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Swiss surprises

The East Gate marks the main entrance to Roman Aventicum in Switzerland. MICHAEL MILNE

The country offers visitors much beyond the usual attractions, including Roman ruins, Olympic history, and culinary treasures.

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

Switzerland intrigued before we even arrived. While researching our trip, we noticed the Swiss websites we accessed had a domain extension of ".ch". That didn't make sense to us; with the exception of the dot-com-centric USA, most international websites bear a two-letter extension indicating their country of origin. They are typically representative of the country name; for example, if you look up a French company, it will likely end in ".fr".

Why did a country with neither a "c" nor an "h" in its name bear that designation? During our visit, we uncovered some unique aspects of Switzerland that may not have been related to the "ch" designation but that seemed fitting nonetheless.

It turns out the official name of the multilingual country is Confoederatio Helvetica, Latin for "Swiss Confederation." Besides being a popular typeface, "Helvetica" refers to the Celtic tribe that lived thousands of years ago in what is now Switzerland, even before the Romans arrived. As we toured the region of Vaud, the "ch" started to make sense in other ways.

Chariots: Switzerland is not a country typically associated with Roman ruins, yet just 30 miles north of the region's capital city of Lausanne, an ancient Roman capital lies tucked amid the cow pastures. At first glance, the town of Avenches appears to be a sleepy medieval village with little more than a main street of half-timbered buildings festooned with fluffy scarlet geraniums cascading from the window boxes.

Visitors can see a hands-on demonstration of the valley's traditional cheese production at Le Chalet.

However, this town boasts something different — at the end of the main street lies what might at first glance appear to be a large oval pit. Upon further examination, it is the remains of a Roman amphitheater, complete with tiered seating. Two thousand years ago, this area was Aventicum, the capital of Roman Helvetia, a segment of that vast empire from which modern-day Switzerland takes its name. Today, the amphitheater serves as a site for concerts and theatrical performances in the warmer months.

The area surrounding the town is a bit more pristine, where the remains of Roman Aventicum are slowly but surely being (literally) unearthed. The scale is massive. Historian Bernard Godel drives us to a point one mile in the distance across a flat plain, where the remains of a wall and two squat, crenellated towers stand.

"This is the East Gate," he proclaims. "It marks the main entrance to Aventicum." Between here and the town lay pastures and farmland, punctuated with tumbled marble columns and evidence of archaeological digs. Striding through the gate along the remains of the Roman road, it's easy to imagine arriving by chariot — until the gentle clanging of cowbells brings you back to present-day Switzerland.

Highlights of Aventicum include the baths, where ongoing excavations reveal the sophisticated system of distributing varying degrees of heated water to warm the floors and fill the bathing pools. A semicircular theater — or perhaps parliament — is nestled amid earthen works at the edge of town. With its vaulted passageways still intact, and the stone outlines of the stage delineat-

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ed, it's not hard to envision a toga-clad senator issuing proclamations.

Champions: Despite Helvetia's relationship with the Romans, the city of Lausanne has a connection to ancient Greece, albeit a more modern variety. Housing the headquarters of the International Olympic Committee, it is billed as the "Olympic Capital." Here in a small park, the eternal Olympic flame burns in a sculpted bronze cauldron, keeping the spirit of the Games alive between global events.

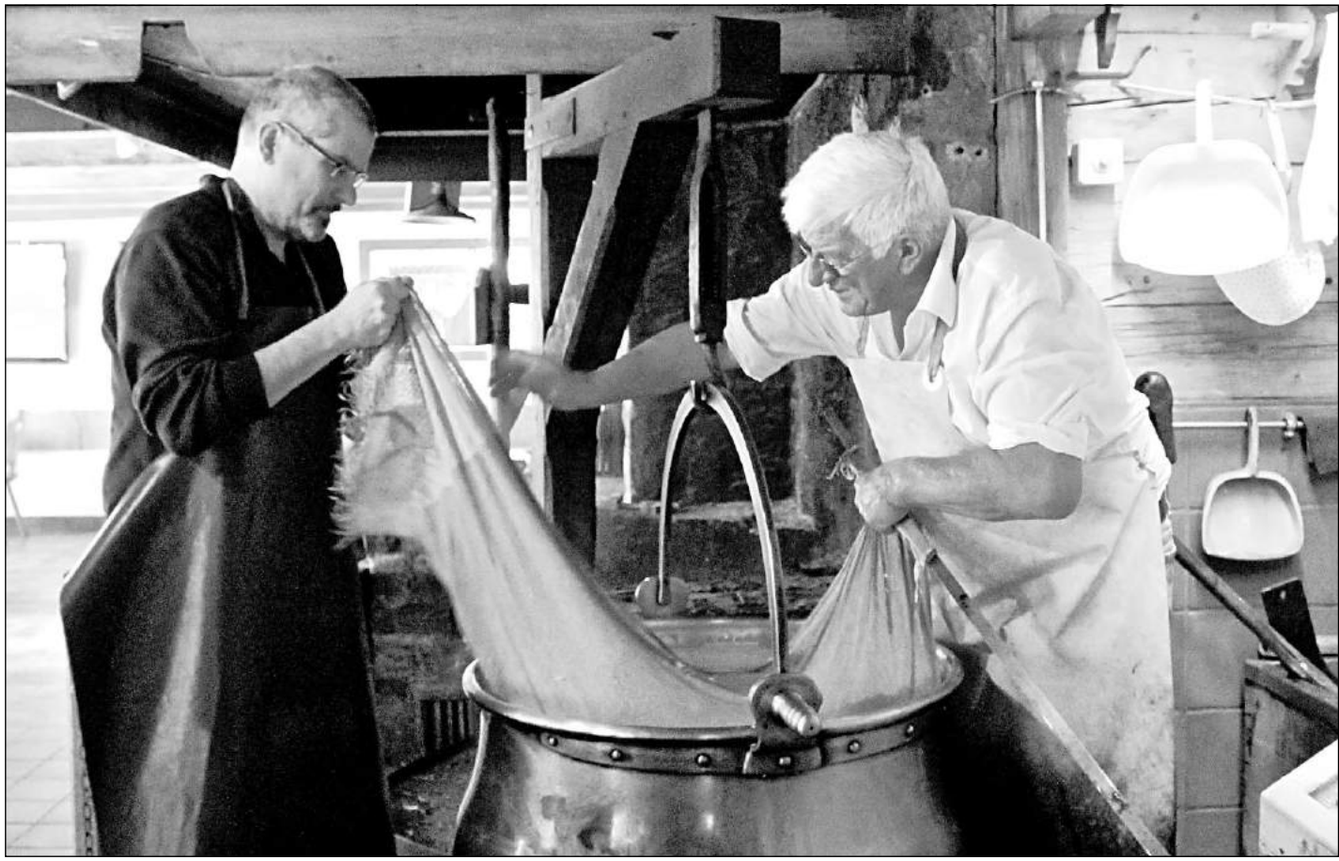
The Olympic Museum provides a stirring history of the modern Games, inspiring visitors as though they were once again watching the United States hockey team upset the Soviet Union in 1980. You can even watch a video of that famous moment. The museum entrance sets the tone for athletic accomplishment: Visitors pass beneath a high-jump bar set at the Olympic record of 7' 10". Craning up at the bar, it seems impossible that any human could hoist his entire body over it.

The story of French sportsman Pierre de Coubertin, father of the modern Olympics, is chronicled, along with a display of the first five-ringed Olympic flag, stitched together by the Bon Marche department store in Paris. Wall-size screens project films of top Olympic moments set to a crescendo of dramatic music. In a separate, hands-on area, visitors can test their reaction, strength, and balance skills against those of Olympic champions, bringing soaring hopes plummeting back to Earth.

Examples of the medals and the torches from past Summer and Winter Games are on display. Additionally, sports fans can search for artifacts from their favorite Olympians; included are the torn leotard gymnast Kerri Strug wore in Atlanta when she vaulted to gold on an injured ankle, the outfits ice dancers Torvill and Dean wore in their Sarajevo performance that earned a string of perfect 6.0 scores, and a wooden discus signed by Al Oerter, the first athlete to win gold in the same event at four consecutive Olympics.

Cheese: Admittedly, "Swiss cheese" is not exactly an unknown term, but we were curious to see whether there was more to it than the stuff typically found at supermarket deli counters. Taking one of the superefficient Swiss trains into the Alpine foothills, we alighted at Château d'Oex, a picture-postcard village that serves as the gateway to one of the country's culinary treasures: Etivaz cheese.

Until recently, this cheese, with its own AOP designation (much like certain wines in France and Italy), was a regional secret. The creamy, nutty wheels are produced to strict standards — coming only from chalets in mountain pastures between altitudes of 3,000 and 6,000 feet, and made with milk produced only between May and October. Visitors can witness part of the process at the Maison de L'Etivaz, the huge cooperative cellar tucked in the hills where local dairy farmers bring their young cheese wheels to age for a minimum of 135 days.



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Visitors can witness parts of the cheese-making process at the Maison de L'Etivaz, a huge cooperative cellar where local dairy farmers bring their young cheese wheels to age.

In Château d'Oex, cheesemaker Maurice Henchoz provides a hands-on demonstration of the valley's traditional cheese production at Le Chalet. Every morning, he stokes up the wood fire in the center of the restaurant's simple dining room and pours almost 200 liters of fresh milk into a copper cauldron to heat. This is a true locavore process; Henchoz can tell which wildflowers the cows are eating by the taste of the milk.

The freshly formed curds are ready by midday, and interested lunch patrons are welcome to help with the straining and shaping of the fledgling organic cheese. But most of those nibbling lunch are locals who play a role in the industry and who have no desire to interrupt their midday break. Thus, it falls to Michael to be cheese-curd strainer for the day. Continually hoisting roughly 30 pounds of curds out of a steaming cauldron gives him a new appreciation of the physical demands of creating such an artisan product.

As the train chugged down the mountain, we reflected on Switzerland's "ch" designation. Perhaps the letters did make sense. Stopping in a local mini-market for a snack, we found the final "ch" that sealed the deal: Amid the milk, bread, and lottery tickets, this standard shop provided a selection of chocolate that would rival most gourmet food halls. Yep, "ch" stands for Switzerland, all right, as easily as a Swiss chalet.

Philadelphia natives Larissa and Michael Milne have been full-time global nomads since 2011. Follow their journey at www.ChangesInLongitude.com.

If you go

The Lake Geneva Region, known officially in Switzerland as the Canton of Vaud, is the "province" on the northern shore of Lake Geneva. It is reached easily by flying into the city of Geneva, 30 miles to the southwest. The region's capital city of Lausanne, perched right on the lake, makes a great base for touring the area.

▶ Lake Geneva/Canton of Vaud tourism: http://www.lake-geneva-region.ch/

▶ Roman site at Aventicum/Avenches: http://www.avenches.ch/en/

▶ Olympic Museum: https://www.olympic.org/museum

▶ Cheesemaking at Château d'Oex and Etivaz: http://www.chateau-doex.ch/en

▶ **Transportation:** All sites are accessible via the superefficient Swiss train system. We recommend obtaining a Travel Pass for 3-15 days through Swiss Rail that also includes admission to several museums and attractions throughout the country.

https://www.swiss-pass.ch/