

Showtime in Switzerland

There are lots of unique entertainment options in Switzerland, and beauty pageant viewing is definitely one of them. Join Chantal as she and two Swiss friends experience all the guilty pleasures Mister Switzerland has to offer.

By Chantal Panozzo | “He looks gay,” said my gay Swiss friend Peter, wrinkling his nose at the television. Filling the screen was Romeo, a plastic-looking man sporting a white top hat, while an announcer relayed Romeo’s favourite foods: fondue and chicken.

“They’re all gay,” replied Peter’s partner Angelo.

Switzerland’s favourite ‘reality’ show

Peter, Angelo and I were sitting in my living room watching the Mister Switzerland pageant together.

I hate to admit it, but it was my second viewing in two days, as I had recorded the programme and upon relaying the proceedings to my Swiss friends, they had insisted on watching it too.

“Swiss people just can’t put on television shows,” said Peter, turning his head in disgust as we watched the women ‘dancers’ throwing themselves at the eight remaining Mister Switzerland contestants, who did nothing but stand awkwardly and smile at the camera in what was supposed to be the ‘Broadway’ portion of the event.

The show was so bad we couldn’t stop watching. I like to think the producers made it that way on purpose, although the audience’s enthusiasm (many members had brought along cowbells) made it appear as if they were watching God’s gift to show business.

Impossible to avoid

If you’ve lived in Switzerland long

enough, you’ve no doubt heard of the Mister Switzerland and Miss Switzerland beauty pageants. Mister Schweiz/Suisse/Svizzera, for example, involves weeks of commentary in all the freebie papers on everything from how much chest hair is reasonable to whether a sense of humour in the winner is important.

I could see their point about the chest hair – and the guys had obviously responded to the whole debate by waxing accordingly – but I winced to think of them being waxed to oblivion.

However, when it came to the topic of humour, I couldn’t tell how that was being judged. Maybe the fact that they could take themselves so seriously was really the humour portion, since one judge even admitted that none of the 16 candidates was able to tell a joke. The guys never actually had to do anything that required brainpower or talent, either.

In any case, it was pretty amazing how hyped the whole extravaganza was, but then again, you can only read so much about Paris Hilton before going overboard ... And these pageants do appear to be developed to channel some of the attention away from ‘Brangelina’ and onto a few good farm boys from Canton Aargau. (Although poor Mr. Aargau did not make the cut to the final eight, despite my emotional support.)



I suppose you could blame me for Mr. Aargau’s fall from glory, since I was too cheap to spend 80 Rappen texting my affection for him to the jury, which I was prompted to do every minute or so. As for my Swiss friends, even if they did prefer the construction worker from Basel to the Kiosk em-



© Laitudspiz.ch

times the freebie paper, *20 Minuten*, is your only defence. You begin reading it to protect yourself from infection more than anything. But then, in the middle of blocking yet another sloppy sneeze, it happens. You find yourself caught up in Switzerland's attempt at celebrity making – which apparently involves shooting infomercials in Turkey.

Back to the show

Most of Mister Switzerland, with the exception of the 'Broadway' portion and a few other minor stage posings, involved film clips of the candidates on vacation in Turkey. There was no live talent show. There was no bathing suit competition. Just clip upon clip of the guys in Turkey. It got old. There was no drama, unless you count pre-filmed footage of a Swiss farm boy falling off water skis along the Turkish coast drama.

"Well, aren't they going to do anything?" said Peter impatiently, as we watched more pre-filmed footage of the contestants sunning themselves in, yes Turkey, while charmed Turkish women cooked elaborate meals for them.

"It's like I told you," I sighed, as we were finally taken back to the present to watch former Miss Switzerland and pageant hostess Christa Rigozzi tearing up as the audience sang *Happy Birthday* to her in English. "The guys are more like figures at a wax museum than actual humans who do stuff."

Wax museum tendencies aside, I will give the pageant credit for the two most interesting parts of the event, which were: listening to Christa Rigozzi speak Italian and German like they were the same language, and secondly, the pre-filmed footage of a contestant saying that plastic surgery was fine – as long as you were over 18.

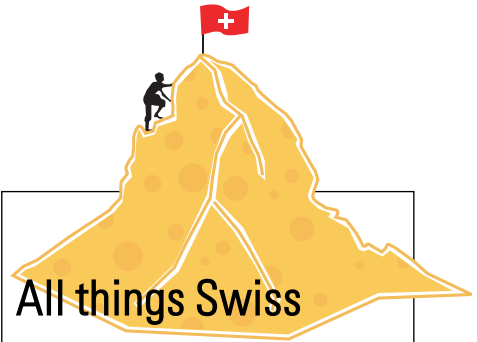
Anyhow, the winner of the whole let-down event was André Reithebuch of Canton Glarus, maybe because he didn't fall off his water skis while in Turkey (although he claims his victory is thanks to his farmer friends ringing their cowbells in the audience).

ployee from Locarno, it was too late to contact the jury the day after, anyhow.

I can't quite explain how my whole obsession with the pageant got started, except to say that when you're stuck on an SBB/CFF/FFS/ABCDEFG Swiss train with people coughing in your face, some-

"He looks like he's 12," said Angelo, shaking his head as we turned off the television.

I agreed, knowing that no matter how 'famous' André from Glarus became, my heart would always be with the forgotten lad from Aargau.



Switzerland through the ages

June 1998: The modern bank UBS is founded through the merger of the Union Bank of Switzerland and the Swiss Bank Corporation. The proposed new name – United Bank of Switzerland – was already taken, so officials chose UBS as the moniker instead. The bank would go on to become the world's largest manager of private wealth assets ... or "the world's biggest manager of other people's money", according to *The Economist*.

July 6, 2003: Local boy makes good. Roger Federer becomes the first Swiss man to win Wimbledon. It was his first of 14 Grand Slams won to date, which included five straight Wimbledon wins (2003-2007) tying him with Swedish tennis star Björn Borg's streak of five in five from 1976 to 1980. With his first-ever French Open win on June 7, Federer drew level with previous all-time Grand Slam leader Pete Sampras of the United States.

Expat encyclopaedia

Cowbells: originally used for cows, Swiss cowbells are now taken to beauty pageants to cheer on favourite contestants.

Culture: something that you only come to understand about a country by learning its language, meeting its people ... and watching its beauty pageants.

Geneva: proud host city of the next Miss Switzerland pageant, to be held in September.

Romansh: a language officially ignored in most of Switzerland, including the Mister Schweiz/Suisse/Svizzera competition.

Turkey: a less-than-discrete financial supporter of the Mister Switzerland extravaganza.