TRAVEL

Swiss hills are alive!

ON TOP OF THE WORLD: Isabel Conway 2,048 metres up at La Berneuse in Leysin, Switzerland. BELOW: Historic Aigle Castle beside rolling vineyards

ISABEL CONWAY checks out the delights of Switzerland, and all a flight away from Cork

"DO we make Gruuweer back in the States", the loud middle-aged American woman asks her friend, who replies: "Of course we do" with total conviction.

The guide looks perplexed here at the centre of gravity of Gruyere cheese, whose origins go back to the 12th century. We have just spent the past 40 minutes immersed in an interactive tour delving into the secrets of a famous cheese that is unique to Switzerland.

Many of the cows producing the milk that gives Gruyere its special flavour in fact graze on alpine pastures within yodelling distance of where we stand, contributing to 7,000 wheels of Gruyere stored from floor to ceiling on tiered shelves in La Maison du Gruyere's chilled cheese 'bank vault'.

And each wheel displays a unique code denoting their A.O.P (similar to Beaujolais and Champagne), a passport that imitations cannot replicate. China, please note!

As long as humans have farmed, the Alpine meadows cheese has been a mainstay in these parts. The average Swiss eats a hefty 21 kilos of it per head every year. Their consumption of chocolate tips a 12 kilo world record. Yet this healthy nation remains remarkably obesity free.

I can't help thinking the reason is their national obsession with getting out into the great outdoors and making the most of their countryside in all seasons.

Walking, climbing, biking down rutted tracks through forests and winter sport activities like cross country and alpine skiing... the Swiss are born to it — in youth conquering majestic peaks and in their twilight years still remarkably active on gentler terrain.

At train stations in Bern or Basle, Zurich or Geneva, you watch city dwellers carrying foldable walking poles, shouldering skis and boots, bound for wild mountains and tamer hillsides, glistening lakesides and rural beauty spots in all directions, at the weekend, summer or winter.

Think Switzerland and certain stereotypes are true. Expect pristine cleanliness, fabulous cheese and chocolate, public transport that runs with cuckoo clock precision, beautiful watches and the world's most secretive banks, stunning mountain and lakes scenery and order everywhere.

It is relatively expensive due to the strong Swiss franc but in this life you get what you pay for and Switzerland delivers on value despite prices comparably higher than some of its neighbours.

Renowned for efficiency, the Swiss have come up with the bright idea of cutting their country, with its four distinct languages and broad mix of cultural and historic highlights and landmarks, up into handy geographic chunks offering diverse regions and districts under a 'Grand Tour' umbrella.

The new Grand Tour of Switzerland (www.myswitzerland.com) divides this charming, accessible country into individual bite-sized pieces of culture, history, gastronomy and scenic diversity. Regions can be explored individually or together on a longer combined trip that links the country easily either by car, motorbike, comfortable train and bus. Packages can include all hotel accommodation in various categories with or without a car or integrated public transport options that include free entry to numerous museums and attractions.

My journey started on the banks of beautiful Lake Geneve in Lausanne, visiting the Olympics Museum then moving up to the Chablais vineyards of Aigle and ever higher to the magnificent peaks surrounding Leysin. After some tastings of local wines at the Emery cellar we took the cable car up to La Berneuse (2,048 metres). Here from Leysin's lofty revolving restaurant (and, if you dare, the swinging rope bridge perched on the edge of a precipice) awesome views of Lake Geneva, the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc and other landmarks unfold.

I had only visited Switzerland enveloped in a thick blanket of snow. but this verdant landscape bursting with flowers, hillsides patterned with meticulously planted vines and the ever present clank of cowbells across the pastures had me equally beguiled.

From Lausanne, we followed more vineyards to Mont Vully with lunch on the balcony of Restaurant du Port overlooking shimmering Lake Murten followed by a quick walking tour of the medieval town of Murten.

Driving through the 'pre' Alps of gentle pastures and forests, German speaking Medieval Fribourg was one of those hidden gems a little off the usual tourist trail. An evening walk in the old town reveals ancient walls and laneways, interesting architecture and all conveniently part of the walking tour. Dinner in the balmy twilight on the terrace at Restaurant Sauvage (www.restaurant-sauvage.ch) was magical.

The picture perfect hilltop town of Gruyeres, whose statuesque 13th century castle commands the horizon, is a favourite spot for sampling the region's favourite dish cheese fondue made with a mix of gruyere and vacherin. Chalet de Gruyeres, a rustic ancient timber chalet sheltering beneath the castle, is famous for fondue.

A look at my watch showed noon had struck. Life can hardly get better, I thought, until we arrive at Maison Cailler to see chocolate being made, have some tastings and test our taste buds. The Cailler brand (now part of Nestle's empire) is Switzerland's longest established, based outside the village of Broc, near to farms that supply its milk.

In Switzerland the views invariably make the journey itself a destination, whatever the season. Its lakes and mountains are at their best in spring and early summer when the ice and snow have melted, while in winter these landscapes elevate Switzerland to one of the world's top winter sport playgrounds.

■ *See www.myswitzerland.com*

■ *Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) and Swiss Air operate daily services to Geneva and Zurich ex Dublin and from Cork to Geneva on Saturdays until March 19.*

My favourite holidays

FROM Donegal to St Louis and New Zealand Soprano Cara O'Sulllivan shares her travel memories and dreams.

Where was your favourite childhood holiday and why: My late parents Donal and Ann brought the family to Co Donegal. It poured the first week and was scorching during the second week but I didn't mind, we got to see wonderful places like Bloody Foreland, Dungloe, Carrigart and miles of beautiful golden sandy beaches.

Where was your favourite holiday as an adult and why: I brought my daughter Christine on a short break to Lanzarote when she was four. It was my first time experiencing warm weather in winter time, I recommend it! We stayed in an apartment with a fabulous view of the sea and watched the sun set every evening. Bliss!

What is your favourite short-break city destination and why: I've never gone on a city break as I have spent a lot of my life working in big cities! I spent a few months in Paris working for Opera de Paris. It was an amazing experience and my absolute favourite city destination. Highlights included Isle de St Louis, a tiny little town on the River Seine and the Chapel on the Rue du Bac where I viewed Saint Catherine Labouré.

Which city or country have you never visited that you would love to see, and why: I've always wanted to visit New Zealand, I nearly made it while working in Australia but had work commitments in Ireland so I had to get back home, maybe some day....

■ An Evening with Cara O'Sullivan, with Special Guests runs at the Everyman Theatre, on January 28, 29 and 30. Bookings on 021 4501673 or www.everyman.com

TRAVEL NEWS

■ FAMILY holiday specialist, Canvas Holidays has launched a pre-school programme, ZERO2FIVE.

Available at two of its premier French resorts — Les Alicourts Resort in the Loire Valley and Camping les Deux Fontaines in South Brittany — the activities are part of a child care programme designed to suit the under-fives.

Witha focus on imagination, skill, adventure, creative, active and social skills, little ones can enjoy mini fencing, electric ride on cars, raft building, circus time and more.

Seven nights with Canvas Holidays (01 2421901; www.canvasholidays.ie) at Les Alicourts Resorts costs from €217 per party, arriving on-site on June 4, 2016, and staying in a Classic mobile home (sleeping two adults and up to four children). Ferry crossings can also be booked with Canvas Holidays. Book now to benefit from the €120 deposit.

******

■ THOMSON has some 'Great Platinum Offers' for 2016 for Cork people prepared to fly out of Dublin.

Head to Riu Helios Bay, Obzor, Bulgaria, on May 23 for 7 nights from €489pps, or Blue Bay, Marmaris, Tuyrkey, on May 30 for 7 nights, from €739pps

You can also head to Mexico direct from Dublin Airport in 2016.

Dublin to Riu Cancun on July 4 for 14 nights will cost from €2,359pps.