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Destination: Switzerland : Rent-a-Chalet : A home away from home where Alpine trails and village shops are just a hike away

May 14, 1995 | EVA G. FREMONT | Fremont is a Los Angeles-based free-lance writer. and

SCHONRIED, Switzerland — Belp . . . Bipp . . . Oberbipp . . . Niederbipp . . . Walliswil . . . Botkin . . . the names had a Disneyland-like lilt and a wonderfully familiar ring. My husband, Bill, and I were driving southwest from Zurich on the autobahn past these towns, headed for Schonried, a hamlet in the Swiss Bernese Oberland. We were *en route* to our favorite hideaway--a chalet we were renting for three weeks, our sixth biennial tenancy since June '84.

Near Interlaken we exited the autobahn following the meandering Simme River west along equally sinuous and narrow Route 11 toward Zweisimmen. It was a picture-perfect Swiss landscape--tidy, garden-girded farmhouses; thin church spires rising against thickly forested hills and mountainsides; small Alpine villages, their chalets aflame with red geranium-filled window boxes.

After Zweisimmen came Saanenmoser. Then we espied the long-awaited Schonried sign and lurched up the familiar steep, stony, narrow driveway. Before us was a sturdy, three-story chalet of dark wood with bright red storm windows and intricately carved wooden balcony railings: Chalet Sonnenfreude. We were home!

"Our" bedroom boasted wood-framed twin beds, sturdy wooden furniture, a generous closet, twin wash basins and an ample balcony with a magnificent mountain view. While I unpacked, Bill organized the kitchen, stowing away the groceries purchased at the Zweisimmen Co-op along the way. Later, walking around the meadow across from the chalet, we could see that our old mountain friends visible from the balcony--Rinderberg, Hornberg, Horneggli and Huggli--were snowcapped still in early June, but their lower flanks were carpeted with Technicolor flowers. The brook to our right gurgled, thanks to the infusion of melting mountain snow. Schonried's one-ski (as in "one-horse") main street at the meadow's end was unchanged: Artfully placed pots overflowing with pansies, nicotianas and geraniums beckoned us to patronize the dairy (*Molkerei*), butcher (*Metzgerei*), small grocer and Fasler's beauty salon. Freshly scrubbed chalets prominently displayed "Vacation Apartments" (*Ferien-Wohnungen*) signs.

The sun still shone brightly at 8 p.m. as we sat on our airy balcony off the dining/living room. Sipping St. Saphorin, a vivacious white wine from the nearby Lausanne region, we basked in the beauty of the sun-dappled mountains and the familiarity of it all.

Sun streaming through the bedroom curtains awakened us early the next morning. Time for our favorite hike, two miles downhill to Gstaad, the storied mecca for the jet-setting likes of Prince Rainier, Julie Andrews and Elizabeth Taylor.

The walk was particularly beautiful amid meadows abloom with daisies, forget-me-nots, purple gentian and buttercups, long gone on our last three September visits. The pretty, toylike blue-and-white cars of the narrow-gauge MOB (Montreux-Oberland-Bernois) railway tootled by.

There are more than 200 hiking paths (*Wanderwege*) in the region, fanning out in all directions. Each of these, as well as the steeper mountain trails (*Bergwege*) is marked with a yellow arrow indicating the time (in Swiss-watch precision), rather than the distance, to the next destination. We had explored these trails indefatigably. Our second favorite, feet down, was the two-hour hike to Zweisimmen over hill and dale, past lone chalets and old farmhouses ringed with bales of golden hay, past a tick pine and yew forest and an ancient viaduct. As we sat on a bench by the rustic Waldmatte Pension consuming our cheese sandwiches (a made-in-Schonried vacherin, a mild, semi-soft type of Camembert), two passersby called "*Greuzi miteinander*" (greetings to you both), with customary Swiss courtesy.

At a farmhouse farther on, goats poked their heads through the wire fence to reach the greener grass outside. We watched, then continued downhill to a geranium-covered archway leading to Zweisimmen's ancient Reform Church. We admired its delicately carved, symmetrical wood choir ceiling and soft-hued 15th-Century frescoes depicting biblical scenes.

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The Bernese Oberland sits on an east-west escarpment in Switzerland's southwest. Schonried, in the region's heart, is a perfect base for bus, rail and car excursions--north to Bern, southwest to Lake Geneva's idyllic vineyards, and northeast to the bucolic Thuner and Briener lakes district.

First on our "must see" list was Murren, nestled on the Schilthorn's sheltered eastern bluff, 5,400 feet above Lauterbrunnen Valley. Founded in 1257, this car-free hamlet is the oldest and highest permanently inhabited mountain resort in the Bernese Oberland. My husband's parents were taken with Murren's quiet charms on their honeymoon there in 1919. We wanted to experience the enchantment for ourselves.

On a blue-sky day we packed overnight bags and drove east past Interlaken, through the misty, beautiful Lauterbrunnen Valley "of 72 waterfalls" to neighboring Stechelberg. We boarded the Schilthorn cable car for Grimmelwald, then changed cable cars. Murren's only titled street, the miniature Bahnhofstrasse is lined with chalets and hotels with prettily carved shutters, shaded with colorful umbrellas. The Sporthotel Edelweiss, a two-story, white-stone, flat-roofed, red-shuttered affair, is a short amble from the Schilthorn station.

Sandra von Allmen, the hotel's energetic, 30-something owner, showed us to our room--one of 26 in the 60-year-old establishment. The furnishings were simple but the terrace view was spectacular: dark, dramatic, jagged walls of the Eiger, Monch and Schwarzmonch

mountains loomed across the valley, seemingly almost close enough to touch.

Early the next morning found us winging up to Piz Gloria on Schilthorn's peak, headquarters of the villainous Blofeld in the James Bond film "On Her Majesty's Secret Service," from which 007 and his girlfriend fled down the mountain on skis, landing in Murren in the midst of an ice carnival.

At Piz Gloria, the bedrock-anchored viewing platform at almost 10,000 feet was filled with Japanese tourists, posing and snapping away; a voluble, gesticulating Hungarian quintet, and several German and Swiss families lolling in the sun. The awesome, wraparound view went from the Swiss Jura to the west, Germany's Black Forest to the north, and the Monch, Eiger and Jungfrau to the east. Later, over coffee in Piz Gloria's flying saucer-like, revolving restaurant, we marveled at the 360-degree Alpine panorama.

Back in Murren we strolled in the tiny

park dedicated to Sir Arnold Lunn (1898-1974), who invented the slalom in 1922. Behind the turn-of-the-century Eiger Hotel there is a narrow, grassy panoramic path that zigzags above Murren's chalets, evergreen copses and hills of variegated green.

All around were cows, their bells gently tolling as they pastured on purple gentian and yellow mountain arnica. The Lego-like red Allmendhubel funicular lumbered by. Snowcapped Schwarzmonch and Jungfrauoch glistened to our left.

That evening, dining at a window table at the Alpenblick restaurant and hotel, Eiger, Monch and Schwarzmonch treated us to a private light show. It was 9 p.m. but the sun still shone brilliantly, spotlighting the Alpine peaks, spray-painting their snowy flanks a glistening, iridescent white. The "late show," indescribably beautiful and eerie, was still in full wattage when we walked back at 10:30.

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We were back in Schonried the next afternoon, "self-catering," as the Europeans humorously refer to vacationing with oneself as housekeeper. This form of travel is less expensive than a hotel-to-hotel itinerary: We paid \$600 per week for the chalet. It is also a more pleasant way--if you select the right base--to explore the surroundings without the yoke of suitcases. Best of all, self-catering is an ideal way to experience local life and customs, as well as to familiarize yourself with the regional language.

Sonnenfreude encompasses a foyer and utility room on the ground level; kitchen, spacious living/dining room, bedroom and half bath above, and three bedrooms and bath on the third floor. The modern, well-equipped kitchen inspired us to cook at home most nights.

Except for occasional nights on the town in Gstaad, our evenings were spent listening to worldwide news and concerts on the chalet's shortwave radio and raiding the living room bookcase--a literary tower of Babel in German, French, English, Dutch and Italian.

On the year's longest day, we hiked up toward 5,900-foot Hornberg, trailing a herd of cows headed for their summer haunts in the higher Alps. The creatures (undoubtedly the same ones that had awakened us at 5 a.m., their bells clanging as they hit the road) were tired, understandably. Three young cowherds prodded the 30-odd bovines with makeshift sticks and occasional yells of encouragement--an evocative, eons-old scene.

On another day, it was 84 degrees in the morning: A boat ride would cool us off. In two hours we were in Thun at the lake's western mouth, boarding the Blumlisalp, a restored 1906 steamer bound for Interlaken. The two-hour Thuner See cruise--past sleepy, idyllic lakeside villages--was lovely.

Among its memorable scenes: a single sailboat's red mainsail profiled against pyramid-shaped Mt. Niesen; Oberhofen's crenelated, fairy-tale castle dominating the lakeside; an elderly gentleman on Gunten's Bellevue Hotel balcony waving enthusiastically above a Swiss flag composed of red and white geraniums.

The day after the Thuner See outing we sought another cooling change of scene: Col du Pillon whence gondolas ascend to the Diablerets Glacier--half an hour's drive from Schonried.

The scene on the glacier's 9,056-foot Scex-Rouge vista point was lively. Half a dozen rucksack-toting summer skiers wended their way back up the glacier's side while another group descended. A young boy and his parents tramped gleefully through the snow.

With old friends from Zurich we dined on succulent spring lamb and spaetzle at Restaurant Sonnenhof, overlooking the pretty Saanen valley. At 10 o'clock that evening, our last night, we sat on the balcony watching the mist envelop Hornberg and finally Huggli. Gradually, Hornberg's peaks reappeared, disembodied, Valhalla-like--a perfect, mystical coda to self-catering in Schonried.

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GUIDEBOOK: All the Alp You'll Need

Getting there: From LAX to Zurich fly Swissair (both nonstop and connecting service), American (direct and connecting) United and Delta (connecting only) to Zurich; round-trip fare starts at about \$1,025, including taxes and security fees. From the Zurich airport take the train southwest to Spiez, change trains for Zweisimmen and change again for Schonried. The entire journey takes about four hours; \$80 first class, \$50 second, one way. Or you can rent a car and drive to Schonried in 1 1/2-2 hours.

Where to stay: For a brochure listing chalets for rent in Schonried, Saanen and environs, contact the Gstaad Tourist Assn., CH-3780 Gstaad; telephone 011-41-30-44993, fax 011-41-30-45620. Rents average \$200-\$400 weekly in summer, \$300-\$500 winter.

Chalet Sonnenfreude, in Schonried, for which we paid \$600 weekly, was listed in a brochure from the Schonried Tourist Office, Hauptstrasse, CH-3778 Schonried; tel. 011-41-30-48888; fax 011-41-30-46470.

Where to eat:

Arvenstubli Restaurant, Hotel Belmont, Murren; local tel. 55-3535. Pot roast, veal dishes, pasta, local specialties; dinner for two with wine, \$76.

Restaurant, Hotel Alpenblick, Murren; tel. 55-1327. Regional specialties; pasta; Alpine views; dinner for two with wine, \$70-\$75.

Pension Sonnenberg, Allmendhubel, Murren; tel. 55-1127. Potato pancakes, raclette, other specialties served in restaurant and on terrace. Lunch for two, about \$25.

Restaurant Sonnenhof, 3792 Saanen-Gstaad; tel. 4-1023. Rustic restaurant on a hill overlooking the Saanen valley. Three-course dinner for four with wines, about \$300.

For more information: Contact the Swiss National Tourist Office, 222 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Suite 1570, El Segundo, CA 90245; tel. (310) 335-5980, fax (310) 335-5982.

--E.G.F.