

Skiing is risky, but there's no better place to try it than the Swiss Alps.

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WHO GOES TO SWITZERLAND?

By MANNY GONZALEZ

Part one

THERE ARE THE OCCASIONAL AFRICAN DESPOTS retiring to their well-earned rewards. Also, fugitives from justice elsewhere who can wangle political asylum from the tolerant Swiss. Finally there are paying tourists who promise to leave after two weeks of looking at lakes and mountains.

Do you belong to any of the above categories? With my usual sense of selfless service to dictators, secessionists and the traveling public, I have collected arcane facts about Switzerland not found anywhere except on Wikipedia, and even a few which you can only learn by going there. Thus, you might be able to drop some facts into casual conversation and fool people into thinking you actually went. ("That reminds me of the time I needed an early-morning taxi to get from Les Armures to the Gare Cornavin...")

In no particular order,

the world that Lindt is better candy than Reese's Buttercups.

Most Famous Swiss Person Ever. Albert Einstein, if you overlook the fact that he was really German. A naturalized Swiss, when his assets were frozen by the Nazis he asked for help from the Swiss government. But that was in 1933 and Hitler was on the rise. Discretion being the better part of valor, the Swiss refused to stand up to the Nazis, and called Bertie, in so many words, "a German at heart." Just in time before war broke out, Einstein moved to the US,



This clock tower in Switzerland gave Einstein the inspiration for the Theory of Relativity.

particle accelerator (CERN, the Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire) that could rupture the space-time continuum at any moment now, as we learned in Angels and Demons. There is a disconnect between ruptured space-time continua and treaty-signing, though it is true the city looks good in autumn.

Anyway, the most famous treaty ever signed by anyone, anywhere, was the Geneva Convention of 1929, which was actually the Third

center called Confederation Centre, thus assuring that very few tourists find it, keeping prices modest by Swiss standards.

Snow, Skiing and Ski Villages. Unless you go in summer, any ski resort in Switzerland will cost you an arm and a leg, especially if it has a name like Gstaad ("stah") or Zermatt ("tser-mah"). (Trust me on the pronunciation, not YouTube.)

Skiing is risky. You can break a leg or get killed in avalanches, which happen regularly in the Alps. If you just want to look at snow, take the Glacier Express. Contrary to its name, this train runs verrrry slowly, because the track is steep and frequently just a few feet from a 2000-foot cliff. It takes 8 hours to run, with only a few stops, from St. Moritz ("sahn mo-riz") to Zermatt, and every minute is a thrill, particularly if you're scared of heights. Pack a big picnic lunch. Keep a spare plastic bag.

Have Crossbow, Will Travel. This is a true story. For most of the past 2,000 years the Swiss and their antecedent Celts and Teutonic peoples have been quite warrior-like, because everyone was so poor. There was hardly any agriculture, just a bit of pasturing and cheese-making, and a lot of subsistence hunter-gathering. This was before they invented tourism, money-laundering and their most profitable industry ever, Neutrality.

To make ends meet, Swiss men went abroad to become mercenaries in richer places in Europe. They were a big status symbol. Luminaries like the Pope and the King of France lobbied to get them as personal bodyguards (this would not always turn out well, as you will learn in the next instalment).

The frugal Swiss soldiers saved their salaries and sent the money back home to their families...

You can see where I'm heading with this. I know this is a crushing disappointment for many Filipinos, but we did not invent the OFW. The Swiss beat us to it by at least 500 years.

The author is resident shareholder at Plantation Bay Resort & Spa in Cebu.



Geneva's placid lake inspires visitors to sign peace treaties.

here is all you need to know about this famous country. (And more than what you want to know, but I'm telling you anyway.)

Notable Industries. Recycling stale bread and year-old cheese they forgot to refrigerate, and selling it to tourists. Designing penknives with 27 attachments, of which 26 are useless, and selling them to tourists. Bottling Coke with almost no fizz, and selling it to tourists. Taking money from rich people and charging them for the service.

Greatest Modern Day Achievement: Convincing

helped convince Roosevelt to build the atom bomb and enjoyed a peaceful life at Princeton University.

Next Most Famous Swiss: William Tell, if you overlook the fact that he was really imaginary.

The Lowdown on Geneva. For some reason, people like to meet up in Geneva and sign treaties. It is almost as popular as Paris for treaty-signing. Paris' appeal is easy to understand - it has wine, women and other good things to get you into a treaty-signing mood.

Geneva, on the other hand, has a water jet and a



The Swiss were among the first OFWs, hieing off to faraway lands to earn a living with their trusty crossbows.

Geneva Convention prohibiting the torture of prisoners of war and which probably every single signatory has violated at one time or another.

The UN got started here and still has lots of offices around town. There's also the Red Cross and the aforementioned particle accelerator, the World Trade Organization, plus the occasional overthrown dictator and entourage, so there are a lot of foreigners in Geneva.

All of them eat at Brasserie Lipp, and you should, too. It is right downtown but hidden inside a shopping

Brasserie Lipp is the go-to restaurant for thrifty diners in Geneva, those who can find their way to Confederation Centre.





The Glacier Express is not for the faint-hearted.

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Part two

LIKE A LOT OF SWISS CITIES, LUCERNE IS situated on a largish lake. One thing you can do in Lucerne is take a Lake Lucerne cruise. In fact, Lucerne probably offers the nicest lake cruises in the country, with snow-capped Alps prominently visible on all sides. At least they were visible until global warming.

However, absolutely THE thing to do in this city is go see the Weeping Lion, which is unaffected by global warming. This is a gigantic carving on a granite mountainside, and it depicts – surprise! – a weeping lion. The lion has been speared and is about to die. The work commemorates the 600 or so Swiss OFW soldiers who died protecting Louis XVI when the mobs stormed Versailles, but nevermind the history. When you look at the lion, you can feel its pain, in a way that few sculptures of any kind can convey. Keep your Henry Moores and your Rodins – if you have any empathy for animals, the Weeping Lion is the most moving, gut-wrenching sculpture you are ever likely to see. It's only a short walk from the northern shore.

The Famous Swiss Numbered Bank Accounts. Wherever you go in Switzerland, it seems as if you are never more than half a block from

new-accounts lady took back the free espresso she had rashly offered, and pointed me in the general direction of Lithuania.

The Famous Swiss Railway System. Most of what you've heard about the Swiss and their trains is true. Yes, Swiss trains almost always run on time; if one is even two minutes late leaving a station, there are profuse apologies and several *hara-kiris*. (Philippine airports should immediately start imposing *hara-kiris*, and let's see how fast our on-time record improves.)

Yes, someone will check your ticket; the ticket vending machines are not easy to use (a lot of them don't have English translation), but better than dealing with an irate conductor.

If you do ever go to Switzerland, it is quite likely you will eventually ride on a train, so here is a tip to make your journey go more smoothly. First, never put your feet on the seats, or a tough-talking conductor will let you have

SHOCKING SWITZERLAND DON'T LOOK FOR SPAM OR LONGGANISA

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Lucerne has possibly the best lake cruising in all of Switzerland. But, like everywhere else in the world, the glaciers are disappearing. Go soon.



There is not much to do in Zurich except count money and have cocktails at the Baur au Lac Hotel's lounge.

some bank you never heard of. If you ever saw either of the Thomas Crown Affair movies (or almost any Hollywood flick that depicts a Swiss bank), you might think that Swiss bankers accept cash (paper money) deposits, but they don't. And you might think there is such a thing as a secret numbered bank account, but there isn't.

At least not anymore, ever since the US Treasury started muscling the Swiss banks to reveal the names of their American clients.

I know this because when I flashed my wad of ten €50s at a friendly-looking neighborhood private bank, the

it. Second, when that happens it does absolutely no good to pretend you don't understand any German, French, Italian or English.

By the way, the thrifty Swiss make their own sandwiches at home before embarking on train journeys. Do the same. And clean up after yourself.

Zurich Confidential. Historically in terms of its economy, Zurich (tsou-rish) has been up, down and sideways. It profited from the growth of craft guilds in medieval times and the explosion of railroad-building in the 19th century. But it was also on the losing side of many wars fought be-



The Weeping Lion is a gigantic sculpture just a few steps from the town center of Lucerne.

tween different Swiss factions.

Before the Swiss invented Neutrality and the joys of making chocolate, they were actually a pretty warlike people. Cantons (sort of provinces) were regularly going to war against each other, sowing intrigues and ganging up on weaker cantons. In fact, probably half of Switzerland today didn't want to join the Swiss Confederation at all, but just got beaten into submission or bullied into signing the Articles of Confederation. Now each canton claims Switzerland was their very own invention.

Anyway, Zurich today is the country's financial cen-

ter (though as I noted before, you can find a private bank around every corner of every village). Zurich's post-WW2 prosperity sprang from its bankers having catered to Nazis during the war, as well as just pocketing the bank deposits of Jews who died in the Holocaust. But don't tell anyone I told you.

Considering how large it is and how well-known, there is actually almost nothing to do in Zurich except meet your Swiss banker. The famous Bahnhofstrasse was once the world's chic-est shopping street, but long ago fell into dowdiness. The most exciting restaurant in town today is

the Zeughauskeller (you can do it: tsoug-house-keller), which serves sausages, pork knuckles and, if memory serves, Wiener Schnitzel, all solid German and Austrian dishes. No one ever accused the Swiss of being culinarily adventurous.

And, speaking of non-adventurous...

The Breakfast of Champions. In Switzerland it doesn't matter which hotel you are in; in every city, every village and every hotel or facsimile thereof, Swiss breakfast is as dependable as a Swiss watch. It's as if the food was 3D-printed in some secret lab and then teleported every morning to every inn and hotel. Swiss breakfast has farmer's bread with a seed crust, smoked salmon, ham and salami, fruits in syrup, cheese batons, something that in their opinion is bacon, and "scrambled eggs" that are a clever combination of leftover boiled eggs, new whole eggs and food coloring. You would think they would try *longganisa* or Spam for a change, but nothing doing.

Emergency eats in Switzerland. Let's say that, for whatever reason, you wind up in Switzerland anyway, and cavil at restaurant bills that start at SwF30 per head and swiftly head north. Do

not despair. In every major Swiss city, at intervals of about 300 meters, you can find a supermarket. They don't look like supermarkets from the outside, so here are the names you must recognize: Coop, Migros and Manor. Coop and Migros are just about everywhere, while Manor is much rarer (though there is a really big one in Geneva and another in Basel).

Because I like you, here is some assorted advice about Swiss food products. As I said last week, the Swiss prefer their Coke with very little fizz. The Swiss have not heard of Spam or any product remotely resembling it. Moreover, the Swiss do not know how to make potato chips.

So here are the things you need to snatch up in Swiss supermarkets: French butter. French paté. French wine. German cheese (specifically, Cambozola, which is Germany's most outstanding contribution to world cuisine other than the frankfurter). Italian ham. English biscuits. Spanish oranges and almonds. And, if you have children, American granola.

Buck up. You'll survive.

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LAUSANNE, THE SELF-STYLED OLYMPIC CITY.

Just an hour train-ride from Geneva (and you can in fact go straight from Geneva airport), Lausanne is carved into a steep hillside which rises from the lake. Late in the 19th century, a French guy came up with the idea of resurrecting the Greek invention of sports fests, thus starting a multibillion-dollar industry whose profits and off-the-books transactions today disappear into shady pockets, never to be seen or spoken of again. For convoluted reasons, this business enterprise chose Lausanne as its HQ. As one unintended consequence, Lausanne has the most overpriced restaurants in the entire country, maybe twice as much as Geneva (in the low-budget range).

And if you do go to Lausanne for an Olympic Experience, you may be disappointed. The only Olympic thing in town is the Olympic Museum, which doesn't quite manage to be as entertaining as the Futbol Club museum in Barcelona. Notably missing are any organized films of great Olympic moments or great opening ceremonies, or even an archive of winners and world records. This is a museum on the cheap, designed by a functionary with no imagination, rather than a true enthusiast.

Jaywalking and other high crimes. A friend who once lived in Switzerland likes to tell how her small apartment building assigned specific days and hours for each tenant to use the coin-operated washing machine and dryer. She had a window of 1 1/2 hours, twice a week, but like any good Filipina she tried to use it outside her schedule — whereupon another tenant, who didn't even want to do any washing, came down to tell her to beat it, or she would call the cops.

However, that was many years ago. Nowadays, the Swiss are more relaxed. Babies and toddlers scream to their hearts' content in public,

Bern, Switzerland's Federal City, is a splendid medieval city and an under-appreciated gem.



Bern's Kornhauskeller is an underground restaurant that used to be a grain storage warehouse.

and parents cower in fear. My sister, who used to live in Geneva, brazenly barbecued on her balcony out of season, and the police just gave her a written warning. People ignore pedestrian traffic lights with gay insouciance and even cross the street where there are no crosswalks. It's all these foreigners, teaching decadent attitudes to the Swiss. Before long, they'll ruin everything.

The Capital that isn't. Not one person in 10,000 can tell you what Switzerland's capital is. Correct Answer: None. So as not to offend anyone, instead of a "capital," Switzerland has a Federal City where national officials have their offices. Albert Einstein would later recount that as an employee of the Swiss Patent Office, which is of course located in the capital, he got the idea for his Theory of Relativity from watching streetcars below Bern's Clock Tower, and wondering if the clock would appear to move faster or slower if you were moving, as opposed to just standing there. (It's true — Bern is

streetcar-crazy; I never saw so many in one place.)

As it turns out, Bern is quite a charming place. Some parts look like Salzburg and other parts like a movie set. Honest, it's lovely. (Except for the Federal Muddy Grey paint on every building.) Don't miss the Rose Garden, which has spectacular views



When dining in Switzerland, it is prudent to find a rich Swiss friend to pay the bill.



Modern times have caught up with Switzerland, in the form of graffiti everywhere, even just a stone's throw from the Swiss Parliament building. Metro Manila can help!



Basel's Tinguely Museum is noted for its avant-garde art. Those protruding tubes are telescopes, but the author was unable to catch anyone peering into them.



The Olympic Museum in Lausanne is over-rated and underwhelming. And the grass is overgrown. Olympic profits do not, apparently, go into grounds maintenance.

of the city (tram line 10, uphill from the Clock Tower). For dining, I strongly recommend the Kornhauskeller (corn-house-keller). This name means "grain warehouse cellar," and the building is right in the center of town, where the Bernese liked to be able to keep an eye on their food stocks. Food-wise, Kornhauskeller offers no surprises, but its medieval interior is just stunning and there aren't many restaurants like it anywhere else in the world.

You can invent anything else you like about your stopover in Bern, because no other Filipino has ever been there. Except me. And because I like you, my lips are sealed.

Basel, the forgotten city. Basel is the least-known of Switzerland's big cities even though it is the headquarters of the Bank for International Settlements, which supposedly helps member central banks stay solvent. The BIS has existed since 1930, and up to now, as far as I'm aware, it hasn't prevented even one central bank from getting its country into trouble. Think of Weimar Germany. This record is only rivaled by that of the International Monetary Fund (created in 1944) which singlehandedly turns any balance-of-payments problems into decades-long depressions and economic sinkholes. Think of Mexico, Argentina and most of Africa...

Among the Swiss, Basel is considered a Daring Art Center. The reason I went there in the first place was my Swiss hair-stylist Stefan, who raved about the Wim Delvoye exhibit at the Tinguely Museum; this Wim guy takes commonplace objects and turns them into surprisingly beautiful works of avant-garde art. So I went. I liked his carved tire trucks and his "telescope rear ends," but drew the line at his working reproductions of the human digestive system.

Another major draw is Basel's Kunstmuseum (this word means "Art Museum," and the first syllable is pronounced sort of like koonst, not the way you dirty-minded readers are thinking), which has a world-beating collection that goes back to the Medieval ages, but is most heavy on Dadaists and onward. Despite this being a relatively small city, the Basel Kunstmuseum's modern art collection easily beats New York's Guggenheim or London's Tate.

Graffiti rears its ugly head. You have probably heard that Switzerland is a very clean country. Well, it depends. One of Switzerland's most shameful inventions is the pay toilet, which now costs SwF1.50 for a pee and SwF2 for more serious business. I guess they're clean.

However, on a more macro scale, everywhere you look, whether in downtown Zurich or a remote Alpine barn, chances are you will see graffiti, lots of it. This truly bothers me, because it's just ugly and shows the Swiss are losing their grip. But it is also an opportunity for Filipinos.

Whatever other deficiencies it may have, Metro Manila is a contender for World's Most Graffiti-Free Metropolis. Just open your eyes and check. This is surely not an accident. It can only be supposed that certain secret patriots in Manila have been going around, making war on graffiti by Terminating With Extreme Prejudice anyone in possession of spray paint after 6 p.m. The message has really gotten out. We should identify these dark knights and offer their services to the Swiss. It's the least we can do for the country that sells us Ovaltine.

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