

Real Road Adventures: Lucerne – Lake Lucerne Region

Hi I'm Jeff Wilson. Grab your hiking boots and your sunglasses. Charge up your electric car and your appetite. Get ready for a high-voltage, low impact, summer trip through Central Switzerland!

[Standard open]

For me, two of the very best things about travel are exploring pristine nature and sampling new foods. So, when I get a chance to combine the two - plus throw in one of the most gorgeous cities in the world (and a dash of unexpected adventure) - well, that makes the perfect trip.

There are many amazing places in the world to visit. But if there was a dictionary definition for “well-rounded travel destination,” it would read “Central Switzerland.”

It includes beautiful Lucerne, a city that ensnared the hearts of 19th century romantic poets and spirited them away.

Lucerne sits on one the world’s most stunning lakes, framed by a curtain of mountains that feel like they’re begging to be explored.

Just beyond are miles and miles of bucolic countryside and farmland that yield some of the most delicious food ever to tantalize human taste buds.

My theme for this series is sustainable travel. I believe that travel can help make us better global citizens. Now, it is true that it can impact the environment and consume precious resources.

But if we can maximize the positive and minimize the negative – like using carbon offsets for air travel or visiting destinations that have environmentally responsible practices – well, the more rewarding it can be. Not to mention that fact that food produced with organic, sustainable methods just tastes better!

I’ve picked up an electric car and am working my way through portions the Grand Tour of Switzerland - an official mapping of the country’s greatest sights and underrated gems.

And now that the Tour has been outfitted with a network of hundreds of charging stations, it’s known as the E-Grand Tour: the world's first road trip for electric vehicles.

The route is well marked with red-and-white signposts that show great photo spots.

This episode, I’ll focus on the area in and around Lucerne, including the mountain town of Engelberg, and the rolling hills of the Entlebuch region.

Shutterbugs be warned: Lucerne may take you hostage and never let you go. A walk through this city’s old town could fill a hundred photo albums. Colorful, frescoed buildings tell slice-of-life stories from Lucerne’s medieval past.

Ornate fountains bubble up out of cobbled pedestrian plazas.

Here time becomes relative - Chapel Bridge, built more than six centuries ago, links the “old town” on one side of the Reuss River to the “new town” on the other.

[Soundbite Hanny]

Hanny: The bridge is so famous for lots of tourists they come here to see the bridge, but at the beginning, it was part of the fortification ring, and it was also the connection between old town and new town, or 800 year ago it was not an old town, it was called the big city and here on this side, the small city.

The star of Lucerne’s show is the view. Shimmering Lake Lucerne stretches out into a horizon of mountains. It’s a sight custom made for a travel poster – and it’s been featured in plenty.

Throughout its history, Lucerne has always taken full advantage of its eponymous lake, from commerce for local tradesmen to sight-seeing delights for boat-loving tourists.

Today its sailing into the future aboard Switzerland's first climate-neutral cruise ship. This is the MS Diamant, touted as a milestone in Swiss navigation history. Its lightweight, aerodynamic design makes it not only sleekly beautiful but also more efficient.

The streamlined design plus a hybrid propulsion system means the MS Diamant consumes up to 20% less fuel than similar-sized ships. They compensate for the fuel they do use through myclimate carbon offset program.

It’s packed with interesting features. On the main deck, you get the terrific views you’d expect sailing such a famous lake. Want to get closer to the water? Head down to the lower deck for submarine-like underwater views.

You can round out the cruise with a traditional Swiss meal. The mouth-watering dishes are made with ingredients from local farms.

For outdoor enthusiasts like me, there are few things that stand out as inarguably “Swiss” as this little red pocketknife with the multipurpose blades. Back in the late 1880's, the Swiss Army wanted to purchase folding knives for their soldiers - ones that could be used to assemble rifles or open cans of food in the field.

Originally made by a German manufacturer, a Swiss maker of surgical equipment came up with an improved design. Today, the Victorinox Company produces tens of thousands of knives in a variety of styles, and their customer base spans the globe. But the easily identifiable Spartan model hasn't changed since it was patented in 1897.

[Soundbite]

Vanessa: When we build a knife, we check first the plan.

Want to take a stab at making your own? A guide will coach you through assembling the 27 different parts, layer by layer.

Vanessa: We start here, with two rivets, with the point up in the hole, left and right in the hole. So bottle opener and can opener, yeah. For the mineral or maybe a beer, or and this one for the ravioli, so you have lunch.

Jeff: So I can always eat

Vanessa: Ok, so you press the peddle and stay pressed and hold. Bring your hand on this side here and do straight to you, ok.

Jeff: Ah so that's makes everything...

Vanessa: On the same level, yes, and the spring is strong now.

Jeff: Yup, I see. It's engaged, yeah so. And that's basically the knife without

Vanessa: Without the covers, yes right.

I've opted for a twist on the traditional, with a transparent red color.

And there you have it. I have my own personalized Victorinox Swiss army knife. Not only is it a great souvenir, I'm not going to go hungry or thirsty in Switzerland!

If you use the Grand Tour of Switzerland as a guide while traveling, you're guaranteed to see some of the best scenery in Europe.

Another fun feature of the Grand Tour is that you can pick up one of these tour-themed box lunches. They're available at various shops and hotels along the way and give you great sampling of whatever the local specialties are. It's a good way to taste the region's culinary traditions while you're checking out the views.

And speaking of food, are you passionate about farm-fresh produce and cheese? How about delectable baked goods and gourmet wines? Then add Culinarium Alpinum in the town of Stans to your Central Switzerland to-do list.

In a former Capuchin monastery from the 16th century, gastronomy and regional products marry into a foodie's paradise.

The idea is to connect Swiss chefs with local food producers and promote the region's unique culinary heritage. There are courses and seminars on regional plants and traditional dishes. You can pick up products and recipes, or you can spend the night, or just drop in the restaurant for an authentic Swiss meal.

[Soundbite]

Peter: So what we're doing here is a farm to table concept. We only work with products that we can purchase in Switzerland and we purchase all the products directly from the producer. But yeah the idea is to show the diversity of herbs, fruits, apples, pears and the diversity of plants which are in our area. And it should also bring the farmer and the producer together to show the plants that the chef maybe says "oh can you plant this for me and I'll buy it then from you."

Jeff: So actually, the chef actually helps create a market.

Peter: Yes, also it's public so everybody's invited to come here and see the diversity and also taste it directly from the plant.

Jeff: Tell me about the building here, it's beautiful.

Peter: This building, used to be a monastery and it was opened in 1584, and until 2004 it was a monastery and how it has been converted into a restaurant. And we also have fourteen rooms in the ancient cells from the monks. Of course, now it's a bit bigger, but we have transformed several cells into hotel rooms.

One of the amazing things about Switzerland is there are so many wildly beautiful places that are so easily accessible.

Just a little over a half hour's drive from Lucerne is the resort town of Engelberg. Home of a 12th century Benedictine monastery, Engelberg means "mountain of angels" and - yes - it's a place just this side of heaven.

The town is an inviting network of narrow cobbled streets and flower-laced window boxes.

Glance upwards and you'll spot Mt. Titlis, a 10,000-foot snow-capped wonder.

It takes three separate cable cars to reach the summit of Mt. Titlis. The last section of the ride is conducted aboard the world's first rotating cable car. The Rotair gondola whisks you up the mountainside with 360-degree panoramic views that extend over some of the most stunning landscape anywhere in the world.

This is the land of the eternal snow, where the views are nothing short of awe-inspiring... sweeping vistas that skim over deep mountain gorges and distant icy peaks.

Mt. Titlis is a favorite spot for skiers during the winter, and in summer you'll find a full range of outdoor sports at your disposal.

There are lots of trails in the Engelberg area for both hiking and biking. Since I've already spend some time hiking in the mountains, I thought I'd give my legs a little bit of brake and take this e-bike.

The trail along lake Trubsee is especially scenic, an easy woodland path that curves around azure water. Though you're actually never far from civilization, you get the feeling of being completely immersed in nature. I cruise along enjoying the classic alpine tableaux.

There's something almost transcendent about viewing untouched Alpine landscape from this elevation.

Lush meadows unfold in every direction and in the distance I can hear the clang of cowbells. There are at least a half dozen cheese dairies in the Engelberg area that welcome visitors; I discovered a dairy and showroom right next to the monastery.

[Soundbite at tasting]

Walter: We are in a monastery, and we have the show, actually, behind me you can see the show factory. Everyone can come in and see what we are producing. We have the mountain milk here. Up in the valley we only use this mountain milk.

We make some soft cheese and some semi hard cheese. The cheese goes all over Switzerland. We are lucky that we can deliver the grocery stores here in Switzerland. We have some cheese that goes into export, even in the US, we have some cheese that goes to the US.

I swear you can taste alpine meadows and happy cows in this cheese! But it's not just the milk. There are also the time-honored processing methods that give this cheese its unique flavor.

Traveling west on the E-Grand Tour, Central Switzerland is packed with amazing scenic viewpoints and inviting activities. The Tour lends itself to slow travel, which is not only more relaxing, but also can help you make stronger connections with the places you're visiting.

Today's itinerary features a giant in the world of sustainable destinations: the Entlebuch Biosphere Reserve. More than 150 square miles, this area is part of a UNESCO biosphere program that helps people care for their environment.

The Biosphere Program recognizes places that provide local solutions to global challenges. The idea is to involve local communities in conservation efforts that help sustain the economy for people living today, while still protecting the environment for future generations.

The people of Entlebuch safeguard their rolling moorlands, as well as their livelihoods, by promoting certified-local products and low-impact tourism.

One of the side benefits of sustainability work is fantastic, regional food.

Anyone on the hunt for such food needs to know about the little town of Marbach. It's the start of what's known in Switzerland as a "Food Trail."

To follow the Food Trail, you make a relaxing hike - about two hours long (though most people allow extra time for stops along the way).

So, I'm off to go on the Food Trail here, and the Food Trail is sort of a scavenger hunt of local delicacies. And I think by the time I get to lunch time, I probably won't need lunch.

At each stop, you get to sample a locally sourced food product.

Before we get started, a brief disclaimer: To those attempting to follow the itinerary in this program, the producers of this show cannot be held responsible for total calories consumed.

(OK? I did it. Let's eat)

There are multiple Food Trails scattered throughout Switzerland. Most of them involve solving puzzles or finding clues to locate each stop.

On the Marbach Trail, the number one product is cheese (well, this is Switzerland after all). Some call this 'following in the trail of the water buffalo.' Water buffalo were introduced into Switzerland in the 1990's to make mozzarella. Their milk is much thicker and coagulates faster than ordinary cow's milk. It produces a rich, creamy mozzarella that's 'deliziosa.'

The food trail clues lead you on an appetizing adventure that includes a gondola ride up to a scenic mountain viewpoint. If you solve the final puzzle, just stamp your ticket, hand it to the server, and get one last dessert. Ok, it's a modest prize after all that legwork, but for me, the big reward is the scenery!

Back on the road, I have no trouble locating a car charging station. Many towns and hotels along the Grand Tour offer charging stations, and I'm happy to discover one at the Kemmeriboden-Bad Hotel.

This very traditional Swiss hotel is wrapped in a beautiful landscape of farms and hiking trails. It's been owned and operated by the same family for six generations. The rooms were built from converted farm buildings, and range from small and cozy, to expansive luxury with a rustic twist.

And guess what? There's delicious food to be consumed! Besides expertly prepared regional dishes, the restaurant is known for its luscious and generously portioned meringues, topped with a mass of whipped cream. This particular dessert was dreamed up 80 years ago as way to use up extra cream from the farm next door.

If you're craving more local sweets, be sure to swing by the famous Kambly tasting room in Trubschachen. Kambly cookies are an institution in Switzerland, beloved for their light, buttery texture. The company uses flour and butter sourced from a nearby mill and dairy, and environmentally friendly packaging.

[Soundbite]

Jeff: Incoming, ok.

Franziska: Perfect.

Jeff: it's a little, looks like a little too much. Maybe

Franziska: Yeah a little bit too much chocolate, but um we love chocolate.

Jeff: Is that a thing? Yeah too much chocolate? I don't think so. I don't that's

I'm lucky enough to get to try my hand at making some special edition Matterhorn cookies.

Franziska: Wow, this one is perfect.

Jeff: I'll just keep going. Well actually, at some point I have to eat them, but. Now this is very labor intensive. This is the way these cookies are made so you....

Franziska: Yeah.

Jeff: You're back here making cookies, this takes a lot of time right.

Franziska: Yeah, we make all day the hand made products, and here you have so many steps till the end.

Jeff: Right.

Franziska: But in the end the taste is beautiful.

Jeff: Well I love almond-flavored anything is good. Almonds and hazelnuts.

Franziska: You made a good job.

Jeff: Thank you.

And now for something completely different (and, for once, not food related...)

Thar's gold in them thar hills! I've always wanted to go panning for gold. I just never thought I'd be doing it in Central Switzerland. But still, you can't really argue with the setting, can you?

In the wilds west of Lucerne, the ruggedly beautiful Napf gorge calls out to those of us prospecting for adventure. Many of the streams here have tiny gold flakes concealed along their banks.

[Soundbite]

Jeff: Ok so Terry I was hoping to retire by the end of this afternoon. Is that going to happen?

Terry: That would be great, right?

Equipped with boots, spades, and gold pans, I'm off to strike it rich.

Terry: So we're not going to see big, um, nuggets due to the set up of the mountain. So the nuggets, they've been transported from the central part of Switzerland, from central part of the Alps, with the glaciers over here, and the stone and the nuggets and the gold have been kind of broken down to little parts, and in the end we end up with a little bit of sand.

It's painstaking work, requiring plenty of patience and a lot of luck, but you get to keep any gold you find.

Terry: So the gold over here, and actually I'm not kidding, is one of the purest gold you can find. It's also really, really, really thin and soft, so it's not used for jewelry. Actually when you go to the jewelry shop, they still give you twice as much money as compared to normal gold. But it's hard to find, there are no machines, so it's just muscle power.

Pure gold is usually alloyed with other metals to make it stronger.

Well, I didn't make my fortune, but I had fun trying.

Ok, pardners, after trying my luck in the streams, I need someplace to kick off my boots and set a spell – and I mean real relaxation.

Kneipper Experience, near the town of Sorenberg, is a soothing, spa-like nature preserve. This is where you indulge body and mind.

Sebastian Kneipp was a 19th century Bavarian priest and one of the forefathers of naturopathic medicine. After nearly dying of tuberculosis, Kneipp began developing an approach to health based on the idea that humans should live in accordance with nature.

He's most remembered for his work in hydrotherapy, but he also promoted plants, exercise, nutrition, and balance. Pull off your boots and walk barefoot along paths lined with dozens of different materials, such as pinecones or wood, that stimulate the blood circulation. Then plunge your feet into the cold mountain water.

To my way of thinking, when it comes to variety and sustainability, Central Switzerland is just about an ideal destination. There's elegant Lucerne...there are the endless opportunities to sample delicious food and authentic culture...and best of all, it's a place where you can enjoy nature up-close, firsthand, and treated with care.

Time to get back on the road for more of the Grand Tour. Thanks so much for joining me in Lucerne and Central Switzerland!

Tune in again as I search for more "Real Road Adventures!"