

Real Road Adventures: Zurich

We're on the road to new adventures! Hi, I'm Jeff Wilson. You know, one of the things I love about travel is that I learn so much. And on this trip I'm getting a ton of new ideas - on clean energy, on delicious whole foods, and well, just how to be a better traveler. And when it comes to innovation, there's no place like Zurich!

[Standard open]

How will thoughtful, conscientious people travel in the 21st century? Can we find ways to get the very best out of life, to enjoy new and exciting experiences, while still treating the planet's resources with respect?

More and more travelers want to travel sustainably. We want to be aware of our own consumption. And we want to learn how other people and cultures are innovating; how they're creatively balancing the needs of people with the needs of the environment.

Switzerland is taking the lead on climate action and that's why I'm starting this series in Zurich.

Zurich is ground zero for earth-friendly innovation. Now, we all know that international travel contributes to greenhouse gases. But in order to help balance those effects, I flew Swiss for my air travel and used one of their partners, myclimate, to buy carbon offsets to compensate for those emissions. I'm also driving an electric car while I'm in Switzerland.

Anyone who's watched my shows knows that I love train travel. But there are times when you want to avoid crowds (pandemic anyone?) and take advantage of the freedom that a car can give. I flew to Switzerland from the U.S. and picked up my EV at the Zurich airport. Now I'm embarking on a series of trips based on the Grand Tour of Switzerland.

The Grand Tour is a circular route through the country, about a thousand miles in length. It's a mapping of the very best Switzerland has to offer, designed to be easily covered in any direction, in small sections or for those lucky enough to have the time, as one continuous journey.

Today, hundreds of new charging stations make it the E-Grand Tour of Switzerland: the world's first road trip for electric vehicles.

Our destination for this episode is Zurich. Summer is my favorite time to be here, and the historic center is ideally set up for ambling on foot.

Modern sustainable practices are everywhere in Zurich, although they may not be obvious at first glance.

Throughout the old town you'll find echoes of Zurich's long and storied history. But the people who live here have a clear-eyed view toward the future.

Water, water everywhere! From its namesake lake, to the flowing river Limmat, to the more than 1200 city fountains, Zurich overflows with liquid wonders. Well, clean, available water is one of the foundations of sustainability, and the city has that in spades.

Not only is Lake Zurich great for summer sports, it also provides a sustainable source of energy for nearby homes and businesses. Specialized "heat pumps" extract heat from a cooler medium (such as lake water) and transfer it to nearby buildings.

No need to buy bottled water when you're in Switzerland; just put your water bottle under any spout and you're good to go. It's clean, it's free, and it means fewer plastic bottles make their way into the environment. I always carry my own water bottle with me when I travel.

And to quench my thirst for fitness fun, I get my body to a "badi." Badis are outdoor public swimming areas, generally with small bars or restaurants nearby.

What to wear when swimming in the 21st century? How about a swimsuit made from recycled plastic bottles?

If they were to hold a swimsuit competition for environmental responsibility, my vote would go to Round Rivers Clothing. This forward-thinking company actually collects plastic from the Limmat and transforms it into swimwear.

Let's face it, our planet is swimming in plastic. Experts say that by 2050 there could be more plastic in our oceans than fish. Round Rivers Clothing is not just climate neutral, their upcycling process actually captures CO2 from the atmosphere, making them net CO2 negative.

[Soundbite Peter Hornung: When I discovered plastic bottles in the Limmat, I thought it would be nice to make something out of it, a product. But then I went out of the water and saw my swim shorts and I realized this is the same material as polyester.]

Jeff: Tell me a little bit about how the process works.

Peter: The steps are you take the bottles, you sorted by color. We have kind of a base. And then we take these transparent bottles. We shredded them into little plastic flakes. Then it gets melted into granules and these granules get processed into yarn and the yarn into fabric. And that's it. What Round Rivers makes differently, we start from the raw material and we collect it by ourselves. Nobody else does that so far. And I think this is the big difference, that we start by cleaning the environment and that generates our own raw material.

Jeff: Can you show us some of the clothing?

Peter: Sure. This short is actually made as a circular design. So this is 100% polyester from the Limmat. So we have eliminated every foreign material. There's no metal, there's no zipper, there's nothing.]

I got to try out a Round River swimsuit in the Limmat River. And I have to say, the only thing that's more enjoyable than swimming in Zurich is knowing that you're actually helping the environment at the same time.

Ok, travel host confession time. One of the main reasons I love to travel (and one of the reasons I like coming back to Switzerland in particular) is that I love food! Great food, that is. And I especially like discovering restaurants that feature locally sourced, sustainable ingredients that are used in a creative way.

Whether you want 100% organic food that's thoughtfully prepared using seasonal ingredients; or something entirely vegan, it's no problem to eat sustainably in Zurich.

My new favorite is a Michelin-starred vegan restaurant called "Marktkuche." Here they put "freshness" at the top of the menu. The name means "Market Kitchen" and the idea is to capitalize on whatever vegetables are at the peak of the season. There's no written bill of fare. You just choose the number of courses you want—between four and eight—and let your taste buds be surprised. The chef takes a purist approach, concentrating on a few simple ingredients for each dish and combining them in new ways to create fantastic flavors.

Anyone who travels can't help but notice how much food waste there is in the hospitality industry. Hotels and restaurants chuck away unconscionable amounts of food on a regular basis. So, what I consider one of the brightest trends in hi-tech are apps to help reduce this waste.

The Zurich-based company Kitro has created state-of-the-art technology that allows restaurants and hotels to track every discarded food item. Kitro uses artificial intelligence to analyze food waste throughout a business' entire supply chain. I get a demo of it at Luigia Italian Restaurant.

[Soundbite Naomi: "So traditionally to measure food waste it was very manual, you had to write it down on paper or type it into a tablet and having worked in kitchens and in service we realized that you don't have the time to stand there and write down what you're going away. And so we wanted to automate the entire process, and so there's no buttons, there's no interaction with the device. You put your trash bin on top and it automatically click data. You can try to it out, actually so."]

Jeff: So we just...

Naomi: "Throw it in and it'll capture an image. The image is sent up to the cloud servers where we basically process all the data and then the customer gets it on the dashboard where they can see, the muscles, how much muscles they threw away."]

The Kitro technology photographs, identifies, and records each piece of food thrown out, including its weight, and shows how improvements can be made.

[Soundbite: So, we know that the United Nations sustainability 12.3 goal, it's to half food waste by 2030 and the problem we've had until now is that no one's actually measuring. So we don't know if we've halved it in 2030, if we've never measuring so the cool thing about KITRO is that we can provide data where there's been data gap for a very long time, but also as more and more properties start to measure with KITRO. You can also start to set industry benchmark and standards.]

Here at Luigia, where they work hard to reduce their carbon footprint and even grow their own vegetables to add to recipes, the Kitro technology fits well with their mission of becoming a more sustainable business.

Zurich always seems to be on the leading edge. Another great example is a company called Swiss Wood Solutions.

[Soundbites: Christian: Jeffrey, I'm sure you have a purse with you. Don't you?

Jeff: I do, I do. I always carry...

Christian: Can I just have a short look at it. So I I'm not I'm not going to take out anything.

Jeff: Oh, I trust you, I trust you.

Christian: Oh, you see, I mean, this is like very, very normal, my purse looks pretty much the same, but you can see this there a lot of plastic cups and done yeah. So, it's all plastic, plastic, plastic. So, if you imagined this is just ten cards, if you multiply it by the users of cards in world annually, you will have the equal weight of 150 Boeing 747s just being brought into the market for the payment cards.

Jeff: Wow.

Christian: And if you imagine this huge volume replaced only by a small amount of our smart Swiss wood cards, this would already be a real contribution to reducing plastics.]

Scientists and wood technologists at Swiss Wood Solutions have created environmentally friendly alternatives to petroleum-based plastics and endangered tropical hardwoods.

They make modifications to sustainably managed European and North American wood species, creating materials that match the durability and aesthetic properties of plastic and tropical woods.

[Soundbite Christian: So now as you can see, after the modification densification process, we obtained the same material with the same weight but...

Jeff: Wow

Christian: ...at a different density, because the volume of course has been reduced to about one third of the original the volume.

Jeff: Very hard, very dense.

Christian: Yes, and you can see really,

Jeff: totally different sound

Christian: Yeah, different sound. Yeah this is what makes it really interesting for music instruments because the sound velocity is really, really outstanding.]

Tropical woods are highly prized by musicians for instrument making, so having sustainable products that offer the same advantages can help combat illegal smuggling of endangered wood.

Zurich has long attracted experimental artists, such as Dadaists in the last century, and it's still on the vanguard with its dynamic street art

There are countless examples of public art scattered throughout the city.

A lot of public and street art here is spread out geographically, so a fun way to see it is on an e-bike. E-bikes are great for getting off the usual tourist paths, since distances can be covered in no time and you can easily take on hills. And of course, they don't produce any art-damaging pollution!

On two wheels, you suddenly get a new view of the city as it comes alive with works by both amateur and professional artists.

One of my favorites is this huge kinetic sculpture by Swiss master Jean Tinguely. It's countless moving parts depict a "machine without a purpose," said to be a commentary on modern consumerism.

[Soundbite Karin: We have a building which is mainly out of concrete, we have two buildings which is mainly out of wood.]

Want more proof of Swiss innovation? One of Zurich's latest visionary efforts is a modern neighborhood built in an old cement factory.

[Karin: There are solar panels on all of the rooves, the electricity we produce mainly by ourselves. We use the heat that is produced from the computers, or the servers, from a nearby data center and into pipes we get the water which is heated by those than computers which warms the water in the households.]

Hunziker Areal is a fascinating glimpse into what true sustainable living can look like. It's built around the idea of a 2000-watt society. Here, around 1,200 people live in 13 energy-efficient buildings, and each resident consumes a total of no more than one ton of CO2 per year.

[Karin: We have a mobility station with different vehicles like bicycles, electric bikes, and also we have shared cars.]

The idea of a 2000-watt society was pioneered by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. Researchers found that 2000 watts is the world average for energy use. This ranges from 12,000 watts in the United States to only 300 watts in less developed countries.

To get practical tips on using energy (or just to have a good time), head over to the Swiss 'Umwelt' or Environmental Arena.

The large, futuristic-looking building is a sort of giant sustainability playground. It holds dozens of hands-on, interactive exhibits, everything from best practices for showering to the impact of food choices. Families: you'll want to carve out a bit of time here. If you have kids, you can put them to work

producing electricity on the Energy Slide. Or they can have races to see how much energy is created by riding a bike. And everyone seems to want to get into test driving tiny electric vehicles on the huge obstacle course.

[Soundbite Jeff: No wonder Fred Flintstone was in such good shape.]

In Zurich, I've discovered the ultra-modern Placid Hotel. The building has a Minergie P certificate, which is a Swiss certification program for buildings with low-energy-consumption. The sleek rooms feature plenty of amenities and panoramic views. And equally important for this trip is an electric car charging station – we need a full battery for tomorrow's adventures!

If you want to get really eco-friendly, Switzerland is a perfect place to camp. Camping is a fun way to get to know a place, and it's also great for reducing your carbon footprint. I'm a fan of classic tent camping here, but you can also park a caravan or trailer. Fischer's Fritz campground is right on Lake Zurich.

The lake is very accessible, both for locals and visitors. My crew and I found a convenient boat rental within a few miles of the campground.

I like to rent a rowboat or kayak because they get you close to the water without having a negative impact on the environment.

Even though this is one of the most densely populated areas of Switzerland, the water here is cleaner than in most European cities. In the past, the lake was used mainly for commerce and transportation, but today it's one of the best places in the city for pure relaxation.

When you get hungry, just head back to Fischer's Fritz Restaurant next to the campground. They serve up an impressive list of fresh seafood options. You can even get "catch of the day" fish direct from Lake Zurich.

[Soundbite Seri: I was one of these strange people baking at home, so it all started like this, with a normal oven at home, without having any clue about dough.]

There's no shortage of food options in Zurich. In the quiet pre-dawn hours, baker Seri Wada sets about an important task. Lots of people have goals in life. Lucky for all us bread lovers out there, Seri Wada's goal is to make the all-time best baguette.

[Seri: I research in France and there is some you know some measurements concerning size and weight of a baguette, so I just meet these requirements.]

Jeff: But that can affect the I mean you know the size and the weight can actually affect, like the crust, I mean, depending on how it's...

Seri: The other one, people would just yeah, maybe it'd be too short or too heavy it's just a little bit, but according to the French requirements, it's not a baguette. So I was the only one.]

Just a few years ago, Seri was a high-powered financial advisor. Then he decided to follow his heart and become a baker.

[Seri The newest thing is, we all have got a vegan croissant and vegan pain au chocolate. I can show you later. We've got the normal pain au chocolate and vegan they look quite similar. And that's actually the best part of my job.]

Seri delivers his baked goods to restaurants and shops in person - by bicycle. A familiar sight on city streets, he's become known as "Cycling Baker of Zurich."

[Seri: Let's say, making people happy. It sounds silly but our customers have to sense a kind of magic when they have our bread. And that's the thing, it's really satisfying to see people like the bread.]

If you enjoy traditional food with a modern twist, I recommend the rustic Ziegelhütte restaurant. Located beside a forest on the edge of Zurich, Ziegelhütte is both an old-fashioned country inn and a restaurant. They tout hearty Swiss cooking with plenty of vegetarian options, and even grow their own herbs and vegetables on site.

And for dessert? I'm heading straight for the "home of chocolate." The Lindt Home of Chocolate is an enormous temple dedicated to the world's most popular confection.

Lindt's been making chocolate lovers happy for 175 years. And me? I feel like I just found the golden ticket. I'm going to take a tour.

The expansive museum lures visitors with a colossal 30-foot fountain that flows with real chocolate syrup. You plunge into an interactive trip through the tantalizing history of cocoa bean, beginning with its discovery and early cultivation efforts. As European fascination with chocolate grew, the Swiss revolutionized the industry with several brainstorming ideas on combining cocoa and milk.

Of course, the best part is the tasting room or "Chocolate Heaven" as it's called. And yes, you can try as many samples as you want. Finally, cash in your entrance ticket at an entertaining Rube Goldberg-style machine to receive a special golden treat!

There are lots of great side trips from Zurich and having a car gives you plenty of flexibility to explore more sights along the E-Grand Tour.

Just a couple of tips on driving in Switzerland. The Swiss driving enforcement very seriously. Seatbelts are compulsory. Also, you need to use your lights both the day and night. And unless you're driving an electric car like me, you're discouraged from keeping your engine running at traffic lights or train crossings.

The town of Einsiedeln, about a half hour's drive south of Zurich, makes a perfect day trip from the city. In contrast to Zurich's edgy modernism, Einsiedeln is a fascinating journey back in time.

This has been a place of pilgrimage for centuries and continues to be one of the most important holy sites in Switzerland. That's thanks to this beautiful Benedictine Abbey, the country's most important baroque building.

Thirteen centuries ago, a pious monk named Meinrad set up a hermitage in the forest near here, where he led a very strict, ascetic life.

The local people admired Meinrad, often bringing him donations which he would pass along to the poor. Well, one night, two men came to the hermitage hoping to rob him. The monk let them in and gave them food and shelter. But after the men found he had no money, they repaid his kindness by murdering him.

The story of Meinrad's death spread throughout Europe and pilgrims began flocking to his hermitage to pay their respects. Later a community of monks founded a Benedictine monastery here.

The monastery church is famous as a devotion site for the Black Madonna. Over the centuries, this medieval statue of the Blessed Mother grew so dark with smoke and dust that in 1803 it was simply painted black.

The church's beautifully intricate decorations reflect its status as one of the most revered holy places in Europe.

Because of his welcoming spirit, St. Meinrad is known as the 'patron saint of hospitality.'

If you love getting out in nature, this is a great place for your *own* meditative pilgrimage. The area has nearly 250 miles of hiking trails. For more than a century, Swiss Forestry Laws have meant that at least 30% of Switzerland remains forested and that percentage is growing.

Sustainable practices have been shaping Switzerland for decades. That's why it's so much fun to visit Zurich to see what's new and exciting on the horizon. The more we can balance our needs with the needs of our planet, the more gratifying travel can be.

Thanks for joining me!

Come along next time as I search for more "Real Road Adventures!"