

Real Road Adventures: Lake Geneva Region

Hi, I'm Jeff Wilson! This week I'm shifting into cultural high gear as I visit western Switzerland, home to world-class vineyards and the global peace city of Geneva. We're taking the scenic route through Swiss innovation, with a little French joie de vivre thrown in along the way. It's the road trip of a lifetime through the Lake Geneva region!

[Standard open]

Western Switzerland is where you come to get a big picture view on life. It's home to stunning Lake Geneva, the largest body of water in the country; the mighty Alps rise along the horizon. It's where writers and artists gravitate to create epic works, where great minds congregate to solve global problems, and where valuable intercultural exchanges happen every day.

For this series, I'm homing in on amazing destinations that also prioritize sustainability. I believe that no matter who we are, we have an obligation to protect our planet for each other and for future generations.

Travel can open our eyes to the wonders of the world and bring new light to global challenges. Our choices on where we go and how we spend our travel dollars can make a difference.

I've used carbon offsets from myclimate.org for my Swiss flights, and I'm traveling along the E-Grand Tour of Switzerland via electric car. The tour is a mapping of the country's best sights and includes hundreds of car charging stations along the way.

In this episode, I visit portions of the tour in French-speaking Switzerland, including small towns near Lake Neuchatel, and the cities of Lausanne and Geneva.

We're starting things off on a colorful note – with butterflies!

Entering the 4000-square-foot Papiliorama in the town of Kerzers, you're transported into a balmy, tropical world where more than a thousand butterflies flutter freely. A Dutch biologist and his wife founded this wildlife preserve more than 30 years ago to help raise awareness about the fate of tropical forests, and it's been a hit with the Swiss. A wide range of exotic plants, birds, and other wildlife round out the reserve. The mission is to immerse visitors in a fascinating ecosystem, at least for a short while, so they can marvel at its beauty and appreciate its fragility.

Southwest of Papiliorama, the little town of Avenches flows with Swiss-French charm and remnants of an illustrious past.

Two thousand years ago, Romans conquered most of what is present-day Switzerland. Avenches, or Aventicum as it was known then, became the capital of the territory.

The beautifully preserved Roman amphitheater is the clearest reminder of those glory days. Aventicum boasted a population of around 20,000 at its peak. After a few hundred years, the city was overrun by Germanic tribes from the north. Today only about 3000 people make their home in Avenches, but the beautiful amphitheater, which has excellent acoustics, is still used regularly for opera and other music festivals.

Are you a fan of fairy-tale architecture and authentic local delicacies? Then swing by the medieval town of Murten. Not only is it one of the most picturesque towns in Western Switzerland, it's a "must-stop" for a special cake called Nidelkuchen.

Sound up Jeff: Bon jour. Hello.

The recipes for this caramel cream delicacy have been passed down for generations. To give it that "melt in your mouth" texture, at least five thin coats of cream are brushed onto lightly raised pastry dough

[Soundbite]

Uli: The founder of our bakery knew about this cake that was very famous at the time, but he wanted to have a cake that was tasty all day long and it was more fluffy and more cream on it. And instead of taking bread dough, he would take the dough and add milk to it, which makes the cake much more lighter, fluffier, juicier.

There are also savory versions of the cake that are often served as an appetizer with a glass of local wine.

Further south along the E-Grand tour, Lausanne rises steeply above Lake Geneva. This is both a popular resort town and busy commercial center. In ancient times, there was a Roman military camp here, and over the centuries it grew into an important stopping point on the route from Italy to the North Sea. Today Lausanne is home to the International Olympic Committee, and the lively city streets have a young and energetic feel.

From carving out Lake Geneva, to sculpting the city's hills, to powering medieval fountains and wheels – water has been a pivotal actor in Lausanne's evolution.

Guide Franziska Werren explains more about how water has driven the city's fortunes.

[Soundbite]

Franziska: The historic part is built on three hills, and between the three hills you also have two Rivers.

Jeff: Why is the city built over them?

Franziska: Because the very beginning was down by the Lake. The Romans. But then they got attacked from people coming from the north. They had to leave the place down by the Lake and come up on the Hills. This was in the fourth century.

History comes to life as mechanical figures in the old town clock, added in the last century, tell stories from Lausanne's past.

To get the full "Lake Geneva" experience, you need to get out on the water. I'm taking a 2-hour CGN Lavaux evening cruise.

Lake Geneva is the largest lake in Switzerland and one of the biggest in Western Europe. It was formed around 10,000 years ago by a withdrawing glacier. That slow-moving mass of ice left this stunning landscape in its tracks.

Unusually deep, the lake reaches down about a thousand feet at its lowest point. Our boat glides past a panorama of terraced vineyards and rural countryside. The border between Switzerland and France runs

nearly down the middle of the lake. Most of the more populated areas are on the northern Swiss side, while a few French towns sprinkle the southern shore.

Dinner on board is a gourmet affair. During summer months, a Michelin-starred chef prepares both traditional Swiss dishes and more modern offerings.

This is the perfect way to watch the evening settle in over mountains and lake.

With the morning light, I've got a yen to explore. I'm using an e-bike to tour the Lavaux, an internationally famous wine-growing region on the shores of Lake Geneva. A 20-mile path through the vineyards can be explored on foot or by bike, but either way, the views are not to be missed.

Nearly 2000 acres of steeply terraced vineyards stretch roughly from Lausanne to Montreux and are designated a UNESCO world heritage site.

These are vineyards with a pedigree. Some evidence shows there were grapes during Roman times. And the terraces can be traced back at least a thousand years to when Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries controlled the area.

According to UNESCO, the Lavaux is an "outstanding example of a centuries-long interaction between people and their environment." The main grape grown here is the chasselas, which yields a crisp white wine that originated in Switzerland (and is said to pair perfectly with fondue).

The vines thrive due to heat coming in three ways: directly from the sun, sun rays bouncing off Lake Geneva, and heat stored-up in the many stone walls of the vineyards.

Domaine Blaise Duboux, which dates back some 500 years, is one of the top wine estates in the area. It spans more than 12 acres, three-quarters of which are devoted to growing chasselas grapes.

Owner Blaise Duboux practices biodynamic farming, which is a form of organic agriculture that views a farm as a closed, diversified ecosystem. It's a holistic approach that uses locally sourced materials for fertilizer and takes into consideration all the other plants and animals on the farm, treating them as a single living organism.

[Soundbite Blaise]

Jeff: So tell us a bit about what biodynamic farming is.

Blaise: For me, for me, it's definitely the connection with the vegetables and the animals. That's the idea. To reconnect all of that together. Trying to vine in the soil with the compost that you give will react in the soil and grow on its own without chemicals, of course, sustainability.

Jeff: So it's not just what you put in the soil. But also how you see the whole system.

Blaise: Exactly.

Researchers say that organically grown wine actually tastes better than wine produced in conventional ways.

[Wine tasting]

Blaise: So natural cork, trying to be sustainable, right up to the end. Glass, recyclable. We bottled the wine two months ago. As we say in French, santé.

Jeff: Santé.

The bounty from vineyards doesn't come only in a glass. Ever heard of a pop-up wine spa? It's a creative idea uses the parts of the grapes and vines that are leftover in the wine making process for soothing body treatments.

In a beautiful bucolic setting at Domaine Bovy estate, I discover a mobile wine spa called La Vigne. It's a "waste nothing" concept that both contributes to the local economy and provides a welcome indulgence for visitors. First you unwind in a relaxing bath in the vineyard while sipping wine. Next, there are a variety of skin treatments, such as exfoliation with grape seeds and pulp. Known as vinotherapy, the idea is that grapes have anti-aging and regenerative properties (such as polyphenols) that help skin look better. I get full body wrap in grape sediment... and finally, a relaxing massage with grape seed oil. Not sure if my skin's looking younger, but I know it feels great.

To round out this agricultural odyssey, I stop by the Praz-Romond Farm. Worked by the same family for more than five generations, the farm welcomes visitors. They're a popular supplier of cheese and meat, but these days their main focus is on sheep.

[Soundbite Sylvain Chevalley]

Jeff: This is your flock.

Sylvain: Yes. There is about 120 sheep

Jeff: And they get milked, you said twice a day?

Sylvain: Twice a day, yeah. We bring it to the house over there and we milk and then they come back here.

Jeff: They seem happy.

Sylvain: Yes. It's better when it's sunny.

In 2009, one of the owners visited New Zealand and discovered the merits of sheep's milk, especially when it comes to making ice cream.

[Soundbite Sylvain Chevalley]

Sylvain: In sheep's milk, there is more fat and protein, but it's easier to digest because the protein are good for humans.

Sustainability is key here. The animals spend their days grazing on the lush meadows. Their fodder is made from cereals grown on the estate. While some visitors are initially skeptical about products made from sheep's milk, the Chevalley family know that tasting is believing.

Jeff: Oh, man, you're killing me. I'm going to have to eat all of this. Well thank you, Sylvain. This is really good. Very tasty.

From wholesome foods to technological wizardry, the Swiss always seem to find ways to improve the quality of human endeavors.

Human activities have left many thousands of pieces of orbital debris or "junk" in the near-Earth space environment. And that's a problem.

[Soundbite Lionel]

Lionel: If you can imagine a highway with a lot of cars going around, you had one car that is breaking down in the middle of the road. Well, what do you do? You call the tow truck. The tow truck is coming and removing the debris, defunct car. And then the highway is good again. That's what we want to build accurate space. We want to build a tow truck for space.

Not only can debris fall unexpectedly from the sky, it can create collision hazards for future missions. The ClearSpace organization was selected by the European Space Agency to lead the first mission to remove debris from orbit.

[Soundbite]

Lionel: First we need to get launched. We need to go in orbit. We need to reach the orbits of this debris that we want to go and grab. And when we reach this debris, we have to analyze it. Because the debris is uncooperative. It has no engines, it has no way to control its attitude. So we have to look at it. We have to determine how it rotates. And then we have to determine how we can grab it in the safest way.

ClearSpace will use an experimental, four-armed robot to capture a piece of space junk located about 500 miles above Earth.

[Soundbite]

Lionel: If you imagine that we have growing amount of debris, then it can hurt the whole industry behind it. So we can lose navigation, we can lose weather forecasts and all these kind of things that we absolutely need on Earth. So we don't really realize it, but actually, each and every one of us is dependent on space in some way or is using space technology at some point. That's why we have to tackle this space debris problem.

Driving along Lake Geneva is like cruising through a real-life travelogue.

Commanding the southwestern tip of the lake, the vibrant city of Geneva is an international nerve center.

The famous jet d'eau fountain spouts spectacularly from the lakefront, surging more than 400 feet in the air. The city has a sophisticated, multicultural feel. The busy streets throng with pedestrians. And scaling a hillside, the beautiful old town is an inviting labyrinth of narrow passageways and historic facades. I've long admired the people of Geneva for their work on serious world issues, such as hosting the European headquarters of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and International Red Cross Committee. More and more, I've come to admire their efforts on tackling the global climate crisis.

The Swiss Federal Council has committed to a climate-neutral Switzerland by 2050. Guide Sandrina Palomera has the inside story on some of Geneva's sustainability work.

[Soundbite Sandrina]

Sandrina: Just this area, because we are here, is very important. We are, all these buildings have been connected in 2005 to a network called Geneva Lake Nation, which means to climatize and heat these buildings. We pump the water from the Lake at 40 meters depth. We take it to the different areas. In winter, we warm it up. In summer, we cool it down. And when the water goes back to the lake, we water the parks. And this will save 75,000 cubic meters of fuel and no pollution. And this system is so good, we are installing it in other areas of Geneva, for instance, near the lake and near the airport.

A wise person once said that "youth is the hope of our future."

I found one example of that here in the creative “Youth for Soap” program. This non-profit initiative combats waste by collecting used soaps from hotels, recycling them, and donating them to homeless people and others in need.

The program is also a win for participating hotels such as the Edelweiss.

[Soundbite Maria Croci]

Maria: We were throwing away about a ton of soap in the bin every year, which is huge. Not only Edelweiss, of course, the six hotels. Cost, of course, because all treatments of what we throw away is very expensive. Or it gets more and more expensive with the years. So if we can avoid putting everything in the bin, it's good.

Youth for Soap is a terrific example of many organizations coming together for a good cause.

The project is managed by students of Espace Enterprise, a vocational training center in Geneva.

The actual recycling is done by people living with intellectual disabilities. And Swiss chemistry students developed a purification process to ensure hygiene.

[Soundbite Laurence]

Laurence: We give the soap to nonprofit in Geneva, to homeless centers, food banks, all the person who might need the soap, in Geneva. The students are between 15 and 20. It's a business school, but it's really the start of their professional life in fact.

Thousands of soaps have been distributed to people in need since the launch of the program.

[Soundbites students]

Jeff: What do you plan to do in the future?

Jeff: You don't have to, you know... What do you want to do? What do you dream about?

Mamadou: He wants to finish his four years of business school. Then he would like to become a director and to have a good company.

Dylan: He doesn't know where, but he wants to work in business after.

Laurence: When I see the youngsters, changing, maturing discovering life, I think that's for me the most fulfilling when I see them in action, this is really a small champagne moment. When really you discover they learn something, they're...yeah, they change. They change through the project And then I've got the feeling my job is useful.

I can't leave Geneva without indulging in one of my favorite pastimes: a visit to a chocolate factory. For two centuries, the Favarger Company has been making fine chocolate from scratch.

[Soundbite Adrien]

Adrien: You're really in the heart of the Favarger manufacturer. This is our fresh chocolate workshop where our chocolatiers are busy making all of our products by hand. At the moment what you see is the production of the marmite or the soup pots. This is part of a Geneva tradition and we're making tens of thousands of these over the next few months in order to be ready for the event which takes place in December. Here, what can go wrong is that you can sometimes get air bubbles. This is a chocolate that

hasn't been molded correctly. We like to keep them on the rotator for as long as we can so that we push out really all of the air bubbles and it makes a consistent chocolate for us.

The company specializes in creating chocolate kettles that each December are part of Geneva's Escalade celebration. They commemorate the night in 1602 when a certain Madame Royaume saved the city by hurling a cauldron of boiling soup onto enemy soldiers, helping drive them off, and warning her fellow citizens of the attack.

Today Favarger is focused on responsible, sustainable production.

[Soundbite]

Adrien: We're a very small player in the confectionery industry overall, but we try to have as much impact as we can on all parts of the supply chain. We start with the sourcing of our cocoa beans which are Rainforest Alliance certified and they have a single origin in Ghana. And then for the remainder of the ingredients we aim to source them from as many local producers as possible and this goes from the sugar which is beetroot sugar from Switzerland to of course, Swiss milk which is what makes the chocolate so creamy and delicious

Adrien: Favarger being 200 years old and having not changed its production in almost 200 years, we find that we're now serving in demand for products are all natural, ethically sourced and use local ingredients. So, we're very much on trend with what the consumer wants and it's what the business is good at doing. And it's also what's good for society as a whole.

Fascinating history, spectacular scenery, sophisticated culture, and social conscience...these are ingredients for a great travel destination. And the Lake Geneva region has them all. Thanks for watching! You are now an official ambassador for sustainable travel.

Join me again as I search for more Real Road Adventures!