



TRADITIONS

OPPOSITE: A FAMILY TAKING A REST ON AN ERRATIC BOULDER OF THE EIGER GLACIER IN THE JUNGFRAU REGION, BERNESE OBERLAND. BELOW: ROUNDING A CORNER IN THE ALPS YOU ARE QUITE LIKELY TO COME ACROSS GRAZING CATTLE



Swiss family rambling

Story by Ava Chisling

All year round, when families and friends in Switzerland take a stroll it is not just for exercise but as part of a traditional and important bonding process that sees young children, and even the elderly, walking up the steepest sides of the Alps

AVA CHISLING, CHRISTOF SONDEREGGER/ST/SWISS-IMAGE.CH

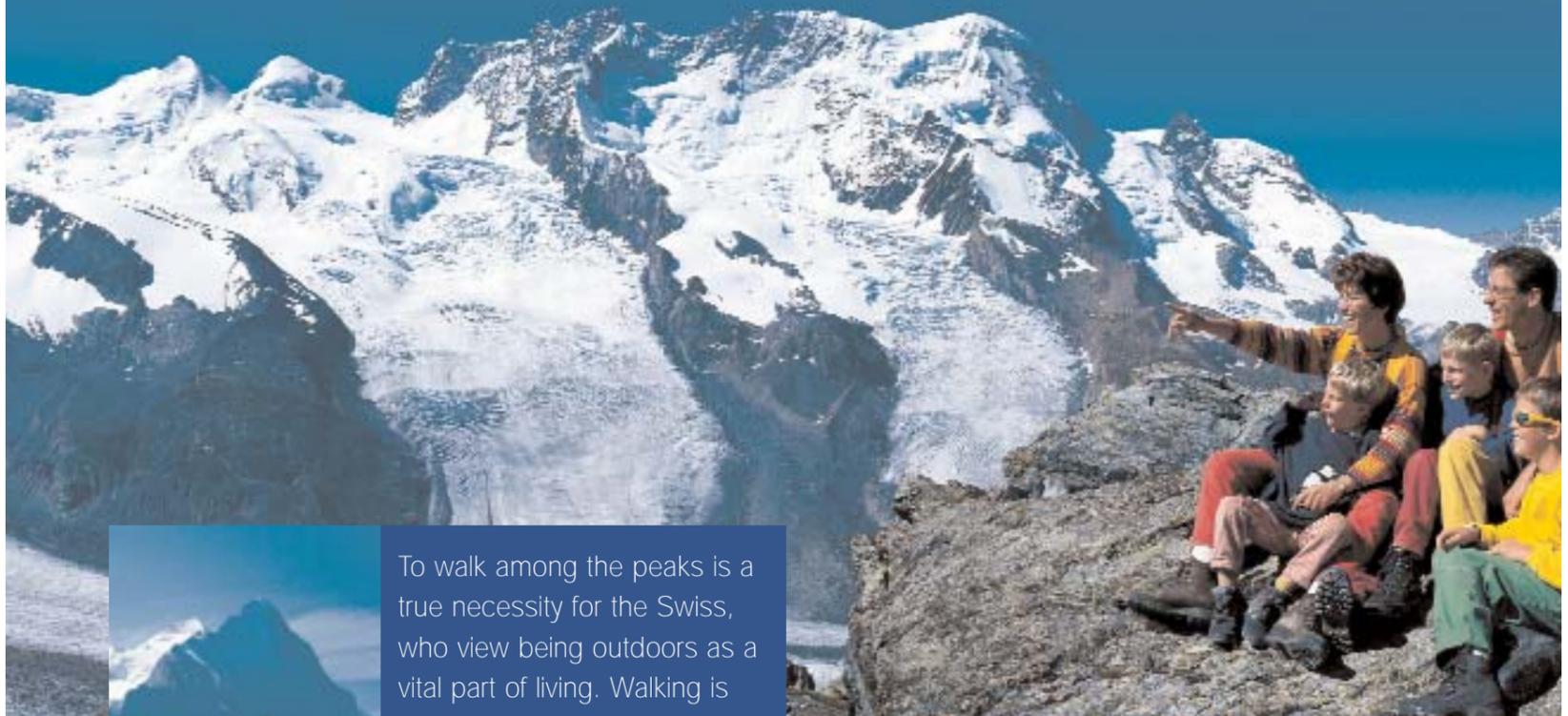
When the Swiss travel abroad, they explore the region by climbing to the highest point possible and then winding their way slowly downwards,' says Stéphane Bolognini of Lausanne. A walking enthusiast, 32-year-old Bolognini was born in Geneva, Switzerland's second largest city, but was raised in the surrounding mountains. He is one of the millions of Swiss nationals who believe the Alps are a part of their very being; as important to their lives as food and water.

As the population increased in this part of Europe, the Swiss moved higher and higher up the valleys. It was up in the mountains that they discovered pristine pastures for their cattle and the totally pure water for which they built elaborate networks of canals to supply the villages below.

'Where other countries have the sea, we have our mountains,' says Francine Isoz, a Swiss ski instructor and expedition leader living in Villars. 'Most of us have grandparents or great-grandparents who farmed these lands up high and could not have survived without the food and water of the mountain. Their lives and that of nature were totally intertwined. This connection to the region, and to the quiet and the remoteness of the mountain trails, can never be broken.'

Take a walk on any Swiss mountain and you will find three, even four, generations of the same family walking on trails from early morning to late afternoon. It is not uncommon to see older men and women leaning on their grown children for hours at a time, taking very small steps up very steep trails. Frailty has a different meaning in the Alps – getting older does not mean sitting at home watching TV or playing cards – it means being outdoors, high ▶

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above, even if you need more help today than yesterday. The same holds true for small children. You find infants strapped to their parents; toddlers running down marked paths ahead of the family and youngsters who wander off on their own, only to come around again once the picnic begins.

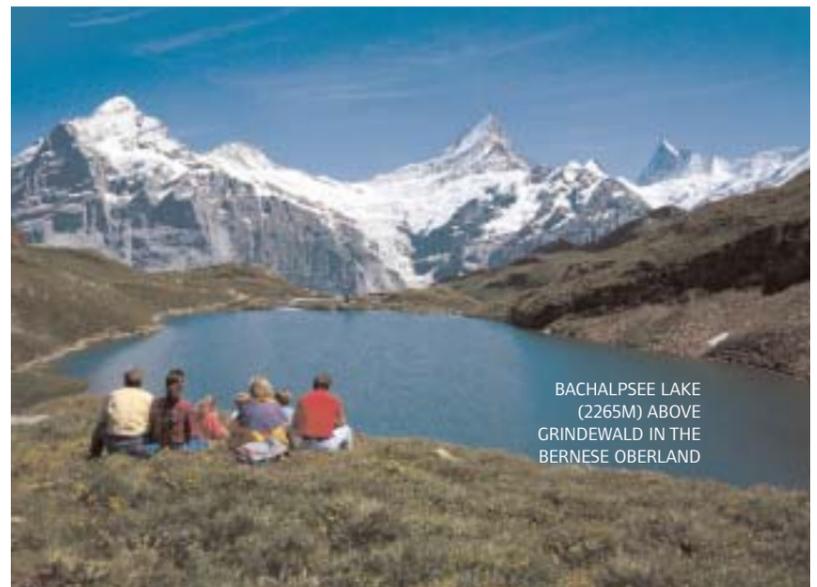
'I remember the first time my father and his friends took me to a cabin in Plan Nèvé, in the canton of Vaud,' says Bolognini. 'The scenery was stunning. We sat outside, surrounded by beauty, and we ate *raclette*. We spent hours walking and eating.' Bolognini has already taken his one-year-old baby up the trails. 'You are never too young to be in the mountains. It is a part of who we are. I bought an all-terrain stroller that can handle the toughest trails and my little girl sits calmly, watching the scenery that changes by the second. She is learning about herself as we walk. She is Swiss.'

Villars is a resort town located in the heart of Vaud, in French-speaking Switzerland. One of the best walks in the region begins on Col de la Croix, a road so steep it is closed to cars in the winter and has been used in the famous Tour de Suisse and Tour de France bike races in the summer. Thankfully, it is only a half-kilometre or so before the turn-off from the Col leads to the narrow and winding path to Bretaye, the centre of mountain-walking in this area.

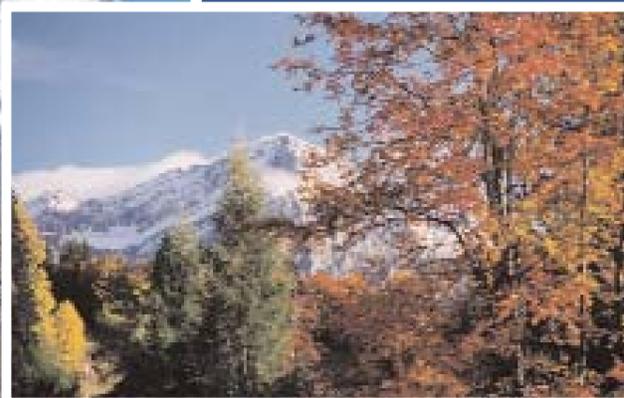
As on most paths throughout the country, the Swiss always stop to talk to neighbours or to help travellers. You can tell who was raised in the mountains and who wasn't because the locals are the least hurried. Most often wearing proper hiking boots, a wide-brimmed hat and carrying an adjustable ski pole for balance, the Swiss take the time to admire the scenery or to relax on a seat along the way. To walk among the peaks is a true necessity for the Swiss,

who view being outdoors as a vital part of living. Walking is not a sport here – it is culture and it is history. 'Walking along the ridges, passes and summits symbolises the ability to do your best. It actually brings me closer to God,' says Isoz.

The difference in elevation between Villars and Bretaye is about 600 metres. There is a look-out point a few minutes up from the Col where a long sign on the cabin's edge indicates the name and the shape of each peak. Here an entire panorama opens in front of you and the walk has just begun. 'The wonderful thing about walking is that you are able to think about everything or nothing at all, even in a group,' continues Isoz. 'I find it enormously relaxing to meander through trails, especially when they are not paved. There is nothing as humbling as having to crawl through the forest to reach your destination!'



BACHALPSEE LAKE
(2265M) ABOVE
GRINDEWALD IN THE
BERNESE OBERLAND



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FAR LEFT: A FAMILY RESTING ON THE GORNERGRAT (3131M), VALAIS TAKING IN THE VIEWS OF THE BREITHORN (4159M). ABOVE AND LEFT: VIEWS OF VILLARS

RECOMMENDED WALKS

Aside from the set trails up in Bretaye, here are three more extraordinary mountain walks...

Villars to Plan-sur-Bex This walk is one of the easiest in the region and you are guaranteed to experience something different each time you go. This includes seeing a triple rainbow, a llama or hundreds of sheep with their noisy guard donkey. The trail doubles as a winding road but this is the old route down the mountain and isn't used very often. As you descend, you go through the town of Gryon, famous for attracting snowboarders in the winter, and then through the beautiful farmlands right on the shelf of the mountain. At Plan-sur-Bex, there are two well-known Swiss restaurants where you can recharge for the hike back up.

Barboleuse to Sololex A wonderful cross-country ski trail in the winter, this walk attracts people from all over Europe. As you follow Route de Sololex, you wind through little villages on the way up, with majestic peaks on all sides. Once at the top, go to the Refuge Sololex serving typical Swiss fare. There are further trails into the woods should you feel up to it. Keep your eyes open for the red foxes. Or better, keep your ears open as they tend to bark like dogs!

Huémox-Panex-Aigle This walk is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Put aside a good three hours and meander 1300 metres down to the city of Aigle. This mountain walk is so magnificent, it's difficult to put into words. You will find yourself spending all your time looking up as the view is right upon you. Peaks that were hidden even from high above, suddenly appear. You go through forests in absolute silence. You can see eagles soaring above and the terraced vineyards below. Once in Aigle, you can take the bus or a taxi back up to Villars.

Luckily, with 50,000 kilometres of trails to choose from in Switzerland, unless you decide to you don't have to do any crawling. Part of the fun of walking is trying to spot a chamois or a bouquetin in the distance or, even better, a marmot, which are difficult to see despite their persistent chattering. Some of the marked routes in this area are circular so you don't have to worry about getting lost; others are more of a challenge and lead to nearby peaks and advanced trails.

Among the many beautiful things about walking around Villars is that, at this height, you're often above the clouds, so when the conditions are right, a carpet of thick white cloud covers the entire valley below while you bask in the sunshine, even in December. However, that lovely carpet can also rise and engulf the trails in thick fog. Keep your eyes on the jagged Dents du Midi peak for the Swiss have an expression that goes: 'If the hat of that peak is covered, then it is time for you to be covered, too.'

The mountains continue to provide for the Swiss but in a different manner than in the old farming days. The landscape is a driving force of the Swiss economy and attracts millions of skiers and snowboarders in the winter and walkers in the summer and fall.

'One day my friends and I walked up to a small hut in the middle of nowhere,' says Bolognini. Small huts are set up throughout the Alps to shelter weary hikers when they get tired. 'We had walked all day and really needed a place to rest. We opened the wooden door and were very surprised to find a wedding reception in process! Twenty Belgians had hiked up with a ton of food on their backs and were celebrating the marriage of their best friends. We were invited to participate, of course, and it was one of the most meaningful nights I have ever spent on the mountain. It was wonderful to see how much they appreciated our culture and how far they would go to celebrate it. As we say in Switzerland, *'D'en haut, c'est plus beau* (from up high, it is the most beautiful).' ■

AVA CHISLING, CHRISTOF SONDEREGGER/WALTER SORTO/ST/SWISS-IMAGE.CH