

TOURISM IN THE BERNESE OBERLAND

The Bernese Oberland was one of the prime destinations for Swiss travellers early on. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was mainly naturalists and humanists who visited this mountainous region, among them Albrecht von Haller, whose 1749 poem *Die Alpen* (The Alps) had a far-reaching impact, and also Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose second journey through Switzerland in 1779 took him to the region. He was inspired to visit by a travel booklet published by the priest Samuel Wytttenbach (1748–1830) in 1777. Wytttenbach's detailed account of his journey from Kleine Scheidegg to Grosse Scheidegg, Grindelwald and the Staubbach-Falls aroused in Goethe the desire to see these places for himself. He likewise recorded his impressions in writing and they, too, were significant for the beginnings of tourism. These two works were however by no means "travel guides" in the classical sense, even if the vivid descriptions did not fail to have an impact.

It was not until the first travel manuals came on the market at the end of the eighteenth century that tourism began to develop, and it soon became part of the educational programme for young noblemen and sons of the upper middle classes from England, Germany, Scandinavia and, in some cases, America, to complete their schooling in classical culture with a trip to the historic sites and landscapes of France and in particular Italy, with a stopover in Switzerland. This travel programme became known as the "Grand Tour".

Perhaps the best-known travel book of the early period was the "Anleitung auf die nützlichste und genussvollste Art in der Schweiz zu reisen" (Instructions on the most useful and enjoyable way to travel in Switzerland), published in 1793 by the German physician Johann Gottfried Ebel (1764–1830). Full of praise, he wrote: *"There is no doubt no other country, no corner of our earth, as strange and interesting in so many respects as Switzerland."*

Success was not long in coming. The first guests arrived, most of them travelling from England. This was not least owing to the English historian William Coxe, who accompanied the Count of Pembroke in 1776 on a journey that took him, among other places, to Switzerland. He recorded his impressions in 1779 in the work "Sketches of the natural, civil and political state of Switzerland", in which he repeatedly praised the beauty of nature.

The British publisher John Murray (1808–1892) printed a handbook for travellers to Switzerland as early as 1829. And the first "Baedeker", published in 1844, soon established itself as one of the most important travel guides to Switzerland.

Along with Central Switzerland and the region around Lake Geneva, the Bernese Oberland was an important destination. In addition to descriptions of places worth seeing, the book also contained information about accommodation. And that was a crucial question: Where could guests stay?

Thun established itself early on as an ideal base for trips to the Bernese Oberland – both because of its inspiring location on the lake with a view of the mountains and in terms of the existing infrastructure. There were already inns in Thun, first and foremost the Freienhof, which was newly built in 1783 by the city's master builder Christian Friedrich Anneler and was considered among the most modern lodgings far and wide. No wonder, then, that the building occupies a central position in Marquard Wocher's panorama painting completed in 1814. If we take the panorama to be a "travel advertisement" for Thun, then the visually "animated" hotel clearly shows that the well-being of guests was taken care of here accordingly. In addition, the accommodation was right next to the landing stage (Ländte), from where rowboats could bring guests to Neuhaus two or three times a week. They could then be picked up by waiting carriages to travel on to the Oberland.

Thun would develop into a popular holiday resort over the next fifty years. The Knechtenhofer family started the ball rolling with the hotel "Bellevue et du Parc" (construction started in 1834 and the hotel opened in 1840) in the Hofstetten district, considered one of the best addresses in Europe according to "Baedeker", followed in the decades thereafter by the "Thunerhof" (1873–75) and the "Beau Rivage" (1902), two grand hotels that left nothing to be desired.



View of "Thunerhof" and the hotel "Bellevue". Photo: City Archive Thun

What's more, Thun itself was increasingly evolving into a "destination" in its own right. The aim was for the town to be more than just a "transit point" and a "stopover" on the way to the Oberland, so efforts were made to offer guests everything they needed for their "happiness": an English church for the numerous English guests, tennis courts and croquet lawns, and also an alpine garden near the Thunerhof where edelweiss had been planted so that guests would not have to go to the mountains to pick it. The flower was considered the epitome of the high alpine landscape and the souvenir of alpine tourism par excellence.

But not only that: opposite the Grand Hotel, souvenir shops were set up such as the Chalet Thunerhof (1875–1908) where visitors could buy so-called "Thun majolica", locally produced ceramics with alpine floral motifs. Particularly popular were souvenir plates decorated with city scenes and oil-painted landscapes featuring the Staubbach Falls, the idyllically situated Rosenloui, or the Jungfrau and Bluemlisalp massifs, to name but a few best-selling subjects.

Thun's importance as a tourist destination continued to grow, while other areas still had some catching up to do. In Interlaken, for example, the situation was not so rosy when it came to accommodation. It was not until the 1830s that the first guesthouses were built for the increasing influx of visitors. Nevertheless, the needs of the guests were quickly met here too. With the expansion of the road and the railway network (Bödeli Railway, 1873, Därligen – Interlaken) as well as the extension of the road along the right bank of the lake by the Frutiger construction company in 1873

(Gunten – Beatenbucht), it also became easier to get close to the high mountains.

During a period of thirty years, one hotel after another was built. Today Interlaken is one of the major tourist centres of the Bernese Oberland and offers sixty hotels with about 4,100 beds, six youth hostels and other hostels with about 450 beds, eight campsites with 1,045 pitches, and holiday flats with about 1,000 beds. With the construction of various mountain railways, above all the Jungfrau Railway by Adolf Guyer Zeller in 1912, the mountain regions are very accessible. Every year, these areas are visited by millions of guests from Switzerland and especially from abroad. When travel restrictions were put in place as a result of the 2020 pandemic, these were the destinations, including the Bernese Oberland, that were able to attract a large domestic audience. And many a visitor came to the same conclusion as Goethe: *"Why travel far, when good things are so near"*.

Text: Gabriele Moshhammer, Art historian



Hotel "Bellevue". Photo: City Archive Thun

JOHANNES BRAHMS, NAPOLEON III, HEINRICH VON KLEIST ... FAMOUS GUESTS OF THUN

Emperors and kings, composers and musicians, painters and poets – many celebrities visited the city of Thun as welcome guests in times gone by. Would you like some examples? Here you are!

MUSICIANS

“Relaxation, Thun is a splendid place for that, and you will not be finished relaxing after only one day”, wrote Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) in a letter. He spent the summer months of 1886, 1887 and 1888 in a spacious flat in Thun-Hofstetten. After concentrating intently on composing in the mornings, his afternoons were set aside for leisure activities such as a boat trip on Lake Thun with a season ticket, a visit to a wrestling festival or an ascent of Mount Niesen on foot. Other musicians likewise appreciated Thun as a congenial place to stay, such as Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962),

Europe’s most renowned violin virtuoso at the time of the First World War, who performed in Japan and the USA as well. In 1929, Kreisler spent a few days off at the upscale “Thunerhof” hotel in Thun, which opened in 1875 and is now home to the Kunstmuseum Thun. The operetta king Ralph Benatzky (1884–1957), composer of the operetta *Im weissen Rössl*, which is still performed today, lived off and on in the 1930s in a comfortable villa in Thun’s Bächimatte neighbourhood. The composer Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) also stayed in the Bernese Oberland a few times, spending a fortnight in Thun in 1847, when he was mourning the death of his beloved sister Fanny.

KINGS, QUEENS, EMPERORS

Crowned heads stayed in Thun from time to time in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1930, King Faisal I of Iraq (1885–1933) spent fourteen days at the Hotel Thunerhof with his entourage. From Thun he made excursions to the Blausee Lake, to Bern, Lucerne, and Zurich, and to Bulle, where he attended military exercises. In Thun, Faisal I paid a visit to the Selve Swiss Metalworks. A selection of further crowned heads who came to Thun: Queen Victoria of England, King William III of the Netherlands, Queen Isabella II of Spain, King Maximilian II of Bavaria. But non-European kings were also here: King Fuad I of Egypt and King Chulalongkorn Rama V of Siam. Napoleon III (1808–1873), who was elected Emperor of France in 1852, stayed in Thun several times in the 1830s, where he



House of Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) on the upper Aare Island.
Photo: City Archive Thun

attended training courses at the Thun Military Academy under Colonel Guillaume Henri Dufour and performed various services. At that time, he also published a paper entitled "Political and Military Observations on Switzerland". In 1865, now as emperor, Napoleon III stopped off in Thun on his Swiss tour. On that occasion, he admired the newly built Thun barracks, still a very striking structure today. "*Vous aurez là une jolie caserne,*" he noted.

POETS

Many poets have been guests in Thun in the past, where they thoroughly enjoyed the scenic landscape and picturesque medieval Old Town. The French poet Romain Rolland (1866–1944), who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915, spent a few relaxing days on holiday in Thun's Hotel "Bellevue" in August 1915. The German poet prince Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) travelled through Switzerland three times and during his Swiss journey of 1779 he stayed in Thun. While here, he enjoyed the beautiful view from the churchyard (cemetery) of the town church towards Mount Niesen and the Alps, a vista that countless painters have captured over the years. Goethe wrote to his friend Frau von Stein in Weimar: "*Thun, where we arrived in time to see the beautiful view of the lake from the churchyard and to walk along the Aar to the lake.*"

The poet Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) stayed for a few months in 1802 and a few days in 1803 in a small house on the Upper Aareinsel island, which is now officially called Kleist-Inseli. In a letter to his sister Ulrike, he wrote: "*Now I live on an island in the Aare, at the outlet of Lake Thun, quite enclosed by the Alps, ¼ mile from the town. I have rented a small house at the tip, which was very cheap because of its remoteness, for six months.*"

The house no longer exists, but a Kleist monument by Urban Thiersch was erected in 1983 to commemorate the poet. Kleist experienced a very fruitful creative period in Thun, working on his poems *Die Familie Schroffenstein* (The Schroffenstein Family), *Der zerbrochne Krug* (The Broken Jug) and *Robert Guiskard*.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) had a patron in Thun at the time of the First World War in Colonel Carl Richard Ziegler, who was then director of the Federal Equestrian Institute in Thun. In 1922 and 1923, Rilke spent a few days in Thun. He visited the "Concours Hippique", which enjoyed an international reputation at the time. He also attended a ball at the "Thunerhof" hotel and visited the von Bonstetten family at their "Bellerive" country estate in Gwatt. About a stay in Thun in 1923 with a female friend, Rilke wrote: "*Je suis si heureux de ces jours que nous avons passés à Thoune, parfaitement beaux.*"

Robert Walser (1878–1956) stayed in Thun for a short time in the spring of 1899 in a rented room on the Obere Hauptgasse. At the time, he was working as an assistant accountant at the Spar- und Leihkasse Thun and, as he wrote himself, at the Feller brewery in Thun. In one of his stories, Walser was full of praise for the town: "*The area (of Thun) is considerably more beautiful than I have been able to describe here, the lake is twice as blue, the sky three times as beautiful.*"

ARTISTS

Numerous artists have also been guests in Thun over the years, above all many vedutists and minor masters, who very often artistically captured the wonderful view from the churchyard of the town church towards the Alps and the foothills of the Alps. August Macke (1887–1914), an important representative of the artist group Blauer Reiter, should also be mentioned. From September 1913 to June 1914, Macke stayed with his family in the "Rosengarten" house on Lake Thun between Oberhofen and Hilterfingen, which still stands today. Thun is depicted in many of his paintings in captivating colours, showing arbours, the attractive high sidewalks, the town church, and also fashion boutiques and hat shops. Macke and his family felt very much at home on the shores of Lake Thun, as can be read in a letter: "*... and we feel very well and happy here.*" And last but not least, we must not forget an artist to whom the city of Thun owes the beautiful Thun Panorama: Marquard Wocher, who stayed in Thun in the summers of 1808 and 1809 and made sketches for his panorama, which opened in Basel in 1814.

Text: Dr. Jon Keller, retired city archivist