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LIFE ON THE EDGE

Jonathan Bastable visits Lucerne, a lakeside city with medieval charm, contemporary cool and a dramatic Alpine backdrop

WHEREVER YOU GO in Lucerne, you are bound to catch occasional glimpses of architect Jean Nouvel's striking Kultur- und Kongresszentrum (Culture and Congress Centre). Standing at the point where Lake Lucerne funnels into the River Reuss, the modernist cultural centre is the newest symbol of the city, a contemporary counterpoint to the medieval Kapellbrücke bridge. In daylight, from the far bank of Lake Lucerne, it looks like a beached aircraft carrier. At night, what draws your eye is the illuminated three-letter acronym – KKL – high on its façade. But the building is at its most impressive close to. It sports an amazing cantilevered roof, which juts out like the peak of a gigantic baseball cap. A large piazza connects the building with the lakeside, and much of this broad space is taken



Jean Nouvel's striking Kultur- und Kongresszentrum (Culture and Congress Centre) on the banks of Lake Lucerne



Clockwise from left: the interior of the KKL; a traditional dish of liver served with rösti potatoes; the Old Town Hall; gondolas from Mount Pilatus to Lucerne



► up with a shallow pool. Little watery pathways lead from there to the foot of the building, where they pass under its walls. Most evenings there are people here in this urban water meadow, enjoying a drink beneath the shade of the vast roof before heading indoors for a performance.

The big square pond and the grey massif of the KKL combine to make a stylised microcosm of the city's own appealing topography, which has the lake to the front and the granite bulk of Mount Pilatus, Lucerne's local alp, rising up behind. Like Mallory contemplating Everest, I felt the need to get to the top of Pilatus, just because it was there. Unlike Mallory, I was more than happy to do it the easy way. I bought myself a ticket for the Goldene Rundfahrt – the golden round trip – which involves a short voyage across the water, a cogwheel railway up the mountainside, a leisurely stroll round the summit, and a series of cable cars back down. You'd be crazy to go to Lucerne and not do it.

The Rundfahrt boat left exactly on time. It steamed away from the town, keeping the tall mountain to the starboard side, and then chuffed along the south shoreline. We passed by Richard Wagner's pretty house, then moved out into a world of lakeside hamlets filled with a mix of Bauhaus-style flat-roofed condos and fantastical multi-gabled wooden cottages.



Occasionally our route led past a long spur in the lake, a kind of fjordlet leading off into liquid depths. These byways looked enticing, but the ship followed its prow, deviating from its course only to make stops, like a rural bus, at various villages along the way. I had half a mind to get off at Kehrsiten-Bürgenstock, where there was a tempting café close to the jetty, a few good-looking homes, and a lush green field pitched at the same steep angle as the roofs of the houses.

The boat took more than an hour to amble up to Alpnachstad, at the far end of

Lake Lucerne. All the while the profile of the mountain was changing as we moved over the blue water and the sun sailed across the equally blue sky. We passengers piled off the boat and formed an orderly queue to board the cogwheel railway, a kind of slow-motion rollercoaster – but one with no downs, only ups. It is a lovely ride. Very quickly you get high enough to have a commanding view over the lake that you just traversed. Your ears pop with the altitude before you reach the halfway stop. In its higher reaches, the track runs parallel to a footpath. There were a few hardy hikers trudging wearily along it. Everyone on the train looked at them with the same expression: a mixture of admiration and pity.

The railway pulled in eventually at a ziggurat of a terminus, and from here it was a short climb up some steps to the very peak of Pilatus. Turn south, and you are looking towards the distant snow-tipped peaks of the Monch, the Eiger and the Jungfrau. They are a magnificent sight – serene and glacial as a row of ice-carved buddhas. Turn the other way and you are looking right down on Lake Lucerne and the city itself. You can take in the first half-hour of your boat trip as if reading a map. Nearer by, but still far below on a saddle of the mountain, stands a little chapel. What it is doing in such an inaccessible spot I can't imagine, but I could make out one pious soul, picking his way along the ridge to preach or pray.

The descent from Pilatus is altogether quicker than the ride up, and it is rather thrilling. The departure point for the cable car is a few steps from the platform at which the cogwheel railway arrives, but its route leads down another face of the mountain. Attendants pack you in like commuters on the Tokyo underground. Hold on tight when the car sets off, because for a few seconds it swings on its taut rope like a ship's lantern in a gale. Part-way down the mountainside you get out of the communal cable car and into four-seater gondolas that follow a path cut through the dense trees. It's a fine way to travel – peacefully and effortlessly skimming the treetops until you arrive back in the city, or at least a suburb of it. Your round-trip ticket is valid for the 10-minute bus ride to the centre.

That evening I sat in a bar on Unter der Egg, which is the cloistered north bank of the Reuss. This is the place to be at cocktail hour, among the aperitif-drinkers and early diners. At one table I saw a nun, seated all alone, devouring an ice-cream cone. ►

➤ From this waterside part of the Old Town you have a grand view of the old Kapellbrücke, its wooden balustrade garlanded with bright flowers. Directly opposite me, on the far bank, was the Jesuit Church, its twin cupolas like giant green heads of garlic atop a pair of shot-towers. The river was a soothing sight. Swans, with their long interrogative necks, meandered back and forth like unanswered questions floating across the mind.

I saw lots of people drifting slowly along the pavement towards the KKL. Many of these happy folk were wearing their concert-going finery: women in cocktail dresses and silk shawls, men in dark unstructured suits with colourful open-neck shirts. It struck me as a cheerful dress code, slightly formal, somewhat joyous. I decided to leave the bar and walk downstream, against the flow of people, and came upon a pair of rather marvellous constructions in the river itself. On the north bank stands a small and unobtrusive hydroelectric station, there to harvest power from the fast-flowing Reuss. On the surface it takes the form of various concrete walkways and plateaux, and there are people standing or sitting about on this industrial object, soaking up the evening sun or steeping their feet in the cool puddling water. Atop it all stands an orange wedge, about eight feet tall with a door in its one perpendicular side. It is, no doubt, an entrance to the innards of the hydroelectric station, but standing here, looking so conspicuous and incongruous, it could have been Doctor Who's Tardis redesigned for the 21st century by the inventive Monsieur Nouvel. Opposite the hydroelectric station, on the other bank, is the so-called Nadelwerk (or 'needleworks'), a fine piece of 19th-century engineering. It is a system of wooden stakes, like a long row of *pizzaiolo's* paddles, which can be raised or lowered to control the volume of water in the river. When the stakes are down, the water becomes ruched like a curtain as it squeezes through the gap. The result is an attractive waterfall. It is no surprise that the café tables alongside the Nadelwerk, like the ones on the Egg, are always full.

The next day I explored the town, beginning with the bewitching assemblage of 20th-century art at the Rosengart Collection. It has some great stuff. Renoirs share wall space with Legers and Kandinskys, and there is a roomful of Chagalls, each one of them suffused with love and sorrow: *David Mourning His Son Absalom*, *Les Amoureux*, a Christ



Above, a view over Lucerne valley to the summit of Pilatus. Left, a traditional Swiss horn player. Below, the *Dangerous Liaisons* room in The Hotel, designed by Jean Nouvel



crucified alongside a longcase clock... The Rosengarts – father and daughter – were friends and patrons of Picasso, and works by him form the heart of the collection. There are lots of drawings, including a sketch of a mother and baby that is as subtle and profound as a Da Vinci madonna. Some of these figurative works are much later than one might expect – they were produced long after Picasso began doing his fractured, kaleidoscopic compositions of violins and newspapers and music stands. You get the feeling that he was far too big an artist to be constrained by one style or movement – that he was a cubist only when he was in the mood for it. And, even in this smallish collection, you cannot help but be impressed not just by Picasso's versatility, but also by his sheer output: the paintings and pots and sculptures seem to have poured out of him in a torrent, like the waters that gush through the Nadelwerk.

It is a short walk from the Rosengart Collection back to the KKL. Right at the top of the building is the Kunstmuseum, Lucerne's showcase for contemporary art. I happened upon a fabulous travelling exhibition of works by Chinese artists. I saw an astonishing maquette, a scale

model representing the clifftops and palaces of Tibet. It hung from the ceiling and was made from edible dog chews that had been unfurled and stitched together. There was also a tiny piece by Ai Weiwei: an ashtray-sized ceramic of a rolling wave, like a Hokusai in miniature 3D.

Come the evening I wandered off into the Old Town. It is at its best at twilight, when the shops are shut, the streets empty, and your eyes naturally drift upwards to the decorative frescos on the façades of the buildings. There are tall paintings of tradesmen and shopkeepers, announcing the kind of shop that is housed below (or once was). In places, plaster saints balance on plinths installed at first-floor level; elsewhere there are wooden-framed frontages like Jacobethan manor houses – only here the wood is carved into pleasing curves and picked out in oxblood tones. Many of the older buildings are capped with chaotic, whimsical roofs featuring turrets and towers and gabled windows barely big enough to put an arm through. The Old Town is dotted with open squares (each one with a fountain at its centre) where you can sit down with a glass of wine to enjoy the architecture.

The next day was a Sunday, and my last morning in Lucerne. I got up early and

went for a walk to Wagner's house, which I had seen from the boat. The first five minutes led me through railway sidings and boatyards behind the KKL, but soon I was in a pleasant park. I nodded *guten morgen* to the joggers and dogwalkers, and watched a few intrepid swimmers tiptoeing past the drowsy swans to take a dip. Walking on, I soon found myself at the bottom of Wagner's garden, where his sloping lawn meets the shore. The water was opaque and silvery at this hour, like mercury. Mists rose in wispy strands from between the pale mountains. It was a Romantic artist's dream of a landscape: not hard to see why this place appealed to a big-canvas composer such as Wagner.

It was, however, a little chilly, and I wondered whether I should postpone visiting the house and go in search of coffee and a piece of cake. Suddenly the church bells of Lucerne began to chime all at once. Their pealing reverberated round the lake in such a way that it was impossible to tell which direction the sound was coming from. The bell-music just filled the air and – though it was an illusion – seemed to be making ripples on the surface of the water. I tell you: it was as if those mountains were singing to each other.

LUCERNE LOWDOWN

WHERE TO STAY

The Hotel Jean Nouvel's hip boutique hotel on the south side of the river, a short stroll from the station. In each bedroom the ceiling is a huge mural depicting a (faintly erotic) still from a film that means something to Nouvel: *That Obscure Object of Desire*, *The Pillow Book*, *Last Tango in Paris*, *The Sheltering Sky*. Definitely the coolest hotel in town. Sempacherstrasse 14 (00 41 41 226 8686; www.the-hotel.ch). Doubles from SFr375 (about £260)

Hotel des Balances Old-world but very stylish hotel in the heart of old Lucerne. It overlooks the river to one side and the Weinmarkt to the other. There is a fine restaurant, but this is also a terrific place for an aperitif. Weinmarkt (00 41 41 2828; www.balances.ch). Doubles from about £240

WHERE TO EAT

Bam Bou French-Asian fusion restaurant in the basement of The Hotel. Terribly chic. Sempacherstrasse 14 (00 41 41 226 8686). About £95 for two without wine

Wirtshaus Galliker A proper local Wirtshaus that has been in the same family for more than a century. The food is heavy and hearty and the welcome warm. It's not at all posh, but immensely enjoyable. Schützenstrasse 1 (00 41 41 240 1002). About £55 for two without wine

WHERE TO DRINK

Rathaus Brauerei A little micro-brewery on the riverside, underneath the Old Town Hall. The beer is excellent, and so are the brezels – sandwiches made with plaited bread. Unter der Egg 2 (00 41 410 5257; rathausbrauerei.ch). About £7 for a brezel

WHAT TO DO

Walk the lakeside Go round the south shore to Wagner's house (www.richard-wagner-museum.ch), or take the north shore to the Verkehrshaus der Schweiz transport museum (www.verkehrshaus.ch).

Climb the walls The view from the ramparts of the remains of the medieval city walls is lovely.

Ride a toboggan

Switzerland's longest summer toboggan ride is at Fränküntegg, on the slopes of Pilatus. Get there on the gondolas from the Lucerne suburb of Kriens.

Soak up some culture Catch a concert at the Kultur- und Kongresszentrum (www.kkl-luzern.ch), or see modern art in the Kunstmuseum at the

top of the building (www.kunstmuseumluzern.ch). Visit the Rosengart Collection for Picasso and his 20th-century peers (www.rosengart.ch).

GETTING THERE

SWISS (www.swiss.com) flies to Zürich; then take the fast train to Lucerne. ✈️ A 1hr 45min flight to Zürich, then an hour's train ride

