

# Some Differences Between Switzerland & Canada

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Sure, Canada has Mounties and beavers, and Switzerland has clocks and cheese, but I want to move past the obvious differences and explore some subtle ones. This isn't scientific or rigorous, it's just a bunch of personal observations and experiences.

## Rail

People in Switzerland use the train system a lot. People in Canada don't use passenger trains at all. According to Wikipedia, Switzerland [tops all countries in passenger kilometers per capita at 2120](#), and I think I heard that it was up to 2400 km per person this year. Canada doesn't even make the list at less than 80. So what is the underlying difference? I think it's a combination of a bunch of things that just make the economics work here. Switzerland has a smaller area to cover; hence all travel is a day trip – there and back. A trip across Canada can take a week, so sleeping and eating need special logistics. For shorter trips, getting to and from the train station to where you actually want to be, can take just as long as the train trip itself. Why don't they have train stations in airports in Canada like in Switzerland? In Switzerland, having a car in a city can be more of a liability than a convenience. Almost all the track in Switzerland is electrified. This coupled with nuclear generating stations mean the cost of operations is nearly zero. The diesel electric trains in Canada are competing directly with cars and trucks for fuel. The [SBB web site](#) quickly and easily plans out your whole itinerary - including local trams and busses, so it's completely integrated and you don't have to juggle 3 itineraries for your city transit, the train and the other city transit.

## Retail

There is less retail choice in Switzerland. When one walks into a supermarket in Canada or the U.S.A to buy deodorant or shampoo one is presented with 'wall of product'. In Switzerland, unless you're talking chocolate bars, there is likely to be only a dozen different brands, and not the variety of sizes, shapes, prices, special offers, co-product sales, 'green' versions, colors, flavors and packaged quantity found in North America. This can be a good thing as long as there is one you can live with – and since I'm easy to please, there always is. But why the difference in product fecundity? It may be because of smaller stores, for example big-box stores are relatively rare in Switzerland. It may be because there is less competition; Coke, Schweppes and Dr. Pepper have a presence, but not Pepsi, Cott, R.C. Cola, etc. This leads me to believe that it isn't entirely a free market. Maybe the retailers – basically COOP and Migros – are getting paid by vendors who corner the market.

## Voltage

The 220 volt system here, means power cords are very thin. That also means they roll up better in the vacuum cleaner – or that you can have a longer cord on your vacuum for the same power loss. Like, I can run the vacuum cleaner down to the building entrance some two stories below with the vacuum cleaner plugged into the plug in Samantha's room. Of course I have to put the cord through the railings, but I was very surprised when I first tried it.

## Channel One

They have channel one on TV. I don't know what the North American problem is with channel one, but for my whole life I've started surfing at channel two and now I have to rethink the pattern and start with one. It's as bad as the mind shift switching to zero based numbering systems when starting programming.

## **Chicken Man**

There's a chicken man. No, not like the soap opera that used to be on CFTR radio in the mornings, but a real man that sells chickens out of a truck on Worbstrasse. It's like a catering truck that has a Swiss Chalet or St. Hubert's rotisserie in it instead of sandwiches, and every Tuesday he parks on Worbstrasse and sells whole bar-b-qed chickens to people who stop on the roadside. I guess he parks at other locations on other days, but he has some 25 chickens rotating at once, and you can smell him all the way from the Kreuz Hotel.

## **Trams**

Like most European cities, they have electric tram lines instead of busses. Well they still have busses, but a lot less. These trams are huge seven segment jobs, more like inner city trains, that easily move hundreds of people. When one of these puppies pulls up to the stop it's like "wall of tram". If you think the streetcars in Toronto are big, you should ride one of these. You can actually treat it like a moving sidewalk and walk from one end to the other while it's moving and save yourself a block of walking at your destination.

## **Reverse Birthdays**

In North America, when you have a birthday or celebration of some sort, your friends may treat you with something, but in Europe, it's the other way around – the birthday person buys everyone else something. Kind of weird to get used to, but it works.

## **First Floor**

They number the floors of a building differently in Europe, the ground floor (or Erdgeschoss) is unnumbered and then the 'first' floor is what North Americans would call the second floor. So, when you are going to a business on the 'zweiten stock' (second floor – as in eins, zwei, drei), it's actually the third floor and you should be looking for an elevator. I haven't seen any thirteen story buildings, so I don't know if there is the superstition here about naming the 13th floor – if that was the case then it might all be the same above a dozen floors. In Italian, the word for floor – as in a story – is piano, so you see signs like primo piano or 2 ° piano, which means the second and third floor respectively, but there are no musical instruments there at all.

## **The Phone Company**

The major telephone company is Swisscom, which is equivalent to Telus in Canada. They have a monopoly on landlines, but not on cell phones, where there is quite a range of consumer competition. For business use though, only Swisscom provides Blackberry service or data plans. The company isn't necessarily evil, they just maximize their profit based on their dominant position – which makes them seem evil. The service is good and coverage is excellent – it basically covers everything in Switzerland below 1000 meters in elevation – but I just rebel at paying monthly fees. Same for the cable TV, it's just not something I do gladly. So I'm getting hosed for 25 Francs a month for a few kilobytes of bandwidth and paying .50 per call and .20 per SMS.

## No Cheques Please

Nobody uses cheques here. Everything is done with electronic banking or cash. This is weird, but I guess that means they don't have to shuffle these little pieces of paper around the country, which come to think of it, would probably drive the Swiss bankers nuts. The usual bill payment method is to get a 'pink slip' in the mail with your invoice. This Einzahlung Giro has all the payment details, the vendors name, address, account, the amount and it's in a standard form. You could take this Giro to your bank, but then you would need to speak German, so we use the Credit Suisse online banking system called Direct Net. The process is to enter the account and amount on a visual representation that matches the pink slip exactly, and then (I think it may be optional) enter the more than 20 digit reference number. There are also orange slips. The color is so pale that Jackie and I can't tell the difference between them, so we usually try to enter it as a pink one and if it complains we switch to the orange one. If all goes well the account number is sufficient, but in some cases you have to enter the vendor name and address because it's an account not known to the system. This doesn't mean it's a small vendor. For example I have to enter the name and address of Credit Suisse to pay my Visa or American Express (which is stupid because it is Credit Suisse's banking site), while the doctors, dentists and music teachers and everyone else are all in the system. Of course there are all sorts of passwords and RSA SecurID tokens needed, but hey, one would expect this of a Swiss bank account, no?

## Cash

For in person transactions, there is the Maestro debit card of course – and cash. It's amazing really. I can go to a gas station and buy a pack of gum with a 200 Swiss Franc note and nobody bats an eyelash. This is equivalent to a \$200 bill. This is unheard of in North America where they won't take anything larger than a \$20 at anywhere other than a bank. And you can do this at 07:00 in the morning; I'm sheepishly handing the lady at the bakery a hundred Franc bill for a four Franc loaf of bread and it's 'keine Problem' – no problem. We have the implicit assumption in Canada, that anyone carrying hundred dollar bills is either a drug dealer or an unscrupulous contractor working around the GST, but here it's absolutely normal.

## Sports

I haven't found a hockey league to play in. Bern's a small town of 120,000 people, so there is only a couple of arenas. Compare this to a similarly sized city like Kingston in Ontario with eight arenas. They don't have the infrastructure that Canada has for hockey, where you could max out playing a couple of games of hockey every night if you wanted – especially if you're a goalie. Maybe I haven't tapped into it yet, but it seems to be more like a poker game or a golf club, where you have to know somebody or get a membership because your dad is a member. It might be like that in general for sports. I haven't found anything like the Nepean Sportsplex where you get swimming, ice sports and field sports all in one place. Or maybe I'm looking for the wrong sports. I should be playing soccer, skiing or going mountain climbing, not playing hockey or curling.

## Bread

Unlike bread pan-baked in Canada (which when sliced has the classic shape, with a sort of square area at the bottom and a rounded top) most breads in Switzerland are baked without a pan and are shaped by the hands of their creator. Among other varieties, what is popular in Switzerland, is an egg bread twisted into a braid, called [Zopf Brot](#). It's traditionally eaten on Sunday, but it's now available every day. The variety in shape can be a slight problem if you need square bread for a toaster or sandwiches that fit inside a square Tupperware container. The wheat here isn't like the hard red spring wheat of Canada

either, so the bread tends to be more cake like and less doughy – if you know what I mean – because it has less gluten I think. Oh, and if you want to make some money, there is a wide open market for bread slicers, because apparently no bakery in Europe has one.

## Shaving Soap

OK, I admit I'm an old codger, with some very set habits. For example, I shave with a safety razor, brush and shaving mug. This is mostly to avoid disposable razors and pressurized cans of shaving cream that I figure are the scourge of the earth. So naturally, after a while I ran out, and I'm looking for a round cake of soap that fits my shaving mug. They do sell shaving brushes here, but apparently not cakes of razor soap. I tried a too large and too expensive perfumed soap by Axe, but then girls were crawling all over me, so I don't use that any more. What? You don't believe me – or the ads? Actually, the closest thing I've found so far is a blue flying-saucer-like plastic case of [razor soap from Wilkinson Sword](#) at the German based [Müller Apotheke](#). But recently, I discovered shaving soap also comes in tubes like toothpaste, and you're supposed to squeeze some on your brush and create the lather directly on your face rather than in a mug. I have yet to try it out.

## Coconut & Chestnut

There are many street vendors, most of which you can find in any city, but an uncommon one found in Switzerland is a coconut fountain. Fragments of coconut (with husk) are arranged on a tiered, pyramidal frame and water is cascaded from the top to keep them moist. There are also chestnut vendors of course. They do a roaring business in the winter months, because there's nothing like a bag of roasted chestnuts when you're cold and the smell pervades an entire town square, so they have really good advertising.

## School Hours

School starting times are not fixed by law, so the schools start and end whenever they want, and elementary schools send children home for lunch too. Unfortunately this means full-time employment is not an option for caregivers like in Canada. The school hours for high school are longer than in Canada too, so during the winter a student goes to school in the dark and comes home in the dark. I'm told there is something perverse about being in school and seeing the moon out the window.

## Advertising

The SF ([Schweizer Fernsehen](#)) TV channels don't interrupt the show for advertising, and between shows they will tell you how many minutes of advertising are coming, so you can get up and do the needful. In fact if there are no commercials, they will play music and present a random pattern on the screen with a clock counting down the time till the next program. I guess there aren't any public service announcements or it isn't necessary for the station to advertize its own shows because it's a national station.

## Metallbau

My daughter had a work term in Geneva at an architect's office. One task she was given was working on a parking garage. Her instinct was to design with wood, like buildings in Vancouver where she worked before, but she was told that the customer would never go for it – all they wanted was a 'Swiss Box'. A Swiss box has a lot of glass and concrete, but inevitably it also has a fair amount of 'Metallbau' (metal construction). I love it. Instead of rusty steel that may or may not be painted, they actually use stainless steel and aluminum because somebody cares to use quality materials, and they want buildings to be

around more than a couple of years. You can see shiny or brushed metal on most buildings younger than a half century, and often it's accompanied by flawless varnished wood or fine edged stone. It's something you would enjoy coming home to or working in for a long time.

## Cuisine

I guess a survey of differences wouldn't be complete without mentioning different cuisine. There are a couple of dishes particular to Switzerland, but the most cited example is raclette, which we had the other night. When made by professionals at a fair like [Fasnacht](#), raclette starts with a half a cheese wheel held edge-on under a heat source. When the surface of the cheese has melted enough, a knife is used to scrape the melted part onto a bread slice – and voilà!. Private homes have special two tiered electric grills. The top is used for frying meats and vegetables and the space underneath the grill is for people to slide a little tray loaded with cheese for it to melt. You then pour the cheese on potatoes or bread and eat it with pickles and the meat and vegetables. Like fondue, raclette is more of a social gathering than a feeding event.

## Coffee

In Canada one usually gets a double-double (double cream, double sugar) at [Tims](#), but in Switzerland the usual is either an espresso or a similar density coffee in a slightly larger demitasse. The [Nestlé Nespresso S.A.](#) company is the dominant player, and in fact coffee exports reached 1.05 billion Swiss Francs last year, exceeding chocolate exports by 24%, largely because of them. At home, I'm still making coffee in a drip-type coffee maker, mostly because our kitchen isn't large enough for an Nespresso machine, but there are two machines at work, a huge one and a smaller secondary backup machine at our end of the office. Despite it's close proximity, when I get a cup, it doesn't usually last long enough to make it back to my desk.