

Switzerland | A growing network of centuries-

old hotels lets visitors explore the country while

experiencing its history. *Henry Shukman* finds

himself in the footsteps of Rousseau and Lenin

A night in the past

There's something about a peaceful lake in a small, long-civilised country that brings children's books to mind. On the lake a steamer goes by; there's a beach off which people swim; and a biplane grows over the hill. Look! The pilot is waving down at the people.

Is it the Ladybird books? Babar the Elephant? I can't quite place it — but here on the banks of Lake Biel in north-western Switzerland, the world seems to have reverted to a lost state of orderliness. Perhaps it's something to do with being here with my mother.

She and I are just starting out on a little tour of the historic hotels that dot the Swiss countryside, the kinds of places that sound suitable for an 83-year-old lady, or where Agatha Christie might have enjoyed setting a novel. We have been to Switzerland together before, but I was a boy and remember little beyond the thick, white butter and the miniature tins of Hero jam with peel-off lids. Does she know the book I'm struggling to recall? "Sorry, darling," she says. "Can't help."

While Switzerland has its fair share of grand old five-star palaces, it also has numerous lesser-known hotels that are more low-key but often even more

ancient and storied. Many were waging a losing battle with centuries of dust, rising upkeep costs and growing obscurity, but are now enjoying a renaissance, helped by the formation in 2004 of a new marketing and support organisation, Swiss Historic Hotels. It now counts 51 members (motto: "patina, not dust"), one of which welcomed its first guests in 1519. A website offers "time travel routes", itineraries that use Switzerland's trains, ferries and buses to connect member hotels and historic sites along the way.

Our tour starts aboard the ferry on Lake Biel, an old white steamer from Edwardian times that is taking us towards the first of our hotels. Mum has brought along not Agatha Christie but Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* (1782).

It's just the thing, since the philosopher lived in our first port of call one summer, a hotel on St Peter's Island (actually no longer an island but a peninsula, since engineering works in the 1870s lowered the lake's water level). From the jetty, a 10-minute stroll along a tidy path through woods and past a herd of organic cattle takes us to the former Cluniac monastery where he stayed, the Klosterhotel St Petersinsel. The guestrooms here first opened in the 16th century and the

hotel's antiquity is immediately apparent — old stone cloisters, immense floorboards, smooth but unvarnished, rough-hewn stone walls, wooden beams, flagstone floors, clunky iron door-latches. All have been beautifully restored: such are the Swiss regulations on preservation that it's easier to expose history than try to overlay it. The restaurant in the courtyard serves an excellent four-course dinner each night, featuring fish from the lake and wines from the island's own vineyards. Everything feels civilised and well tended.

It's open to all — families out for a Sunday stroll who want to get the kids an ice cream, just as much as the wealthy patrons from Geneva here for dinner and a night in a historic room. The rooms where Rousseau stayed in the 1760s have been preserved and are left unlocked. You can wander in at any time if you're staying at the hotel: two starkly furnished rooms, with an armoire, fireplace, a small four-poster and a trapdoor in the floor, through which Rousseau used to escape into the kitchen below when admirers came calling, while his partner Thérèse deflected the visitors.

Rousseau was a tormented man, and his particular brand of distress was a "tug-of-war between solitude and society", in the words of historian Peter France. Nevertheless, he remembered his weeks on St Peter's Island as a time of unparalleled joy. "I was only able to spend a couple of months on the island," he wrote, "but I would have spent two years, two centuries or even an eternity there without ever being bored."

To try to get a taste of Rousseau's love for the island, I slip out for a moonlit swim late at night. It's eerie and lovely. Trees crowd the shore. Reeds are tall in the moonlight. There's nothing quite like lake-swimming, I decide. You've got the smell of a river but no current, and great

spaciousness but no waves, no tides and no lurking monsters to worry about. It's like floating in your own little world. I swim slow enough to hear the trickling sound of my strokes, like little scales being played on a tiny glockenspiel. At least until a duck breaks into a slow, hacking laugh. I can't help a flinch of paranoia: is it somehow laughing at me?

Lake-swimming is popular in Switzerland. Every day at 6pm Fritz Wehrli, owner of the creakingly historic Hirschen Inn in Oberstammheim, in the canton of Zurich, northeastern Switzerland, goes for an evening swim in a local lake called the Nussbaumersee ("nut tree lake"). It's a beautiful spot, and he invites me to join him.

As we swim breaststroke side by side out to the middle, we chat about his family's history. "I'm a descendant of 10 generations of local bailiffs," he tells me. "We are a historic family without a single important figure," he adds with a hint of a smile.

You couldn't ask for a more delightful and hospitable host in your guesthouse. The Hirschen is an untouched 17th-century farmhouse-cum-inn, half-timbered, a great pile of a place from the outside, yet delicate and fine within. The walls are mostly wood panel, the bedroom doors are painted with local and biblical scenes in blues and greys, the door frames intricately carved. My own small four-poster upstairs has two large cherubs gambolling on a board overhead, gazing down at me.

There are old ceramic stoves in many rooms, and undulating tiled floors, as well as floors with broad, unpolished boards. Around the inn's barns and farm buildings, orchards and vineyards scale the slopes. It has only six bedrooms, and the three in the main house are worthy of a museum. A 10th-century chapel stands on a knoll behind. No wonder it was named last year's Historic Hotel of the Year by the International Council on

Monuments and Sites. It's like stepping into an older Europe.

Once or twice a week the local "Stammtisch" takes place around a big wood table in the bar-restaurant downstairs, an informal committee of local grantees meeting to discuss town affairs while sipping the local wine. The small town of Stammheim falls into two halves — Ober and Unter — and folks from Oberstammheim drink wine from their vineyards, while the people of neighbouring Unterstammheim prefer theirs. They say the people of one half are more intelligent, but those of the other have a better sense of humour. A debate gets going in the bar over which is which, but no one seems to be quite sure. Whichever it is, our host has clearly managed to inherit genes from both sides, which aids the feeling of easy hospitality in this old place that has been welcoming visitors for centuries.

Everywhere in Switzerland you can feel the human hand at work. Roadside verges, stands of trees, even the rivers — someone has been out there with trimmers, strimmers or damming equipment, making sure all is in *ordnung*. The area around the little town of Flühli, for example, in the middle of the Swiss Alps, is designated the "Unesco Biosphere Entlebuch", yet even here, among vertiginous meadows and awesome grey cliffs protected as natural wonders, old chalet farmhouses squat on the mountainsides, and the hands of their farmers can easily be seen in the surrounding tidiness of the land.

Paths lace the mountains. Here and there chapels stand among the high peaks offering refuge against storms,

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built for salvation of all kinds. The Santiago pilgrim route passes by a few miles away, connecting a series of mountain chapels.

Here we put up at the Hotel Kurhaus Swiss Spirit, in the middle of Flühli. It's a fine old wooden edifice from the mid-19th century, built as a "cure-house", that is, a sanatorium, but converted to become a hotel in 1904. It is another haven of broad, dark, creaking corridors and tremendous wraparound balconies on to which the daybeds of the convalecents might once have been rolled out. It's just what you want a hotel to feel like: a retreat, a place where a stranger can feel not just safe but at home, while all the time a bracing world outside is just waiting to be explored.

The Kurhaus's most famous guest was Lenin, who stayed here during the summers of 1914 and 1915. An old photo in the hall shows him standing out on the front steps enjoying a glass of wine with a local carriage driver.

As it happens, I'm staying in Lenin's very room (108, on the second floor), which has a scenic view over the main street and the precipitous valley side opposite, as well as an old wicker sleigh-bed in which he is said to have slept. The wooden room isn't big, but cosy and restful — not the obvious place to give birth to a world-shaking revolution.

Finally, as Mum and I are having a drink in the late sun on the terrace, looking out at another manicured Swiss landscape, it comes to me, that elusive children's book. "Tintin", I blurt out. "He stayed in a place just like this, before heading off to Tibet. It must have been the Tintin books I was thinking of."

She sips her Riesling, shrugs and says: "Fascinating, darling."





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Henry Shukman was a guest of the Swiss tourist board (MySwitzerland.com) and Swiss Travel System (swisstravelsystem.com), which offers tickets and travel passes to tourists. The Klosterhotel St Petersinsel (st-petersinsel.ch) has doubles from SFr230 (£158); the Hirschen Inn, Oberstammheim (hirschenstammheim.ch) has doubles from SFr120 (£82) and the Hotel Kurhaus Swiss Spirit, Flühli (kurhaus-fluehli.ch) has doubles from SFr144 (£99); all including breakfast. For details of other hotels in the organisation, see swiss-historic-hotels.ch



Clockwise from above left: the interior and exterior of Klosterhotel St Petersinsel; a bedroom at the Hirschen Inn, Oberstammheim, and the inn's exterior

