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Dictating identity and lifestyle

ISABELLE EICHENBERGER

In Switzerland, mountains are even included in the national anthem. They dictate the day-to-day life and thoughts of Swiss at home and abroad. The UN has declared 2002 the "International Year of Mountains".

"I HAVE SEEN MOUNTAINS and many waterfalls" – this snippet from the opening song at Expo.02 sung by Youssou N'Dour, tells of his discovery of the Jura. With its highest peak, Mount Suchet, standing at 1600 meters above sea level, the region may well inspire a Senegalese, although those who live in the high Alps would merely smile knowingly.

While the Jura and the alpine chain together cover two-thirds of Swiss territory, it is the Alps which dictate our national identity – more so than in other alpine countries with a more varied topology. Here the mountains are part of the landscape and are omnipresent in town and country alike.

"Without the mountains there would be no Switzerland," says Christophe Gros, assistant curator of Geneva's Museum of Folk Lore. "The country's fundamental organisation is dependent on economic survival in alpine regions and on the preservation of values and emotions: It is a question of identity, in the same way that Portugal or Ireland would be difficult to imagine without the sea and the fishing industry. The beauty of the panorama is based on a lifestyle which is closely bound up with the natural landscape."

Thousands of hikers appreciate the opportunity to commune with Nature. Moreover, is not a nostalgia for simplicity and directness behind the popularity of "Heidi"?



AURA

What would Switzerland be like without mountains? They stamp our cultural identity and economic life.



Mountains reach as far as the urban world (here the Stockhorn forms a backdrop to a suburb of Thun).

and “Alpabzüge”, the festivals held when the cows descend from their mountain pastures? Winter sports also boast a long tradition in this country, dating as far back as the 15th and 16th century. The Alps have ever been a magnet for Swiss artists, scholars and sportsmen – long before their invasion by English (and later Japanese) tourists.

This attraction even took on a mystical dimension in the Age of Enlightenment. In his poem about the Alps, Albrecht von Haller urged the “decadent, wastrel” cities to come here and take note, “because here, where the Gotthard’s summit rises above the clouds; where the lofty world appears closer to the sun (...). inventive Nature has fashioned, in a small country, all that is necessary and useful.”¹⁾


Nowadays many Swiss own a holiday home – a “rustico” or chalet – in the mountains. To hear them talk, one has the impression that the differences between the two worlds are lessening, and that they increasingly overlap during weekends and holidays. In the event of a disaster, the ties between these worlds are even stronger. According to Félix Bollmann, Director of Swiss Solidarity, the volume of donations following the floods in the Valais in 2000 reached record

proportions. “People were very moved by the pictures of Gondo,” he adds.

Far from the day-to-day life of Switzerland, Swiss Abroad frequently meet in communities and clubs which, according to Christophe Gros, “reflect an extremely strong regional identity”. Yet Swiss at home and abroad appear to know too little about their mountains. This has prompted Madeleine Wiget of the Valais to offer training as an “alpine expert”, a new profession which aims to familiarise city dwellers with the “real” mountains.

Behind the picture-postcard landscape is a harsh world in which survival is the name of the game: a world of climatic chaos, threatened by the fragility of its ecosystem. Mountains provide Europe with water, but they are also the source of countless dangers. Only a quarter of the population lives in alpine regions, and Thomas Egger, Director of the Swiss Group for Alpine Regions, talks of “a worrying shift towards agglomerations”. The population in alpine regions has been declining for some years. A look at jobless statistics shows that alpine regions have the highest number of unemployed.

The political dimension dates back to the 19th century and the national construction of the “alpine fortress”. The populist Right never misses an opportunity to sound the old rallying call “We are unique”. Yet this exploitation of the myth is misplaced; while the Alps certainly provide a protective barrier, they also form a natural North-South link.

The alpine region was divided up following the rise of nationalist movements in the 19th century, but it has held onto its fascinating identity. Moreover, it has given birth to new alliances, of which the alpine convention is a perfect example. 

¹⁾ “The Alps” A poem. Written during a journey through the Alps, Albrecht von Haller, 1795.

<http://www.sn.ch/d/fuehr/expvirt/etinhelv/haller.htm>

Translated from the German.

INTERNET

- www.berge2002.ch
- www.montagnes2002.ch
- www.mountains2002.org
- www.sab.ch/f/index.html

2002 – International Year of Mountains

The idea to launch an International Year of Mountains came from the United Nations. The FAO, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, is responsible for its co-ordination. The aim is to use information campaigns, projects, exhibitions, festivals and films to raise awareness of and improve the situation of alpine communities, preserve their cultural heritage and facilitate sustainable development. These actions are being implemented in Switzerland under the motto “Mountains unite!” IE