

Bikes and Hills and Alps, Oh My!:  
A Two-wheeled Adventure through Switzerland

By Mark Alan Hudson

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### **Setting the Stage**

Adventures all start somewhere, just a moment in time where you make a choice. Sometimes the choice is a conscious one that is planned and other times it is the result of an unconscious reckoning, perhaps not even one that you recognize.

For this adventure, that moment, that choice, began with a question, way back in the fall of 2005.

For my wife Sandy, the year 2006 would be one of those momentous years where a “zero,” connected with a celebration, called for something a little out of the ordinary. Given that three years earlier, I had had a heck of a good celebration (at least this is the report I’ve heard from a number of people in attendance), I knew I’d have to do something special.

So one evening, without much ado, I posed “THE” question. “So Sandy, would you prefer a trip or a party for your birthday next summer?”

As soon as I asked the question, I realized it was a dumb one. “Trip” registered mentally at the same moment the sound did. “Great,” I thought. “What in the world can I do that will be special enough?”

As with many things in life, timing can play a huge role. Only two days later, I received an email from Chafin Rhyne, a bike shop owner in Lincoln. It was short and to the point, “Do you know anyone that might be interested in a week long bike trip in Switzerland? Jenny (his wife) and I did it last year and we are going back and would love to take along some people we know.”

I don’t consider myself a genius but this question was an easy one to answer. Two people I know, one an expert with bikes (and their repair) doing a repeat of a trip they’d already been on. I’m sure my response back to Chafin of “Sandy and I *might* be interested; please send more info,” skillfully hid my hand waving and screaming “Yes!” at home.

When I posed the idea to Sandy, it was clear I had the bases loaded and had a chance to knock one out of the park.

### **Lots of Time but Lots to do**

A trip abroad is not quite the same as heading to Orlando, New York or Los Angeles. We live in a different world from what we knew just five years ago. Planning is more important. Rules are important.

But we had heard that Switzerland is a civilized country and their political neutrality to world events was something that made a trip there more attractive to us as Americans. But, not being speakers of French, Switzerland’s official language, and having only rudimentary skills in German, the other predominant language there, we needed to make sure we’d be able to “survive” a trip of almost two weeks.

As it turned out, the company we were booking our trip with, Bike Switzerland, is run by John Klemme, an American who has lived in Switzerland for almost ten years. He

knew what we needed to do and pay attention to and through the tour's website and continuous email communications, kept us on track with our plans for the bike part of the trip.

That left us to simply make our travel arrangements from Shelby to Geneva, where our trip would begin. While we had hoped to use frequent flyer miles from our dominant local carrier (I am beginning to think of these as simply a marketing ploy), our best flight option turned out to be using another carrier to Newark and having a direct flight from there to Geneva. Our return trip would be the reverse. We committed to the flights, as well to the trip, late in 2005.

Our trip to Switzerland would begin August 2. We now had seven full months to figure out how to get street and cycling clothes for almost two weeks, along with bike helmets, into a carry-on bag. Through lots of decision making and practice, along with advice from the "pros" in Lincolnton who did it the year before, we were able to make the grade by our time to leave.

Chafin and Jenny helped in that regard by having a pre-trip social and dinner with the local riders who were making the trip. Along with the Rhynes and Sandy and me, Dr. Clay Richardson and wife Joanie from Morganton were going. Susan Sain, Dee Nachamie, Stephanie Osbourn, Wilton Scrounce, Colin Smith, all from the Lincolnton area, we making the trip, along with Mark Keener, Alan Hinchler and Alan Hutcherson. Our group would be rounded out with Christian Burger from the Chicago area, Bill and Diane Helsel from the Pittsburgh area and May Brit Dorun-Persen, a Norwegian. The latter all had connections to the Richardson's.

## **Geneva, the “City of Peace”**

Almost 10 months after that first question and the serendipitous email, we landed in Geneva. Six of our group was on the same flight and we were met by John in the airport and he got us to our hotel and checked in. “Enjoy yourselves today,” he told us “and we’ll see you for dinner tonight. We’ll all meet in the lobby at 5:40.”

With that, we headed up to our room to wash up, wind down from the trip and try to adjust our minds to the fact that it was 10 in the morning here and not the 3 AM our bodies were telling us. The best cure for that situation, we were told, was to just start the day and get out and walk around. We’d crash and burn eventually, but if we stayed active, it might be after dark.

So we toured. And what we found was that Geneva is a beautiful old European City. Where we tend to think of Williamsburg and Jamestown as old here in the US, Geneva’s citizens regard that as fairly recent history. After all, there is more than 2,000 years of recorded history for the city.

Situated on Switzerland’s largest freshwater lake of the same name, Geneva is centrally located to the vast majority of Europe, most of which you can get to in less than two hours flying time. The third largest city in the country, it has a diverse population, with more than 150 nationalities represented in its population base, which approaches 400,000 people.

The stereotype of Switzerland being a land of secret numbered bank accounts is just that, a stereotype. In fact, recent international law has made such a practice almost non-existent. Now, privacy and discretion is still valued in banking institutions, but that is different.

Instead, Geneva is more renowned for being home to 200 international organizations, a very large majority of which are humanitarian in nature. These include the World Health Organizations, the United Nations and the International Red Cross, among others. The city is known for its arts culture, with numerous museums, theaters and performance centers throughout the city. With more than 1,100 restaurants, it may surprise some to learn that Geneva has more restaurants cited in travel guides than any other city in the world. Meaning...you won't starve here.

### **Getting on with it**

Our walking tour included getting fitted with our bikes, which turned out to be brand new, right out of the box babies. "David," whose role would be to help us with luggage, assure our daily picnic lunch, and to cheer us up with happy thoughts when the going got tough, helped us with last minute adjustments to the bikes.

Our dinner was to be a treat; we headed out into Geneva's nearby wine country. Most people don't know that Switzerland has a very vibrant wine production and it compares to other European standards in both quality and prize. Around Geneva, there are more than 1500 hectares of vineyards. Translating into US measurements, that means "a lot of land to grow grapes."

Our destination was the "Domaine des Molards," a vineyard owned and run by Michael and Claire-Lise Desbaillet. With 11 different varieties of wine from their operations, it proved to be a fairly easy task to satisfy the pallets of our tour group. Our hosts did not have to understand a word of English to know everyone was having a great time. They topped it off with a homemade dinner with products from their garden. We

reluctantly headed back to catch the last train into Geneva, where we all slept soundly after being up for more than 24 straight hours.

This meal, we later realized, merely set the stage for our gastronomical adventures for the trip.

### **Almost ready to ride**

The next day, tour director John met with us early in the day to talk about our trip, scheduled to be a mere 500 kilometers or so across Switzerland. When we did the metric conversion and came up with just over 300 miles, we felt a little better. “Hey, that’s just 60 miles a day,” I thought to myself.

During the meeting, he handed out cell phones to everyone, each programmed with the numbers of all the tour members as well as his number. “Nice touch,” I thought, “but we won’t likely need them.” After all, I’d been on a number of bike tours. How lost could I get in a country not much larger than our great state of North Carolina?

The rest of the day, we spent touring old parts of the city and shaking off the last effects of jet lag. Our day was topped off with a meal at the private club of the United Nations, situated nearby right along Lake Geneva. We weren’t sure how John and bike Switzerland arranged this but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t due to my diplomatic status. In fact, I later shared with some folks that I was happy that I was let back into Europe as a traveler at all. There was that incident, some thirty years earlier when I was traveling with a rugby team....well, that’s just a story for another time.

### **On the road again**

Our first day on the road started out under clouds but soon cleared and blue sky abounded once we left the city. We were treated to gently rolling terrain through

farmland, an easy and relaxing ride. In many ways, the weather and the road were toying with us.

A short 30 miles later, we were in Rolle, a picturesque town next to the lake. After a great picnic lunch, we were ready to move along as our route sheets indicated we would have a couple of hills on the way to our hotel in Chexbres, in the middle of wine country. The route directions noted the terrain was “easy” but this little voice inside my head started buzzing. We began a slight incline away from the lake.

An hour later, finally able to stop without falling over, I looked down on Lake Geneva. The little voice inside my head was now taunting me.....”Gently rolling, gentry rolling, E A S Y terrain.”

As if that wasn't enough to damper the spirits, clouds began to roll in. I was hoping we'd make it to the hotel before the rain.

We did. Others didn't. And the cell phones that some thought an extravagance began to see a lot of use.

And after the short lasting storm, we all relaxed on a veranda, tasted some of the locally bottled agricultural products and watched a regatta on the lake, now miles away and a thousand feet below us. Later, after another exquisite meal, we settled down to another night of sound sleep.

## **Of Cheese and Hills**

When we got up for our second day of riding, it was very breezy and cool, with still ominous clouds darting around. An hour later, the sky had cleared and the breeze quieted. We were ready to go.

No surprise, we were climbing almost immediately and did so for about three miles before the first flattened spot came into view. But the scenery was spectacular and the entire group's spirits were high. Especially so for Colin and Wilton, two experienced cyclists who have never met a hill they didn't like. I made a note to myself to keep an eye on these two; they could be trouble.

We rolled along and eventually caught views of what looked to be a castle in the clouds. As we neared, it was clear that it was sitting on top of a high hill. "Boy, I'd hate to have to climb that thing," I chirped. Sandy, my dear sweet wife, gently reminded me that the castle was our destination for the morning. I think it was at this moment I started having grave misgivings about the geography of the country.

But pain is sometimes fleeting or more imagined than real and we got to the town of Gruyeres about the time rain showers did. The town and the castle date back to about 923 AD and the castle itself was built from 1272-1280. Also, this is where Gruyere cheese is produced. We spend some relaxing time touring the castle and town, as well as the cheese museum. We are impressed and enjoy the visit.

As we leave town, the skies have cleared again and the weather is mild. Scenery is so spectacular everywhere we look, we think that maybe it will soon lose its interest to us. Fortunately, this never happens.

As we forge on, we pass spots where the artist M.C. Escher lived, as well as psychologist Carl Jung. We also pass the spot where the first hot air balloon to circumnavigate the globe began its journey. I wonder to myself if I'm the only one that would appreciate a ride on it today.

Soon, clouds reappear and it begins to rain. That means we must be getting close to our hotel in the small town of Chateau-d'Oex. Everyone has now ridden about 120 hilly miles in two days across terrain the Swiss would call easy and which we had not seen in our normal riding.

### **Weather, food and exercise**

As a group, everyone was getting comfortable with each other and beginning to learn the interesting things that make people tick. As with the case in all people, this began with discussions on the weather, the food and our ride.

Just a week before we arrived in Switzerland, Europe had had a huge heat wave. The country had experienced temperatures in the upper 80's and low 90's, exactly like our weather here in August. But normally, the highs were in the low 70's, the range we were now experiencing. And the rain, which seemed to be falling every day, was more of the intermittent shower variety. It seemed like everyone had the proper gear, and even though we'd arrived wet, we all figured that if we just didn't have long drenching showers, we'd be fine.

One of the best ways to see anyplace can be on a bicycle. We were certainly getting our money's worth in this regard. And then there was the food. We'd already been treated to some exceptional dinners and lunches. Even the naturally lean riders like Jenny and Chafin were wondering how the Swiss, on average, seemed to be so fit.

The answer, in addition to the key trait of moderation, is the attitude of the Swiss regarding daily errands and traveling to work. Quite simply, they walk a lot. Even when they utilize their excellent public transportation system, they walk. They wouldn't think of getting into their car and driving a mile to the market if they could walk there. Of course, gasoline at the equivalent of \$6 or more per gallon might change the habits of many Americans as well.

Such was the fodder for dinner conversations during the trip.

### **Another day, another shower**

Some people tolerate the heat, some function better in the cool. Some even do okay in the rain. It turns out Sandy does okay in the cool and the rain. I don't.

What promised to be a nice day turns out to be a long rainy morning. Despite a very interesting visit to Gstaad, Switzerland's "Vail," I was suffering. Wet and cold, my energy was fading. It seemed everyone else was doing fine. At lunch, I made a decision to bail on the last 25 miles of the day. When I made that call, another one of the group suffering a bit also decided to not ride. Our options were to catch a train on in to the Interlaken/Bonigen area or travel in our support van. We choose the van, despite the fact that Switzerland's trains are VERY bike friendly, many with special bike accommodations on them.

The choice of the van ride turned out to be a good one as we were able to help when one of our group had a fall. Though not serious, it was painful and the ride in the van was the right choice.

As we were dealing with the accident, and as if to mock my hard choice, the sky turned blue and the temperature warmed up. Those of us who decided not to ride ended up at the hotel less than an hour before the riders did.

### **The top of Europe**

Our fourth day on the road was a rest day where we would travel by train and cog railway to the Jungfrau, highest peak of a series of three mountains. The Eiger is perhaps the more well known of the three but the highest railway station in Europe is at the Jungfrau, which translates from German as “virgin.” The railway station on the mountain is at 3,454 meters or just over 11,333 feet.

The spot is a tourist mecca, complete with hotel, restaurants, skiing and other activities. It’s worth the trip though; it’s not often that you can stand in snow in the middle of August in a tourist venue.

Back down the mountain, our next stop was Lake Brienz and the Grand Hotel Geissbach. Built in the 1880’s it is aptly named; this was perhaps the most luxurious of our accommodations along the route, but certainly not the most intimate.

From here, we started the next day with climbing right out of the gate and after almost an hour, our tour director called to see where we were. Somehow, virtually all of us made a wrong turn and were climbing in the wrong direction. The hill climbers were not discouraged. I was too tired to be upset and thankful I was not as fast a rider as some of the others. With a glass half full attitude, I figured I did not have as far to make up.

The day would have the steepest climb of the trip in it and half the group, due to the lost time and because of an approaching bad storm, decided to take the train to our destination city of Lucerne. As we reached the top of the pass, the weather seemed to be

clearing and the group decided to try to finish the ride into town. Of course, it rained again but the terrain was more forgiving. Sandy and I met two couples of Swiss riders touring with panniers and rode with them for an enjoyable hour or so.

Lucerne was a delightful city and we actually had time to walk around and enjoy the city a bit. As we walked back to the hotel after dinner, a full moon appeared above the peaks of the mountains. Sleep, as we'd come to expect after long days in the saddle, came quick but ended too soon.

### **Through the woods we go**

Our fifth full day of riding would take us another 60 miles north to Raperswil on Lake Zurich. While we would have hills, the terrain was definitely moderating. But the miles were adding up and several of us were tired. Also, Rapererswil was having a festival and had an old town worth exploring. Several of us decided to forego the afternoon riding and take a train so we would have time to see the town.

It was a good choice and we had a great afternoon to explore. As it turned out, several other riders made the same decision a little later and joined us in town about an hour after we arrived. Those who rode the entire afternoon paid the price with being caught in a major storm. But after hot showers and a great meal, we joined the throngs of people for a major festival, capped by a 45 minute fireworks extravaganza.

Our last full day of riding started with an overcast sky but the terrain continued to flatten out. After an easy morning and a good lunch, we traveled through a delightful forest where an artist had carved beautiful animals into downed trees. We were well on our way for a good afternoon when a major storm came up. Cell phones crackled everywhere and we all met at a nearby train station where we decided we would be safer

riding on a train. All but two riders, Wilton and Christian, decided to take the train; they took the chance that the storm would pass.

As it turned out, their bet was a good one as the storm changed directions and left but a drizzly and overcast sky. When our train finally left the station on our way to Sax, we saw them churning away a short time later. With the weather holding, about half of us decided to try to finish the day about 20 miles away from town. We cruised along the Rhine River and even entered the small country of Liechtenstein, Europe's Rhode Island, without fanfare. We still ended up in town cold and damp, despite the holding weather, but it would be worth it. Warm soup and sandwiches would tide us over to dinner, which was one of the best of the trip. Better yet, it was located in the historic inn where we were staying, the Schlossi.

### **Last dance**

Our last full day in Switzerland would begin with a short 6 mile ride to the train station, where we would leave our bikes for transport back to Geneva and we would board a train for an excursion into the country's capitol, Bern. We arrived in Bern with the sunshine and had a relaxing day of sightseeing and shopping. By the time we boarded the train for our last jaunt back into Geneva, many of our group had clearly run out of steam. Naps were the order of the day for the last couple of hours of the train ride.

At dinner, everyone had favorite stories to share and promises to make about keeping in touch. And, I think many in the group will manage to do that. Partly because there is a geographical connection of many of the riders to western NC, but mainly because everyone seemed to get along so well. Such are the gifts of a trip such as this.

In ten days, with six of them on a bike, we'd traveled virtually the entire length of an amazingly beautiful country. Its people were kind and hospitable to a group that, for the most part, could not speak its language. We'd learned that we could challenge ourselves physically and still have some energy (some more than others) to enjoy the places we traveled through. As it turns out, we'd climbed more than 11,000 feet in the first five days of riding, almost the height of the snow covered mountain we'd visited on our "rest" day.

We all learned much during our travels. About ourselves. About our hosts. About our travel companions. Perhaps most important, we learned that first hand experience will always beat passive viewing when it comes to athletic endeavor. And that athletes need not be young, rich or glorified by the masses to earn respect.

And as for the birthday girl, she is already dreaming of something for the next big celebration.

Interested in your own Swiss Adventure? Bike Switzerland's website is [www.bikeswitzerland.com](http://www.bikeswitzerland.com) or you can reach them by phone at +(41) 22 342 38 57. Their email address is [john@bikeswitzerland.com](mailto:john@bikeswitzerland.com) and their mailing address is 20 Jacques Dalphin, 1227, Carouge, Switzerland. You can also get information from Ride-A-Bike bicycle shop in Lincolnton at [www.rideabike.com](http://www.rideabike.com) or by phone at 704-735-1746.

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