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A YORKSHIREMAN VISITS THE LÖTSCHENTAL

Not six miles from the busy Rhone Valley and only a mile or two from one of the main trans-Europe routes of the railway age, lies the lost Swiss valley of the Lötschental.

Here, in a deep cleft among the highest mountains of Europe, live a people whom time has passed by. They speak their own language, and are fervent Catholics in a Protestant area. To visit them is to step back into the Middle Ages.

Their valley is a unique phenomenon. One is used to hearing about pockets of people whom history has left high and dry in the jungles of Papua New Guinea or Brazil, or in the high mountains of Africa and Asia. To find one in the middle of the best-developed tourist area of the world is a surprise.

Until very recently, when tourists began to find it, the Lötschental had the barest contact with the world outside. Now faced with the 20th century, after 1,500 years in the Middle Ages, the old way of life of the valley is facing a tough fight for survival. But, for the moment, the old ways remain.

It is easy to see why the centuries have swept past the Lötschental. The mountains rear up like two walls on the sides of the valley. At no point do they fall below 8,000ft. and their green pastures are iced like a cake by glaciers and perpetual snows.

The west end of the valley is blocked by the longest glacier in Europe, and at the East is the only exit—the long and dangerous gorge of the River Lonza, which rushes the translucent blue of a curled wave, through walls rising 4,000ft. above the torrent, and at right angles to the hidden valley.

The tracks are dotted with shrines where the travellers can pray for safety before tackling the next stage of the journey. Yet the scenery alone is enough reward for the journey. The towering white peaks, soaring to 12,000ft. and the green of the fertile valley, make fine contrasts with the deep weather-beaten brown of the wooden hamlets.

Cobbled

In these hamlets you first come face to face with the past. The small wooden chalets are piled in a cluster on the mountainside, and seem far removed from the twee music-box chalets of the tourist region.

Then you realise that this is what a medieval village looked like, vividly recalling half-forgotten pictures of Britain in the Middle Ages. The cobbled streets are never wider than one cart's width, and usually only wide enough for one man to walk down.

Barns, small, with one room, lean drunkenly on each other, standing on six or eight legs and protected at the top with mushroom-shaped stone slates designed to keep mice and rats from climbing in. The effect is, of inverted Noah's Arks on stilts.

Houses and barns alike are tiled with wood shingles weighed down with heavy stones—though one householder, evidently confused by encroaching modernity, has covered part of his roof with the shingles, part with stone slates, and part with corrugated iron.

On the houses' rickety balconies stand piles of hay or manure. Rakes and scythes are hung on pegs beside the door, as an Englishman might hang an umbrella, and from beneath them poke the long tusk-like prows of a fleet of sledges. There is a rich smell of manure, hay and sun on wood.

Beautiful

There are no museum pieces. Houses put up in the last decades look exactly the same as those that have been there for centuries. It is a continuing way of life.

Inside the old houses there is just one living room, besides a cellar, a

store-room and a passage. The hearths are open and there is no chimney.

Fixed benches stand below the windows and round the circular stove of local stone. People sleep in high double-deck bunks with little boxes beside them to help in the climb to the upper bed. The old furniture is beautiful—heavy hazel and oak tables, and painted and carved cupboards.

Almost all the people live off the land. But, inside their homes, they make their own clothes from their own wool as they did in Yorkshire before the first murmurings of the Industrial Revolution. During the winter the wool is combed and carded by the old men and children, and then spun by the womenfolk. In the spring it is woven dressed and dyed. The old, carved instruments and, the old measures are still used.

Flax is grown for linen underwear, shirts and aprons and all the hats are made from rye. To this way, the people of this self-contained valley stick to clothes that can be made from materials grown there.

Clothes are made to last. Patches are no disgrace—they show that the owner is wealthy enough to possess many different pieces of material.

Another winter task is the carving of furniture and house beams. Like every house in the valley the beams and furniture have texts, proverbs, and timely pieces of advice on them.

"My house is my world", appropriately observes one such inscription on a lone house overhanging the Lonza

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gorge, "He who it pleases, greet God".
"May God's blessing, peace and virtue. In this house never desert you", runs another.

Other inscriptions better suit the dour matter-of-factness of mountain people. One house is particularly cheerful. Over the door of the living room is written "Whether I go out or in, death waits for me"; above the bed: "I go to bed—perhaps to death."

Whoever slept there must often have awakened disappointed, for the people of the valley live to a ripe old age. In the cemetery of the biggest village, I came across three nonagenarians within three square yards.

The air is pure, and pollution is unknown. Middle-aged visitors remark that they have not seen as many butterflies since their youth, and many species of rare plants grow in the valley too.

Life is simple and vigorous. I visited the valley during harvesting. The whole family takes part. Old women, I saw several of at least 80, work as hard as anyone.

Other women, in ankle-long black dresses, white blouses and aprons, with nut brown faces and bulging biceps, scythe away as vigorously as the men. Every so often a man carrying hay on his head appears. He looks like a haystack with legs.

Carrying, is in fact, the normal form of transport. Ingenious wedge-shaped racks are used for carrying firewood on the back, and I also saw long baskets for bread, and wooden barrels for milk, on people's backs.

Food is simple—mainly bread and cheese. Sometimes it is varied with a roast barley soup, or, increasingly with meat.

As with clothing, these isolated people have relied on what they could produce for their needs. Salt was for centuries the most important imported article for the valley, and wars were fought for it.

What the rest of Europe regards as staple foodstuffs were late to reach the Lötschental. The first basket of potatoes was harvested only 100 years ago—by a soldier who had returned from service abroad. Other soldiers brought in maize, tobacco and coffee at about the same time.

Art in the valley is different from most of the rest of Europe. There has only been one "fine" artist of repute born in the valley, but every man is his own artist, exquisitely carving his own implements.

Theatre has developed more on European lines. Cut off from the world, the people of the Lötschental made their own entertainment, like the people of the Welsh valleys. Every hamlet has its theatre, and annual plays have long been presented. Sometimes they go more smoothly than at other times.

Besides this, a huge number of festivals occur throughout the year. The most striking is the "Segenson-tag" when the men dress up in the carefully-preserved military uniforms

of their ancestors who served as mercenaries under the French Bourbon kings.

Disastrous

One reason for the festivals is to allay the toughness of the valley life. Work is hard enough, but the valley has a long history of natural disasters—notably avalanches.

To cope with disaster or poverty, the valley in its isolation, evolved its own welfare state.

Almsgiving continues in food and kind, both individually and at elaborate festivals. There is communal land for the use of the poor, and free communal wood. Lots are drawn among the able-bodied in the village whenever there is communal work to be done, and this takes precedence over anything else.

There is also the kind of spirit where, if a man wants to build a chalet, the whole village will drop what they are doing and carry his wood to the spot. Other common land is apportioned by lot, and ancient grazing rights are estimated by the numbers of cows legs (divide by four to find the number of cows).

The community spirit has served the valley well. After a disastrous war in 1550, the Lötscher were made permanent vassals of an outside power, paying crippling dues, but by dint of 200 years hard work saved enough to buy their freedom.

During this period of subjection, the Reformation passed the valley by. It remains ardently Catholic, while the area around is firmly Protestant.

The reason is that when the spirit of change finally found its way into the valley, the Lötscher held a Reformation of their own. They assembled in the biggest church in the valley and agreed that abuses in the Church must go.

They agreed on a number of reforms, and swore solemnly to observe them. This was in December, 1562. On March 29 of 1563, as soon as the paths were passable, they sent representatives to the local Bishop who agreed to the reforms.

Luxury

Now the valley faces a far more momentous event than this, in the arrival of the 20th century. The signs of change are everywhere in the valley, and those who know it well fear that the old way of life will not last long.

Tourism began to find it in the late 1950s. Since then a road has been built further and further into the valley. By next year it will reach the furthest village.

In the hamlets, cranes used in building luxury hotels tower over the medieval villages. A souvenir shop has opened. Colour TV is in two shops in one narrow street. I even saw in front of one house a pair of plaster dwarfs.

"The road has completely changed

the climate of the valley", said one man who has known and loved the Lötschental for 40 years. "Now the people are only out for money. Now an English company is building a ski-lift there, and wants to turn it into a ski resort.

"It will be a huge success—as it has the best eternal snows in Europe—but it will be the end of the valley as we know it. I give it two or three more years".

Some of the old friends of the valley secretly hope that there will be another spate of avalanches to frighten away the tourists and developers. But it is hard to say that the valley should stay as it is, and not develop. It will mean an easier life for many after centuries of hardship.

All the same, coming from modern Europe, it was easy to wish, perversely, that the spirit of the Lötschental was taking us over, and not being taken over.

(By courtesy of the "Yorkshire Post")

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