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On time on the summit

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Richard Jinman finds alpine magic and a little rock'n'roll glamour on a breathtakingly efficient train journey.

In Britain, they like to name locomotives for famous explorers: Sir Walter Raleigh, Captain Robert Scott, even Dr Who. In western Europe, where train travel is less a leap into the unknown and more of a fast, cost-effective means of getting around, they prefer cold, hard statistics written on the engine's flank.

The silver projectile sitting low on its haunches at Paris's Gare de l'Est has "578.4 km/hour" stamped on its side and "November 14, 2007", the date it achieved that speed. Only tourists – English and Australian tourists, in particular – seem to find this remarkable; everyone else is hurrying down the platform. It is 8.02am on a brisk spring day and the train is scheduled to leave in three minutes. In this part of the world, this means the train will leave at 8.05am precisely or our conductor, Patrick Bernard – immaculate in grey uniform, tie and cap – will face embarrassment, a disciplinary hearing or quite possibly the guillotine.

Monsieur Bernard has nothing to worry about, of course: his train departs 30 seconds early. At 8.20am, he saunters into the first-class carriage exuding the bonhomie of a maitre d' at one of France's better restaurants. "Yes, tickets please," he purrs as the Paris suburbs begin to blur through the windows. I am sitting in a reclining, cloth-upholstered seat that would put some airlines to shame; it is a fine introduction to the European rail system.

Our destination today is the Swiss border city of Basel. Here we change platforms and board a waiting InterCity train to Lucerne, in central Switzerland. This is where my Swiss Pass (see breakout) comes into play. Switzerland has the world's most densely serviced public transport system – an astonishingly efficient matrix of trains, buses, cable cars and ferries – and the Swiss Pass gives you access to just about all of it. The Swiss train, like its French cousin, is comfortable, clean and ruthlessly punctual. At 1.30pm – just five-and-a-half hours after leaving Paris – I arrive in Lucerne to be confronted by the kind of scenery you usually see only on the lids of chocolate boxes.

Sandwiched between the Swiss Plateau and the Alps, Lucerne is the country's fourth-largest city. Its old town, an outrageously romantic collection of spires, steeples, medieval bridges and half-timbered houses, sits on the edge of a lake, a mirror for its pulchritude. Not surprisingly, Lucerne is a magnet for tourists and even in the off-season they seem to outnumber the locals. Our guide is a no-nonsense Swiss named Hanny Felder. This was once a fishing village, she says. It was the opening in 1220 of the Gotthard Pass – an alpine route connecting the northern German-speaking part of Switzerland with the Italian-speaking region – that saw Lucerne grow into a travel hub. In the 1860s, it came into its own as a tourist destination when travel pioneer Thomas Cook began bringing well-heeled Britons to Switzerland as part of the Grand Tour. Felder's whistle-stop tour takes us from the city's newest structure, the KKL building – a giant modernist pavilion designed by celebrated French architect Jean Nouvel – to the tavern in the old town where composer Richard Wagner once sipped his quotidian glass of red. Just about everything in Lucerne seems to have burned down at some point. Things got so bad in the 17th century that the city's rulers banned the use of wood as a building material. Even so, the train station went up in flames in 1971 – "a problem with pommes frites", Felder says – and two-thirds of its historic wooden bridge was destroyed by another fire in 1993. "Maybe a cigarette," she suggests.

For me, Lucerne's hidden jewel is its Picasso Museum. Housed in a rather drab former bank building on Pilatusstrasse, it is home to an unexpectedly stunning collection that includes 32 works by Picasso as well as pictures by 21 other respected artists, including Cezanne, Matisse, Miro and Klee.

We leave Lucerne – and climb a mountain. Not on foot, luckily, although that would have helped offset lunch: a calorific catastrophe featuring cheese fondue, potatoes and macaroni cheese. I flash the Swiss Pass at a bus driver and travel to the Kriens chair-lift station in Lucerne's outer suburbs. Here, you enter a small red capsule that slingshots into space as it begins the 40-minute journey to the peak of Mount Pilatus, 2132 metres above sea level. The ski season is over but a late, heavy fall of snow

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means the slopes above and below are coated white.

Arriving at the summit, you feel like you've wandered into a James Bond movie, partly because the final leg of the ascent involves a large cable car but mostly because the Hotel Bellevue – a steel-clad cylinder lodged in a nook just below the summit – looks exactly like a Bond villain's lair. Opened in 1963, it replaced an older hotel that ... burnt down.

Up here, the alpine views are astonishing. From the tip of Oberhaupt – one of the mountain's three peaks – you can see Lucerne, the lake and parts of Italy and Germany. Blackbirds glide beneath you in the cold, clear air and some of the mountain goats who call this place home stare warily from their vertiginous perches. Queen Victoria visited in 1868 and was smitten by the sunsets, apparently.

An alternative way to visit the mountain is on the Mount Pilatus Railway, the world's steepest cog railway. It takes 30 minutes to travel the 4.6 kilometres from the village of Alpnachstad to the summit. Running on gradients of up to 48 per cent and passing through seven tunnels and 18 bridges and viaducts, it's quite a thrill ride. Many travellers ascend the mountain on the chair lift and descend on the train, using a ferry to travel between Alpnachstad and Lucerne.

Our next stop is Montreux, a destination reached via the GoldenPass Line. One of Switzerland's most celebrated rail journeys, it spans the 240 kilometres between Lucerne and Montreux on the shores of Lake Geneva. The rolling stock is fitted with enormous, panoramic windows and you can sip wine or beer as you take in the view. The Swiss Pass covers the journey but here's a tip: pay the Sfr16 (\$18.84) tariff and sit in the eight-seat VIP compartment at the front of the train. Here, you get a 180-degree driver's-eye view of the snow-covered peaks, lakeside chalets and meadows full of the greenest grass on the planet.

After travelling through the Brunig Pass, the GoldenPass train stops at Interlaken. After that, the only settlements of note are Zweisimmen, Châtaux d'Oex and Gstaad, winter playground of the well-heeled and home to celebrities including Roger Moore, Elizabeth Taylor and Roman Polanski. Sadly, there is no sign of either Roger or Liz as the train slows to pass through Gstaad station. We approach Montreux through some of the vineyards that line the terraced, south-facing slopes on Lake Geneva. Yes, the Swiss do make wine but they don't export it. The vineyards are small and produce mostly white wine using the chasselas grape. The Lavaux wine region – all 830 hectares of it – has been listed as a world heritage site by UNESCO and a wine-tasting trip through pretty villages such as Lutry, Epesses and Corseaux is a great way to spend a day.

Montreux is a curious place. Its most prominent buildings are the florid hotels built in the belle époque style of the late 19th century. More recent additions are the casino and the convention centre, home to the celebrated jazz festival that takes place in early July. Freddie Mercury, the late lead singer of Queen, owned an apartment in Montreux and a life-size statue of him punching the air in full rock-god mode, erected after his death in London in 1991, stands rather incongruously on the edge of the lake.

Indeed, Montreux is rather rock'n'roll, despite being an expensive, rather sedate town in a country not renowned for its rebelliousness. British rockers Deep Purple wrote their anthem Smoke On The Water here after the band's members watched the original casino burn to the ground in December 1971. They then set up a studio in the Montreux Grand Hotel and recorded their most successful album, Machine Head.

Most people come to Montreux for tranquillity. The views across the pristine lake to the snow-capped mountains are extraordinary. And a few local attractions demand a visit. Chillon Castle inspired Lord Byron to write his romantic poem The Prisoner Of Chillon in 1816. The castle's 13th-century latrines, which flush straight into the lake, suggest the waters were rather less pristine when the building was occupied by the Dukes of Savoy.

I'd also recommend a trip to the nearby town of Vevey. Here, you can walk from the train station to the small, rather modest graveyard where Charlie Chaplin is buried next to his wife, Oona O'Neil. Just to the left of their headstones is the resting place of another local resident, Hollywood star James Mason.

The cemetery is empty when I visit. Sitting on the small stone bench in front of Chaplin's tomb, I wonder how one of the world's most famous entertainers ended up in this quiet corner of Switzerland. A warm breeze is blowing and the lake sparkles in the distance. Snow-capped mountains rise to a blue sky behind Chaplin's grave. For a man who spent his life in the limelight, it must have been a wonderful refuge. "Not so bad, Charlie," I think. "Not so bad."

Richard Jinman travelled courtesy of Etihad Airways and Rail Europe.

Etihad has a fare to Paris for \$1410 via Abu Dhabi. Air Austral flies from Sydney to Paris via Reunion Island for \$1415; it's the same fare for Melbourne passengers, who fly to Sydney on Virgin Blue. (Fares are low-season)

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