

Gambling. Swiss-style.

As someone who hails from a land with world-famous casino towns like Vegas and Atlantic City, I was interested in experiencing a Swiss casino firsthand. But when my 74-year-old Swiss neighbour Marie took me to the Baden Casino, I couldn't help but feel a bit let down over this strange world of Swiss chance.

By Chantal Panozzo | Let's face it. The Baden Casino might as well be a church. Well, OK, maybe not exactly a church, since Swiss church bells are much louder than anything going on at the Baden Casino. But still. As far as noise went, the gamblers in Baden were making very little; maybe they were too busy praying.

After my tour of her smoky neon palace, Marie settled into the leather seat at her preferred slot machine, and gestured at me to stand behind her. She set her lucky gold and black "casino only" purse on her lap, and proceeded to teach me, *auf Deutsch*, how to use the great American slot machine.

High-stakes instruction

Around us, bells were dingling. I saw lights flash and heard coins clanging into cups. I knew people were winning. But there were no cries of victory, no exclamations of how fun spending a week's salary in coins was going to be.

I wanted to run over to these winners and throw their hands up in the air and jump up and down for them.

But I stayed put. My neighbour was showing me the last of

about seven games the machine offered.

"Sit, sit," she gestured, finally presenting me with the machine. I placed a SFr 20 bill into it as she watched over me, making sure that if I lost, I would at least lose quietly.

"It's best to change up the amounts of your bets," she said, after my money started dwindling. She hit some different buttons and I scored a big 20 rappen. "*Siehst du?*" she asked, clearly pleased with herself. Finally, satisfied that I could play by myself, she went off in search of her own easy road to retirement.

Shhh!

Across the room, SFr 1,000 bills were being fed into machines. People were losing. But I heard no wails of defeat. I heard no audible swearing (and I would know, these are the foreign words I understand best). Either these people had money to lose, or they were holding all their angst inside until the day it would manifest itself as an SVP poster that blamed everything bad in Switzerland on foreigners like me.

The whole Swiss casino atmosphere was a bit disappointing to an American who was anticipating soaring exclamations of excitement and four-letter words of defeat. But then again, what did I expect? I was most likely surrounded by the very same people who don't flush after 22:00 and don't dare to use a vacuum on Sunday. If I wanted excitement, I was either going to have to wait for Zurich's

Street Parade or leave the country.

If the Baden Casino is supposed to be a playground for adults – as its advertising campaign would have you believe – then I prefer the one for kids. SFr 20 for a slot machine or SFr 20 for a Ferris wheel? I know where I'll get my rush. At least on a Swiss Ferris wheel, I might be able to scream with glee and get away with it.

A balm for defeat

As it was, I was losing, so I didn't have to try to hide any squealing that might have resulted from a win. The best part about the Baden Casino became the SFr 5 Coke, which came with lemon *and* ice and somehow made up for the taste of defeat. And the SFr 40 that I lost in the machines, I did my best to make up for in pretzels.

Marie stopped by as I sat at the bar, munching away. She was clearly in a dreamy gambling state, motioning with her bucket of coins that she was going to keep trying her luck. Other gamblers came and went as I sat at the bar. But they didn't sit and talk. They grabbed handfuls of nuts or pretzels and rushed back to their machines.

Suspended reality

As I observed the gamblers, smoking with one hand and feeding the machines with the other, I couldn't help but feel somewhat depressed. I wanted winners and losers, cheerers and wailers, not people





© Chantal Panozzo

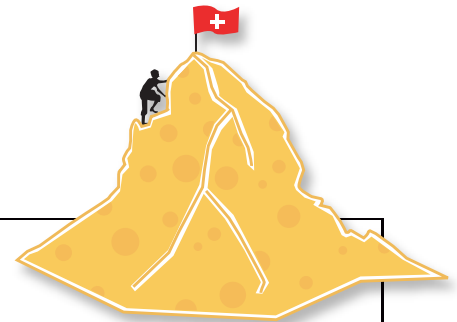


© swisscasinos.ch

who only puffed, pressed and repeated, with no emotion in between.

The orange neon lights did nothing to cheer me, either. Rather, they made the place feel like a strange bowling alley where everyone acted like they scored five pins a turn, even when the reality was strikes and gutter balls.

Finally, as I was about to eat one pretzel too many, my neighbour, despite her lucky “casino only” bag, announced she wasn’t having any *Glück* either. As we were walking home, the clock bells clanged and a cargo train screeched by. I covered my ears. It was good to be back in the real world again.



All things Swiss

Switzerland through the ages

1920: Fifty-five per cent of the Swiss populace voted to outlaw new casinos – and close existing ones – in a national referendum. In 1993 the ruling was overturned, paving the way for the return of the casino to Switzerland. And finally on April 1, 2000 (no joke!), Switzerland enacted a new law that allowed for unlimited stakes gambling, instead of the SFr 5 maximum that had previously been the norm.

Expat Encyclopaedia

Cash: When I first moved to Switzerland, I had to change my mindset about money, and actually go to the ATM every week. Since Switzerland is a cash-based society, people expect you’ll pay for your SFr 2 bar of chocolate with a SFr 200 bill (whereas in the United States, they expect you’ll pay for your \$2 bar of chocolate with a credit card). Luckily, ATMs are rarely far away in Switzerland. There’s even one right in the middle of the Baden Casino.

Pennies: The Swiss are apparently too rich to deal with pennies; they don’t even make them. The smallest coin available is a five-rappen (penny) piece. Therefore, every price tag or bill always ends with a five or a zero. It all makes for very clean transactions (and who would expect anything less in Switzerland?). But it also makes me wonder if they’re rounding up these hidden pennies in their own favour. Because where else would they go?

The relativity of loud: A friend and I were chatting while we waited for a tram in Zurich. As we were talking, a woman sat next to us and then proceeded to cover her ears dramatically. “So loud,” she said. “Why do you have to talk so loud?” This woman was clearly on her way to the Baden Casino.

Smiling: I’ve trained myself not to smile at people like I used to. But trying to hold back outward signs of emotions is probably one of the hardest things I’ve ever attempted. Good thing I didn’t win big at the casino.