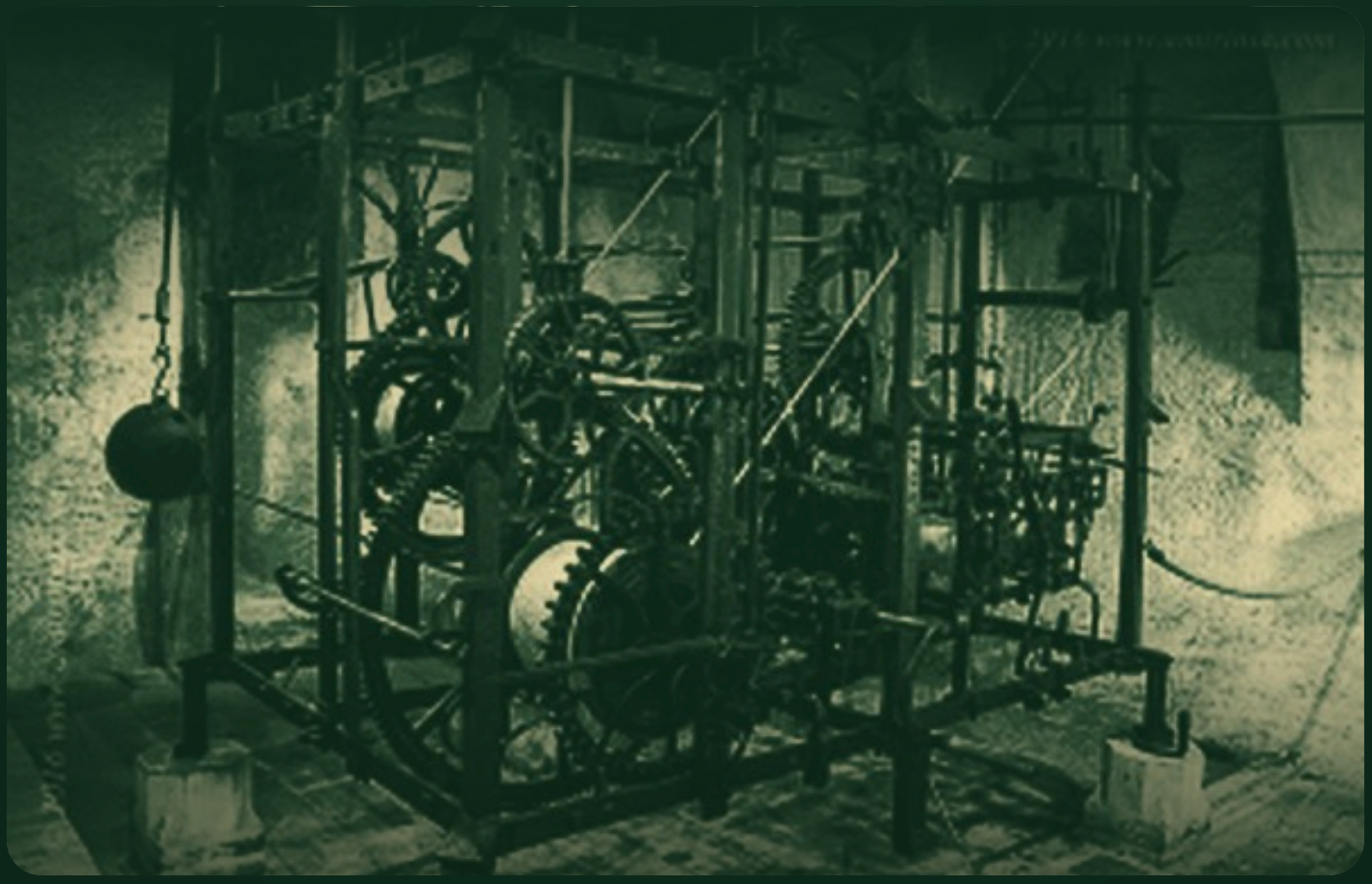
Exploring Bern and Interlaken

FROM A UNESCO-LISTED MEDIEVAL CAPITAL TO THE LAKES AND PEAKS OF THE BERNESE HIGHLANDS

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



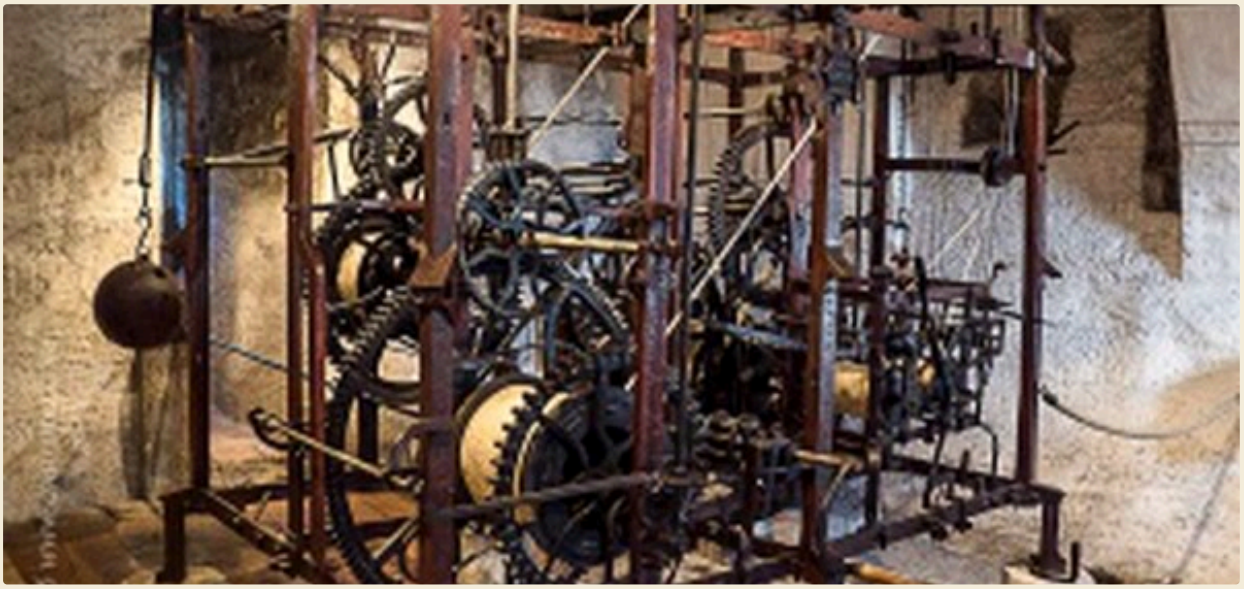
ZYTGLOGGE	EMMENTALER	INTERLAKEN	STOCKHORN
The Astronomical Clock	*Cheese of the Show Dairy*	*Between Thun and Brienz*	*Postcard Views at 2,190 m*

A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE

Exploring Bern and Interlaken

A capital with the calm of a village – then on to lakes, peaks and postcard scenery in the Bernese Highlands

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Zytglogge – the intricate clock mechanism

Bern is a busy capital city that manages to sustain a sense of calm and projects a charm that you could only find by living in a village.

It is no wonder that whole city was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. As the federal capital of Switzerland since 1848, it stands on a narrow hill surrounded by the Aare River which is on three sides. The old medieval town was originally built surrounded by woods, but a major destructive fire in 1405 transformed it into a new city rebuilt in stone.

I was amazed to find buildings, predominantly coloured in grey, different to other European cities that I have seen where they are mostly painted brightly with various shades and colours of white, red, blue and yellow. The uniformity of light grey throughout the old town has created a distinctive character.

II

I started my journey from Bern train station – a curved glazed steel canopy outside the station located opposite the thirteenth century Church of the Holy Ghost. It is the modern symbol of the capital.

I strolled through the cobble-stoned old city centre, passing into the incredible six kilometres of arcades designed for selling goods in bad weather. Now it is one of the longest covered shopping corridors in Europe.



Einstein's house

I reached the oldest gate which is in the western part of the city. A large crowd had gathered to see the figures of a large astronomical clock on the fifteenth century clock tower (Zytglogge), one of the landmarks of the city. The tower used to be a watch-tower and prison in the thirteenth century. Our guide led us inside the tower, climbing the 130 narrow stone steps up to the highest platform in the tower. Two wooden windows open to a view over the top of the old town and on to a distant scene of the Alps. I entered a room where the clock mechanics are located. An amazing 16th century device consisting of several metal shafts and iron gears managed the movement of the clockwork. A large iron cannonball is a bouncing pendulum, which adjusts the accuracy of the clock. A plate marked by the name of clock master Kaspar Brunner indicates that he made the instrument in 1530.

III

There are many museums and galleries to discover in Bern. In my half a day walking tour of the city, I passed Einstein's house at Kramgasse Street, where the scientist lived for two years in 1903. It was here where he developed his theory of relativity and changed the understanding of time and space and the study of physics. Our guide also showed us a small café where he used to spend his time regularly.

I continued my journey down Kramgasse coming across some sixteenth century historic fountains. Bern is a city of fountains, just like Zurich. Among hundreds of fountains in the city, there are eleven significant ones, which are decorated with statues to symbolise the past story about historic events or to mark past heroes of Bern.

In Bundesplatz is the Swiss Parliament (Bundeshaus) and was surprised to find a street market opposite. Can you imagine a market opposite our House of Parliament selling vegetables, fruits, variety of cheese and other local products? The Bundeshaus, built in 1902, is not just an official government building; the doors are open to the public for viewing tours and it also hosts events.



The cathedral tower of St Vincent

IV

I continued to the Münsterplatz, one of the oldest plazas in the old town, which stands in front of the fifteenth century Bern Münster Cathedral of St. Vincent, one of the largest and tallest cathedrals in Switzerland. Not completed until 1893, (it took over 470 years to complete!) in the entrance, you will find an amazing illustration of the last Judgement etched in a gold colour. It was the only statue to survive the Protestant reformation. If you fancy viewing Bern from above, you will need to take 344 steps to 100 metre height to reach the spire.



all these different cheese to sample

I spent my afternoon visiting the Emmentaler Show Dairy in the village of Affoltern located in the rolling hills and steep valleys of the Emmental region which is only 37 kilometres from Bern. Visitors come here to discover the history of cheese production, both the traditional production of cheese-making by hand over wood fire and the modern processes of preparing cheese in large containers. The world famous Emmentaler AOP is produced here and in the Show Diary you can create your own cheese.

V

I began my second day in Switzerland by taking a train to Interlaken some 56 kilometres from Bern. I had a weekly Swiss Travel Pass which entitled me to travel on the rail, trams, bus and boats throughout Switzerland. A tip. Sit on the upper deck of the carriage and you can see the scenery so much better.

Interlaken is a holiday resort town in the Bernese highlands located in a valley between the two lakes of Thun and Brienz, and surrounded by the picturesque snowy green mountains of Eiger, Monch and Jungfrau. The name, Interlaken is only 125 years old and came about when the small village of Aarmühle had a name change. No some might describe it as the most famous winter holiday destination in Switzerland.



Funky Chocolate shopfront

VI

I decided on a foodie walking tour of Interlaken and nearby farmlands to taste local cheese and chocolate. Through alleyways, filled with restaurants and cafes all of which seemed to be decorated with flower baskets and colourful flags of the buildings were painted in white, green and yellow. The eighteenth century wooden mahogany coloured houses, adorned with woodcarvings on the façades add a charming character to the dreamy Alpine town. I only stopped to taste seven different types of local cheese; I could have tried many more!

My final foodie stop was at the Funky Chocolate Club at Jungfraustrasse to taste a variety of chocolate, where you can also learn about the art of chocolate making, softening, melting and making casts.

I ended my tour around Hoheweg, a vibrant street decorated with flower baskets. This is where luxury hotels, the casino, boutiques and shops are located, the setting is astonishing because just opposite is a large field with the Jungfrau Mountain as the backdrop.



paragliding is very popular

VII

Paragliding is a popular adventurous sport around the heights of this region and I was distracted by watching the skydivers floating down. Interlaken is not only a great place for relaxation but also an exotic outdoor hub to experience skiing, biking, hiking, horse riding and a pack of watersports.

Next day, I took the train towards Erlenbach im Simmental to join other hikers who were on the road to experience gastronomic delights on the alpine mountains across the Stockhorn. Catching a cable car from the Stockhornbahn at the bottom of the valley to reach the summit, you travel over vast green-carpeted land outside the winter snowfields.

The first station was Chrindi where a salad cheese rolls broke my hunger as I stared at the picturesque scenery in the valley below my feet and on my left, there was a stunning distant view of Interlaken and Thun River.



picture-postcard scenery

VIII

Another cable-car took me to the summit of Stockhorn which is 2,190 metres high. The spectacular distant view of snowy mountains, Interlaken, Lake Thun, Lake Hinterstockensee, and on my right, the view of Lake Oberstockensee was just a postcard-perfect scenery beyond words.

After pasta and more cheese I set up to trek the mountains feeling the pressure on my knees. I continued my journey going through zigzagging paths until I reached the Berggasthaus Oberstockenalp farmhouse in the open field. Time for more food; walking really boosts the appetite at this altitude. A meringue dessert and tea while listening to the symphony of cows and sheep around me fortified me for the onward walk.

On through the forests I eventually reached Hinterstockensee Lake before returning to Chrindi Station to make my return journey to Erlenbach. I decided on an alternative return journey. I stopped in Spiez to take a boat ride on Lake Thun to Interlaken. The journey is well worth it for you to see the landscape from a different setting. Here were mountainous green forests, pretty villages, farmhouses and magnificent baroque churches and castles but I was seeing from ground – well, water – level instead of from peaks and mountains.

Those who have only visited the area in winter should return when the snows are gone. There is a different landscape, a different feel and different things to do.

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