

DESTINATION ♦ EUROPE



MT PILATUS

The biggest attraction, Mother Nature, is free; Max Chocolatier is mouth-wateringly worth the experience, and buy a Swiss Travel Pass for economical public transport.

PICTURES: SUPPLIED, SWISS-IMAGE.CH

**SWISS TWISTS**  
 Just when you thought you knew Switzerland, she has some surprises  
 CELESTE MITCHELL

ESCAPE ROUTE

SWITZERLAND

GETTING THERE

Swiss International Airlines flies to Zurich via Singapore or Hong Kong with partners Singapore Airlines and Qantas. [swiss.com](http://swiss.com)  
 The Swiss Travel Pass provides holders with unlimited access to public transport including trains, buses and boats, free access to more than 500 museums and up to 50 per cent discounts on mountain railways and cableways. Children under 16 travel for free when accompanied by a guardian using the app. [myswitzerland.com/rail](http://myswitzerland.com/rail)

DOING THERE

The Familie Schilt welcomes visitors to its farm in Iseltwald, to sample its cheese and meat platters or camp overnight in the barn during summer. [schiltenhof.ch](http://schiltenhof.ch)  
 Chocolate tastings at Max Chocolatier in Lucerne cost 100CHF (about \$133) for one person, up to 320CHF (\$430) for 12. [maxchocolatier.com](http://maxchocolatier.com)  
 Rent a Bike has 4500 diverse bikes at 200 rental stations across the country. You can drop them off at a different station to where you hired them. [rentabike.ch/en/home](http://rentabike.ch/en/home)

STAYING THERE

There are 12 rooms at Hotel Valrose in Rougemont, starting at 190CHF (\$250) a night. [hotelvalrose.ch](http://hotelvalrose.ch)

MORE

[myswitzerland.com](http://myswitzerland.com)

Like a *Stepford Wives* house in the cul-de-sac of western Europe, Switzerland looks good from all angles. It wouldn't be caught dead with one hair out of place, nor be one minute late – the country is perfectly preened and undeniably picturesque. At two-thirds the size of Tasmania, within one day you can descend from a snow-capped mountain where Alpine ibex teeter on perilous slopes, have lunch while gliding across a turquoise lake, eat cheese with a Swiss TV celebrity cook, then hike to a grand heritage hotel where a waterfall tumbles 500m, just beyond your balcony door.

While the sound of cowbells clanging and images of rolling green hills are every bit as postcard-perfect as you might imagine, here are four Swiss myths that deserve dispelling.

**MYTH NO.1 IT'S EXPENSIVE**

All that natural beauty comes at a price, and for all of Switzerland's charms, the resounding rumours remain that it's deathly expensive. While there may be \$7 coffees, the biggest attraction – Mother Nature – plays her starring role for the grand sum of zilch. And enjoying her beauty can be done almost as cheaply.

Clutching a Swiss Travel Pass (like a VIP pass to the country's best assets), I board the GoldenPass Panoramic train in Montreux – its oversized windows wrapping up into the ceiling overhead – and sit agog as giant spruce and firs, green hills and the shimmering Lake Geneva are beamed in from all angles. It has the hallmarks of an iconic luxury train journey, such as Canada's Rocky Mountaineer, but three days of continuous travel on Switzerland's trains, buses, and ferries on a three-day pass starts at \$306 – just over \$100 a day. Access to more than 500 museums and some mountain

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cableways is also included – most notably, the world's steepest cog railway to climb to the 2133m peak of Pilatus, near Lucerne, where I spend a day looping around short walking trails and drinking in views of 73 peaks for absolutely nada.

Similarly, it's the smallest – and most affordable – joys that etch the deepest memories. Such as meeting celebrity farmer Sonja Schilt, winner of TV cooking show *Landfrauenküche*, in Iseltwald and seeing her barn where you can camp in the straw for around

\$40 a night; and taste-testing a lively Vilette chasselas made by fourth-generation winemakers Jacques and Aurelia Joly in the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Lavaux region, available to buy for under \$20 a bottle.

**MYTH NO.2 IT'S ONLY FOR SNOW BUNNIES**

This is a country made for hiking and being that "efficiency" is Switzerland's middle name, you can scale mountains, traverse lakes, see gushing waterfalls, and never be too far from a ferry dock or train station to reach your next stop. More than 60,000km of hiking routes and 12,000km of cycling trails spider-web across the map with excellent signage. You can pick up an e-bike from Rent a Bike at one of hundreds of stations.

**MYTH NO.3 IT'S ALL SWISS CHALETs AND CUCKOO CLOCKS**

The Swiss chalet is alive and well and the architectural style is fiercely adhered to in some villages. But while the exterior remains an ode to traditional craftsmanship with

decorative carvings etched into the eaves, stepping into the Hotel Valrose in Rougemont bucks connotations of twee. Built in 1904 to coincide with the opening of the Montreux-Oberland Bernois railway in the Pays-d'Enhaut district, the hotel had been closed since 2007 and reopened in 2016 after extensive renovation. In juxtaposition to the 11th-century Romanesque church spied through my window, the modern interior has butter-soft leather lounges, pony-hair touches, timber-clad walls and thick grey woolen curtains.

**MYTH NO.4 ITS CULINARY HIGHLIGHT IS FONDUE**

Coveted globally and obsessively consumed by its countrymen (a third of the nation's production never leaves the borders), Swiss chocolate has long been a machine-made pleasure. But eight years ago Swiss investment banker and watch seller Patrik König decided to channel his personal pursuit of the perfect chocolate into a factory for his son, Max. The heady smell of cocoa

swaddles me as I step into the chic Max Chocolatier storefront in Lucerne for a private tasting, and in the temperature-controlled glass casing in front of me, tiny truffles – lined up like precious jewels, encrusted with delicate slivers of fleur de sel and sprigs of lavender – beg to be sampled. Using local ingredients, the highest quality cocoa, and releasing seasonal collections wrapped up in beautiful packaging, the atelier chocolate makers have a cult following, prompting a second store in Zurich. But when it comes to quality control, there's one important set of taste buds to get past first.

"When he bites into a chocolate it's like the sun is shining ... the way he enjoys it," Max Chocolatier brand and communications manager Ramona Odermatt says with the joy of Max's reaction across her own face. Max's favourite: the raspberry branchils.

This wide spectrum of experiences proves myths are made to be broken.

**THE WRITER WAS A GUEST OF SWITZERLAND TOURISM**



GOLDEN PASS



MAX CHOCOLATIER