

Harriet Report #18 [April 28 to May 6, 2001]

Love Switzerland – Sometimes; with Boys

Well yeah, boys! I mean my sons, Peter, age ten, and Arthur age seven.

Arthur picked “snowy mountains” for our last school break week together before we stop living in Europe, and I translated “snowy mountains” into Switzerland, because when we flew over the Alps back and forth to Crete and to Rome, he always said “I want to go there.” Little did I realize that his interest was completely based on the hope of a snowball fight.

I was clueless about even more, that’s for sure. Never having been to Switzerland, I had no idea what I’d been missing. And then as quickly as I fell in love with it, I fell out of love. What a fickle creature, that Harriet.

Admittedly I’m an extreme extrovert and very people centric, but the Swiss Nature, not the humans, screamed “Notice me!” It must have been the vista’s of stunningly clear lakes and snow covered severe mountains, fresh thick green of grass, trees, and shockingly bright flowers blooming everywhere, including the abandoned antelope pen at the zoo, filled with what appeared to be garden but Anita was certain was just weeds. And she’s born, raised, and settled in Zurich so she should know.

It was actually kind of shocking. A good kind of shocking, that the gardens had such healthy full colored flowers and the green of the spring grass and new tree leaves were for real, not just a polarized sunglasses trick. Things were clean. It was a comforting setting, but something unsettled me; probably too clean and something funny between me and the humans. Was I suddenly a major bitch? Right!

Where was the grunge? Simple answer; very well disguised. We did see power plants, industrial parking lots, and military installations, but they were hidden. For example, in the peak of Mt. Pilatus where I felt on top of the world and totally private with only a handful of other tourists enjoying the we’re-way-out-in-nature-now view, there were funny rock looking doors in the sheer cliff of the peak. Anita explained that there was a military base inside the mountain which had been hollowed out and included living quarters and defense stuff. The boys were only slightly interested in this, but I thought it was absolutely remarkable. How James Bondian! How discreet! How Swiss?

Between the comfortable warm weather, lack of rain, incredible nature, blooming flowers, and a good sleep each night, I thought I was in love. Eventually it started to fall apart, which made it a whole lot easier to go home to Delft. I love that happy feeling I get every time I return to Delft, so comforting.

To document the week's journey, I kept a Nightly List of favorites and least favorites, relatively humorous and revealing. I quizzed both Peter and Arthur for their list additions too, although sometimes they were distracted with other occupations instead of paying attention to their answers. Jump ahead to the Nightly List, or stay tuned for my complementary Telling More, they do not repeat each other. Which is more revealing I wonder? Lastly I share my list of Things I've Learned in Switzerland. Enjoy!

TELLING MORE ABOUT THE TRIP:

The boys had been with Alex for two weeks prior to our departure and I struggled with some emotional divorce related stuff, plugging my ears with positive self talk as we walked away from the house to catch our first train Saturday morning. We had 10 hours of trains to go and I was not going to let divorce wreck the trip, damn it!

Successfully I conquered my emotional weirdness, but the day was tough anyway. See the Nightly List for more. We arrived in Zurich at dusk after the last hour's train ride through steeply rolling green hills with only a very occasional house. The setting light was absolutely unrecordable and religious, glowing up all that fresh spring green. Thinking like a painter I was totally lost how to capture it, so I just reveled in it. The boys were Gameboy bound, the easy way out parenting.

By the time we were at Anita's apartment in the suburbs it was dark. Not until the next morning did we get to see outdoors which wowed me all over again. That was our zoo day. Not an entire success with much whining, see the Nightly List for more on that.

Anita's house is a whole nother topic. I knew ahead of time that it was a strip apartment in a suburban complex, ala US condos. Surprise! It was Switzerland. It was attractive and clean and sophisticated Swiss systems were employed everywhere, even the toilet. It made for an outer space experience of the most comfortable type. Even the shower curtain was more clever than one ever seen by my American eyes before. Right after I discovered that Arthur had pulled it down "accidentally" and I'd bravely confessed to Anita, she had it popped back up with NO DAMAGE!

Of course there's Anita herself, and her live-in, Manuel, who is not dark and exotic as his name implies. He's blond, boyish, and bookish behind his glasses; the usual northern European tallish and attractive, and so young looking. For our two day visit, he was also quiet. Peter, Arthur, and I were maybe a wee bit overwhelming for the place and it's occupants, but it was oh so nice to be tour guided by Anita, cosseted in their comfy home, and have someone to talk to!

While Manuel's busy starting his investment banking software company, Anita took lots of time off from her forestry PhD research schedule to hang out with us and cook, and clean, and listen to Harriet talk about this year. Not an easy task for any human considering the year is centered around being divorced, but hopefully made easier by sitting on the sunny porch sharing a beer.

And I did do a little bit of dishes and I shared a towel with the boys to make less laundry. Don't say I didn't try to do my part! Well yes, we were late leaving the last morning and I didn't get to strip the bed as planned, but I did command Peter to ask Anita, as I had my head deep in a special shoving and racing exercise with the wheelie suitcase, "should we strip the bed?", a question pretty well set up for a "no, don't bother" answer. Yes! No guilt!

So on Monday we left the comfort of Anita and Manuel's, but according to plan, Anita met us later that day on the ascent up Mt. Pilatus to enjoy our big goal with us; a fabulous view of the Alps from the top of a snow covered pointy thing, a mountain, you know? So that was a huge success, hard to tear myself away. So hard that at the halfway down stop, I fell asleep on the park bench while memorizing the view of the mountain peak. I was probably supposed to be watching the boys on the playground, but the one time they started pain screaming, I woke in a flash and ran to see what was wrong; pretty much nothing of course.

Our hotel in Lucerne was ducky, lots more Swiss standard. Clean, light, airy, simple, large, and those silky white satin puff quilts that are so damn annoying because there's no way to sleep with just a sheet on you when you get too damn hot. As we all do, right ladies? The sheet is wrapped around the quilt, although I've considered taking the quilt out, but then it'd be too cold, especially with the french doors open as they had to be, because it was too damn hot. Hmm, there's a cycle here somewhere.

Tuesday was Transportation Museum Day, a big drawing card with the boys, oft quoted as great fun for the kiddies in the guide books. No disappointment there. It was great! Except for occasional whining of course, see Nightly List.

You know how you might get "testy" and everything is more extreme and you have to try to stop the "stupidness", it's your job to Control and Fix the bothers, like your ten year old son unscrewing the window handle just out of boredom but to you it's a personal affront and the seven year old insists on chewing his squirt gun plug even though you know it will get lost and the gun won't squirt anymore, which one hour later is true but he insisted he wouldn't lose it and now he's crying and it's all your fault? Well, that's not a good mood to be in. I recommend you avoid that one, maybe by taking hormones and never having your period ever again. Maybe.

But I'm a Harriet, I would never have a barely rational bad mood, would I?

On Wednesday we did what I wanted, which was a romantic old fashioned elegant lake steamer ride to a “twee” village which wasn’t twee to me. I loved the blooming gardens and benches lining the lakeshore and the clear, clear water and view to mountains disappearing in clouds five thousand feet above our heads. It was sweet and luckily nobody was looking when Arthur and Peter climbed that tree and broke a honking branch off. I don’t think anyone, and possibly especially the careful Swiss, would like having their park tree mangled by out of control children while their mother daydreamed, not asleep this time, on a bench fifteen feet away. Hey, it’s an artist’s life. See how convenient that self-titling is? Also notice the predominance of park benches in the Harriet and Boys version of Switzerland.

Thursday was special-view-of-the-alps-train-journey day. It was a six hour trip. I controlled the Gameboy play in the following way; they could play as long as they looked up when I shouted for them to notice some extremely stellar vista, of which there were really a lot and Arthur definitely stopped looking up. But Peter was thoughtful about looking up at least ten seconds and saying “Wow, that’s neat Mom.” This was me trying. We stopped in Interlaken for lunch. It was disappointing but still felt Swiss.

That evening we arrived in Montreux in the dark, the Riviera of Switzerland, and I chose a taxi to get to the hotel. What a flash of brilliance that was, it was straight up hill. But the mood had changed and I was starting to not love Switzerland anymore. The Hotel du Pont didn’t help matters and it was an easy decision to not stay past that one night. Luckily no bugs or rodents got us in our brief stay.

The weather had changed to gray mountain blocking overcast, not the hotel’s fault. It stayed warm and rain-free, but I lost the good sleep factor. Our hotel was ten feet from a roaring waterfall, and I mean ROARING, and our room was five feet from a cog train track which disappeared into a tunnel under the house next door. The tunnel didn’t block out the loud chugging of the trains. How quaint.

And my bed was a study in bouncy sinking, kind of hammock style. I had to stand on tip toe to reach the back of my butt onto the high mattress but then sank down so deeply I needed handicapped railing to climb back out. The boys LOVED it, all the jumping factor. I was scared they were going to break the ancient wooden frames or fall through the warped floor of our attic room. Didn’t though.

Still, I know when to take action. We checked out the next day and a nice tourist office lady found us a very comfortable, and back to Swiss standard, hotel in the old town center of Vevey, a short bus ride along the lake from Montreux.

I'd seen enough Montreux, which was pretty much nothing except that fabulous waterfall and our pealy painted hotel with it's raggy gray carpeted dark hall and surprisingly delicious, possibly horse meat, dinner. I don't know my French meat words that well, but I never saw meat that shape and color. The boys enjoyed their strawberries and the people were very kind until we announced with great bravery that we were leaving a day early. I understand reprimand and an extra twenty francs on my bill even if it is all in French. Glad to pay, wiped out my guilt at leaving.

Friday we visited the Chateau de Chillon, the most visited site in Switzerland, see the Nightly List for comments. Bused to Vevey hotel and collapsed in a late afternoon quiet time of French dubbed TV and squirt gun fights in the bathroom for boys, happy girlfriend reading for Mom laying in bed by the open french doors. It was bliss. It was raining. Does that matter? Shouldn't we have been out in the streets absorbing the flavors of French Switzerland? Not!

Saturday was travel day, and night. We were taking a nine p.m. train to Basel to catch our all night train to Amsterdam. But first, a short train to Lausanne for our one and only art experience. Don't say I don't consider the boy's interests in planning our "vacations". We'd already played miniature golf once and were to play it again if they behaved at the Museum D'Art Brut. It was special to me to see a museum devoted to untrained artists, who also are "unsocialized", i.e. psycho or otherwise odd. It was great! And the boys had very little trouble behaving because there was a big courtyard with more questionable climbing trees in front and they had just had a nice french fry and ice cream lunch, so everybody was happy.

I could care less about their cheating at miniature golf either. I passed on the opportunity for some prime moral lesson, especially after that tasty Swiss beer I guzzled, helpful in attaining the proper mini golf attitude to match the disco music broadcast tastefully quietly over the course. And what a tasteful course.

Actually, Peter and I decided it was a prefab kit because the holes exactly matched the mini golf course in Lucerne. Simple green surfaced holes with green grass surrounds and some tasteful green obstacles. Some challenging hitting, I like the Start Over rule, but the course tastefully blends in to the lakeside setting. No blemish on the park, you know? I kind of missed the raucous tackiness of the American model for mini golf, but this was Switzerland. Fun still.

That night we set out for home on a series of trains, settling into our first ever overnight in our own train cabin. It was a triple bunk closet, and Peter kindly slept in the ceiling bunk. I was scared for him but there were two puny little straps he would roll into before he fell in his sleep to the steel floor of the train car. Arthur was safely settled in the middle bunk and I most bravely took the bottom bunk, nicely situated exactly at regular bed height. Then, to get me back, it was too hot and the window had to be open which was too noisy, by far. Both

boys announced the next day that they slept great! See Nightly List for my comments.

Loved the trip to Switzerland, what a treat! Wish I'd known how gorgeous it was before. Check out the Nightly List and Things I've Learned in Switzerland.

NIGHTLY LIST:

Day One: Saturday 4/29/01

Mom's favorites: like my book; nobody sick; had enough food and drink picnic on train; reading to Arthur.

Mom's least favorites: conductor lady in Germany telling me how to parent with no Gameboy, bossy cow; Peter getting bored of Gameboy and whining; choppy rhythm of reading "Skellig" out loud to boys; Arthur drops his lunch on train floor and I eat it and it's gritty; cold air blowing on my privates when sitting on train toilet; boys whining at Zurich train station.

Peter's favorites: like seeing the castles, river, and cliffs [Rhine Gorge in Germany].

Peter's least favorites: sitting there doing nothing when there's nothing to see and Mom said we couldn't play Gameboy [blame the train conductor, she kept going past with some kind of glare].

Arthur's favorites: the mountains, castle, and river.

Arthur's least favorites: Mom bugging us.

Day Two: Sunday 4/29/01

Mom's favorites: flowers and grass and trees blooming and budding; rosti potatoes at Anita's; fresh fruit bar at the Zoo; laying in the grass and english daisies in the sun with magazine while boys entertained themselves on playground at Anita's; shirtsleeves; beer on deck with Anita; talking to Anita; tigers and monkeys at Zoo.

Mom's least favorites: boy's whining about being bored at the Zoo.

Peter's favorites: playing with my yoyo and the tiger.

Peter's least favorites: walking up the hills.

Arthur's favorites: monkeys and tiger.

Arthur's least favorites: flamingos.

Day Three: Monday 4/30/01

Mom's favorites: breakfast Anita made of good coffee, juice, and croissants; all of Mt. Pilatus' views; walk from bus to gondola in Kriens through flower garden neighborhood; laying on bench at mountain playground with view of Pilatus peak and watching boy's play together, nap, green field, nap; exciting gondola; cheese fondue; beautiful evening walk along Lake Lucerne with swans and perfect sunset light and really clear view of Pilatus peak.

Mom's least favorites: boy's rough housing at lunch restaurant on top of Pilatus; rushed packing in morning; run to train; fight with Peter before breakfast.

Peter's favorites: having snowball fight; playground; going on gondola; seeing the mountain.

Peter's least favorites: the BIG gondola – liked the small, sitting down one better; this morning when I was angry.

Arthur's favorites: playing snowball fight with Peter; seeing the Alps; eating cause I was really hungry; playground.

Arthur's least favorites: going on the scary cable car.

Day Four: Tuesday 5/1/01

Mom's favorites: more beautiful views; late afternoon play at lakeshore park; extreme ping-pong with Arthur in ping-pong cage; breakfast room with lots of windows; transport museum; happy lunch with Peter while Arthur watched model boats; getting pretty blue ring as early birthday present from Arthur who picked and bought all by himself; sitting in sun at museum with boys happily playing and not hurting anyone else's kids.

Mom's least favorites: convincing boys to go on tunnel ride; loud hammering in morning outside room; gnats at mini golf; some whining at transport museum; fussing at first at mini golf; weird burger at roadside stand at mini golf.

Peter's favorites: transport museum, car building the best, tunnel ride; mini golf; being with Mom on the bench; ride simulator.

Peter's least favorites: fighting with Mom in morning, bruise on head from yesterday hurts.

Arthur's favorites: mini golf for sure; giving Mom the birthday present and Mom liking the present; playing in rocks at the lakefront; ping-pong; museum.

Arthur's least favorites: hitting my head playing on the boat, fighting with Mom.

Day Five: Wednesday 5/2/01

Mom's favorites: Lake Lucerne boat ride; benches by lake in green and flower parks with new green tree leaves and white coated mountain peaks; Arthur hugging and snuggling me on boat; Peter helping carry and cooperating; sidewalk lunch with cream and strawberries and ice tea; mirror maze; Arthur going in ultra fancy store to ask how much watch is and it was 4,000 swiss francs (US\$ 2,600); breakfast crusty bread, butter, and red jam in almost sunny overcast window.

Mom's least favorites: Arthur running full blast into mirror in maze, cheek took the blow, looking purple red now three hours later; when English woman chatting with on boat asked what I do with my time in Delft; onion grass smell at glacier garden; sunburn at sidewalk cafe.

Peter's favorites: reading and laying down in the sun by the lake; sitting on the boat; eating the huge ice cream; mirror maze.

Peter's least favorites: Arthur not wanting to go to restaurant because we would have eaten right away [ended up riding ferry instead, then rejected ferry restaurant, got off at next stop and finding restaurant]; waiting outside that thing [glacier garden] for you guys, I thought they were going to shut it with you in

there; sitting out there when you guys went in that watch shop when you wouldn't go in the mall.

Arthur's favorites: um, nothing, wait, ice cream, the boat, park, finding the nest.

Arthur's least favorites: smashing my face in the mirror and hitting my head, oh yeah, that was yesterday [two days ago actually].

Day Six: Thursday 5/3/01

Mom's favorites: seeing fox run along farm fence in alpine pass; incredible alpine views between Lucerne and Interlaken and between Spiez and Montreux; the amazing waterfall ten feet outside the door at Hotel du Pont; sitting outside at lunch in Interlaken on edge of Japanese garden.

Mom's least favorites: big fight with Peter; aftertaste of wild garlic cream soup at lunch; sick after too big lunch capped by Swiss chocolate mousse; the three flights of stairs at Hotel du Pont; the rundownness of Hotel du Pont; the noise of the cog train descending and ascending the mountain into tunnel running under building adjoining Hotel du Pont, five feet from our window.

Peter's favorites: I liked seeing the view of the Alps and playing in the garden at lunch.

Peter's least favorites: hitting my knee today and fighting with you this morning, the huge fight.

Arthur's favorites: I didn't have any favorites.

Arthur's least favorites: nothing, I didn't have any least favorites [blame Gameboy say I].

Day Seven: Friday 5/4/01

Mom's favorites: finding a nice new hotel in old city of Vevey with the help of Montreux tourist office; the Chateau de Chillon and exploring all the weird hallways; laying in bed in window reading book in new hotel; squirt gun fight in street; finding Vevey; more Swiss quality and charm, not Montreux's grunge.

Mom's least favorites: salad swimming in dressing at lakeside lunch in Montreux (more proof that Montreux sucked, I'm sure); paying US\$9 for three measly chicken nuggets with fries twice, once for each boy; telling Hotel du Pont lady that we were leaving a day early; fighting with boys; pen store with Arthur and Peter fussing for pens.

Peter's favorites: the castle room, um, the one with the weapons; the castle.

Peter's least favorites: looking for you [at castle].

Arthur's favorites: leaving the bad hotel, seeing the castle, having a nice bus ride.

Arthur's least favorites: hitting my head on the cement [tripped and fell backward, ouch!].

Day Eight: Saturday 5/5/01

Mom's favorites: lunch at Lausanne family restaurant on hill near Musee L'Art Brut with firemen and more firemen having their lunch too; amazing

chocolate mousse; Musee L'Art Brut; waking up in nice hotel in Vevey; great shower and nice breakfast; beer while mini golf; cool mini golf dog (huge, short hair, tiger striped); beautiful outdoor market in Vevey and eating fresh raspberries.

Mom's least favorites: packing fight (as usual); not finding mini golf at first; Peter bitching about beautiful market in Vevey.

Peter's favorites: mini golf, the art museum was ok.

Peter's least favorites: the market.

Arthur's favorites: mini golf; market; art museum.

Arthur's least favorites: none [not even you and Peter fighting in front of dinner place?] no.

Day Nine: Sunday 5/6/01

after all night train, arriving in Delft in morning

Mom's favorites: seeing nesting swan out the window; playing with the newness of our couchette on train; walking around Delft in afternoon and feeling comfortable at home.

Mom's least favorites: the sleep on train, jerk, rattle, hot, window loud, fat jiggling horribly with the frequent lurches; kids fighting while playing with Mattoks here at home this afternoon.

Peter's favorites: sleeping and being up on the bunk bed on train.

Peter's least favorites: trying to get you to read, whenever we said one word, it would start a whole conversation and then we'd have to get you to start again.

Arthur's favorites: sleeping in the bunk bed.

Arthur's least favorites: fighting with you about Pizza Hut [that was yesterday].

THINGS I'VE LEARNED IN SWITZERLAND:

- Swiss standard is great and innovative, clever, and clean
- Swiss standard doesn't extend to Hotel du Pont in Montreux which is plain old run down
- those weird European white asparagus are NOT as good as skinny green US asparagus
- everyone does not speak English, even in tourist places
- the Alps are stupendous
- Swiss cows are less dramatic than lovely black and white US cows, Swiss cows are tastefully color coordinated in white with tan spots
- girl cows can try to mate other girl cows, saw it today
- stairs kill me [three flight walk-up at Hotel du Pont]
- wild garlic is weird, like onion grass to eat
- Switzerland is very variable and each section separate: language (all four official ones plus English: that's German, French, Romansch, and Italian),

government (TOTALLY decentralized), culture, terrain, quality of trains, type of food

- Montreux seemed grungy, Lucerne seemed beautiful; was it just the weather? or me?
- fondue with tomato sauce in it is good too
- when it's overcast, it stops looking like "Switzerland"
- L'Art Brut is by people that are unsocialized, not just un-art trained, some use incredible detail and some loose and messy, few women
- it irritates me when the boys speak Dutch
- what a difference between Holland and Switzerland; the terrain, the light, the people's attitudes; the cleanliness
- in Switzerland, less people smile and giggle at/with me, much more disapproval? or I'm a jumbo bitch, but a few did laugh and were generous of spirit with us
- coming home means giving the boys back to Alex and even with the sun out Holland looks a little depressing

CONCLUSION:

Life is good in Delft, even with getting divorced and changing the boys' lives so drastically. Switzerland is gorgeous and not so horribly expensive. So glad I went there and enjoyed it with my precious sons. Thank you Peter. I love you! Thank you Arthur. I love you!

THE END