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**Autor:** Jäger, Jakob  
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# The Land of the Geriatric Hiker

Jakob Jäger



At Arth Goldau there's no room for the army on a walker's train.  
All photos: Jakob Jäger

It is 9am at Zürich Hauptbahnhof on a crisp autumn mid-week morning. Suburban and longer distance trains roll in to its numerous platforms as commuters disembark in droves and head out into the city centre. Railway staff quickly turn-around the trains, preparing them for the next service, but already people are waiting on the platforms to board. These are a different type of passenger. Most appear retired; most carry small rucksacks; many have folding hiking sticks; all are wearing sensible footwear. These are residents of the city heading out to use the 62,000km of Wanderwege that cover the Swiss countryside – an intricate spider's web of signed footways. Over one-third of Swiss adults claim to be a 'Wanderer' and due to having more of that precious

quantity, time, it is the active retired that do the most walking. A recent survey shows that on average each of the age-60-plus walkers waiting for a train at Zürich will walk some 600km per year.

As we board our train, which is heading towards the Alps, we realise that increasing age is no limit to restricting the activities of these 'Wanderers'. Many of our fellow passengers are fairly obviously over eighty and all seem fitter than many of the younger regular travellers boarding the train, who are probably facing a more prosaic day out. Even those heading to work are fairly slim and trim, as it is rare to see an obese Swiss. Walking seems to be a part of the national psyche and trains heading to rural areas, as well as the high Alps, regularly have sections of carriages cordoned-off for walking groups from the cities, and on fine weekends the SBB often musters extra trains at short notice to cope with demand.

We disembark at Arth Goldau to change onto the Rigi Bahn (RB) to climb to the 1800m high summit. Far from being one of the highest peaks in the country it is a popular destination on a day like this, as it is within a 90min train trip of most of the country's most populous areas. I have heard it described as the 'Suburban Mountain' for it is populated with farms almost to the summit, has areas

A train en-route up the Rigi.



of pleasant woodland, and it is laced with well signed walking routes, from the easy Wanderwege, to the very difficult Bergweg. All these routes are comprehensively signed, either with the ubiquitous yellow signs seen across the country for the 39,000km of Wanderwege, or the red and white markers for the 23,000km of Bergwegs. The signs do not give distances, but average walking times to the destination. These times are based upon a reasonably fit person covering 3km horizontally, 300m vertically, or a combination of both, in an hour. These signs are placed by a nationwide association, Schweizer Wanderwege, which has tens-of-thousands of members. Many act as volunteers to ensure that the routes are correctly signed along their whole length, and also help to keep paths clear. Apparently the average age of these volunteer members is in the late 60s.

Scores of these 'Wanderers' leave our main line train and join us as we walk to the RB's adjacent 'temporary' station to board the rack railway for its 1200m climb to the summit. The two-car train soon fills, leaving a group of Swiss Army Conscripts and many passengers on the platform. Not a problem as on this sunny morning another two-car train is waiting-in-the-wings to take up the expected overflow. The service stops at several small halts on its way to the top and at each groups of fit, elderly, people disembark to walk the paths of their choice, most probably finishing up at one of the numerous strategically sited Gasthofs for a beer and a bratwurst before walking, or riding, down to join an afternoon main line train back home - as we did. ☞



TOP: Walkers set off from the summit station.  
BELOW: The magnificent view from Rigi Kulm.

## ☞ *Swiss Tip: - When in London.*

Next time you're visiting the sights of London, and you've watched The Swiss Glockenspiel in Leicester square (performs Mon - Fri for up to five minutes commencing at 12 noon, 5pm, 6pm, 7pm and 8pm, and also on Sat, Sun and public holidays at 2pm, 3pm and 4pm), why not make the obligatory visit to Harrods? Once you've fought your way through the tourists on the ground floor, find the lifts or escalators and make your way to the third floor. Here you can find refreshments in the *Montreux Jazz Festival café*, and if that £70K+ is weighing heavily in your wallet, you could always buy a Swiss Reuge musical box! If you can't afford it, you can always ask to hear it, demonstrated by one of the helpful staff (wearing white gloves!) ☞

Reuge Musical box.

