

EXPAT ADVENTURE



Christmas comes to Baden, as Chantal acclimates to shopping without a car.



Costco girl in a car-free world

By Chantal Panozzo | In 2006, I agreed to move to Switzerland from Richmond, Virginia for three years not only so my husband could pursue a work opportunity, but also to experience a new way of life – one that happened to include not owning a car.

In my new hometown of Baden, I found it was simple to get around by train, bike, bus and the ever-popular walking method. Especially helpful was my shiny new GA (General Abonnement), which saved me from not only trying to figure out alien ticket machines but also from getting fined for my ignorance over how to use them.

Short-term love affair

I praised the on-time departures of trains. I marvelled at the shiny, clean buses, some of which even claimed the honourable

distinction of 'Bus of the Year'. I invested in heavy-duty, reusable shopping bags and developed muscular arms. And I told everyone back home it was easy being car-free.

But it only took a couple of months before I realised not having a car meant not having other stuff, too. Because while that silver-framed, full-length mirror would be nice, carrying it 10 blocks home would not. And that vintage chair from the flea market had to be tested, not for its comfort, but for how it felt a foot off the ground in my arms.

For the first time in my life, I could only buy what I could carry.

Where there's a will ...

Even so, I pushed myself to extremes, like any good former Costco girl living in a



Giving up a car is one thing. Giving up materialism during the holidays is quite another. Find out how Chantal tackles that season of merriment, Advent calendars, Christmas trees ... and shopping excursions via public transportation.



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It's just not Christmas without a tree!

car-free world would. When Coca-Cola was on sale, I managed to drag eighteen litres of it home along with my other groceries. 'Where there's a will, there's a way,' I thought, thankful for a cliché to get me through the pain until I woke up the next day, sore and strained by something as pathetic as grocery shopping.

It was then I realised that even I, an American, would have to impose some shopping limits on myself. But six months into my newly deprived lifestyle, I put my foot down. It now was Christmastime and even the Swiss had come to their senses and opened stores on Sunday.

Yes, it was the season of shopping. And nothing was going to stop me from having a big, grand Christmas tree.

The Swiss hardware store Jumbo, with its large display of holiday trees, was just a bus ride away in Baden-Dättwil. It was no problem getting there ... but getting home with my six-foot tall Christmas treasure was another story. Every time the bus turned, the tree tipped and the Swiss stared. My one hand gripped the trunk; my other hand gripped the side of the bus. Both hands begged for a steering wheel.

I realised I couldn't buy anything of stature without a car, but I had come to Switzerland determined to survive without one. However, I was American. It was Christmas. I needed things.

... there's a way

Unlike my Swiss neighbour, I couldn't just be content with the town's Christmas decorations – I had to have my own, because gosh, it just wouldn't be the same otherwise. A car was my only hope. So I compromised and joined Mobility, Switzerland's car sharing organisation.

For a yearly subscription fee of SFr 190, I had cars only a seven-minute walk away that I could reserve online and take wherever I pleased. Like a library, I could browse many models and borrow my choice for as many hours as I deemed necessary. It seemed like the perfect solution, despite the pain and suffering involved in taking an eye test in German (note to self: 'e' is pronounced like an 'a') in order to obtain my Swiss driver's license.

Liberation

A year later, as proud, experienced Mobility subscribers, my husband and I reserved a van from the train station and drove to Jumbo where we picked out a Christmas tree with no thought of the transportation consequences. It fit perfectly in our vehicle. And we still had two hours to reunite with the road, two hours to revel in our old American selves, where what we bought had no relationship to what we could physically carry.

We headed to IKEA, the closest thing to a big-box store in Switzerland, and where we therefore felt most comfortable, sure of finding every kind of Christmas decoration we could want. Of course, with a car waiting for us in the parking lot, we somehow came out empty handed.

It wasn't until we returned to IKEA via train and bus a week later that we found two sets of curtains, wall mounting devices, speaker stands and a carpet. Since we couldn't carry it all, we got half of what we wanted, endured a painful bus ride home, sighed, cursed, complained and realised two days later, while admiring our festive tree with Baden's decorations glittering through the window behind it, that actually, we weren't really missing a thing.



All things Swiss

Switzerland through the ages

1928: The St. Niklaus Society of Küssnacht am Rigi takes over the organisation of the town's first formal 'Klausjagen' parade, now held annually on the night of December 5. Since the Middle Ages, villagers used the parade to drive away bad spirits with noisy cowbells and horns. As time went by, elements of Catholicism entered the pagan ritual, making it a local highlight. Samichlaus Day, celebrated on December 6 in Swiss-German areas, involves a visit from Samichlaus and his 'helper' Schmutzli. Samichlaus reads from his book of good and bad deeds – good children receive nuts, mandarins and other goodies. But, in times of old, if a child had been too naughty, Schmutzli would threaten to whisk him away in his sack for a beating. These days of course, Schmutzli re-enforces good behaviour with a much scaled-down fear factor.

1944: *The Adventures of TinTin*, by Belgian author Hergé, continues with *Red Rackham's Treasure*, which introduces the eccentric and ingenious character of Professor Cuthbert Calculus ... who incidentally, was based upon Swiss explorer Auguste Piccard. Auguste was the first man to reach the stratosphere in a pressurised capsule attached to a balloon that he invented. He ascended to 15,781 metres in 1931, and later used the same concept to design a submarine in which his son Jacques descended 10,916 metres in the Mariana Trench – a feat that hasn't been attempted since. His grandson, Bertrand, followed in the Piccard footsteps and circumnavigated the globe in a balloon in 1999. Jacques Piccard passed away on Nov. 1. For more on his life, see page 6.



Expat encyclopaedia

IKEA: Home away from home for many expats, especially at Christmas, who shop there mainly to revel in its sheer monstrosity.

Public transportation: The answer to why the Swiss are so in shape – they've been running to make their connections on "no mercy for tardiness" Swiss transportation since they could walk.

Stars: Christmas lights shaped like stars decorate many Swiss cranes, serving to heighten my awe over the spirit and joy with which construction is done in the country.

Swiss Made: The laws of economics do not apply to the Swiss. A Swiss-made item can be three times the price of an imported one and the Swiss will pay three times the price – with cash. Try not to stare as you bargain hunt.