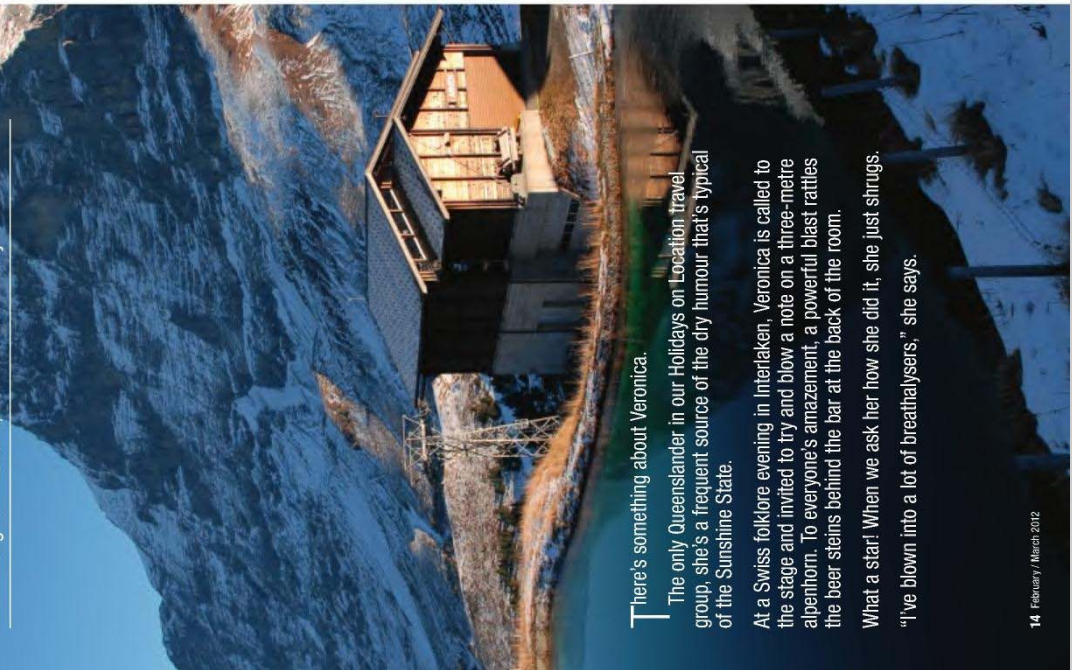


Destinations

Skis, cheese, hotels, cow bells, Federer, etc

Chris Viney encounters all but one of them on a pre-Christmas whirl through Switzerland, Austria and Germany



There's something about Veronica.

The only Queenslander in our Holidays on Location travel group, she's a frequent source of the dry humour that's typical of the Sunshine State.

At a Swiss folklore evening in Interlaken, Veronica is called to the stage and invited to try and blow a note on a three-metre alpenhorn. To everyone's amazement, a powerful blast rattles the beer steins behind the bar at the back of the room.

What a star! When we ask her how she did it, she just shrugs. "I've blown into a lot of breathalysers," she says.

But the real stars of the Swiss show aren't up on stage – they're out there brooding in the dark, looming over the valleys and villages by day, silver in the moonlight, blazing white under the sun, an endless skyline of serene mountain peaks.

The Alps are a constant presence during most of our journey – on the horizon, beyond the train window, above the church spires, beneath the spans of the cable cars and chair lifts.

I'm with a group of Australian travel agents on an educational visit and in the space of 10 days or so, we cover a range of destinations in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. The aim is to see many of the highlights that Holidays on Location arranges for its clients, who would travel at a more relaxed and strategically-planned pace. We go from point to point on Europe's wonderful high-speed trains, which whisk us from the centre of each destination to the centre of the next.

My notebook reflects the character of the trip – random jottings, quick impressions, memorable moments.

Back in 1980, Jude and I camped in the Lauterbrunnen Valley near Interlaken. Europe on \$5 a Day was our Bible and the fare on the Jungfrauoch railway was out of range. (It was a mistake – travel opportunities like that don't come around often and we should grab them when we can.) More than 30 years later, I finally chug out of Grindelwald beneath the stupendous North Face of the Eiger, then into and through the mountain itself, to pause at the Eigerwand Station and gaze out of the window – a window in a mountain! – and down the precipitous face of the most deadly of all Alpine walls.

The train stops at the Jungfrauoch, Europe's highest terminus, where the comfortable restaurant and heated observation terraces look out to black rock, white ice and the sinuous curves of the Aletsch Glacier.

In Basel, our guide on a walking tour of the lovely city introduces us to the Swiss sense of humour.

"I will tell you a Swiss chock," he says. "Japanese tourists say that people in Switzerland smell like chiz!"

I wait for the punchline, but that's it.

The city is beautiful, with its fine churches, civic buildings, ancient bridges and high walls overlooking the Rhine. It's also the home town of Roger Federer. "I used to see him often at the post office, and he is a very nice man," our guide, who's not joking this time, tells us.

In Lucerne, I'm sitting at a riverside café, a warm blanket over my knees, bag of chestnuts and mug of mulled wine to hand. From the narrow streets of the old town comes the distant clang of deep-toned bells and the sharp crack of whips. I finish my wine and join the crowd walking towards the bridge. The sound grows in volume, more of a crash than a jangle. Soon they appear – double lines of solemn-faced marching men, cigars jutting from bearded lips, waistcoats embroidered with meadow flowers, huge cow bells slung at knee-level from broad leather belts, clashing in time to every measured step. With devil masks and rattling chains, black-costumed whip-crackers follow the marchers, swinging their lashes close to the noses of spectators on either side of the bridge.

From Lucerne, a cable car swoops in a series of graceful arcs up to the heights of Mt Pilatus – there are sensational views down to the city and its lake. Paragliders hang in the sky, their slender canopies curved like colourful aerial maggots.

From the village of Engelberg, the thrilling Rotair cable car revolves through 360 degrees as it climbs towards the peak of Mt Titlis. Here at the highest viewpoint in the Swiss Alps, some of my travelling companions experience their first ride on an open chair lift. As the snow drops away beneath us and the chair swings into



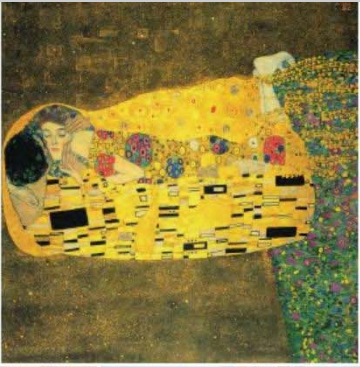
space, their shrieks attract the interest of skiers on the slopes below.

Vienna's imperial palaces, art galleries and museums are simply overwhelming – I'm not the only visitor in the Belvedere Palace to stand mute in front of Gustav Klimt's masterpiece *The Kiss*, a shimmer of sumptuous gold leaf and glowing oils in silver, black and a bright garden of floral colours.

In the evening, a wander past tinkling carousels in the Christmas markets at the magnificent Schonbrunn Palace is a good prelude to an evening of music in the Orangerie concert hall – Strauss and Mozart, who else?

Stuttgart in Germany is the site of the remarkable Mercedes-Benz Museum (pictured on the cover), which tells the story of what is arguably the world's best-known and most prestigious marque. The exhibition begins on the top floor, with displays of the wonderful machines designed and built in the early 1980s by Karl Benz, inventor of the modern motor car. From there, my route through the world of Mercedes-Benz spirals down via ramps and steps, descending through the decades towards the present-day and into the future in a series of spectacular displays and beautifully-presented explanatory information.

Destinations



Left: The North Face of the Eiger, Swiss Alps scene. This page clockwise from top left: Millenau Bridge, Basel; Holidays on Location group in Salzburg (Veronica second from left); The Kiss, Gustav Klimt; Chapel Bridge, Lucerne

In Rothenburg ob der Tauber, the medieval village is decked out for the Advent season, with the Christmas markets doing a brisk trade. There's time for one more hot brautwurst and steaming mug of glühwein before flying back to an Australian summer. But the last day of the journey wouldn't be complete without another laconic quip from north of the NSW border.

Crossing a cobbled square in Rothenburg, I catch my toe on a protruding stone and stumble.

"Had a good trip?" Veronica asks.

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