



Lovely Lucerne is full of character

FROM somewhere near the night-time River Reuss, the booming tones of an old folk-tune arose. As I felt my way precariously down the steep, unlit alley, I almost tripped over the three alpenhorns stretching 10 feet or so across three adjoining steps. Well – if you don't find alpenhorns in Switzerland, where else will they be? I was so impressed by the players, warmly dressed against the biting cold and collecting for charity, that I gave them a handful of francs for their box.

This glimpse of folksiness offered a pleasant contrast to the elegance, seriousness and style of Lucerne during its music festival. This famous event began over 70 years ago, when the conductor Arturo Toscanini organised a week of music in the gardens of Richard Wagner's villa near the town. Ironically, considering Wagner's anti-Semitic reputation, Toscanini aimed to create a festival free of the Nazism which had already polluted festivals in Salzburg and Beyreuth.

Now about 135,000 visitors attend three annual Lucerne Festival sessions. In the summer there are over 60 concerts, street music and a children's section, at Easter, sacred music is a feature, but I was attending the November festival, focusing on the piano.

Legendary names on the programme included Andras Schiff, Andreas Staier, Emanuel Ax and Grigory Sokolov – the latter would give no less than seven encores to his amazing performance. Director Michael Haefliger has a special interest in promoting up-and-coming talent, and jazz pianists Anke Helfrich and Jon Davis were among several great fringe performers.

Lucerne's world-class concert hall, the KKL, has a frosted white auditorium and black marble public spaces whose picture windows overlook the lake, so well-heeled concertgoers can

Drenched in history with world-class music and art to enjoy alongside splendid scenery, **Jenny Woolf** really couldn't find anything to dislike about this Swiss city

watch boats serenely passing, and the lights of the grand Hotel Schweizerhof – a venue for the smaller concerts – twinkling across the water.

Our hotel, the Wilden Mann, was one of the oldest in the town, very near to the river in a narrow old street, and about 10 minutes walk from the concert hall. With rambling corridors and oddly-shaped rooms, and many curious antiques decorating its corridors, it dates from the 16th Century, and was named after the mythological wild men who crop up throughout all European history. Its century-old Bergerstube restaurant is a riot of painted shields, wooden beams, stained glass and antlers, which at first made me fear a menu of dumplings and fondue. However, the food puts a modern twist on traditional, and this deeply comfortable restaurant introduced me to Innerschweitzer Sbrinz cheese which goes a treat with fig mustard and fruit bread. On Saturdays, you can buy this and other local produce from a large farmers' market along the nearby river bank.

Switzerland has a very high standard of living, and a reputation for being expensive. Prices weren't high compared with similar quality in England, but since almost everything in Lucerne seemed to be high quality, the francs did melt away. And so sparkingly clean was everything that even the old places – really old places, hundreds of years old – looked almost like new.

There was a most extraordinarily quaint

apothecary's shop just opposite the hotel and some very pretty houses in nearby winding streets. Everywhere was decorated with glittery Christmas lights, church steeples punctuated the skyline, and when it actually started to snow I started to feel as if I'd somehow strayed into a festive movie.

That impression was reinforced by some sightseeing. For centuries, Lucerne, its lakes and mountains have attracted tourists, but although there are now over a million visitors a year, it lacks any sign of tacky tourism, and the beauty of its setting can be appreciated at any time of year. In winter, with changeable weather, the lake was all pale blues, silky greys and fluttering whites, and the panorama of mountains surrounding the city were partially covered in snow and constantly changing mists.

The 14th Century Kapellbrücke ("Chapel Bridge") is Europe's oldest covered bridge and one of Switzerland's most photographed monuments. It had many intricate 17th Century paintings in the eaves, which remained in place till some careless person dropped a cigarette in 1993 – sadly much of the present bridge is an accurate reproduction, but it is still worth seeing.

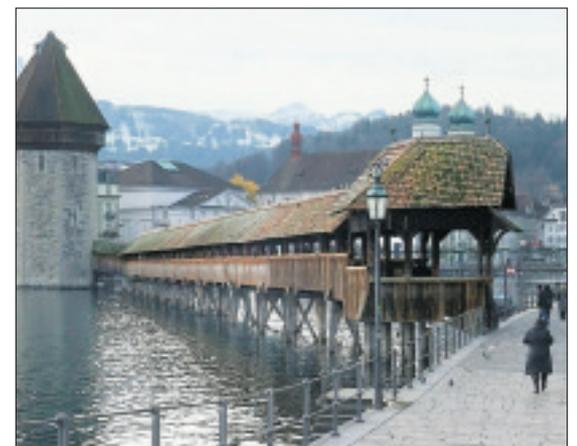
Many of the town's houses have elaborately decorated facades, some modern, some more than 150 years old. The most famous are probably the neo-Gothic Dornach House, whose specially curved windows prevent outsiders from looking in, and the "Balances" hotel, both of which are by the Mannerist painter and

FACTFILE

❑ For more information contact the Lucerne Tourist Board: www.luzern.com
Phone: +41 (0)41 227 17 17

❑ Details of the 2011 Lucerne Festival can be found on www.lucernefestival.ch

❑ The Wilden Mann Hotel is on www.wilden-mann.ch
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Plenty of attractions ... from top left, a stallholder at the Lucerne farmers' market; the exterior of KKL concert hall and lake; the delicious Innerschweitzer Sbrinz cheese, fig mustard and fruit bread; Anke Helfrich playing jazz piano at the November festival; the quaint, ancient apothecary's shop opposite the Wilden Mann Hotel; a facade of Dornach House in Lucerne; Chapel Bridge, Europe's oldest covered bridge.