

# What have the Swiss ever done for the rest of us?



**Harry Ritchie**

**Swiss Watching**  
by **Diccon Bewes**

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Diccon Bewes starts his book with a word association test: close your eyes and say whatever comes into your mind on hearing the word 'Switzerland'. Mountains, you might say, or chocolate, or cuckoo-clocks, or cheese with holes in it, or yodelling, or watches, or the Red Cross, or neutrality or... well, let's face it, there are lots of things to associate with Switzerland, from penknives to banks.

OK, Bewes continues, now name a famous Swiss person. Not so easy, particularly if you're not a tennis fan. There's William Tell and Heidi, I suppose, but they don't count, being fictional characters. Thanks to this book, I can now name Bond star Ursula Andress and the architect Le Corbusier alongside Roger Federer, but it does seem that here's a country with a strong identity but even fewer celebrities than Belgium.

But that's typically Swiss, says Bewes: to make all those cheeses, upmarket watches and bars of chocolate without making any limelight-hogging fuss.

A journalist who now lives in Switzerland, Bewes is a well-qualified guide to a country that, although familiar, requires expertise to understand.

For one thing, Switzerland has always stood apart. Independent, unaligned, neutral since 1515, it is a 'landlocked island' to quote the subtitle, and now the non-EU state at the very heart of Europe.

And despite its very strong brand identity, Switzerland is complex

and diverse, with four languages and 26 cantons, ranging from the banking community of Zurich to the Heidiland boondocks of Appenzell Innerrhoden.

Bewes reveals how Switzerland is riddled with contradictions: the Swiss are champions at recycling but it's against the law to recycle on a Sunday; the country is neutral but still has compulsory military service and an army of 200,000 ready to defend the homeland. It is tolerant of religion yet recently voted to ban minarets. And there might not be a Swiss navy, but the Swiss merchant shipping fleet is larger than Russia's.

Thanks to this informative and entertaining guide, I now also appreciate that although the Swiss didn't invent the cuckoo-clock after all (that was the Bavarians), they have given us muesli, Velcro, absinthe, LSD, the toilet duck and Toblerone.

And now I know why Toblerone is shaped like it is. It's because – and you'll never guess how this sentence will end – it's in homage to the triangle formed by a balancing act of girls at the Folies Bergere. There. I told you you'd never guess.

**BOND GIRL:** Ursula Andress played Honey Ryder in the James Bond film Dr No. Left: The iconic Swiss Army penknife

