



Chocolate, Cheese, & Chest Pains

GENE 303 Report on Life in Switzerland



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Prof. Richard Culham,

This report, entitled “Chocolate, Cheese and Chest Pains”, was prepared in fulfillment of the GENE 303 requirements for the International Studies Option. The purpose of this report is to detail my experiences living abroad as a co-op student in Zurich, Switzerland.

During the first work term, I was employed at Optotune AG working as a materials science intern. For the second work term, I was employed at G-20 Advisors AG, working as a junior quantitative analyst.

This report was written entirely by me and has not received any previous academic credit at this, or any other academic institution. All photos are my own, unless otherwise noted. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following people, who made my time in Switzerland what it was: Ms. Rhiannon Lohr, Mrs. Audrey Rawleigh, Mr. Seth Rawleigh, Mrs. Verena Peter-Barth, Mr. Niklaus Peter, Ms. Natalia Kukaleva, Mrs. Prisca Willman, Mr. Jonathan Mathai, and Ms. Merrirose Stone.

Kind regards,
Lauren McMillan

1. Introduction

Spending the first 8 months of 2016 in Switzerland was a rollercoaster. This report will highlight a number of key cultural lessons learned in these eight months. “Chocolate, Cheese, and Chest Pains” is meant to provide a holistic view of this time in Switzerland: looking at food, culture, and the societal systems put in place.

First, a small introduction to Switzerland. Switzerland is a small country in the centre of Europe, with a population of approximately 8 million. It is notable as it not only has four national languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansh), but also is not a member of the European Union. As such, Switzerland largely makes decisions about their country autonomously. They have frequent referendums, their own currency (the Swiss Franc), and maintain a strong military presence.

2.0 The Military

In Switzerland, all men are required to join the army. Some men are deemed unfit, and in this situation, they will pay additional tax until they are 30 years old. Others complete civil service, where they work for a government agency during this time. With military training and service being essential to Swiss culture, on weekends, the trains will be flooded with young men in military garb, presumably travelling between their barracks and hometowns.

Then, while they are not advertised, you can relatively easily stumble upon a military base or training grounds. Near one of my employers, there was a tank training facility. For the most part, it was unused, and open to walk through. However, when the military was present, certain roads would be blocked off, and flags would be up, to indicate that guns might be fired.



One of the targets at the tank-training area

3.0 Language

In Zurich and about 60% of the country, the primary language is German. Now, this isn't just any German. Specifically, it is Swiss German. In Germany, the spoken and written language is primarily High German (Hochdeutsch). Swiss German (known as Schweizerdeutsch in High German, and Schwiizerdütsch in Swiss German) is generally a spoken language. It can vary significantly from Canton to Canton and town to town, with very strong dialects. It is so different from High German that Germans often have great difficulty understanding it. With the language being highly regionalized, expats and immigrants often refrain from learning Swiss German, opting instead for High German. Nearly all Swiss Germans speak High German as well, so it is always possible to get by with High German in the German-speaking regions of Switzerland. You may not understand them, but they will understand you.

In the West of Switzerland, French is spoken as the primary language. Italian is spoken in Ticino and a few other Cantons in the South Eastern parts of the country. Lastly, there is the oft-forgotten language of Romansh. It is spoken in certain Alpine cantons. It has very few speakers, and is further considered a group of languages, with each valley in that region having a different dialect. Romansh is unfortunately becoming a dying language.

4.0 Church

4.1 Bells

Within the first few hours in Switzerland, the presence of the Church is sure to be felt. Whether or not you are religious, it is hard not to notice, due to the bells. When we arrived on New Year's Eve, the bells were in full swing. Generally, you will hear them every 15 minutes. At any given place in Zurich, you are likely to be able to hear the bells from at least two churches. On special occasions, such as New Year's, the bells will be ringing longer songs at more frequent intervals.

On Saturdays at 19:00, the bells can last at least 15 minutes, as well as on Sundays leading up to 10:00, calling the parishioners to worship. With weddings and funerals, you will also hear prolonged ringing of the bells at varied times of the day. In general, the bells are automated, so the quarter-hourly bells ring on time. It is a very real concern when looking for a new apartment, to determine how close the nearest church bell tower is. With multiple churches typically within a five minute walk of any apartment, the bells in effect cancel out one another's song, creating a wall of ringing bells.

While you do get used to them over time, they are one feature of Swiss life that expats love to complain about. Our Swiss host, by contrast, lit up when explaining how on Saturdays at 19:00, where particularly on summer evenings you would be outside with friends, the bells in the old town would be so loud, from so many directions, that no one could speak. The bells demand to be heard.

4.2 Religion

In Switzerland, there are three main branches of Christianity, in addition to growing populations from other religions. The three main Swiss denominations are: Swiss Reformed (Reformierte Kirche), Christian Catholic (Christkatholische Kirche der Schweiz), and Roman Catholic. Switzerland was one of the key locations of the Protestant Reformation, and many key players lived there at some point. In Geneva, John Calvin lived for many years, promoting his interpretation of Protestantism, now known as Calvinism. Through the city of Geneva, there are plaques and various monuments which honour the city's role in the reformation.

In Zurich, the most renowned Protestant was Huldrych Zwingli. He was a pastor in Glarus, Einsiedeln and later in Zurich's Grossmünster Church. While at Grossmünster, he began his first rifts with Catholicism. One of the first public displays of questioning Catholic practices was known as Das Zürcher Wurstessen (typically translated to Affair of the Sausages), where he attended a dinner during Lent where sausages were served. The host of the dinner was Christoph Froschauer, and he was arrested, as eating meat during Lent was prohibited. Zwingli then went on to base his next sermon on this topic, supporting freedom to choose what foods you eat, based on Martin Luther's doctrine. In the years to come, Zwingli founded the Swiss Reformed Church.

In general, the Cantons of Switzerland can be thought of as Reformed or Catholic. While both types of churches exist throughout the country, there tends to be one with more prominence in each Canton. This is most felt in the celebrations throughout the year. Catholic Cantons such as Luzern, will hold massive month-long Carnival celebrations culminating in the week of Ash Wednesday, while Protestant Cantons such as Zurich have substantially smaller events.

The churches in Switzerland, while not as famous as those found in Rome or Paris, are also quite striking and distinct. As they did not fight in the World Wars, there are many churches and monuments which have been preserved through the ages. Just as the regions follow different branches of Christianity, they also often follow different styles of architecture.

4.3 Fraumünster

For our first month in Zurich, we lived with the Pfarrer (pastor) of one of the most famous churches in Zurich. Niklaus Peter and his wife Verena Peter-Barth were fantastic hosts, and helped us adjust to life abroad. Being there was also our best glimpse of traditional Swiss life. Niklaus preaches at Fraumünster Kirche. Fraumünster and Grossmünster, where Zwingli preached, are the anchors of the Zurich skyline.

Fraumünster has a long history, and was first built in the ninth century. It was an Abbey, build by Louis the German for his daughter Hildegard. Fraumünster translates to Women's Minister, and was an Abbey for aristocratic women. At one point in time, the Abbess of Fraumünster appointed the mayor of the city. Evidently, Fraumünster had a fair bit of power in the city. Niklaus is

extremely passionate about his church, and was always keen to share about its history. He produced a video, both in English and German, for visitors to learn more about Fraumünster.



Niklaus Peter preaching in Fraumünster Kirche [Fraumünster's website]

One of the most recent additions to the church came in 1970, in the form of five stained glass windows by Marc Chagall. When they were commissioned, Marc Chagall asked what themes they would like the windows to be made of, and the pastor at the time gave a long list of possibilities. Instead of choosing five, Chagall incorporated all of them into the windows. Later, they commissioned an additional window, known as the rose window, by Chagall. The style of the windows is unique, and a wonderful part of Chagall's body of work.



The five Mark Chagall windows in Fraumünster [Fraumünster's Website]

Due to Fraumünster's proximity to Grossmünster, they have often been competing with each other. The friendly competition likely began for patronage but has continued through the centuries in many forms. Grossmünster's building is much larger in size, but through the years, the two churches have competed with regards to their organ. While it has gone back and forth many times, Fraumünster has had the largest organ in Canton Zurich for nearly 20 years now. The stained glass in Grossmünster is also beautiful- with many styles filling each window by Sigmar Polke (2009), from geodes to optical illusions. Even with such long history, the two churches continue enjoy this friendly rivalry.

5.0 Transportation

5.1 Transportation System

One of the other key facets of life in Switzerland is the transportation system. Although Zurich is a city of only 400'000 people, you can reach nearly every corner of it easily by public transportation. Moreover, you can get there relatively quickly. A long commute in Zurich is 40 minutes, so when a coworker had a solid hour commute, most people were surprised. Longer commutes such as hers typically arise when living in smaller towns on Lake Zurich.

A transit ticket in Zurich covers trains, trams, buses and boats. They divide their tickets by zone, so you pay for a certain number of zones within the Canton. Like anywhere else, the buses are subject to delays. The trams, on the other hand, were almost always on time. They work like clockwork, as the trams have right of way on the roads- and usually their own lane. While cars will always stop for pedestrians at crosswalks- even when the car is whipping around a corner, the trams do not stop for people. Instead, they have a high pitched bell, which they furiously ring if any pedestrians are in the way.

The closest I had to any issues with the trams was being brushed by one that was turning, whose edges came over the sidewalk. Typically, the tracks are designed such that this does not occur, but the area was then under construction. One day, however, all of the trams running between my apartment and the downtown were extremely delayed. No trams were coming in the downtown direction, but eventually they let a few trams run towards my apartment. We saw the commotion from afar- with emergency vehicles splayed about, and one tram stopped. Then, as the tram passed by the scene, I saw the puddle of blood, with a big scrunch of paper towel on top.

Returning home, we found the police report for the incident, where an elderly man passed away from his injuries. While the incidents like this are few and far between, they are an important reminder to be careful and diligent regarding all forms of traffic.

5.2 Transportation Tickets

All of the short-haul public transportation in Switzerland is done on the honour system. You simply step on any bus, train, or tram – from any door. Typically, the tickets will not be checked. If one is caught without a ticket, you can be fined 100 Francs. Your name and details will be recorded and registered. Being caught subsequent times increases the fine, and can result in criminal proceedings.

On occasion, we did have very thorough inspections, where everyone on the entire tram was checked. Specifically, I remember one occasion where the tram stopped for a prolonged period, and had 10-15 ticket inspectors checking everyone. More frequently, the ticket inspectors would step on the tram or bus for one or two stops, checking 2-10 people, then step off and randomly check some people on the next tram.

With longer-haul trips, the tickets will typically be checked. However, as the ticket inspectors start at one end of the train and move towards the other end, you will not always be checked if you are not riding the train for the duration. Sometimes the inspectors will walk down a few times, looking for people who have stepped on the train at various stops, but this is not always the case. In the past, it was possible to buy your tickets on board, but that changed on December 11th, 2011. If you do not buy your ticket before getting on a train now, you will be required to pay a supplement or fine in addition to the ticket cost.

Train tickets in Switzerland are purchased for a specific day, but not a specific train. This means that if you are going to Geneva from Zurich, you can get off the train in Lausanne and spend a few hours there before getting on another train and continuing to Geneva. It also means that if you arrive at the station earlier or later than expected, you can hop on the next train. Similarly, it means that for longer-haul trips, you can choose your train. Some trains stop in every small town, while others will only stop in major cities or connection hubs. Sometimes, it's nice to take the slow train, but other times you want to be at your destination as quickly as possible! The bonus about the fast trains is that they expect you to be on them for longer, and in turn have more comfortable cabins with power outlets. Faster trains are also more likely to have a restaurant car, where you can buy drinks and food. The exception to this rule are the special "Super Saver" tickets, which are sold online at a discounted price for trains expected to be less full, as well as most tickets for international trains.

5.3 Transit Passes

As trains are such an integral part of Swiss life, there is a huge range of transit passes available to residents on the Schweizerische Bundesbahnen (SBB) network. The exception to all passes are the tourist hotspots, such as Zermatt. Comprehensive passes will sometimes be offered a discount for these cable cars and trains, but they will not be included in the pass. The largest SBB pass, known as the GA, covers nearly everything in Switzerland. Any train, boat, bus, or tram, anytime. The next popular pass is the Halbtax (Half-Fare). This pass isn't a ticket, instead it gives all users up to half off the price of any ticket. For train tickets, this is often 50%, but for local transit, it will be reduced to a set rate, often closer to 30%. An additional pass, which one can add to the Halbtax, is known as Gleis 7 (Track 7). Gleis 7 is exclusive to young people under 25, and allows them to travel on the SBB network in second class from 7 PM to 5 AM.

In regional networks, such as Zurich's ZVV, one can buy local transit passes which are divided into zones. Zones are typically divided into towns or suburbs. Canton Zurich has the main Zurich city zone, surrounded by many zones for each of the smaller towns in the Canton. For individuals that travel one specific route, they can buy a point-to-point ticket. Finally, there is an interregional pass, where you can get a combined route and regional zone pass. This is useful for individuals

who live in one Canton and work in another, such as working in Zug while living in Zurich. These passes can often be purchased with the Halbtax, for a reduced rate.

During our time in Switzerland, we had the Halbtax, Gleis 7, and a regional ZVV zone 110 pass. This allowed us to commute within Zurich, and have reduced fares when travelling within the country. Using the Gleis 7 encouraged us to day trip throughout Switzerland. Combined with Halbtax, we would pay half price for our outbound ticket, then have a free trip home after 7 PM, ultimately paying one quarter the price of a round-trip ticket. The Halbtax and Gleis 7 very quickly paid themselves off.

6.0 Cuisine

6.1 Swiss Specialities

The two most iconic Swiss food items are Chocolate and Cheese. Both are important in Swiss culture, but Swiss cuisine does not end there. Swiss cuisine is generally quite simple. It typically centers around cheese, potatoes, and bread. Each region then has their own specialities.

One important Swiss dish is Röstli. It is a dish of shredded potatoes, which are pan fried. The dish is so iconic, that the cultural divide between the French-speaking and German-speaking regions of the country has been called the Röstigraben (Röstli ditch). Röstli can be found at most Swiss restaurants, and is often served with a fried egg on top. In Swiss grocery stores, you can buy vacuum-sealed packages of pre-shredded and par-boiled potatoes, so that all you need to do is fry and flip the Röstli. It makes the simple dish even easier to make. Some have cheese, bacon, or onion added, while most remain quite simple.

Classic Swiss breakfasts usually involve Muesli. The most famous recipe is called Birchermuesli. It is made of shredded apples, nuts, oats, lemon juice and cream or yogurt. The mixture is traditionally combined and left in the fridge at least overnight, if not for the week's worth of breakfasts. Nowadays, Muesli also comes in a dry form, like a raw granola, which is eaten with yogurt or milk. As Birchermuesli is particularly time consuming to prepare, the traditional breakfast can also be purchased pre-packaged in individual yogurt-sized tubs.

Yogurt, not only as a complement to Muesli, is similarly treated with great fondness in Switzerland. Each grocery store carries countless flavours and varieties of yogurt. From simple flavours such as strawberry to dessert flavours like chocolate truffle. Each season also brought new flavours, such as rhubarb in spring.

6.2 Cheese

Cheese is an essential part of Swiss life. While thousands of Swiss cheeses have been produced historically, for several years only three types of cheese were authorized to be produced in Switzerland. The Schweizer Käseunion AG (Swiss Cheese Union) was essentially a Cheese Cartel,

which controlled all cheese production in the country. In that time, the three permitted cheeses were: Emmental, Gruyere and Sbrinz. These three cheeses were the only ones which received the stamp of approval from the Swiss Cheese Union, and in turn were the only types permitted to be exported. While Sbrinz is less well known world-wide, it is a cheese similar to Parmesan, and is one of the oldest known European cheeses.



Swiss Cheeses

Gruyere and Emmental are more familiar worldwide. Emmental is what most people call “Swiss Cheese”, which is a cheese filled with holes. The Swiss Cheese Union had to put out advertisements in the US and elsewhere, to encourage people to purchase real Emmental, rather than “Swiss-Style Cheese”, the flavourless rubbery imitation. Together, Gruyere and Emmental are used to produce the iconic Swiss dish of Fondue. Interestingly, this Swiss Cheese Cartel also had a hefty hand in making Fondue as iconic as it is. Before the 1930s, Fondue was a small regional dish, from the Alps. With the Cartel’s declaration that Emmental and Gruyere were essential ingredients (50/50), they also successfully marketed the dish, and in turn, their cheeses. The Cartel made the prices, controlled trade, and was subsidized by the Swiss Government. Altogether, it was a money-making scheme, which dissolved in 1999. When a reporter from NPR’s Planet Money podcast went sniffing around asking questions in 2014, people remained resistant to talk about the Swiss Cheese Union. At most, the majority of cheese makers would acknowledge the existence of the Union, but of course deny any involvement, and insist that it had been dissolved and was no longer active.

Nowadays, there are many types of Swiss Cheese which are recognized and publicized. This includes hard and semi-hard cheeses, like the three “official” cheeses of the Union, as well as fresh and soft cheeses.

In the Swiss home we stayed in, they always kept a container filled with many cheeses in the fridge. Then, on evenings when their friends visited, they would pull the container out before

dinner, so the cheeses could come to room temperature. Then after dinner, when lingering over wine and liqueur, our host would fill a board with the cheese and set out some of her fresh-baked bread. Dinner was never an affair to be rushed. Dinners with family or friends would often last hours.

In keeping Cheese at the forefront of Swiss life, simple dinners would consist often of cheese and starch. Often just cheese, like the cheese plate, and boiled potatoes would be served as a simple dinner. Sometimes bread would be used instead, but perfectly boiled or pressure-cooked potatoes were always lovely when paired with a cheese plate. In addition to the wrapped up whole cheeses in the container in the fridge, our host would also have a container of freshly-shredded cheese in the fridge. I believe it was a young Gruyere that she shredded at least weekly.

Dairy is ever-present in Swiss households, with plenty of milk, cream, cheeses, and ice creams filling their fridge and freezer, respectively. Given the relatively small size of Swiss fridges and freezers, dairy was always given an important role. Milk can be purchased in a number of forms, from milk that must be kept in the fridge, to shelf-stable varieties.

6.3 Chocolate

It's hard to think of Switzerland without Chocolate coming to mind. Suffice to say, Switzerland lives up to the expectations. Chocolate is abundant and well made. Even the grocery store brands tended to be excellent, and provide a large amount of variety. With that said, most Swiss chocolate can be characterized by its creamy texture, which usually involves hazelnuts in some capacity.



The Migros Chocolate Aisle [<http://www.newlyswissed.com/31-reasons-why-switzerland-is-the-happiest-country/>]

In addition to the types of chocolate that have become iconic worldwide, there are even more types which are hard to find outside of Switzerland. The most iconic world-wide are Lindt and Toblerone. For bar chocolate, Migros and Coop (the two largest Swiss grocery store chains) both

produce a full range of chocolate which is exceptional. Although the grocery stores themselves are often quite small, nearly every grocery store has a full aisle of chocolate.

Swiss children are often brought up drinking a powdered chocolate milk or hot chocolate every morning. The two popular types are Caotina and Ovomaltine. Caotina is a straight-up chocolate mix- which also comes in dark chocolate and white chocolate, while Ovomaltine, often known as Ovaltine world-wide, is a malted chocolate powder. Ovomaltine also produce many treats which incorporate malted chocolate, from Mueseli to chocolate bars, and a Nutella-style spread.

6.4 Drinks

Water, as in most places in Europe, is always offered in two forms: *mit* or *ohne* (with or without). With or without what? Gas! The Swiss are particularly fond of their mineral water, and every restaurant will offer still and sparkling mineral water. At one of my employers, we received a weekly supply of bottled sparkling mineral water, while the other employer had a machine which was similar to an industrial SodaStream, which would produce still or sparkling water on demand. The availability of sparkling water seemed to be a given for the Swiss.

While not found much outside of Switzerland and the Netherlands, one classic Swiss drink is Rivella. It is more or less a national soft drink. For such a dairy-loving country, it should be no surprise that it is made using milk serum. One other prevalent soft drink is Apfelschorle, which is carbonated apple juice. These two drinks were at nearly every gathering we attended.

Swiss wine, while it doesn't get much play abroad, is quite diverse and produced throughout the country. Particularly in the French regions of the country, you will find vineyards upon vineyards. Even along Lake Zurich, there are plenty of wineries, producing both red and white wines. The most commonly produced wines in Switzerland are Pinot Noir and Chasselas. Likely largely due to the relatively small amount produced, there is not a lot of exporting of Swiss wine. However, the Swiss do buy plenty of foreign wine. Being in Europe, wine is often inexpensive as well. It was always easy to find a bottle of wine for less than 5 CHF. Beer, similarly, could be cheaper than water. Most corner stores also sell a small amount of alcohol, such as beers or Prosecco in a can. Drinking is permitted on the streets. As the Swiss are quite tidy, cans and bottles will be typically disposed of, or piled around garbage bins.

In the wintertime, many street corners will be selling Glühwein (mulled wine), which is a hot, spiced red wine. It is a doubly warming treat for cold days.

As mentioned above, dinners in the Swiss home we stayed in would often last hours. Our host Niklaus was particularly enthusiastic about wine. As such, just before dinner would begin with a nice Weisswein (white wine) pulled from the cellar. Next they would progress to Rotwein (red wine) once the main course was out. Depending on how long dinner lingered for, a second bottle

of red wine might be opened, or the liqueurs may be perused. Keeping in the vein of wine, Niklaus was preferential to Grappa, a grape liqueur, though Whiskey was also a favourite. These would be enjoyed either with dessert, or following it.

7.0 Healthcare System

Switzerland has a highly efficient universal healthcare system which is completely privatized. Now, that may seem like a dichotomy, but it works for Switzerland. Upon becoming a Swiss resident, one must purchase health insurance. Basic (required) health insurance covers illness, accidents and maternity. It includes many services such as physiotherapy and acupuncture, and places emphasis on preventative health care. The basic health insurance alone is sufficient for most people, as it covers most things from birth to nursing homes. Typical prices for health insurance are on the order of 300-400 CHF per month. While not inexpensive, it is contrasted by relatively low income taxes, often of less than 10%.

The second form of required insurance is accident insurance. For individuals who work more than 8 hours per week, this is covered by the employer. Accident insurance covers all forms of accidents- which occur either in the workplace, or in daily life. The third form of insurance is health insurance for employers. This insurance protects the company from losses experienced when employees are ill and unable to work. It typically covers their salary or a portion of it, for the time they are unable to work.

Unfortunately, through my time in Switzerland, I had plenty of experience with the healthcare system. Due to an exposure of an unidentified chemical in the lab, I ended up in the Emergency Room with chest pains. At the hospital, I was seen quickly, and well cared for. Luckily, most highly educated people in Switzerland speak English, so communicating with the doctors was never difficult. Speaking with nurses was sometimes slightly more complicated, as most did not speak very much English. With a few courses in German, I knew the very basics, including Schmerz (pain) and Lunge (lungs). While not something you ever hope to need, learning basic health-related words proves invaluable in times of crisis.

When my breathing did not improve, I also visited a small walk-in clinic. End-to-end, the visit took 2 hours, including wait time and results. Once seeing the doctor, she took some bloodwork and after waiting a short while, I was called back in to see her and receive the results of the tests. With this bloodwork, she saw evidence of my pre-existing conditions (which in Canada, took repeated visits to diagnose), and then referred me to a lung specialist. Being all-too-familiar with the Canadian healthcare system, I was amazed that I could see the doctor within a matter of days. They apologized that it was 3 or 4 days rather than 1 or 2 days, due to a busy schedule. A far cry from waiting months in Canada for a referral from a walk-in clinic. While this does sound lovely, you are required to pay up front for any costs, without local healthcare. However, insured residents

would not face this problem, aside from their yearly deductible. Like most insurance schemes, if you would like a lower deductible, you will pay a higher monthly premium.

8.0 Exploring Switzerland

With the vast cultures and landscapes of Switzerland, we made it a point to explore the country as much as possible. The extensive train networks, and our excellent train passes, allowed and encouraged us to travel as much as we saw fit. We also took advantage of Switzerland's central location in the centre of Europe, to explore many cities and cultures.

Travel was the major allure of going to Europe for two co-op terms. For Waterloo students looking at going abroad, I would recommend seeing as much as you can, while also taking care of yourself and enjoying where you are. We spent many weekends exploring the country, with occasional international trips. However, we also placed priority upon exploring Zurich and making it a home to us.

8.1 Life in Zurich

I could wax poetic about many aspects of Zurich, from the accessibility of nature, to the fact that I never felt unsafe there. As a woman, being able to walk home alone at night, without worry, was a particularly lovely part of life in Switzerland. Living in Zurich, there were many things we became quickly accustomed to. Throughout the city, there are over 1200 fountains. They spout fresh, drinkable water all throughout the year. With this, one is never thirsty for long in Zurich. If you have a water bottle, you can fill it up anywhere, anytime. Many of these are intricately designed, with different histories.



The newly installed fountain in front of Fraumünster Kirche

Zurich regularly surprised us with cultural events. One of the most unique and fun events was Sachseläuten. It took place on a Monday in April. The Sunday before, they had a children's parade, with fantastic costumes and even a camel or two! On the actual day, they have a big parade of the guilds through the town. The guilds are mostly made of men dressed up in their guild's traditional garb, and the crowds are filled with mostly women – carrying an abundance of fresh flowers. As their friends and family pass, they will run up to give them flowers.

The parade ends with the burning of an effigy of a snowman named Böögg. This holiday has a spirit similar to Groundhog Day, as it determines how the weather in the coming months will be. As tradition goes, if it takes a long time for Böögg's explosive-stuffed head to blow off, it will be a cold and rainy summer. However, if the head explodes off quickly, it will be a beautiful summer. After watching the parade in the pouring rain, Böögg understandably took quite some time for his head to pop off: a record-setting 43 and a half minutes, indicating a very poor summer was bound to come.



Böögg burning in the rain

Every three years, Zurich hosts a festival called Züri Fäscht. Like many festivals, they close the streets, setting up stalls and rides throughout the old town. At night, they held magnificent fireworks. Taking advantage of the lake, they anchor about 3 boats, and set off the fireworks from the boats, all set to music. With the weekend of festivities, there were 2 million visitors in 2016. As you may have guessed, the Swiss are enthusiastic about explosives, so the show was impeccably put together.

8.2 Travelling through Switzerland

On our first full day in Switzerland, our host brought us to Rigi Kulm, a mountain in the central of Switzerland. It was an overcast day in Zurich, but Rigi was perfectly above the clouds. It was a magical way to start our time over there. In my last month, when a friend visited, I took her to Rigi

Kulm, where we had a perfect bluebird day. On both a frigid New Year's Day, and a warm August afternoon, Rigi was a fast favourite.



The view from Rigi Kulm in Winter and Summer

For much of winter, Zurich was grey. One particularly grey and rainy week, we did not remember when we had last seen the sun. We simply looked at the map of Switzerland, looking for anywhere that would be sunny on Saturday. The only region not expecting rain or clouds was Ticino, so we made our way to Lugano. Lugano delivered the sun beautifully. It was the only city I visited in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, but has a lovely mix of Swiss and Italian feels. Much of the architecture was Italian, while the streets were clean and orderly like the rest of Switzerland. The mountains in this region were also intriguing due to their rounded shape.



Lago di Lugano

Closer to Zurich, I repeatedly visited Rapperswil. Rapperswil is a small town at the end of Lake Zurich. It was convenient to visit, either leisurely by boat, or more quickly, by train. It has a small castle on a hill, overlooking the town and the lake. Additionally, the town had numerous rose gardens, earning it the name "City of Roses". Rapperswil never failed to disappoint- particularly

on a sunny day! On days where we had more time to explore, we would go from Rapperswil to visit Einsiedeln (where Zwingli preached). Einsiedeln is one of the most beautiful churches I have ever visited. The inside is white, with relief carvings in a pink stone. Then, every possible surface is covered in gold. It is a Benedictine Abbey, and inside, they are known for their Black Madonna. They adorn the black marble Madonna, in gold-covered garments. Einsiedeln is further known for its Christmas Markets, which fill the streets of the small town.



Rapperswil's gardens and castle

As a Nanotechnology Engineering student, I also made it a priority to visit CERN in Geneva. They have a famous particle accelerator there, and are also the birthplace of the World Wide Web. Although you cannot tour the accelerator itself, they have a few small exhibits, which explains what they do and how it works. Geneva specifically is home to a number of important international organizations. The United Nations has their second largest office there, and their departments include the headquarters of the World Health Organization. The Red Cross was also founded in Geneva.

At every opportunity, we went to visit mountains. From the very famous Zermatt to the less touristy Andermatt, and the waterfalls of Lauterbrunnen, one would be remiss to visit Switzerland without giving themselves a day in the mountains. The Swiss are a mountain people. This means that winter weekends, the train stations will be filled with people carrying their ski and snowboard gear. On summer weekends, the train stations will similarly be filled with people in their hiking gear, as they set off. Life in Switzerland revolves around the outdoors, be it mountains, lakes, or numerous parks.



Staubbach Falls at Lauterbrunnen

9.0 Conclusion, and Notes to Future Students

I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Switzerland, and am hoping to move back following graduation. The 8 months we spent exploring this country were some of the most monumental of my life. Between my roommate and myself, we had the toughest 8 months of our lives while living in Zurich. One major health crisis, one job loss, one frantic job search, few friends, little knowledge of the local language, one grandparent passing away, and the stress of being away from family and friends in both the sad and happy moments. We became a duo, like sisters as we navigated everything together. Summing up everything we experienced, and how Switzerland fit into that would fill more than a book. Of course, for any country, you will have a vast range of experiences and impressions. These will vary greatly from individual to individual. Among the tougher parts- from being ill, to the extremely high cost of living, and the difficulty of making friends in an insular culture, I came out with a positive experience. You cannot prepare for the hardship of living abroad. It is not for everyone, but the experience will be a cornerstone, as you learn who you are without Canada.

Even though it was tough, I loved exploring the language. I loved living near the mountains. I felt at home there. While language sometimes stood in our way, we managed, and thrived. We tried new foods and flavours, we saw new things, we made new friends. Bit by bit, we made a life there. The prospect of returning to Switzerland is one I greatly look forward to. To putting roots down, and becoming conversational in German. To crafting a future, the way I want to: with plenty of cheese, chocolate, and mountains.