

Büsingen am Hochrhein and Schaffhausen

July 9, 2016

I had just finished attending a conference in Davos, Switzerland—out by Lichtenstein and relatively deep into the Alps. The nearest major city is Zurich, which put me close to the small German enclave of Büsingen. When arranging the trip, I thought it might be possible to see both the Italian enclave of ZZZ down by Lugano as well as Büsingen. However, when I booked the hotel I accidentally clicked on the button that simultaneously saved me \$20 and removed the possibility of changing my itinerary. Oh well, another time. For now, I still had Büsingen and was looking forward to my visit.

I had planned to leave relatively early in the morning, however, the train from Davos to Zurich the night before was super hot and I had had a headache throughout the night and was pretty tired in the morning. One day, the Swiss may discover one of the luxuries of the last century—air conditioning. To be fair, a lot of Seattle is not air conditioned. During one particularly hot summer while I was in graduate school, one of my colleagues said that, “When it gets this hot, we smile with clenched teeth and say ‘It’s not so bad.’” Perhaps the Swiss take this approach. Still, it felt like the train was a transplant from a third world country—everyone was fanning themselves. I was using a scientific paper on exoplanet abundances written by a friend of mine, and another of the conference goers used my copy of the NSF CAREER grant solicitation.

The upshot was that I ended up sleeping until 11ish. Finally feeling up for it, I headed out to the Zurich train station to get my ticket. I went to the hotel front desk to see if they had a bus pass for me. All of the other places where I’d stayed in Switzerland (all both of them—Geneva and Davos) had a bus pass that came with the hotel stay (in Davos it included all of the funiculars and cable cars, which was cool). I had thought that it was standard throughout the country, and maybe it is. But in this hotel (a Marriott) it was available for a small fee (probably a thousand dollars or so given the prices in Switzerland. I mean, earlier that week I paid something like \$25 for a small hamburger-like sandwich with a handful of potato chip crumbs taken from the bottom of the bag. But, it was european, so it must be good, right? Like the hamburger with a fried egg and a leaf of lettuce on toast that I had in Portugal—delicious, and almost hunger satiating. Good thing I always stock up on trail mix at the airport.).

Departing from Zurich I took the train north toward Schaffhausen, a decent-sized city near the German border. I knew the train would pass by some sights

worth seeing and I was looking forward to the trip. The region north of Zurich reminded me a little of central Wisconsin. It was hilly, not the rolling kind from Iowa, but some steeper versions. But the hills didn't dominate the region like the Alps do in the south. They are just big enough so that any military tactician would want to have their artillery on the tops. After about a half hour you pass into Germany on the north side of the Rhine river (though in that region it is the west side).

As you come back in toward Switzerland you can see a nice waterfall from the train, the Rheinfall. It was a pretty fantastic sight. It isn't as awesome in scale as Niagara, or as tall as Shoshone Falls in Idaho. But it was pretty (and it's european, so it must be great). The falls had churning white water, probably cascading down about 20 or 30 meters, and there were all sorts of places where you could get up close and personal with it. There were a couple of chateaux, some bridges and walkways, and several boats loaded with tourists. It ws the kind of place that you can imagine taking elementary school kids to see on a field trip—a bit of local flare. I knew it was unlikely that I'd have the time to visit the falls, so on the return trip, I sat on the side of the train that would provide the best view again—and I wasn't disappointed the second time around either.

The train pulled in to Schaffhausen and I disembarked. I checked the bus schedule to get out to Büsingern and noted that I still had about a half hour to kill. So, I decided to walk around Schaffhausen a bit rather than waiting for the bus to come.

Schaffhausen was fantastic.

The streets were quite clean, there were statues of various persons of interest (I don't know who, but they were wearing suits of armor), the shop fronts were well kept, narrow and somewhat winding cobblestone streets, lots of pedestrian paths, church towers, and weird community benches that each had some theme—like one that had the minions from Dispicable Me, one had dancing condoms for aids awareness (a little weird to see out in the street, but whatever), others that were boats or farm scenes, or hand prints from across Europe. The streets were bustling enough to be busy, but not crowded to the point that it was a pain to get around. There was a big, defensive tower on the edge of town (more on this later). It was the kind of place that I would love to bring my kids to and feel totally comfortable having them explore the streets with me (the condom bench notwithstanding). Get some ice cream, play in the square, see some old buildings. It was all there for a good, packed day trip or a one-nighter.

I needed to hurry, but was anxious to see some more of this town on my way back to Zurich. I got to the bus stop, got on board, got out a makeshift fan (did I mention the lack of air conditioning?) and soon took off into the countryside toward by ultimate destination, Büsingern. The bus took a road that paralleled the Rhine, maybe 20 yards to the north of it. It was similar to the roads paralleling the Erie canal—and here the river was similar in width, maybe 50 meters across. As we passed out of the city, I noticed a narrow staircase climbing back toward the town. I had to check that out on the way back—no such staircase should go unclimbed. It was like the large staircases and

footpaths on the bluffs near Heidelberg, Stockholm (Södermalm), and Porto.

As the bus worked its way toward Büsingen there were lots of people swimming in the river. It seemed both here and in Zurich that the river was a centerpiece of summer recreation. It's probably wide enough to water ski on, though that would probably ruin the experience of everyone else. There were row boats, sail boats, canoes, and some small motor boats cruising everywhere with picnickers and sunbathers lining the banks on either side. (In Zurich the people would jump in near the bridge by my hotel and let the current carry them downstream quite a ways, with lots of people laying, sitting, and standing on the wall that contains the river.)

By this time we had passed into Germany. I noticed that the Swiss side seemed more developed than the German side. The German side was almost like the road was separating the houses from their front yards—which were across the street, along the river. There were pieces of shoreline that were fenced off with tables and chairs inside the enclosure. Away from the river the topography sloped gently upwards and was covered with fields of wheat and corn. This region was much more sparsely populated than Lívia had been in France (well, Spain).

The village of Büsingen was quaint, but not particularly large—no surprise there. There was the primary main street, and a few side roads before you hit either the river or the fields. I must admit that I didn't spend much time there, and not much was open by way of shops and businesses. The houses and storefronts were clean and well maintained. There was a mural on the side of a building that summed up the attitudes of the residents. It had a gentleman holding a flag pole that sported a german flag. Coming out of his back pocket was a Swiss flag. The message I got was that the residents were German by nationality and Swiss by temperament—though perhaps they use air conditioning more frequently, I couldn't tell.

It didn't take long for me to run the course of what the village had to offer (it's journey more than the destination for places like this). So, I went back to the bus stop to wait for the return bus. The main street had a lot of traffic, especially bicyclists. One thing I can say about the Swiss is that they like the outdoors. Playing in the river, bike riding, walking, hiking, and trekking abounded. While I was waiting for the bus a pair of older men came up to the stop as well, dressed for a hike, complete with backpacks, walking sticks, and one of them had some leather leiderhosen (but without the shoulder straps—just the embroidered leather shorts with buttons and a leather tie at the waist. It was awesome. I moved over so they could sit in the shade, one said “thank you” in German, then said a couple of additional sentences, which I'm sure were very pleasant. Just before they came there was a little kid and his, sister?, who were riding their scooters around the small square. He eventually worked up the courage to pass sufficiently close to say “Hello”.

On the return trip I got off the bus near the mystery staircase, and started to climb. There was some garden with flowers and vegetables below me as I climbed. The staircase headed toward the tower I mentioned earlier. I eventually discovered that the garden below eventually connected to what was once the

moat. As I got closer to the tower the ground below turned to grass—with a herd of deer grazing in it. I crossed over a narrow bridge into the tower, which was open. Inside was a large, cavernous main floor with a spiral ramp (not stairs) off to one side. I started climbing, since there wasn't anyone to stop me, and eventually, after a few rounds, arrived at the top of the tower. Note that the tower isn't like the wizard towers in the Lord of the Rings—all tall and skinny. This one is a squat structure, like a mideval version of a bunker.

At the top was a restaurant with a lot of tables, which I'm sure is open for business at some point during the year—just not when I happened to be there. The view, however, was spectacular. There were a few cannons near the battlements, for good measure, and the panorama was of much of the central part of Schaffhausen. The top was well above the city, so you could see rooftop after rooftop, church tower after church tower (I seem to recall them having clocks on them), and the winding narrow streets below. As a bonus, the sloping sides of the bluff had a small vineyard—probably for making grape jelly. It was such a great view that the mosquito sound of an overhead drone only bothered me a little.

After using the facilities (for free!), I eventually worked my way down a different path, one that passed through the vineyard and made its way to some narrow staircases near the town center. I spent a few more minutes walking the city, getting some ice cream, and generally taking it all in. Then, I headed back to the train station for the return to Zurich. On the way back, I got another good look at the Rheinfall waterfall. Schaffhausen would definitely make a good place for young-ish kids to experience Europe. In a full day or two slow-paced ones you could walk through the streets, see the fortress, visit some churches, take a boat on the Rhine, or just find a spot where you can play in or near it, visit a cool waterfall with nearby castles, stand with one foot in one country and one in another, get some ice cream or candy, then eat it, and enjoy the nice weather with crowds that are big enough to be interesting but not nervewracking. The train ride too and from Zurich is short enough to remain interesting along its length (about 45 minutes).

Once I made it back, I took some time off, then decided to walk around Zurich. I know it isn't the point of these travelogues to document places that people have heard of, but I did notice that Zurich, despite the impression made by the rooftops and the view from my hotel room, is built on some pretty aggressive terrain. Lots of winding streets, and stairs masquerading as streets. The university is on the side of a big hill and affords a great view. And, on the other side of the river there are stunning views as well from the tops of high retaining walls with parks on one side and 20 meter drop-offs on the other.

With this trip under my belt, I only have two exclaves left to go—the Belgium/Netherlands one and the Italy in Switzerland one. And, two small countries remain—San Marino and Malta. Then I'll have to find some other purpose in my travel life. Maybe ... I dunno.