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Autor: Eugster, Lee
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A HURRIED GLIMPSE OF THE VALAIS

by
Lee Eugster

For many years I've been trying to inveigle a friend in California into coming for a holiday in Switzerland. When my descriptions of rambles in the Valais were of no avail, I sent him the book "Valais" by André Beerly (series La Suisse inconnue published by the Swiss Touring Club), and followed this up by colour slides and a gramophone record reproducing ancient music played on the world's oldest organ in the church of Valère riding one crest of the twin peaks which dominate Sion.

These little "attentions" acted like a drug administered in small doses. But now I'm in for it! My friend announced his short visit. Meanwhile he is poring over the book and a map showing the Valais in relief which I obtained from the Valais Tourist Office. He bombards me with questions of whether we'll have time to explore this town, that valley, etc.

Of course, we won't! In three days one can only get a perfunctory glimpse of the natural beauties and historical treasures tucked away in that canton. Counting on the Valais' witches to cast a spell on my friend, I planned the trip to make him want to come back for a longer stay.

On our drive up the Rhone Valley, we shall stop in Saint-Maurice to visit the Abbey and ask one of the canons to show us its treasure. In Martigny we will look at the splendid stained-glass window, by Cingria, in the City Hall's stairway, then visit the exhibition of Aubergonois' paintings in the Manoir.

Instead of speeding along the straight highway toward Riddes, I shall take the road through the orchards, to see some authentic villages of fruit growers and vintners, such as Fully and Saillon.

In Saint-Pierre-de-Clages the 12th century church, a jewel of Romanesque architecture, calls for a halt before we reach Sion, the canton's capital. There we must remain for at least a day to visit the cathedral, the recently restored church of St. Théodule and then compare these with one of the town's modern churches. After inspecting the Baroque City Hall and strolling up the Rue du Grand Pont (below which flows the Sinonne River) lined with lovely old houses with wrought-iron balconies and antiquarians' shops on their ground-floor, we'll climb toward Valère.

Halfway up, La Majorie, museum of modern art, will permit us to catch our breath before we continue to the church of Valère. Inside its fortification walls, the lodges which once housed the canons are now the cantonal museum. Prehistoric and Roman objects found in the Valais, jewelry, silverware and weapons of the Feudal Age and, last but not least, hand-carved furniture and implements made and used by farmers up to a few decades ago, represent an interesting cross-cut of history.

In the church we will see and hope to hear the 14th century organ of which one can now buy two records. The church contains beautiful Gothic statues, splendidly carved choir stalls, very old paintings and frescoes and centuries-old Persian wall tapestries.

"Sion by night" calls for a raclette in an old-fashioned restaurant with typical Valais atmosphere. Afterwards we may return to Valère through the lanes dimly lit by lanterns hanging from artistic wrought-iron suspensions and admire from the top of the hill the Rhone Valley sprinkled with diamonds of lights which intermingle with the stars sparkling in the dark velvet sky. We can listen to the

play "Sound and Light" giving the impression that the ruined castle of Tourbillon, the charming chapel of All Saints and the church of Valère exchange their complaints while being alternatively lit up by the beam of a search-light.

After Sion, we shall inspect the feudal strongholds of Leuk and Raron which, from their promontories commanded the traffic moving up and down the valley.

In Visp we shall park the car to visit the historic town on the hill and, if possible, go into the workshop of the last artisan who makes pewterware. Then we shall board the train to Zermatt and the Gornergrat from where to enjoy Switzerland's grandest alpine scenery. Time permitting, we may also go by postal bus to Saas-Fee, another beauty spot nestling in a circus of glaciers in the neighbouring valley. There we shall walk along the famous pilgrims' path of chapels, whose six oratories and uppermost chapel are marvels of Baroque art.

In Glis the church deserves a stop-over to view its splendid Gothic high altar. In 1519, Georges Supersaxo, a famous politician, ordered the no less famous church builder and sculptor Ulrich Ruffiner to add the beautiful porch to the church and to build the chapel of Saint-Anne in the side of the nave to house his tomb.

In Brig there will be just enough time left to visit the 17th century palace which Gaspar Stockalper had built adjoining his ancestors' home to shelter his pack trains and the goods which they carried over the Simplon Pass from Italy to France or vice-versa.

While my foolish friend who flew over six thousand miles to see the Valais in three days continues on his journey, I shall loiter there to discover places which I still have not been able to see after going to the Valais for the past twenty years! I like to look at things and places leisurely but thoroughly.

(By courtesy of "Treize Etoiles".)

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