

LITTLE IS THE LIGHT

Nostalgic travels in the mini states of Europe

by Vitali Vitaliev

SAMPLE CHAPTER:

1. Liechtenstein

Preparing for a journey can be as exciting as the journey itself, often more so. As an armchair buccaneer of many years sitting, I am in the habit of getting the nitty-gritty on the place I am about to visit: books, maps, flight schedules, etc. With Liechtenstein though, I faced an almost complete information blackout, except for a couple of paragraphs in guidebooks. The problem with maps was that to find Liechtenstein (twenty-five kilometres long and fifteen kilometres wide) on them, one needed a powerful magnifying glass.

The only work of fiction I could find which featured Liechtenstein was *Midnight Plus One*, a fast-moving and witty thriller by Gavin Lyall, which was not so much on Liechtenstein itself, but rather on getting there. The journey involved plenty of shooting, fist-fights, car-crashes, police ambushes, and a budding romance, of course. Having turned the last page of *Midnight Plus One* in the Eurolounge of Heathrow airport, I braced myself for a hard and eventful trip. I wasn't seriously looking forward to being shot at or punched in the face on my way, but I didn't want to exclude altogether the possibility of a little (and quick) romance – something that most travellers secretly hope for.

The romance started earlier than I expected – on the Swissair flight London-Zurich, when I fell head-over-heels in love with beautiful Swiss . . . yogurt, which they served for breakfast. Never before (or after) have I eaten a dairy product so delicious. Savouring it in a semi-recumbent position was an almost orgiastic delight.

At this point, you might ask why I was flying to Zurich at all. The fact is that Liechtenstein, due to its miniature size, has neither airports nor railways. There is a tiny extension of an Austrian railway line passing through the town of Schaan, next to Vaduz, Liechtenstein's capital, but trains there are almost as rare as snowstorms in the Sahara desert. Guidebooks unanimously agree that the only practical way to get to Liechtenstein is to take a train from Zurich to the Swiss town of Sargans and change for a Liechtenstein post bus there.

The bliss of my yogurt-dominated flight was consummated with a smooth cab ride from Zurich airport to the railway station. The taxi was a long black limo with carpets on the floor and enough leg-room for Michael Jordan.

A young, neatly dressed railway clerk at the ticket window started respecting me the moment I demanded a single ticket to Vaduz. 'First class, sir?' he enquired enthusiastically. His oomph (and respect) evaporated as soon as I replied: 'Second, please!' He must have thought initially that I was a millionaire going to Liechtenstein to say hello to my money: who else would want a single ticket to Vaduz on a Thursday morning?

'Are you from Yugoslavia?' he asked squeamishly, holding my second-class ticket with the tips of his fingers as if it was a wriggling grass-snake.

'No. I am a Ukrainian-born Russian with an Australian passport living in Britain.' I replied honestly.

From the look on his face it was clear that I had had my little revenge.

My train had a romantic name, *Maria Theresia*. Indeed, it was sliding, almost flying, along the track with feminine grace. Having comfortably installed myself at the window of a spotlessly clean second-class compartment, I gazed at the Zurich lake, framed by the snow-capped Alps on the horizon. White swans were criss-crossing the lake's flat surface like floating question marks on a blank page of my yet unwritten travel book. Robust and self-important locals in colourful, stylish parkas were unhurriedly walking their no-less-self-important dogs along the shores.

A smiling conductor peeped into the compartment, switched on the lamp and retired. We were in broad daylight, and I was about to protest at the intrusion, when the train rattled into a tunnel. As soon as we emerged back into the sunshine, a woman with a trolley sagging under food and drinks knocked at the door. She insisted on pouring some beer into my glass and left a stack of snow-white serviettes on the table.

Why can't British railways be as efficient as that? I thought. There seem to be four major factors behind BR's proverbial inefficiency: winter, spring, summer and autumn. And they never fail to find an excuse. In winter they struggle with snow, in spring – with floods, in autumn – with 'leaves slippage', in summer – with God knows what. One morning my London colleague was two hours late to the office. Her train was delayed by a dead dog on the track in Catford. Or maybe it was a dead cat in Dogford, I can't remember.

Are the leaves in Switzerland less slippery than in Britain? And why is it that Swiss cats and dogs never play Anna Karenina?

I think I know the answer. It's no use struggling for cleanliness, it's much better just to sweep the floor, as one Russian writer put it. In Switzerland they don't struggle or look for excuses, they simply do their job, and that's what makes it tick like a brand-new Omega clock.

Looking at ornate ivy-covered chalets behind the window, it was hard to believe that each of them was likely to be stuffed with ammunition. Yes, military service is compulsory in Switzerland, and every male gets drafted for several weeks once a year until he reaches a fairly mature age. In between the call-ups, he is supposed to store his arms and military equipment at home, so it wouldn't be too far-fetched to assume that you can find a couple of mortars and machine-guns, to say nothing of bullets and grenades, under every Swiss bed. Can there be a connection here with Switzerland's constantly declining birth rate?

Obviously, the perennial peace of the country, where you can go to prison for making noise after eleven p.m., has to be protected. From whom? That's an entirely different question.

The more I looked through the window, the more I had the feeling of having seen this placid pastoral landscape before. But where? Then I remembered: in Tasmania! This beautiful

island off the Australian coast has a sizeable community of Swiss migrants. There is even a showcase Swiss village, built by an eccentric Dutch millionaire, Rolf Voss. In a gesture of homesickness, the Jenni family, who migrated from Switzerland to Hobart (Tasmania's capital) many years ago, constructed a 350-metre-long model railway recreating the views of the Swiss Alps in minute detail. They demonstrate this papier-mâché Switzerland to tourists in their Hobart home.

Meanwhile, the real, not papier-mâché Alps were running towards me at break-neck speed, growing in size by the minute. Soon they were dominating the landscape and blocking the sunlight. When their presence became almost totalitarian, the train came to a smooth stop. We were in Sargans.

Little is the Light

Nostalgic travels in the mini states of Europe

by Vitali Vitaliev

Published by Thrust Books



Available for the Amazon **kindle** and in paperback.