



→ POSTCARD FROM...

Interlaken, Switzerland

Yodeling fan Yolanda Carslaw heads to a triennial event to celebrate the Alpine singing style made ubiquitous by *The Sound of Music*

It was 2am and I was wedged between a 20-stone Swiss wrestler and a twinkly-eyed, silver-bearded, 60-year-old roofer at an Interlaken café. The sole non-yodeler at a wobbly trestle table, I let the harmonies of two-dozen mostly male voices bring me out in goose pimples, now and then catching the eye of my sister, Teresa, at the bar. The wrestler, needless to say, provided the bass.

I could just make out Renate Wallimann, the roofer's daughter, eagerly introducing Teresa to yet another reveller. "*Teresa und Yolanda sind Schwester aus England, und sie lieben die Schweiz und das Jodeln!*" she exclaimed, expressing ever greater astonishment that two British 30-somethings had chosen to spend three days at Switzerland's triennial giant national yodeling festival. And with a sincere "*Zum Wohl!*" she took a gulp of the lukewarm coffee-schnapps that was keeping us all going and ordered another round.

Since nine that morning, and for most of the previous day, we had listened to yodeling almost non-stop – all of it more akin to a Welsh male-voice choir than Julie Andrews. My love of the yodel stems from a record with a blue-smocked *alphorn* blower on the cover that belonged to my mother: she went ski racing in Switzerland and Austria in the 1960s and can let out a pretty good *ju-lu-lo-lüü* herself given a lonely windswept summit.

I was unprepared for the scale of Interlaken 2011. With the visitor count 200,000, it was busier than Glastonbury, and 11,000 performers took part – including 500 children. As well as Swiss; there were expat-led groups from Canada, New Zealand, Australia and America, and, improbably, a Swiss-o-phile contingent from Japan and South Korea.

From 9am to 9pm, in precise eight-minute slots, performances were underway in 14 venues in the attractive lakeside town, from churches to sports halls. A tinkling bell gave each group, duet or soloist the signal to step on



Clockwise from top: teenage alphorn players and a flag waver at the opening ceremony; a twisted Cuban cigar was the smoke of choice for many of the participants; the men's garments, which are as intricately embroidered as the women's; two yodelers from St Gallen

stage, and to each performer a compere would offer a cheery "*Viel Vergnügen!*" (Have Fun!) after making introductions. At the end of a set, no matter how great the claps and yips, performers stood modestly, their hands

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in their pockets, with barely a bow.

Factor in 18 beer tents, some with raucous accordion bands, others with yodeling breaking out spontaneously and engulfing the entire floor, and it was a challenge to decide who to listen to and where. Even moving between venues was tricky: beneath every other tree on the Festwiese (festival meadow) little bunches gathered to yodel, tempting

passers-by to pause. Alphorn-blowers formed giant circles, having shouldered their instruments like skis through town.

And how friendly everyone was! In one tent we were struggling with the screw-top of a 50cl Jodlerwein when a young man from Zurich came to the rescue. "You must pour him a glass, because he helped you!" declared his female companion. We spent two hours with them, sharing wine and cake, hearing about their city choir and the composers breathing new life into Switzerland's yodel repertoire. What are the songs about, we wanted to know. "The old songs are about cows, mountains and the joy of singing," Regula Bieri, a social worker, told us. "The new ones are about life." We parted with our programme scrawled with tips about their favourite performers.

Another source of curiosity was the regional dress and accessories. Martin Hersche, a builder from Appenzell who sang with his father and brother, told us about the earrings worn with their scarlet outfits – a snake represented fertility and a butter stirrer productivity. Two women from Basel told me where I could buy the crocheted *Armstulpen* they wore as forearm-warmers. We discovered, too, that *Lederhosen* have no place in Swiss tradition – they belong to Germany and Austria. The male *pièces de résistance* were embroidered matching jackets, the most widespread style in black velvet with puffy elbow-length sleeves.

Tearing ourselves from that café at 4am on the final evening and leaving the Wallimanns – who turned out to be acclaimed composers, too – in full voice, we felt giddy with rich tones and schnapps. And after two hours' sleep, as we marched from hostel to train station, we passed a quartet of revellers softly yodeling in harmony as they meandered home, giving us a final sound of the mountains that towered around us. **N**

ONLINE www.jodlerfestinterlaken.ch

DATE The next Swiss national yodel festival is in Davos in summer 2014