what the restaurant looks like on a clear day. The other pictures are what we experienced. Even though it looks very cold, the temperature was in the mid 50's. This griped us as we both took heavy clothing for the expected colder temperatures. Had we known the true temperatures, we could have gotten by with one less giant suitcase.





JUNGFRAUHOCH/ THE EIGER

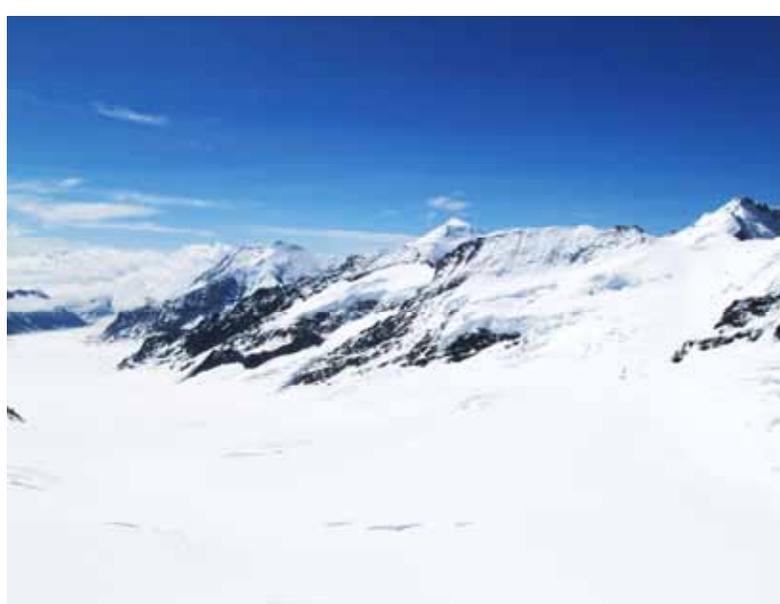
The weather had improved, so we rode the rails up to the Jungfraujoch Mountain, traveling to an altitude of 11,133 feet through a tunnel built in the mountain of Eiger. Kathy was a little unsure if she wanted to do this because of the altitude, but saw a segment on TV where Matt Lauer ended up at the observatory on the mountain. She did quite well, even though she had never been at this altitude before.

There were two stops in the tunnel with viewing windows on the way to the top, and the first one at Eigerwand was socked in! When we got to the second stop at Eismeer, it was severe clear! We breathed a sigh of relief and got off at the top of the mountain. We then took an elevator up to the observatory at the top of the mountain called the Sphinx because of its resemblance to the one in Egypt.



The view was absolutely spectacular! Looking down, we could see a snow play area where people could take a tube ride down then catch a little tram back up. Imagine this much snow in June!!! By the way, I love the telephoto feature of my new camera!





As can be seen by the last two pictures, there was a solid cloud deck below us, but we could see the peaks of the Eiger, Schreckhorn and Wetterhorn in the distance.

GRINDELWALD

After our visit, we went down the mountain to the Kleine Scheidegg station, which is the junction to go either to Wengen or the village of Grindelwald via the cog railway. The views of the surrounding mountains from the town were spectacular! The vistas changed as the clouds would roll through.





We stopped at a little snack bar for lunch, and the lady who owned it had been a nanny in the states at one time. We chatted for some time, and it turned out she collected the US State quarters. Kathy and I checked our pockets and came up with a few for her she did not have. We then headed back to Wengen by train and cog train to our hotel.

SCHYHNIGE PLATTE

The lady in Grindelwald mentioned that there was a steam train up to Schynige Platte, so we headed down the mountain to Wilderswil to catch the train. When we arrived, we were told the steam train only ran twice a month, and we had missed it.



I introduced myself to one of the trainmen and told him I worked on a steam railroad in the states. He then took me on a tour of the engine house and the steam engine. It just looks so much more like an engine than the electric one. That just looks like a box on wheels!



We boarded the train which was pulled by an electric engine, and slowly made our way to the top. As you can see from the map below, it was quite a winding way up to the top. As with Grindelwald, the vistas kept changing here with the movement of clouds through the mountains.



On the way up, we saw a herd of cows, complete with cowbells. We bought one for Kathy's granddaughter at her request.



We could look down at the villages below and see the glacier fed river that comes from Lauterbrunnen.



We also had a great view of Lake Brienz, one of the two lakes in the Bernese Alps. We plan to take a steamer down the lake tomorrow.



There was a hotel at the top with a huge observation deck and a restaurant. We ordered the soup, which was a potato soup with porcini mushrooms that was fantastic, and finished lunch off with strudel.



On the way back from the hotel to the train station, we saw these beautiful alpine anemones growing by the path.



The scenery at the top was great; from the peaks all around us to the glacier carved valleys with flowing rivers and clumps of chalets.



On the train going back down, we saw the same herd of cows going through a tunnel under the tracks to get to the other pasture. Kathy like cow pictures, so I put a couple more in!



INTERLAKEN / LAKE CRUISE

We took the familiar route from Wengen to Lauterbrunnen to Interlaken. After a 5 minute walk, we were at the dock for the Lake Brienz steamer. While waiting for the ship, we looked up and there were three paragliders who had launched from the mountain behind us!



We took the steamer down Lake Brienz, making a number of stops. The most interesting was at Geissbach, where a tram took you up the hill to the Geissbach Hotel. Right next to the dock was a waterfall with a bridge across it.



As we neared Brienz, we saw a beautiful waterfall that was actually shooting out of the mountain with great force!



Arriving in Brienz, we looked for the Rothorn steam train. Unfortunately, they had a technical problem and substituted a diesel. I spoke to one of the trainmen, and was again invited to the engine house to see the steam engines. On the way, he showed me their bathroom, which was fitted out with steam gauges on the water faucets and mirrors that looked like engine windows!

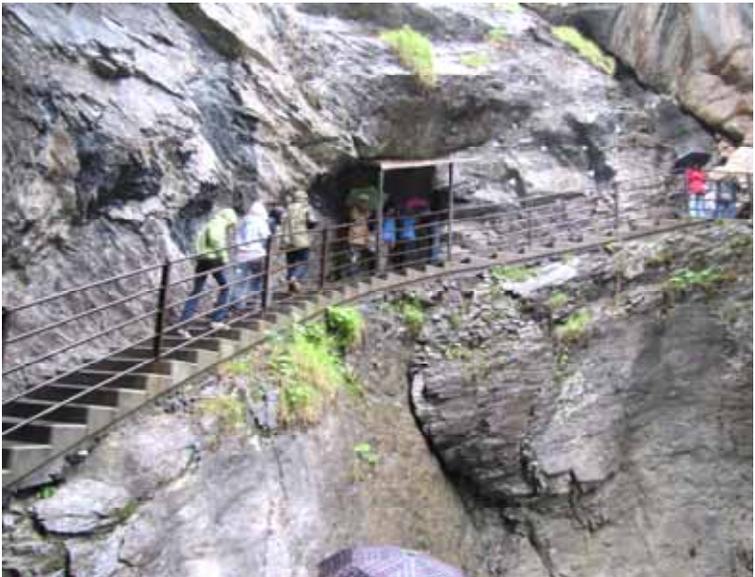
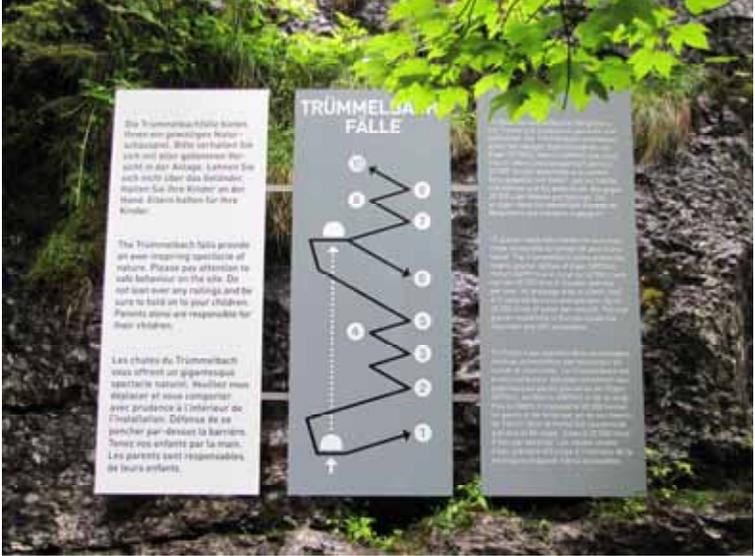


After wandering around town and doing some shopping, we reboarded the ship for the trip back to Interlaken. We then boarded a Swiss Rail train back to Lauterbrunnen, then cog rail up to Wengen.

TRUMMELBACH FALLS AND MANNLICHEN

Today was our last day of touring, so I wanted to see Trummelbach Falls. Trummelbach consists of ten glacier fed waterfalls inside a mountain. Up to 4,000 gallons a second flows through the falls, and it is the only glacier waterfalls in Europe inside a mountain. The upper falls are accessed by an elevator that goes part way up, and then the lower falls are accessed by a series of stairs leading down.

It was dark wet, and slippery, and Kathy was glad she had not gone with me.



After viewing the falls, I stopped at the restaurant at the bottom for a beer, and took one of our usual pictures.



Kathy and I had lunch in town, and then took the Mannlichen cable car up to the top to sightsee.



The view from the top of the cable car was fantastic! The photo on the left is looking down at Wengen and the Lauterbrunnen Valley. Our hotel is the “L” shaped building at the lower left. The picture on the right is looking in the opposite direction towards Grindelwald. At the bottom is the cable car taking you down from Mannlichen towards Grund and Grindelwald.



Sitting on our balcony, looking out at the mountains, we toasted our time in Switzerland with a local Swiss wine.



We have thoroughly enjoyed our time in Switzerland, especially since we had not been here before. This trip was a lot of fun because of the flexibility we had to do things on our own. It is understandable that some travelers would be uncomfortable doing this, but you give up flexibility for security. As an example, we saw hordes of tours going up to the Jungfrau hoch when there was nothing to see because of the clouds. We, on the other hand, could wait for a clear day, which we did. A trip like this was made possible because of the highly developed rail system in Western Europe. This would be impossible to do in the USA or other places in the world. To get to Monte Carlo to meet up with the river cruise group for the second part of our adventure entailed quite a bit of travel. The routing was Wengen to Lauterbrunnen to Interlaken to Bern to Geneva. We then took the TGV (fast train) to Nice and then a local to Monte Carlo. We booked first class on the TGV so we would have a place for our entire luggage, as we were sure the luggage racks in 2nd class would be full. We left at 8 AM and got to our hotel in Monte Carlo at 8 PM. Join us for the second part of our adventure on our website www.stevkathytravels.com for the French Waterways 2012 story.

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