



Marissa

from Burlington
& Burlington Lakeshore
to
Switzerland

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I’ve made it to the halfway point. The homestretch. It’s a rather bittersweet realisation, though. I’ve really gotten comfortable in Switzerland, though of course I still miss some things about Canada. It’s at this point where I’ve stopped thinking about what things are different, and more about what this experience has changed for me. There are some things about Switzerland that I can no longer imagine being any other way, and it is a bizarre feeling to see things that were always familiar to me become somewhat unfamiliar. For example, I recently had to choose my courses for my next year of high school in Canada. I was thinking about what it will be like, and I realised it’s going to be a bit peculiar to have the same school schedule every day. Here in Switzerland, no school day is the same as another. Wednesdays are always half-days, with only four or five 45 minute classes, while on Thursdays I have 7 different classes of the same length. Biology is on Mondays, Geography on Tuesday and Friday, History on Monday and Tuesday, etc. I definitely won’t miss getting up at 6am every morning in order to catch a train, though.

Another significant thing is the village culture. I currently live in Salgesch, which has a population of only around 1,500, with about 20 wineries. About an hour away, though, high in the mountains, is a town called Lötschental. It is well known for its culture during the Swiss celebration of Fasnachts, the carnival-type celebrations spread over weeks or months ahead of Lent. Traditionally, it’s the Swiss people’s opportunity to misbehave before fasting for 40 days. This usually consists of band concerts, parades, and similar celebrations.



The thing that brings so many people to Lötschental during this time are their characters called Tschaggättä. These are monstrous costumes worn by (typically) young unmarried men, who then go out anonymously during the evening to play tricks on the public. I had the amazing opportunity to visit a “cellar” where the Tschaggättä prepare. The cellar stores all the supplies the Tschaggättä need to get ready. This includes hand-carved masks, animal skins (goat, deer, sheep, cow, you name it really), special mittens, pants, and some other items. (shhh...top secret). They gather in these places because their identity is meant to be completely secret. They sneak into the cellar and exit as a completely different being. No skin shows through the costume, and they do

not speak to the public. They even get free food if they go to a restaurant. Pretty good deal as long as you’re willing to be drenched in sweat by the end of the night.

On a similar note, I think it would be rather jarring for many Canadians to see what towns look like here. When someone thinks of Switzerland, they may think of Geneva or Zürich, but where I live, in Valais, it’s really nothing like those places. Along my walk home from the train station, it’s like a gradient of development. Near the train station, there’s apartment buildings, wineries, and houses in very close proximity to each other. It looks very similar to a typical Burlington neighbourhood (minus the wineries).





However, as I get closer to where I live, I pass buildings which are centuries old (and still in use!) and numerous semi-stray cats. By the time I get home, though, it returns to looking suburban. This is all within a 15-minute walk.

The thing I dread most when I think of the end of my exchange year, however, is not being in such close proximity to the people I've become really close to. You always think you can't find anyone at the same level as your friends at home, and then you get proven wrong immediately. I talk to my friends here all the time, every day at least, and I can't imagine a world where I can't just take an hour-long train to see them.

Some additional photos of my town below.

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