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Food wars

Woolies vs Checkers

By Adele Shevel

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**we will never surrender ...
our margins**

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Cover: Vuyo Singiswa

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life

TRAVEL

SOAKING UP THE SCENERY IN STYLE

The Gotthard Panorama Express offers Swiss luxury — and even a flag-waving yodeller **Andrew Thompson**

● Travelling by rail through Switzerland you're spoilt for scenic choice, but Reinhard, the on-board guide whose job — poor man — is to ride this tourist train, still has a surprise: "Go to the photo coach now."

For the camera-ready prepared to leave their cappuccinos, he directs us: "Look to the right." Those following his orders are rewarded. Leaving the sealed glass tube on wheels, designed with curved waist-to-ceiling windows for a view of even the steepest mountaintops from your seat, reveals an adjoining coach with windows that open, allowing reflection-free photographs. It's one of only a few photography coaches in the country and the views are an open-air surprise as we twist and turn through the Alps on tracks laid more than 100 years ago.

As I push down a window of the photo carriage, the blast of

fresh mountain air, followed by a guttural yodel of a long-white-haired man waving a giant Swiss flag on a nearby hill, instantly adds personality to the experience.

"That's Xavier," says Reinhard. "He lives in the old railway attendant's cottage, and he's here waving the flag for us twice a day, whenever he's home."

Until that point, the journey had been every bit the kind of sanitised one you'd expect from an ultra-modern train in the country that sets the global standard for sanitised travel.

The early-morning local train from the Italian-speaking lakeside city of Locarno, and connection onto the Gotthard Panorama Express tourist train in Bellinzona, had run to the very second. My luggage, left at the hotel reception before departure, was already making its own way to my next hotel, courtesy of a baggage



Xavier waves his flag to the passing Gotthard Panorama Express



A special photography coach on the Gotthard Panorama Express train allows for reflection-free photographs of the passing scenery



The city of Lucerne, as seen from the upper deck of Steamboat Uri at the end of the Gotthard journey

transport service offered by Switzerland Tourism to allow for maximum train hopping or mountain climbing.

Upon finding my seat in the Gotthard, I receive a menu offering various local delicacies, beers and wines, and a slew of hot drinks — like the large cappuccino that I set down to heed Reinhard's instruction.

At this stage of the journey, it's hard to imagine a train ride can get any better. Not only because of the high-altitude sight of a passionate flag-waving yodelling Xavier but also because of the sheer drama and history that it encapsulates.

Perhaps not surprisingly,

given the all-star lineup of Swiss scenic trains, the Gotthard Panorama Express is often overlooked for its competitors — the Glacier and Bernina Express have been the country's go-to scenic train lines for some time. But this understated route between Lugano in the south and Lucerne in the country's centre is possibly better.

Passengers can travel in either direction, but for practical and scenic purposes, south to north is my recommendation. This allows the journey to start in Ticino, the only canton in Switzerland where Italian is the sole official language and where a lakeside risotto and

Moments after disembarking, the Uri, a paddle boat built in 1901, pulls alongside the dock under a puff of white steam, ready to complete the experience

crisp white wine in its Mediterranean climes are convincing enough to think you've accidentally slipped across the border. It's the perfect laid-back charm to help gauge against the German sensibility of Lucerne, where for dinner that same day you can easily trade the pasta and wine for sausage and a lager.

From Lugano or Bellinzona, the Gotthard runs north through the heart of Switzerland on a route that, before completion of

the Gotthard tunnel in 1882, would take those looking to get across the Alps and down into Milan upwards of 50 hours by stagecoach. The tunnel, dug mostly by hand, took the lives of 199 workers — a grim prospect to consider as you ascend around 1,000m while reclining in a soft chair with a hot beverage.

These days, trains that are in a hurry use the world's longest and deepest railway tunnel down below, which opened for passenger and freight travel in 2016. But the privileged few who are more concerned with views than speed can still ride along the original aerial panoramic route that's now reserved exclusively for those travelling on the Gotthard or, less often, the esteemed Orient Express.

The Gotthard Express journey is, of course, beautiful. Dramatic loopbacks and helical tunnels that assist the train up the Gotthard ramp as it climbs the Alps make this a far from rapid experience; the "express" moniker is applied for its skipping of regular stations rather than actual speed. This affords ample time to take in sights — like 15th-century castles and three different perspectives of the Wassen Church, a baroque masterpiece perched at 930m — before the descent to Flüelen.

Given the spectacle of the ride, the lakeside village of Flüelen arrives quickly — and it's here that the train terminates. But the Gotthard journey



Wassen's famous baroque Catholic church is visible from three different perspectives while on board the Gotthard Panorama Express



First class on the Gotthard Panorama Express features curved windows for better views of the passing scenery

breakfast stop.

With good weather in full flow, most passengers skirt the indoor seating for an outdoor bench on the old steamer's upper bow, which is where I find myself as we approach the postcard row of houses on Lucerne's outer reaches.

This is the perfect vantage point from which to reflect on what, by that stage, has been the better part of five blissful hours soaking up immaculate Swiss scenery with less than minimal effort — and a fairly compelling place from which to plot the next express experience. ✕

* The writer was a guest of Switzerland Tourism

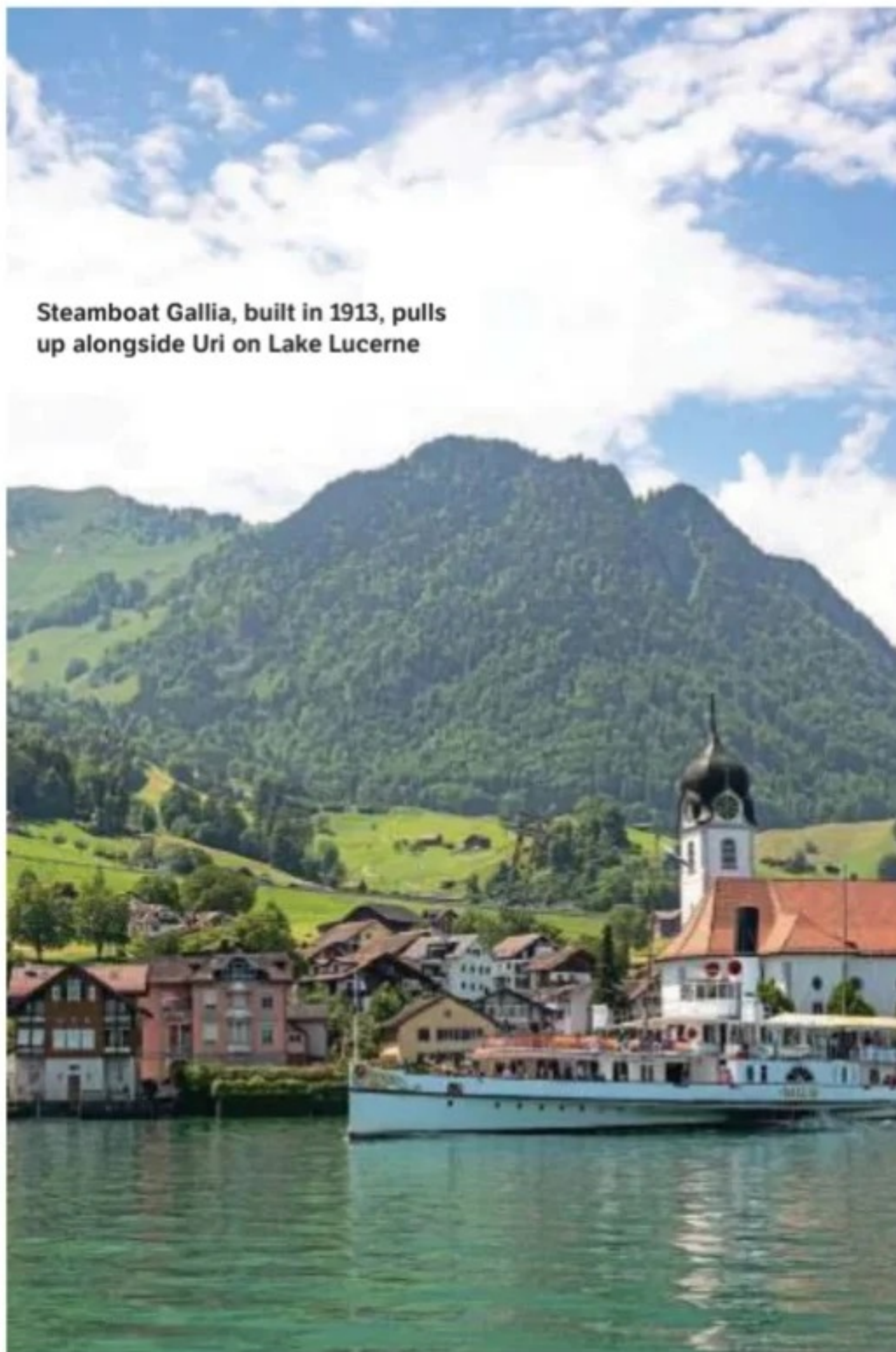
is far from over, because moments after disembarking, the Uri, a paddle boat built in 1901, pulls alongside the dock under a puff of white steam, ready to complete the experience.

So immaculate is the boat, with its silky smooth exposed engine and polished wooden structure, that it's difficult to comprehend it's been floating these waters for well over a century. Even those who aren't bona fide nautical nerds will appreciate that Steamboat Uri is the oldest operating vessel in the world with this particular diagonal steam engine, one impressively powerful and efficient for its relatively small size.

The Uri's two paddle wheels still produce more than enough power to traverse the lake at a comfortable speed. But for most, the sedate two-hour trip crisscrossing the teal waters between tiny villages on the shores of Lake Lucerne, ring-

fenced by emerald forests and towering snowcapped peaks, is likely fast enough as it is.

In the Uri's grand indoor saloon, some guests pull up chairs and order traditional fare from a comprehensive menu. The timing on the south-to-north version makes it an ideal lunch break, while completing it in reverse would make this a



Steamboat Gallia, built in 1913, pulls up alongside Uri on Lake Lucerne



Passengers on board Steamboat Uri, as seen from the indoor dining room

The other trains through the Alps

● GoldenPass Express

With its starting point in Lucerne, and southwest direction through the Brünig Pass, via Interlaken, and down to Lake Geneva's tranquil Montreux, the GoldenPass pairs well with the Gotthard. This route started as an essential commuter line, but its scenery and tourist hotspots along the way led to the recent opening of an ultra-modern three-class tourist train with panoramic windows and on-board catering.

www.gpx.swiss

Glacier Express

If there's one train that's hogged most of the Swiss scenic train limelight, it's the Glacier Express. This eight-hour luxury train journey is between the Alpine royalty of Zermatt and St Moritz, along the way delivering dramatic summer and winter views and a chance to ride across the famous Landwasser Viaduct.

www.glacierexpress.ch

Bernina Express

The Bernina Express, which travels between Chur in Switzerland and Tirano in Italy, is not quite as famous as its Glacier Express cousin, but the scenery and engineering feats as it crosses the Bernina range, with views of Morteratsch Glacier, make it equally dramatic. Also appealing is its much shorter travel time — roughly four hours — and the ability to continue deeper into Italy, or connect via bus along Lake Como back into southern Switzerland.

www.berninarailway.com ✕