

Breno - Zurich : six nights and two wheels

Autor(en): **Bridler, Daniel**

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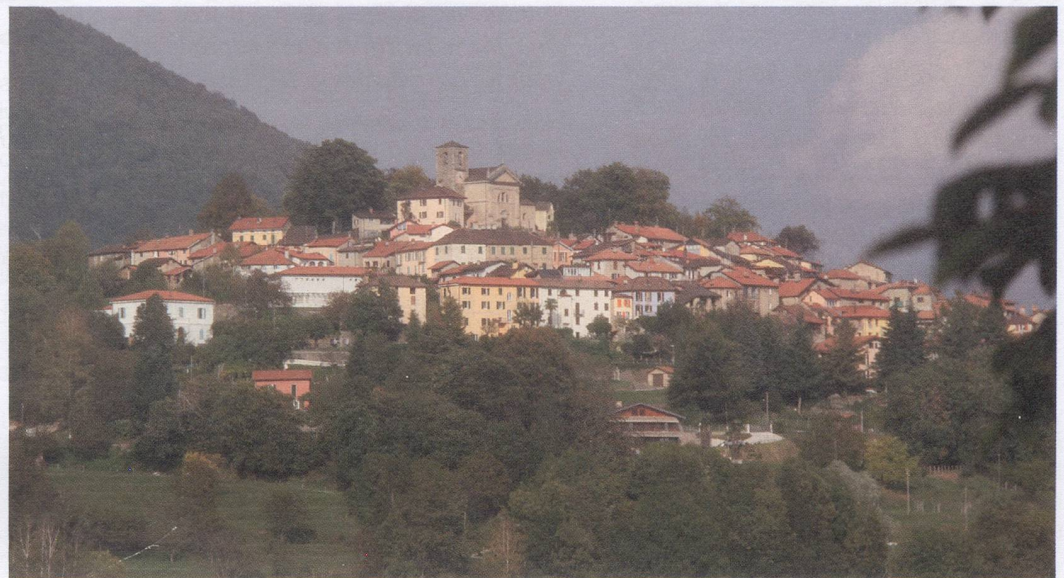
Highlights

- 60th Anniversary of the Auckland Swiss Club
- Farewell of our Swiss Society Team
- Swiss Market Day
- Swiss AHV / New Zealand Super Annuation news

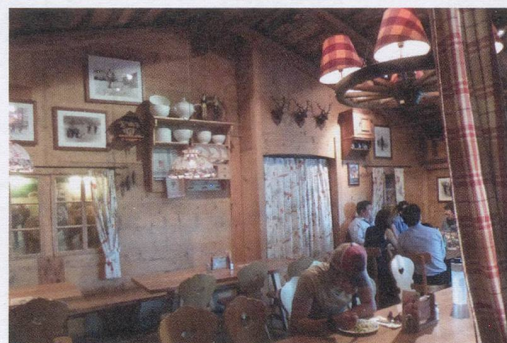
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Breno – Zurich: six nights and two wheels



When the temperatures in Auckland drop below the “nice day for a swim” level and the wet days set in, there is nothing like getting on a plane that will get you to Switzerland, where the air smells of haymaking and the “Badis” (outdoor swimming pools) are opening their doors. That’s what we did three years ago, with Singapore Airlines, the first leg of our annual summer escape to Switzerland. We get a strange preview of our “Heimat” here in a Singapore mall, in a Mövenpick/Marché restaurant:



From the Fondue to the lampshades the place looks oddly authentic, except for the tropical heat outside, of course.

The next day, we land in Zurich and take the train through the Gotthard tunnel, then the “Postauto” (bus) to Breno, a small village in

the Malcantone above Lugano. Spared by mass tourism, the Malcantone, is a quiet valley, ideal for long tramps through chestnut forests and up past the “Alpe” to the “Monti”. We had lived there thirty years ago, so it feels a bit like coming home and catching up with old friends. One of them is Nero. He was my companion on last year’s bike trip from Büren an der Aare over the Simplon to Breno. He is strong, black and he can be stroppy at times but on the whole he is a very reliable... bike.

This year the plan is to go over the Lucomagno Pass to Zurich. So, “Avanti Nero!” We leave the Malcantone on the Via Cantonale past Arosio. And down we race the spectacular “Penudra”. A drop of 500 meters in 24 sharp hairpins. A thrilling biker’s dream. Arrived in the valley, I realise I need some kind of fixing for my iPad, which I have found an invaluable tool. To navigate, I use the www.schweizmobil.ch website.

Schweizmobil, an idea that started in 1993 by a group of enthusiastic cyclists from Olten, was officially launched in 1998 by Adolf Ogi. With state funding and private sponsorship, the foundation maintains 30’000 km of tracks and trails all over the country. For a cost of CHF40.-/year, one gets full access to the website with maps, itinerary-drawing tools on dedicated platforms for hikers, trampers, bikers, mountain-bikers, electro-bikers, line skaters and even canoeists. The foundation also backs

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up a grassroots initiative oddly named "Slow-ups": for a whole Sunday a stretch of road is closed to the motorised traffic and taken over by bikers, skaters, pedestrians, people in wheelchairs. Local clubs, associations, performers and music groups join in the festival atmosphere. In the past ten years these "Slow-ups" have increased in popularity, so that this year there will be over twenty "Slow-ups" nationwide. On one occasion, organisers have even managed to have a stretch of motorway closed.

In front of me, I have a 1:25'000 map constantly centered by GPS. It makes finding small tracks and quiet camping spots a breeze. If it allows you to be closer to wilderness and nature, why not put up with a bit of electronics? So, with an odd sheet of aluminum fished out of a bin and a Swiss army knife, I get to work.

"I'm not going to wear that...!"

...just what I feared: Nero is answering back!! Pretending I had not heard that, I proudly fix the contraction onto the handlebar and off we go.

After having passed Monte Ceneri, which is more a hill than a mountain, we leave the capital Bellinzona to one side and follow some nice shady tracks along the river Ticino all the way to Biasca. The river Ticino is getting wilder as the valley is squeezed in by granite walls on both sides. The narrow Leventina that ends up with the Gotthard massif starts here in Biasca, but we take a right turn into the Valle Blenio that will get us to the Passo Lucomagno about 1700 m higher up.

As dusk is falling on this first taxing day, I crawl more than climb into my hammock spanned across a dry river bed. Gazing at the stars, trying not to think too much about the 1700m for the next day, I soon doze off...only to jump out of my hammock at five in the morning to rolls of thunder. I remember having seen



this dramatic flood warning sign the night before. "You had been warned! Do you ever learn?"

Apart from a hefty hailstorm, the whole event is rather an anticlimax and so we get back on the road. The skies have cleared when we reach Olivone, the last small town before the pass, where we find "Casa Lucomagno" (www.casalucomagno.ch), an ostentatious summer residence built by a wealthy emigrant family at the turn of last century. Like many of these "palazzi" built in humble villages by rich returned emigrants, it proclaims loudly: "Look how well I have been doing!" Today, Casa Lucomagno is an attractive guesthouse. And a welcome change from the dry river bed.

The present hosts add a lively warmth to its

charms. An accomplished artist, Werner doubles up as chef, waiter and convivial raconteur for a familial group of guests. And Pia offers sessions of "rebalancing", a massage and breathing therapy derived from Rolfing. The next morning, Werner even digs out an impressive bike pump, Nero having indulged in a slow air-leak overnight. "That's hospitality for you!" "Mmh, for you, more like it..."

Lucomagno turns out to be a gentle climb, the air getting crisper with every stroke, at a speed that lets you take in every flower, or have a glimpse at a rock or a snail.

"A snail! Talking of speed..."

"Speak for yourself, Nero. Who's doing all the work here?"

Is he just grumpy or has he got a touch of vertigo at the hairy bits where the bike trail follows the old disaffected road with fallen boulders planted in the tarmac like carrots?



And soon, the hospice at the top of the pass is in view: 1916m above sea level. Again good hospitality, some wholesome mountain food and I slept like a marmot. Indeed it was more like winter when I looked out the window in the morning. One could hardly make out the huge statue I had seen the day before: a huge, eery Virgin Mary statue, face turned towards the warmer South, shielding her infant from the freezing North wind. The day is the 22 June: so I celebrate the summer solstice with a snow ball... and a sock instead of gloves!



"Okay Nero, I should have brought gloves. But, then, it's meant to be summer after all"

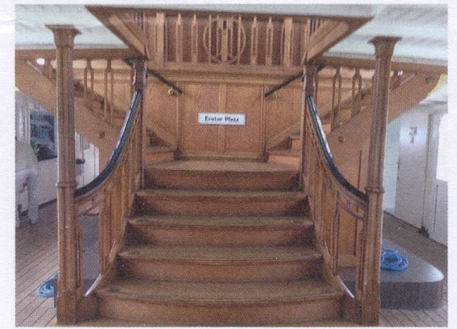
Fortunately the sun is back when we reach Ilanz on the Anterior Rhine. In Sevgein, above Ilanz, we visit some old friends, who have just finished a beautiful addition to their house that they use as B&B accommodation. (www.papaver33.ch) Christian, a sculptor, is also a specialist in

church and old building restorations, using the century old slaked lime (Sumpfkalk) technique, which creates a very even and agreeable climate inside the building. The next morning, after a good night's sleep, we engage in a rugged ride along the impressive Rhine canyon and tackle a long climb to Flims to enjoy a refreshing swim in lake Cresta.

We are ready for the luxury of a washing machine and a soft bed at the Casa Selva in Trin-Digg (www.casaselvatrin.ch). The next day, our route takes us through thick forests and soft meadows all the way down to the river Rhine again. In the evening, "freedom camping" near a reserve by the Rhine and deep asleep in my hammock, I get just about airborne by an explosive bark: a big dane takes off, tail between his legs, to rejoin his owner: I just hope he got the bigger shock than me when he faced my hammock, that green hanging sausage, jumping like a flea. Even Nero is a bit shaken. "Serves you right, sleeping where no one does." is all he says.

In the afternoon, we follow the Walensee, jammed deep and broody between high mountains. We reach Zürich with the ship "Stadt Zürich", just about to sail from Schmerikon. I decide this will be a nice finish to this trip. "You sure about that?" Nero, more at ease on tarmac, seems a bit nervous when we get on board.

"Nero, look at that splendid old steamer. The engines. The First Class Salon. The grand impressive stairs. Like on board the.."



"Oh please, don't mention the Titanic!" We reach Zürich after a relaxed sailing. At least for me.

We had forgotten how busy citylife could be. It is just "Fiiraabig" time.

"What's that, 'Fiiraabig'?"

Think of "feast" and "evening".

"Oh, I like that!"

And here we are, in the courtyard of the 'Klingenhof', the block of flats where we will meet my son and his wife.

"Thanks, Nero, we reached our goal."

"What's that, a goal?"

"It's where one wants to go"

"How can we, at the same time, be where we are and where we want to go?"

Bikes!!

by Daniel Bridler from Titirangi