

INSPIRATION Continental camping

Pt.1

The Grand Tour



The spectacular Susten Pass road across the Swiss Alps

Just how do you decide on the highlight of a trip like this?

Was it the early morning dip in a crystal clear Swiss lake before the rest of the campsite was awake? Or maybe the stunning mountain railway journey that took us to the top of Europe and provided magnificent views across snow-capped peaks?

The exhilarating drive over a winding Alpine mountain pass let me live out my James Bond fantasies. And if diving into the cool waters of Lake Garda on a sweltering hot afternoon didn't

have quite the same danger element, it was no less memorable.

Eating ice cream at a fancy waterfront *gelateria* in Lombardy gave us a taste for how the other half live and discovering cola beer in the Black Forest was a revelation. Despite all that, I suspect our teenage son would say the best part of the holiday was the all-you-can-eat world buffet on the overnight ferry!

Although I'm a strong advocate of camping in Britain, a full-on tour through Europe is something I've longed to do for as long as I can remember. I

don't know if it was all the Brexit talk or the fact that our eldest was now 13 and already showing some resistance to family camping trips, but it felt like the time had finally come to take the plunge.

Happily, our two-week road trip was everything we hoped it would be. The memorable moments began even before we'd left the UK. On the way to the ferry we took a short detour off the A1 for an impromptu glimpse at the incredible Angel of The North. Then, as we waited for the boat to depart from Newcastle, we were treated to a surprise aerobatics show by the Red Arrows.

Camping editor **Iain Duff** and his family hit the road for the ultimate European camping trip – a fortnight of spectacular scenery, fabulous food and *lots* of ice cream. Here's the first part of their camping tour from the UK to Switzerland

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

STAY AT CAMPING BIRKELT

Um Birkelt, 7633 Larochette, Luxembourg
camping-birkelt.lu

Part of the Eurocamp Independent network, this is a typical continental campsite, set in a quiet forest clearing, just above Larochette with a range of excellent facilities. The big attraction is the semi-outdoor swimming pool with huge retractable domed cover. During the high season there is a programme of family entertainment and the shops and cafés of Larochette are close at hand.

MANOR FARM

Seestrasse 201, 3800 Unterseen, Switzerland
manorfarm.ch

A lovely campsite, also part of Eurocamp Independent, set right on the shores of Lake Thun, with direct access to the water from the private beach and amazing mountain views all around. The grass camping pitches are spacious enough and the toilet and shower facilities, situated in a traditional Swiss cottage-style building are first class. The site shop stocks the basics and there is an excellent restaurant on-site. A pedestrian tunnel under the main road takes you to a second camping field, where there are football pitches, table tennis and a small amusement arcade.

NEED TO KNOW

dfdsseaways.co.uk
rac.co.uk
eurocampindependent.co.uk
visitluxembourg.com
jungfrau.ch
myswitzerland.com

That hadn't been part of the plan, but it's about the only thing we didn't plan for. Long before it was hijacked by Clarkson, Hammond and May, the Grand Tour was how they described the European excursions of fashionable young British aristocrats of the 18th Century as they learned about the culture, language and architecture of our Continental neighbours. But plotting our route through Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands, it felt a bit like we were getting ready for a heat of *Jeux Sans Frontières*. Admittedly, there would be no

wacky oversized It's A Knockout-style costumes or water-based obstacle courses (although the giant inflatable ice lollies we picked up in Italy wouldn't have looked out of place on that show), but the trip certainly had the potential to descend into mayhem without proper research. Fail to prepare, prepare to fail and all that.

Luckily, for a big trip like this, the planning is all part of the fun, or it is for me at least. Weeks before we set off, I was poring over road maps and scouring the web; working out routes, deciding on places to go and drawing up lists for everything



Cooling down

INSPIRATION Continental camping

Turn to page 48 for our top tips for camping and driving abroad



View from the ferry cabin



Crossing the border into Luxembourg

imaginable. By the time we left the house we were ready for pretty much any eventuality. You can plan the trip by yourself, but we booked through Eurocamp Independent, who have a network of sites for people travelling with their own tents, caravans and motorhomes across the Continent. They will basically organise the whole holiday for you, from ferries to sites, with added extras like couriers on site, kids' clubs and travel packs filled with useful practical advice.

In the end, our summer tour took us from Amsterdam down to the Swiss Alps, then on to Lake Garda and up through the heart of Germany before ending up back in Holland. During the journey, we passed through 10 countries, drove more than 2,000 miles, spent two nights on ferries, swam in two lakes and sailed across another, took a train to the top of the Alps, celebrated Swiss National Day and ate our own combined weight in pizza.

NEWCASTLE TO LUXEMBOURG

We had booked a cabin on the overnight DFDS ferry from Newcastle to Amsterdam. It's not an especially

cheap option, but it's the perfect springboard if you're going anywhere east of France, especially if you're based in the northern half of the country. The crossing takes just over 15 hours, so plenty of time for a meal (the aforementioned buffet), a spot of duty-free shopping and a drink at the bar, before retiring to the cosy en-suite cabin for a good sleep. As I was going to be doing all the driving, it was important that I was well rested... day one would be a relatively gentle 200 miles along good roads, but from past experience I knew that the first day of driving on the Continent is always a stressful experience so you do need to be firing on all cylinders.

Once you've got used to driving on the right, motoring through the Netherlands is very easy. The wide, flat motorways are well maintained and signposting is clear and ample, making it a

comfortable, if somewhat uninspiring, drive. There was a notable change in surroundings when we crossed into Belgium – the roads seemed slightly less loved and everything looked a little run-down compared to the shiny buildings in Holland. On the plus side, there was more to look at than just windfarms and the first thing we saw

when we crossed the border was a huge roadside advert for chips. My kind of country.

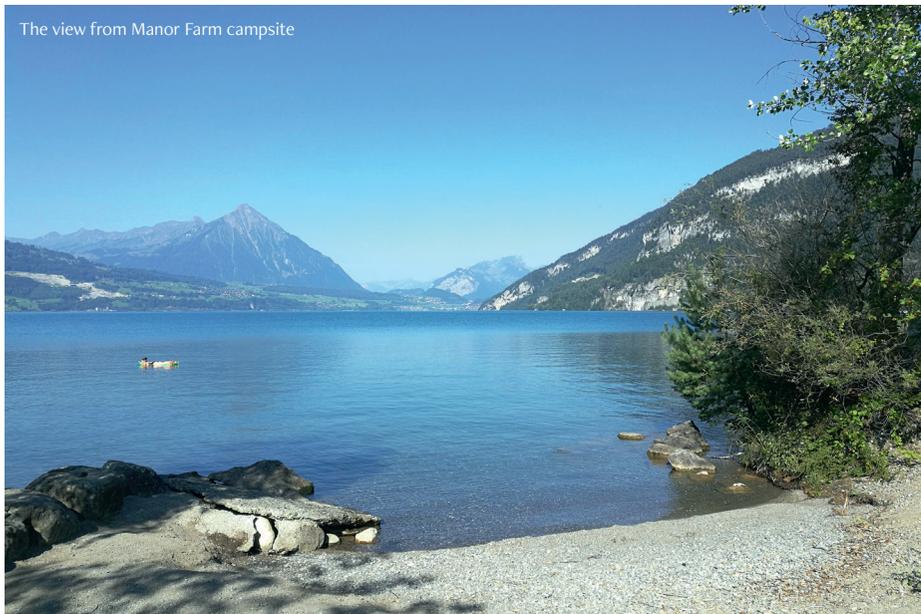
The historic city of Liege – famed for its sweet waffles and mish-mash of architectural styles – was earmarked for a lunch stop. Unfortunately our attempts to penetrate the largely pedestrianised city centre were thwarted by confusing road signs and an inability to negotiate mini-roundabouts.

We also wasted a ridiculous amount of time trying to work the self-service petrol pumps, so in the end decided to cut our losses, get back onto the motorway and carry on towards Luxembourg for our first overnight stop.



Luxembourg City

The view from Manor Farm campsite



Manor Farm campsite



Manor Farm

FIVE LUXEMBOURG ESSENTIALS

CASTLE OF VIANDEN

Vianden

castle-vianden.lu

Luxembourg's only chairlift takes you to this medieval chateau perched high above the town of Vianden. Built in the 11th Century, it has been painstakingly restored to its former glory in recent years.

BUTTERFLY GARDEN

Grevenmacher

papillons.lu

A beautiful, tranquil spot filled with 50 different species of butterfly, plus Chinese quail, chameleons and turtles and the scents of colourful flowers and tropical plants.

BOURSCHEID CASTLE

Bourscheid

visitluxembourg.com

A wonderful castle situated 150 metres above the Sûre river with a history dating back to around 1000AD. The castle is lit up at night, making it look spectacular.

BOCK CASEMATES

Luxembourg City

visitluxembourg.com

A unique labyrinth of underground tunnels and galleries that once formed part of a network of city fortifications. Guided tours of Luxembourg City's prime attraction are available three times a day.

LUXEMBOURG CITY HISTORY MUSEUM

Luxembourg City

citymuseum.lu

A fascinating museum that tells the thousand-year history of the City of Luxembourg with permanent and temporary displays, including geological, historical and archaeological exhibits.

Breakfast time



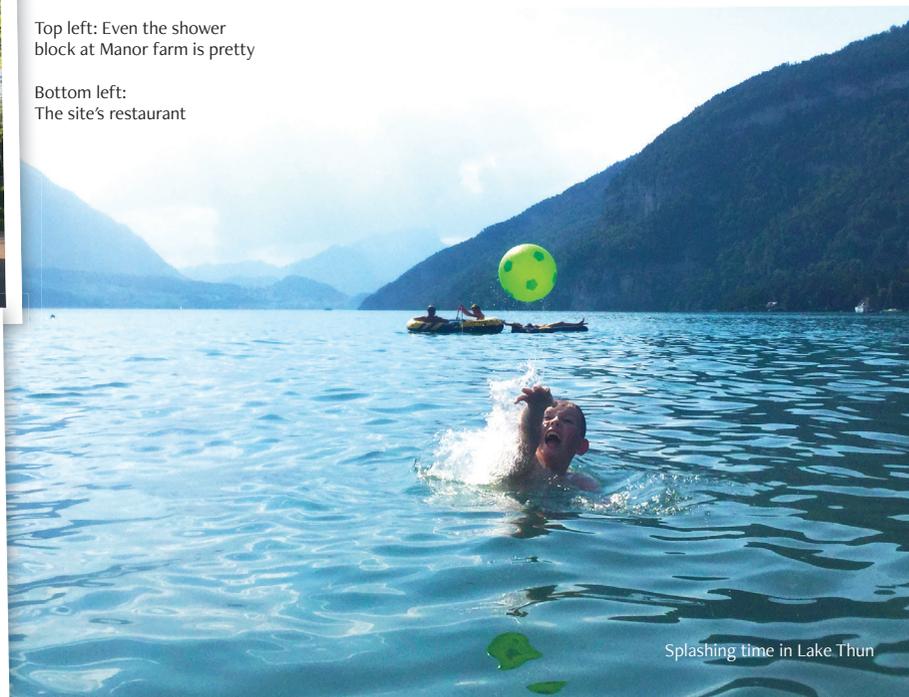
Continental camping **INSPIRATION**



Top left: Even the shower block at Manor farm is pretty



Bottom left: The site's restaurant



Splashing time in Lake Thun

Luxembourg, the world's sole remaining Grand Duchy, is one of the smallest countries in Europe with a total population of about 550,000, roughly the same as Liverpool. More than one-in-five of them live in the imaginatively-named capital, Luxembourg City, which is a pleasant enough administrative centre with plenty of shopping and places to eat but nothing to really get the pulse racing.

Far more interesting is the Mullerthal region, known as Little Switzerland because of its hilly landscape, which is home to numerous medieval castles and museums. The small town of Larochette, about half an hour from the capital, also boasts an excellent campsite with superb facilities, including a semi-outdoor swimming pool with huge retractable cover.

In fact, considering the size of the country, Luxembourg has a surprising number of campsites and most of the places you'd want to visit are within fairly easy reach wherever you pitch. Supermarkets, including the Cactus chain, are plentiful and reasonably priced for stocking up on supplies, especially if you are travelling on to Switzerland, where everything is exorbitant. As an added bonus, for some reason fuel is cheaper here than anywhere else in Europe, so even if you've no plans to stop here for any length of time, you'd be wise not to pass the Duchy (sorry).

LUXEMBOURG TO SWITZERLAND

After a night in Luxembourg we set off for Switzerland the next morning, our route taking us

south through France, via Strasbourg, and crossing the border at Basel. There are no passport checks entering Switzerland, but you may be stopped by customs officers and asked if you have anything to declare. We bought a motorway pass here – you need one to travel on the main Swiss roads, but it's 40 francs well spent, as every road we drove on was superb.

The further we got into Switzerland the more spectacular the surroundings became. By the time we reached Lake Thun, in the heart of the Bernese Oberland region, the rolling hills had turned into tree-lined mountains that rose like colossal, jagged, white-tipped fangs on the horizon.

Located three miles from the resort town of Interlaken, our campsite, Manor Farm, was right on the shores of the lake, with direct access to the water from its own beach and awesome views of those majestic mountains. We were visiting in the middle of summer and the site was busy and bustling, with campers from all over Europe bringing a cosmopolitan feel. It had a good mix of tents, caravans and motorhomes and although the pitches were close together, it never felt crowded or rowdy.

In fact, there was only one time we heard raised voices during our stay, and I'm afraid to say it was my wife and I who were responsible. So if your peace and quiet was shattered that afternoon by a couple of red-faced, shouty Scots then I can only apologise. The golden rule of camping is always practice pitching a new tent at home before

you take it to the campsite. What you definitely *shouldn't* do is try to put up a complicated new tent for the first time after a five hour drive across Europe, especially if the temperature is in the high 20s and you've arranged to meet up with family in half an hour. Surprisingly, it turns out that things can get rather fraught in those circumstances, particularly if the pitching instructions with the tent aren't quite as clear as you'd like them to be. After much sweating and toil, we worked out what we were doing wrong and got there eventually, but not before the kids had learned a whole new vocabulary.

With impeccable timing, my sister and brother-in-law arrived as the final peg went in, bringing wine and beer which made everything better. After quickly pitching the teenager's "pup" tent, dinner was in the site's own restaurant where we enjoyed the first of the trip's many pizzas. Our youngest disappeared to the playpark to make new pals like nine year olds do, and the rest of us relaxed over a few drinks and a catch-up as darkness fell. The perfect way to end a long day.

Next morning, after a hearty continental breakfast with ingredients gathered from the well-stocked site shop, we said farewell to the rellies and drove to Wilderswil where we caught the mountain railway for its 50 minute journey to Schynige Platte, 6,450ft above sea level. The cog railway opened 125 years ago and it exudes the gentle charm of a bygone era as it sedately climbs to the top. From our wooden bench seats we were treated



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to breathtaking views over lakes Thun and Brienz, Interlaken and the Alps, and then to cap it all, as we pulled into the station at the summit we were given a musical welcome by a pair of alphorn players.

From the top, the panoramas over the Swiss Alps are simply magnificent; the Eiger, Jungfrau and Mönch are so perfect they look like they've been painted onto a huge canvas backdrop and, with the cattle bells clanging away melodiously, you half expect Julie Andrews to come sweeping down one of the lush green meadows and bursting into song.

If you're feeling energetic, there's a circular hike around the mountain ridge to complete, but we chose to take a more gentle meander round the Alpine garden, breathing in the fresh mountain air and enjoying the views. The air up here is as fresh as it gets, although it was a slightly surreal experience, walking around in shirt sleeves thousands of feet up, surrounded by snowy mountains. Lunch was taken on the sun terrace of the mountain-top self-service restaurant – alphorn players again providing the traditional Swiss soundtrack – before we took the train back down to Wilderswil.

Back at ground level, we decided to spend a relaxing afternoon at the campsite, reading by the tent, splashing around in Lake Thun, cooking and generally chilling out in the sunshine. In the mad rush to find “things to do” on holiday, sometimes it's easy to forget how nice it is to just put your feet up on the campsite and do nothing. It's not always easy to completely relax, though – just as we were dropping off to sleep, the peace of the campsite was shattered with a huge explosion that echoed round the mountains. A couple of hours later there was another, and as dawn broke, yet another. Either we were under attack or there was something else going on, and thankfully a quick Google search revealed that it was the latter.

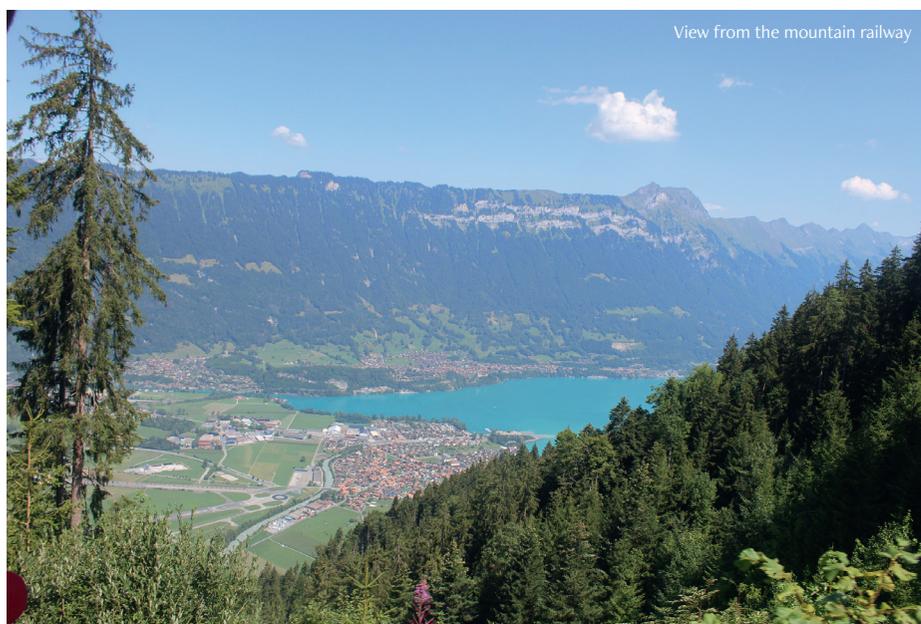
It was Swiss National Day, a public holiday to celebrate the founding of the country, and the explosions were fireworks set off by enthusiastic locals to mark the occasion. Now all the Swiss flags and bunting that adorned the campsite buildings and fluttered from tents and caravans made more sense! After a fantastic pre-breakfast swim in the lake we caught a bus to Interlaken to take a boat trip around Lake Brienz, a super way to see the mountain scenery, especially on a sunny clear day. The trip from Interlaken to Brienz takes about 75



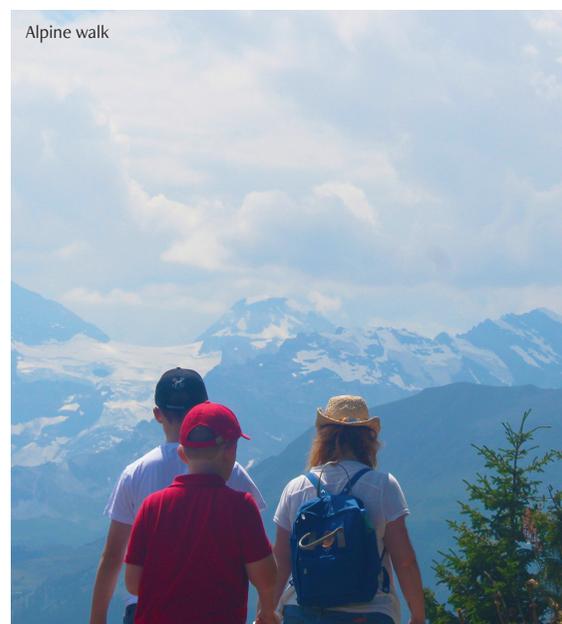
A table with a view



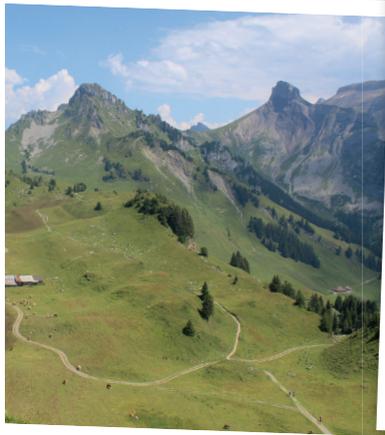
The hills are alive...



View from the mountain railway



Alpine walk



“We passed through 10 countries, drove more than 2,000 miles, swam in two lakes, took a train to the top of the Alps, celebrated Swiss National Day and ate our own combined weight in pizza.”



FIVE INTERLAKEN ESSENTIALS

JUNGFRAUJOCH

Grindelwald
jungfrau.ch

A spectacular train journey takes you to the highest-altitude railway station in Europe and from the observatory you can enjoy 360 views of the stunning Alpine landscape. Admire the ice sculptures, take a walk on the snow (even in summer) or go sledging, skiing or snowboarding in the Snow Fun Park.

BRIENZ-ROTHORN RAILWAY

Brienz
brienz-rothorn-bahn.ch

One of the oldest steam cog railways in the world makes its way through leafy forests, alongside steep cliffs and across green alpine meadows during a 7.6km journey to the top of the Rothorn.

BALLENBERG SWISS OPEN-AIR MUSEUM

Brienz
ballenberg.ch

Featuring over 100 original buildings that have been transported from their original sites, this museum charts the history of Switzerland through its architecture

SCHYNIGE PLATTE

Wilderswil
jungfrau.ch

Take the spectacular mountain railway to the top where you can enjoy beautiful views of the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau and take a walk round the alpine garden.

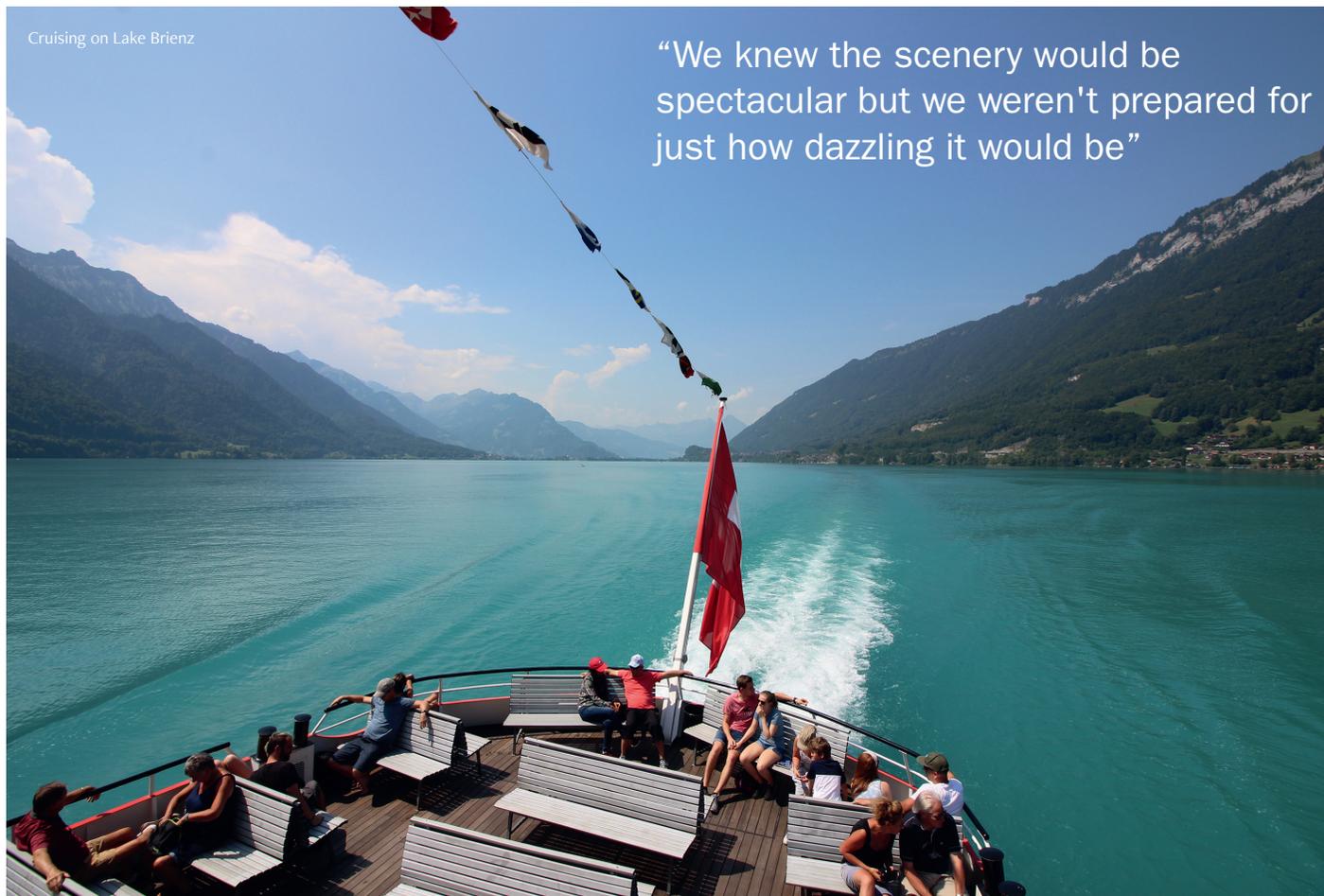
ST. BEATUS CAVES

Beatenberg
beatushoehlen.swiss

Deep inside the immense Niederhorn Massif these caves offer easily hiked, lighted trails that lead past roaring subterranean waterfalls, through narrow passages and to grottos with stalactite and stalagmite formations.



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Cruising on Lake Brienz

“We knew the scenery would be spectacular but we weren't prepared for just how dazzling it would be”

minutes, with various stops along the route where you can depart or board. From Brienz you can take a trip on the magnificent Rothorn steam railway or catch a bus to the open air museum of Swiss life at Ballenberg.

Because we wanted to get back in time for the Swiss Day festivities, we opted to stay on the boat and sail back – taking lunch on board – but if you disembark here you can take a train to Interlaken, which takes about 20 minutes. Back at the campsite it was lovely to see happy Swiss families getting together to celebrate their national day and rather than take the free shuttle back into Interlaken for the big official fireworks display, we decided to stay on site and join in with the local celebrations by the lake. The fireworks went on late into the night

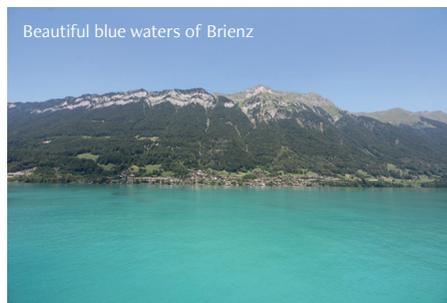
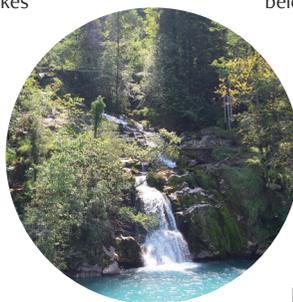
With the smell of gunpowder still hanging in the air, we rose early next morning and packed up for of the next leg of the journey to Lake Garda in Northern Italy. In three days, we'd only scratched the surface of the Jungfrau region but what we had experienced was a joy. We knew the scenery would be spectacular but we weren't prepared for just how dazzling it would be. We made a decision



to return at some point and explore further, with a trip to the top of the spectacular Jungfrauoch top of the bucket list – although a bit of saving-up will definitely be required.

SWITZERLAND TO ITALY

The route from Interlaken to Italy takes you through the Gotthard road tunnel, a 10-mile-long concrete tube that allows you to drive through the heart of Alps and into the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland. But before we reached it we had one last taste of the country's astonishing natural landscape as we crossed the Susten Pass. This, frankly terrifying, road links the village of Innertkirchen in the Bernese Oberland with Wassen in the Reuss Valley and climbs its way to a height of more than 7,400ft, almost twice as high as Ben Nevis. It's only about 28 miles long but these bald facts don't get close to telling you the full story. This is one of the greatest roads you've never heard of.



Beautiful blue waters of Brienz

The tarmac clings desperately to the side of the mountain as it twists and turns on a steep ascent towards the top. The sharp hairpin bends seem to jut out into the abyss as you creep cautiously towards them, but if you have the guts to look out the car window, the views over the vast valley below are absolutely breath-taking.

Alarmingly there are no barriers for long stretches of the route – all that separates you from a vertical drop of thousands of feet is the odd stone block dotted along the side of the road. It's white-knuckle stuff and certainly concentrates the mind!

On the descent the road is just as precarious, with yet more sharp bends and precipitous drops. At least there are more barriers on this section, although ironically that makes you wonder how dangerous the road must be if they're needed! Again if you're brave enough to open your eyes (passengers not drivers!), the sweeping views over the Meien valley make it all worthwhile. I'm not going to lie – as we reached ground level I was mightily relieved. But what an unforgettable experience.

We powered on through the Gotthard tunnel, then past Lake Lugano and on into Italy, skirting round Milan and onwards towards Lake Garda. We weren't even halfway through the trip and it was already a proving to be a truly unforgettable journey, filled with memories that will last forever. And there was plenty more to come.

Read Part 2 of Iain's Grand European Tour in the next issue of *Camping*