

# On the trail of Dickens in Switzerland

## English writer found inspiration during his four trips to the Alps

BY ADAM H. GRAHAM

Ninety minutes into what was supposed to be an hourlong snowshoe walk up the craggy Great St. Bernard Pass in the Alps, my Swiss guide — Patrick Vincent, professor of literature at the Université de Neuchâtel — swore that the 11th-century monastery we had set out for was just around the next bend.

The structure, perched on this 2,469-meter, or 8,100-foot-high, pass where the snowy seams of Switzerland, Italy and France converge, has a storied history: It was founded by St. Bernard himself, is the birthplace of the iconic dog bred by the monks, and it provided room and board for illustrious visitors like Napoléon and Alexandre Dumas. But I wanted to see it for a different reason. I was retracing the steps of Charles Dickens, who ascended the pass to get to the monastery while living in Switzerland in 1846.

Although known mostly for his depiction of gritty London streets and of his travels to America, Dickens was also inspired by Switzerland, where he spent five months writing “Dombey and Son,” found inspiration for “Little Dorrit” and “David Copperfield,” and finished his fourth Christmas story. His visit was no mere writer’s retreat: He temporarily



The 11th-century St. Bernard monastery atop the Great St. Bernard Pass in the Swiss Alps was among the sites visited by Charles Dickens during his stay in Switzerland in 1846.

sembled Machu Picchu. After parking in an abandoned resort, we began a climb up the gusty trail.

“Dickens came in September, so there was no snow,” shouted the professor, tightening his snowshoes as downhill skiers zipped past us. “And he traveled on mule!”

We didn’t have a mule, and that’s not the only difference between our journey and Dickens’s. He and his 11-member party (including his wife, Kate, and two servants), traveled from Lausanne by steamer, then coach, then mule. The round-trip journey took them four days, and the last leg through the steep Valley of Desolation, described by Dickens as “awful and tremendous,” is probably no easier to climb today than it was in 1846.

In another letter to Forster, Dickens’s description of the monastery revealed his terror and reverence of the Alps. “A great hollow on top of a range of dreadful mountains, and in the midst, a black lake, with phantom clouds perpetually stalking over it. The air so fine, it is difficult to breathe ... the cold so exquisitely thin and sharp that it is not to be described.”

That description was a contrast to the scene that I took in when I reached the entrance to the monastery. The views of Italy, France and Switzerland were downright halcyon, and the lake was not cloudy and black but frost-blue under a hyacinth sky. We were met by a monk, who insisted we nourish ourselves over bowls of soup. The vegetable soup came with a generous slab of Bagnes cheese,

honey-sweetened tea, thick slices of brown bread and a carafe of red Dôle wine from the Valais region just below.

Although it’s still possible to stay the night, as Dickens did, I stayed for just a few hours, filling my time with a quick tour of the monastery’s oddball museum, which showcased local taxidermy and ancient coins and maps once used for passage. I also searched for the 800-year-old crypt, allegedly stuffed with the bodies of ancient travelers who didn’t survive the crossing.

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**LAUSANNE** Lausanne is the beginning of the Swiss Riviera, which stretches along Lake Geneva toward Montreaux. The region is no stranger to writers, drawing Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edward Gibbon, Lord Byron, the Shelleys, Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway. And, of course, Dickens. From June to November 1846, Dickens paid £10 a month to rent Villa Rosemont, overlooking the snowy Dents du Midi and the lake. His first letters were lucid: the “moonlight on the lake is noble” and the steep up-and-down streets are “like the streets in dreams.”

But Dickens’s bucolic Lausanne has changed. The Hotel Gibbons, where the writer briefly stayed, is now a bank; Villa Rosemont is now the Grand Rosemont, a brawny pink Art Deco condominium on Avenue Charles Dickens. A walk down Avenue d’Ouchy brings you past La Villa at No. 57, where one of Dickens’s sons took French lessons. A left turn on Avenue de l’Elysée leads to the Elysée Estate, which Dickens considered renting but thought too large. It now houses a photography museum, one of many museums in arty Lausanne worth visiting.

Today Lausanne’s vertical, steep streets and sidewalks retain a dreamlike quality. A youthful, creative energy pervades the city, earning it the distinction of Switzerland’s counterculture capital, and not a bad place to be a flâneur for a day. On a warm April afternoon, I strolled past the ateliers of scruffy musicians and bespectacled architects near steep Avenue d’Ouchy, which plunges down Mount Jorat to the lake.

**LAVAU** Dickens was fond of walking, and his letters to Forster reveal that every evening at 6 o’clock sharp he set off on 15-kilometer treks through the neighboring “vineyards, green lanes, cornfields, and pastures of hay.” The “long twilight and delicious evenings” lured him to Lavaux, an ancient clover-green labyrinth of mountainside grape terraces that cobbles up the mountain from the lake. There he got a vantage view of the ever-changing Alps, “which

were sometimes red, purple, or black and sometimes very ghosts in the clouds and mist.”

Lavaux, inscribed on Unesco’s World Heritage List in 2007, has a rarefied beauty but is cumbersome to explore. Trails are too steep for a leisurely bike ride and too narrow for an uninsured rental car. But they are perfect for an e-bike, which I rented at the Lausanne train station.

The e-bike allowed me to see as much of Lavaux in one day as Dickens might have seen in a month on foot, and I got plenty of exercise, too. The steep hill still got the adrenaline flowing, but not so much that I was too sweaty to enjoy a glass of Epesses when I stopped. I rolled through picturesque wine villages and admired the alpenglügen, a pinkish sunset glow atop the peaks, and l’heure bleue, that sapphire hour after dusk.

Dickens’s warmest observations of Switzerland were made here, and ended up in the pages of “Little Dorrit”: “The air there was charged with the scent of gathered grapes. Baskets, troughs, and tubs of grapes stood in the dim village doorways. Church-roofs, distant and rarely seen, had sparkled in the view.”

But Dickens’s Swiss summer came to an end, and before he left, he wrote in a final letter: “Surely there is no such place as London. I seem to have heard of it in my childhood, but I am pretty sure it was a lie of the nurse’s. Mountains, valleys, lakes and vines and green lanes, are all I believe in.”



moved his wife, six children and the family dog to Lausanne, where they lived in a villa staffed with four servants.

Dickens visited the country four times over the course of his life, and recounted his impressions in a ream of private letters, many of them prickly, that nonetheless indicated his unabashed love for Switzerland. “Oh god! What a beautiful country it is!” he proclaimed in one letter to John Forster, his friend, and later biographer.

This spring I made a four-day trip to explore three areas of Switzerland frequented by Dickens, seeking to discover what kept him coming back. In addition to the Great St. Bernard Pass, which Dickens took before spending the night at the monastery, I would stop in Lausanne, where the Dickens family stayed in a villa overlooking Lake Geneva, and the Lavaux Vineyards, where the writer took long nightly walks. The settings became an occasional writer’s muse.

**THE GREAT ST. BERNARD PASS AND MONASTERY** We traveled to the Great St. Bernard Pass from Lausanne by car, on a 100-kilometer, or 60-mile, route that hugged the easternmost hook of Switzerland, passing clusters of chalets and steep vineyard terraces that re-

### CROSSWORD | Make The Change

- Across**
- 1 Hose shape
- 5 Building blocks
- 11 “The Office” woman
- 14 QB feats
- 17 Years in old Rome
- 18 Capital city formerly behind the Iron Curtain
- 19 Nephew of Cain
- 21 “Let’s Get Lost” singer Baker
- 22 So happy you can’t see straight?
- 25 Where to enter the theater
- 47 Calpurnia’s dream in “Julius Caesar” and others
- 49 Bear’s cry
- 50 Circle above the airport?
- 55 Manager with four World Series titles
- 57 Very clumsy person, in slang
- 58 Subject of the 19th, 24th and 26th Amendments
- 62 Willing to do
- 65 TWA competitor
- 67 See 77-Across
- 98 “Sure thing”
- 99 \_\_\_ beetle
- 100 Eternally
- 101 Canterbury can
- 102 Org. trying to clear the air?
- 105 Ed Wood player in “Ed Wood”
- 108 Squad cars
- 110 Woman who’s the very best at saying no?
- 114 Part of TBS: Abbr.
- 115 Pal of Pooh
- 116 Modern marketplace
- 117 Like the verbs “come” and

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### Traveler’s forecast

High/low temperatures, in degrees Celsius and degrees Fahrenheit, and expected conditions.

	Saturday	Sunday		Saturday	Sunday
	°C	°F		°C	°F
Abu Dhabi	40/33	104/91	S	40/33	104/91
Almaty	28/19	82/64	S	30/19	86/66
Athens	34/25	93/77	S	37/26	99/79
Bangkok	32/26	90/79	T	32/26	90/79
Barcelona	27/19	81/66	PC	27/22	81/72
Beijing	31/25	88/77	T	32/25	90/77
Belgrade	33/22	91/72	T	36/21	97/70
Berlin	29/15	84/59	Sh	29/17	84/63
Boston	35/22	95/72	T	29/18	84/64
Brussels	23/16	73/61	Sh	21/13	70/55
Buenos Aires	12/4	54/39	S	13/5	55/41
Lisbon	23/15	73/59	PC	25/16	77/61
London	21/13	70/55	R	21/16	70/61
Los Angeles	26/16	79/61	PC	27/17	81/63
Madrid	32/16	90/61	S	33/17	91/63
Manila	31/24	88/75	T	29/26	84/79
Mexico City	24/11	75/52	T	24/11	75/52
Miami	33/26	91/79	PC	32/25	90/77
Moscow	27/12	81/54	PC	24/14	75/57
Mumbai	31/26	88/79	T	31/26	88/79
Nairobi	24/13	75/55	PC	25/13	77/55
New Delhi	38/27	100/81	T	36/27	97/81
New York	37/24	99/75	T	32/20	90/68
Nice	27/21	81/70	S	28/21	82/70
Osaka	31/24	88/75	Sh	34/24	93/75
Paris	22/15	72/59	R	22/13	72/55
Riyadh	38/26	100/79	S	38/27	100/81
Rome	28/18	82/64	S	33/18	91/64
San Francisco	20/12	68/54	PC	20/12	68/54
Sao Paulo	20/9	68/48	Sh	18/12	64/54
Seoul	30/21	86/70	T	31/22	88/72
Shanghai	32/28	90/82	T	33/29	91/84