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RELAXATION ON BETTMERALP

BY MARIANN MEIER



View of Bettermalp

(SNT0)

The mention of a winter holiday conjures up a picture of a sunny landscape covered in white, with an azure sky above majestic icy peaks. One thinks of the joys of skating and the excitement of ski-ing, of happy crowds in fashionable winter resorts and gay apres-ski life.

There are people, however, who want to escape motor traffic, international crowds, bar life and fashion parades and would gladly give up some of the luxuries in order to find peace and quiet. I have found just such a place—in the Valais, South Western Switzerland, where a mountain range separates the Goms Valley (Vallee de Conches) from the Great Aletsch Glacier. The Bettmeralp is an alpine summer pasture at 6,435 ft., an ideal ski-ing paradise in winter.

There are excellent train services to Brigue on the Simplon line and a comfortable small-gauge railway up the Goms, but soft comfort ends at the valley stop of Betten. From there one has to stand with 49 other people in a cabin of the aerial cableway, twice for about seven minutes. The cabin glides

without effort high above the snow-covered meadows and white tree tops. The higher one moves, the more superb the panorama. Across the width of the Rhone Valley stands the magnificent Valais Alps: the Fletschhorn, the Alphubel, the Dome, the Matterhorn, the Weisshorn and many others, all some 12,000ft. high and more. There it is, the fairy tale landscape of the picture postcard, complete with neat, wooden chalets old and new, their roofs piled high with layers of snow.

The serenity of a snowy afternoon

But I want to tell you of the beauty of the Bettmeralp when the sky remains hidden and snow falls for days on end. There is indescribable fascination in the falling snow and the consequently changing scenery. The sugar icing on the dark green firs and pine trees turns to a thick overall coating, and soon the whole Wurzenbord forest to the East of the village is just one splendid array of white Christmas trees. Walking through the woods on what should be a path, but which is like a super luxury white pile carpet, the scenery seems more like

a surrealist painting than groups of larches and firs.

No snow falling at the moment. The silence is so perfect that it is almost tangible. Every now and then a tree shudders and quietly sheds some of its load before retreating again into statuesque dignity. All of a sudden two lone skiers appear from between the shrouded trees. "Gruezi" or "hello" or "bonjour"—what does it matter—we understand one another without words, drawn together on the enchanting stage.

Almost imperceptibly the greyness has become lighter, and a faint glimmer of sunshine havers above the valley. A ray of light steals in between the branches, and as it filters through the mist and gets caught in the snow crystals, a myriad of tiny diamonds suddenly float about. Beyond the edge of the abyss there appears a kind of magic rainbow, quite bewitching. As if it were the signal for the actors to come out of the proscenium, a rook starts to call and another answers. A little brown figure goes darting up a larch tree, a marten. For a moment I feel it must be the scenery of the Sleeping Beauty coming to life. Suddenly I come to as a little snowball which I inadvertently kicked off the edge, rolls down the slope gathering momentum. Fortunately it comes to a halt—I have not caused an avalanche.

Back to the village where the sun has disappeared again, and the sky has come down over the top of the Bettmerhorn at the back, and the horizon is gradually being swallowed up by the greyish white mist creeping up from the valley. I just reach my hotel before visibility is down to a few yards. I brush the snow off my boots (hired like my skis at the local sports shop) and get ready for lunch. There is simple, wholesome food carefully prepared and pleasingly served by mostly local girls and women. How well a drop of Valais wine goes down, a palatable white "Fendnt" or an earthy red "Dole". The nutty local rye bread, too, is a treat, and I must just mention the "Raclette", the luscious cheese dish of the Valais.

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Dusk at the Bettmeralp

It is cosy and warm indoors. The double windows fit so tightly that not the slightest draft will creep in. The whole building is centrally heated by electricity, most efficiently and always piping hot water—not bad at 6,000ft.!

It has begun to snow softly and silently, and it never stops all afternoon, billions of fine dry grains. I go out, my hooded anorak protecting me. Dusk sets in early. I make some enquiries at the local ski school office: Swiss ski school instruction is such a boom, especially for children and beginners.

The road is almost deserted now; there are a few inveterate ski enthusiasts about; one or two instructors whiz by, recognisable by their pillbox red anoraks and superb tan. A mother is pushing home her snow-covered pram mounted on skis. On the main practice slope a father teaches his two little sons to do some modest ski jumping. A mongrel dog rolls himself luxuriously in the snow, and a couple of children slide down on a toboggan. I meet the village policeman in fur boots and anorak. Suddenly, I hear an engine. Out of the mist appears a red caterpillar tractor keeping the village road free from new snow and pressing the old layers well down.

I walk higher up the village and go to another little guesthouse-cum-restaurant for a cup of verbena tea and a slice of tasty apple flan. On the way home, I have great difficulty in finding my way, what with the darkness and the steadily falling snow.

That night, on retiring, I can't see the normal dark, starlit sky; no moon and no glittering lights indicating the villages and the town further down the Rhone Valley. All is one eerie silent greyness, the snow falling inexhaustibly. My room, though, is friendly. The

walls are made of Arolla pinewood and a red and white check eiderdown on the bed matches the curtains. I turn down the thermostat of my radiator, open the balcony door and slip into bed—how well I sleep in the total stillness at that altitude!

What a surprise next morning — although it is no longer snowing now, it is a solemn, pale grey and white picture that meets my eye. I hardly recognise the village; the road seems a couple of feet higher. The railings of the wee bridge have disappeared under the snow. The signposts which were at eye level yesterday, are down at knee height. Tremendous industry everywhere. Local inhabitants and visitors trying to cut paths away from their front doors. Men on chalet roofs working hard in an effort to free chimneys. Youths with shovels shifting tons of snow from rooftops and balconies. The quaint little chapel on its solitary hill is embedded in an even deeper mass of white—no more than the very tops of the narrow window are visible. And where is the brook? The heavy snow loads on either side have caved in and now meet across the middle. Some of the smaller huts have completely disappeared, and the ice-rink is like a huge oblong tray of cottonwool. The ski racks outside shops and inns are only half their normal height. Where one just about distinguished a garden fence or hedge yesterday, a white quilt has smudged all outlines. To reach the doors of some of the shops and the local hairdresser's, one passes between cut-out passages like trenches in the first world war. And those weird lumpy figures at the roadside could be plastic rubbish bags dumped for collection by a horse-drawn sledge, or an abandoned toboggan—one really can't tell.

Every day the beauty is new

Where the village road ends, progress is very slow. Even on yesterday's path I sink into the soft snow up to my knees. Where there were marten and fox traces yesterday, there is nothing; the animals are hiding. Sheer beauty everywhere, but amazingly different from the day before.

Next morning complete transformation yet again: cobalt blue sky, radiant sunshine, the white expanse of the snowglittering and sparkling. Small birds chirp on the balcony and jackdaws make an almighty row in their delight. Soon it gets really hot, and one can lie in shirtsleeves on a deck-chair outside. The village has come to life again. Everybody seems to be out on skis, toboggan, on foot. All four ski-lifts are working non-stop. From the distance I can see little dark figures fitting down the mountainside from above the village; the exhilarating experience of a descent on skis. So many possibilities, too, in this part of the world, ranging from short runs down

from the Blue Lake to long, strenuous tours to the glacier and across the Hochfluh.

But even with the village astir, it is a leisurely style of life—no bustle, no haste. The sun is getting so hot that the snow starts to melt on the surface, and next day, after a freezing cold and starlit night, huge, dagger-sharp icicles hang from roof edges and balconies. Chilly sculptures reflecting the sunlight and shedding cool drops in the warmth.

And there, on the other side of the Rhone Valley, the giant peaks rise majestically into the sky, reassuring despite their aloofness. How far away the roar of London's traffic seems, fog, smog, rush and ratrace!

Yes, a perfect holiday place.

COMMENT

SWISS PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE

One of the traditions of Swiss parliament is that non-retiring federal councillors must be automatically re-elected at the start of a new four-year legislature. Another parliamentary usage is to refrain from verbal outbursts and slanging matches. Personal feelings are not allowed to show and the Swiss Chambers are probably the quietest legislative assemblies in modern democracy. The chairman of each House never has to call to order or intervene to safeguard their "dignity", as happens occasionally at the House of Commons. The spectators up in the gallery have to be content with rather dry, intellectual pleasures.

All this is part of Swiss parliamentary etiquette. It is a tradition to which most people involved in the life of Parliament are dearly attached. To show just how true this is, the readers of "La Suisse" read an astonishing piece of rhetoric by one of the top French-speaking experts on federal affairs, Edouard Perron, in his report on the government's election last December. The outcome of the vote in Federal Assembly was namely the re-election of six federal councillors, the election of Mr. Nelio Celio as President for 1972 and the election of Mr. Kurt Furgler as Christian Democrat federal councillor, who succeeds Mr. Ludwig Von Moos. But the incident for which many will remember the elections was that Mr. Pierre Graber, only elected a year ago in succession to Mr. Willy Spuhler, was elected by a very small majority and held his seat at the Federal Council because of a high number of abstentions. This is Edouard Perron's description of the proceedings:

"Until then (the re-elections of Mr. Brugger and Mr. Celio) everything had followed its normal course. But then came Mr. Graber's turn and