

# Switzerland: a perfectly scary place

You wouldn't think it to look at it, but Switzerland is a pretty scary place. The *strasses* sparkle hours after Street Parade, the trains are so punctual you miss them, and the people speak four different languages and still somehow understand one another. Is this paradise? Is this perfection? Or is this ... just plain scary?

By Chantal Panozzo | The laundry room door wouldn't open, even with my key. *That's strange*, I thought, jiggling the key and trying to turn the knob. Then something stranger happened. A voice from inside said, "Hallo?"

It was the voice of my 75-year-old Swiss neighbour, Rosmarie. She had locked herself in the laundry room: on purpose. I should have known. Because a few weeks ago, she had installed a special alarm on her door in addition to its double locks. She had told me many times that "Switzerland was trashy, dangerous and filled with foreigners" (and although I always try to overlook the foreigner comment, I have never understood her point about the danger or the trash).

Locking herself in the laundry room while she washed bed sheets was the next logical step in her mission to protect herself from all the knife-wielding foreigners who were taking over Switzerland. The problem was that it also shut out the empty-laundry basket types, who wanted nothing to do with crime and everything to do with dry towels.

"It's me," I called, leaning my empty laundry basket against my hip. "It's Chantal."

The door opened a crack as Rosmarie peered out.

"Sorry," she said, flinging the door wide open while repeating her usual line about trash, danger and foreigners. "I don't mean you," she added. She never does.

As Rosmarie hung up her sheets, I started thinking about Switzerland as I attempted to clean out my dryer lint with the tiny brush Rosmarie leaves on top of the 20-year-old dryer to ensure that no matter how old it gets, it always continues to look brand new.

## Of fear and foreigners

There are very few places in the world that are as shiny and safe as Switzerland, and yet my neighbour is scared to be alone in the basement of our locked building on a Sunday night. I have never, in four years, seen anyone in the basement other than her, my husband, and the spiky-haired teenage *coiffeurs* from the first-floor salon with whom we share the laundry room. While I find these teenagers scary, it is only because at the age of 15, their destiny is to remain a hairdresser for life thanks to the Swiss



education system. However, my neighbour is scared of Switzerland in an "I'm going to be attacked and killed" kind of way.

To be fair, she was once mugged at umbrella-point by the Limmat River.

But to be fairer, I think there are bigger things to fear in Switzerland than umbrella carriers – the main one being the Swiss People's Party (SVP). These politicians have exaggerated danger and criminalised foreigners in their political advertising and policies (to the point where human rights organisations get involved) and my neighbour's actions are proof that the SVP's tactics are working.

That's too bad.

Because although I think of Switzerland as nice, safe and clean, thanks to the SVP, many Swiss people no longer do. When I witness people, such as my neighbour, living in fear in a country so pristine that the scariest thing is a foreigner, I almost want to laugh. Because when you fly over Zurich in an airplane and look down, you see nothing but tiny houses and manicured rolling hills. And it's the only country I know of where the perfection seen from 15,000 feet holds true up-close. Zurich has a skyline composed of church steeples, a wide pedestrian street with shops selling thousand-franc coats and three-hundred-franc shoes, and a population that appears to be able to buy everything they need – with the exception of a sunny day.

## Too perfect?

To me, Rosmarie's fears seem a bit ridiculous, but then again I'm a foreigner and Switzerland itself seems a bit ridiculous. The

# to call home



© Chantal Panozzo

© Kati Clinton Robson

country is so well taken care of that things often look fake. Trashcans are shiny, benches are bright red and everyone competes for a non-existent gardening award. No one ever arrives late for anything. They speak four different languages but still somehow understand one another. You can ride the bus for years (and eat your lunch off the shiny clean floor) without someone actually checking to see if you bought a ticket. And companies will send you a bill for anything from stamps to sofas – after they’ve already delivered your goods.

How long can this way of life last? Is Switzerland doomed to – heaven forbid – become somewhat normal? Are my neighbour’s fears really a normality that most human beings already know? Or are certain political parties ruining the country for the very people they are trying to protect?

## Fear comes full circle

As I’m pondering this, I realise that Rosmarie is standing near me, watching me clean the lint from the dryer. All of a sudden, I’m nervous because I don’t know if I’m doing it to the high standards she expects.

As I wallow in fear, Rosmarie reiterates hers: “I’m going to wait for you, so we can go upstairs together.”

I put down the little brush thinking the dryer couldn’t get any cleaner, but then Rosmarie grabs the brush and proves to me otherwise.

As she finds lint in crevices of the dryer I didn’t know existed, I watch in disbelief, realising, she’s right. Switzerland is scary. In fact, I think it might be the scariest place I’ve ever lived.

## All things Swiss



### Switzerland through the ages

**1863:** The International Committee of the Red Cross is founded in Geneva. The main purposes are to help victims of war, act as a neutral mediator in cases of conflict and promote respect for humanitarian law. The ICRC has lent a helping hand in almost every major crisis over the past 147 years. To find out more, or learn how you can help, go to [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org).

**1916:** The Dada movement began in Zurich by a group of like-minded artists seeking refuge from war-torn Europe. Disillusioned by WWI and the ideals that inspired it, these men and women sought to create a more peaceful, humane society through their anarchic anti-art movement. The bedlam that emanated from Dadaism went on to inspire the Surrealist and Pop Art movements. Learn more about Zurich’s wild side on page 56.

### Expat encyclopaedia

**Billag:** A tax organisation that goes door to door to ask you if you own a radio or television and trusts people when they say “no”. Good for them.

**Post.ch:** One of the many sites in Switzerland where you can order products, have them delivered, and then pay the bill when you feel like it.

**SFr 999:** The amount of cash you’d get back, no questions asked, no eyes blinked, no manager called, if you bought something for SFr 1 with a SFr 1,000 bill. But unfortunately, this can’t happen because nothing in Switzerland is as cheap as SFr 1.

**Trash:** Putting it out too early is a crime in Switzerland and worthy of a SFr 250 fine. Now that’s scary.

**Travel:** After living in Switzerland for four years now, I can’t travel anymore. Sorry, France. Sorry, Italy. Sorry, world. But compared to Switzerland you’re trashy, dangerous and filled with foreigners, and I just can’t take it any more.