

The six months of Christmas

© BilderBox

Some mark the beginning of summer by watching a snowman's head explode at the *Sechseläuten* festival in Zurich. I mark the beginning of summer by finally getting rid of my Christmas tree.

By Chantal Panozzo | The first time I brought a live Christmas tree home on a Swiss bus, I thought nothing could have been harder. Every time the bus turned, the tree tipped and the Swiss stared. Didn't everyone take a tree home on the bus? Apparently not. Maybe they took trains or cable cars.

But later, I realised getting the tree home was the easy part. It was getting rid of the thing that presented the real challenge. Because in most Swiss towns, there is only one tree-pickup day. And even if I were actually motivated enough to read a trash pickup schedule the size of a book – in German – and figure out exactly which day was “Tree Day”, it wouldn't matter. I have come to the conclusion that I am always in the States visiting family and friends on *the* tree-pickup day because I never see any trees lying around on Swiss sidewalks.

Apparently, the Swiss don't seem to share my tradition of leaving the tree up until there are more needles on the floor than on the tree. Rather, the Swiss get rid of their trees while I'm still ringing in the New Year a few times zones away. This is all very unfortunate because it means that I end up celebrating something like the six months of Christmas, as my tree (at least what's left of it), becomes a permanent fixture on our balcony well into the spring.

Faking it

“Next year we're going artificial,” I told my husband Brian in February, hoping this would be threat enough to get him to do some-

thing with the poor tree, which was now half-buried by snow.

“Yeah, yeah, I'll take care of it when the snow melts,” he said, too engrossed in the Internet to care about anything other than virtual reality.

When the snow melted in March I said, “Maybe we should just go throw it in the woods.”

But Brian just laughed, staring at his computer. Thanks, YouTube, I thought.

In April, I dragged the thing to the other side of the balcony so at least I wouldn't have to look at it from the living room. By now it was all trunk and branch, and it was ruining the view of my tulips. I wanted to think spring, not lazy husband. Because let's be honest, getting rid of a six-foot tree is a man thing.

Fences make great neighbours

By May, my neighbour Frau V was getting antsy too. I couldn't blame her since I'd moved the tree as close to her balcony as possible to avoid looking at it myself.

I'd catch her peeking around the balcony divider and shaking her head. In the hallway, she'd remind me how she never bothered getting Christmas trees, and instead enjoyed the town's Christmas decorations because those didn't involve any work.



© Chantal Panozzo



© Brian Opyd



The next week, she emphasised she would be doing spring-cleaning. I tried to tell her it's hard to do spring-cleaning when you don't do summer, fall or winter, but I accepted the offer to borrow her high-powered washer anyway – since it was more a threat than an offer. Needless to say, I was excited when Brian actually agreed to use the power-washer, figuring the tree would be ancient history by the time he finished burning the concrete balcony to oblivion; but instead, he somehow managed to power-wash around it.

Enlisting the army

In June, after a powerful storm blew the tree back into view from my living room window, I told Brian, “You need to get rid of that thing before my parents get here.” Instead, he sat in a chair engrossed in his Blackberry, so I picked up a magazine and sighed, trying to accept that while some people celebrated the 12 *days* of Christmas I might just be forced to enjoy 12 *months* of it.

But to my surprise, an hour later, there he was – my husband – dutifully cutting the tree into little pieces with the saw tool on his Swiss Army knife and putting them into a trash bag. The project took him a few hours, but I learned an important lesson: There is no greater threat than the impending arrival of the in-laws.

So last month, when my parents asked if they could come in March to ski in Zermatt, I couldn't have been more pleased. “Are you kidding me? Why not February?” I exclaimed. Because after all, once a real-tree person, you never become an artificial one – even if you end up enjoying a Christmas that somehow seems to last all year.



Switzerland through the ages

1775: The city of Zurich erected Switzerland's first municipal Christmas tree.

1864: St. Moritz hotel pioneer, Johannes Badrutt made a wager with four English summer guests to stay in his hotel over the winter, offering to refund their travel costs if they were dissatisfied. The tourists returned the same Christmas, making St. Moritz the world's first winter holiday resort.

1908: Swiss textile engineer, Jacques Brandenberger, introduced cellophane (plastic wrap) to an eager cooking public. His invention certainly comes in handy each December as kitchens nationwide overflow with baked seasonal goodies. Leftovers, yum!

1989: Swiss non-profit organisation, OceanCare, was founded to protect the interests of the world's dolphins and other cetaceans. For more information on their cause, see page 16.

Expat encyclopaedia

Artificial tree: Trees that involve a lot less drama than live ones, but I just can't seem to bring myself to buy one.

Christmas in July: Something people celebrate to justify the fact they are too lazy to put away their decorations.

Half-price ticket: Something I've wondered whether or not I need to purchase, in order for my Christmas tree to ride the bus.

Jumbo: A Swiss hardware store that starts selling real Christmas trees in November, even when the only people buying them so early are expats like me.

Mobility.ch: A car-sharing programme that's probably good to join if you're planning on doing any kind of tree transport.

Visitors: Recommended to have early in the year, such as mid-January, to motivate husbands to face the reality of tree removal.