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VILLAGE
SPECIAL

ALL ABOARD —Switzerland

Preface

Too many countries struggle to keep people living – and prospering – in rural regions. But the Swiss have a bright idea: PostAuto.

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At twilight the mountain village of Saxeten in the Swiss region of Bernese Oberland is even sleepier than during the day. Only a few cats can be seen scurrying across the meandering roads, ducking between chalet houses. Yet at sunrise the scene comes to life: people step out of their wooden homes and in the light of dawn a bright-yellow Mercedes bus pulls up at the station by the old schoolhouse. Three passengers jump on board and are greeted with a joyful “Hello!” from Carolyn Lansdell, who has been working as a driver for PostAuto, a subsidiary of the Swiss Post, for just over a year.

As the 20-seater leaves the village behind and heads down a serpentine road towards the larger town of Wilderswil, Lansdell takes particular care. She’s not simply carrying commuters this morning: there’s a trailer attached to her bus

containing 1,000 litres of fresh milk, which farmers loaded the night before. “We’re the only PostAuto that still delivers milk,” she says. “And on the way back we’re going to pick up bread for the Alpenrose Hotel.”

Switzerland’s iconic yellow PostAuto is the descendent of the horse-drawn post coach that trundled along the lanes in the mid-19th century. These Swiss Post coaches travelled to far-flung towns and would give villagers a lift as long as they didn’t mind sharing the back seat with piles of letters. In 1906 the first automobile-run post route launched between Bern and Detligen, with more quickly following behind.

As the vehicles grew in size, so too did the demand for public transport. Soon the PostAuto was born, leaving mail delivery up to another Swiss Post subsidiary. Today, it is the leading bus company in Switzerland’s public-transport network. Every year 145 million passengers travel with the operator, which connects even the smallest of villages – such as Saxeten – with the infrastructure of larger cities.

“When I first started we drove a beige Land Rover and delivered parcels,” says Paul Seematter, the patriarch of a Saxeten farming family and a former PostAuto driver. “It was a good second income and I met the most interesting people,” he adds, as he shovels hay into his cowshed. Amid the jingle of cowbells he recounts stories from his 30 years as a driver (he is still referred

to as the “chauffeur” in town). “In the early days the mountain road didn’t even have a barrier to protect us from the steep drop.”

Since the establishment of the service between Saxeten and Wilderswil in 1951, the connection has vastly improved and become a vital lifeline for the 96 people of Saxeten who have neither a baker nor a bank. Villagers must take the PostAuto into Wilderswil for their shopping or even to catch a train to Interlaken, a bigger town in the vicinity. “For us the PostAuto is very important,” says Erika Balmer, co-owner of Saxeten’s only hotel, the Alpenrose. “Many of our guests come up with the PostAuto.”

Erika and her husband Kurt are the village’s serial entrepreneurs. They own all the businesses in town: the hotel and the three restaurants for which Kurt and his mother Ruth cook with a passion.



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PostAuto pointers

Employees: 3,900
Buses: 2,238
Lines: 877
Passengers: 145 million per year
Turnover: CHF743m (€680m)

Saxeten in numbers

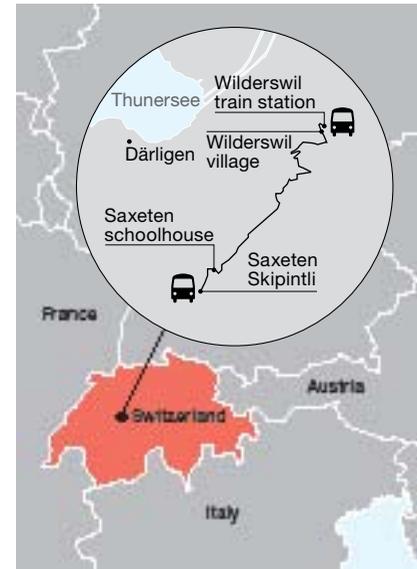
Population: 96
Founded: 1233
Cost of a house: CHF500,000 (€460,000)
Key facilities: Fire station, Hotel Alpenrose, Restaurant Pintli, Glühweinbar and skiing and toboggan routes.
Challenges: To keep the younger generations in Saxeten and remain an independent village.



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THE MONOCLE VIEW:

What: Switzerland is exemplary at making its rural areas attractive, productive and financially viable.

Switzerland is good at a lot of things but one achievement that gets neglected in all the talk of banks and watches is the country’s success at making rural life economically viable. Plenty of nations pay lip service to the notion of reviving the countryside but more often than not it still pays to go urban. Mobility is just one problem that the PostAuto, combined with the Swiss rail network, overcomes.

The backbone of the rural economy is still farming, however, and here again Switzerland provides a model to follow. Businesses across the country carry out their duty to support farmers, from Coop supermarkets and restaurants serving regional produce to exporters bolstering the national brand abroad. The government’s commitment to the Swiss tourism and hospitality sector, much of which resides in non-urban destinations, is also exemplary. If we want to see the countryside truly vital again, we need to enable people to make money there. A few extra bus routes would be a good place to start.

- 01 PostAuto bus winding its way down from the mountain village
- 02 Next stop?
- 03 Families rely on PostAuto buses to get to school, work and to do their shopping
- 04 PostAuto livery
- 05 Towing a thousand litres of milk
- 06 PostAuto is Switzerland’s leading bus company
- 07 Ruedi Simmler, director of the Bern region for PostAuto
- 08 Kurt Balmer, co-owner of Hotel Alpenrose

“It’s a hard life, you have to love being in the countryside,” says Erika, noting that her guests appreciate the solitude of the village. If it weren’t for the PostAuto, many of them would probably never find their way up to Saxeten in the first place.

In the countryside, buses are the ideal means of transport: they’re safe, flexible and, unlike trains, don’t depend on expensive infrastructure. PostAuto’s network is around four times the size of the national rail’s coverage and therefore responsible for even the most isolated communities.

“The benefit of PostAuto is that we are given the opportunity to make many decisions locally,” says Ruedi Simmler, deputy director of the Bern region for PostAuto. “In Saxeten we were able to adapt the timetable for the schoolchildren, for instance.”

PostAuto continues to innovate. This summer it launched the first trials of an autonomous shuttle bus in Sion. If it is a success, the organisation will be able to diversify its rural offering across the country, although this scheme is still years from fruition. “We are in the process of transforming from a simple bus company to a holistic mobility provider,” says Daniel Landolf, PostAuto’s CEO. “We want to test new forms of giving access to locations that were previously not connected to the public-transport network.”

Back in the Bernese Oberland, Lansdell is making her 10th and final journey of the day, arriving in Saxeten at 18.03. Next to the bus stop is the blue-shuttered house of the community’s president Martin Boss, who used to drive for PostAuto too. “It makes us mobile,” he says. “There’s nothing here, not even a market. For that you need to go down the mountain.” — (M)