

President's Letter

With the summer holidays well behind us, the Swiss Association of Singapore is offering a full program for the months ahead. The wide range of activities should offer something for everyone. However, we are always open to suggestions from our members.

Besides the regular monthly activities, new and interesting events/programs are scheduled for the period ahead:

- Launch of English conversation class on Friday, September 28.
- Bowling evening on Friday, October 5
- A visit to the Police Museum on Thursday, October 18 (free of charge)
- A visit to a Hydroponic Farm, (Herbs and Spices) Saturday, October 27
- Carpet information/appreciation talk on Monday, October 29

You are encouraged to visit www.swiss-sg.org, from time to time to obtain the most up-to-date information.

At the Rainmaker's in Laos

As in few other countries in Southeast Asia, Buddhism shapes almost all aspects of life in Laos. At the same time, there is evidence of animist or Hindu customs that have been preserved for centuries. One such tradition is the adjuration to the rain god who is called upon to resuscitate the crops after the dry season.

The idea that sparsely populated Laos is home to quite a few specialists in rocket science technology is obviously met with initial scepticism. Laos, one of the smallest Southeast Asian states, surrounded by powerful neighbours and comparatively modern countries like China, Thailand, and Vietnam, is one of the poorest countries in the world. Though the blazing colours of opium, carvings, and silk fill the local markets, few manufactured products are known, let alone sold, beyond the country's borders.

A sincere "thank you" to all members who wrote an article for our newsletter on an event they have attended.

Please mark your diary! The Swiss Association of Singapore shall again host a membership day on Sunday, December 9, 2007. The traditional SAS menu "Hoernli and Ghackets with Apple Sauce" will be served, free of charge, for all members renewing their membership and new members signing up. Santa Claus and his helper "Schmutzli" shall be our guests of honour on that day. Santa Claus confirmed that all children attending the event will receive a small bag with goodies.

I very much hope that your busy schedule will permit you to attend many of our Association's events.

Sincerely yours,
Luzia Kappeler
President

Fertilizing the Sky

Shopping Centres are popping up everywhere in other Asian cities, but in the capital, Vientiane, one still looks for them in vain. The land, the people, the handicraft, and the cuisine in this country are still dedicated first and foremost to one product that seemingly has nothing to do with rockets: rice. Even in restaurants, rice is served in woven baskets called Katip, which can be up to 40 centimetres in diameter. Unpredictably it is this staple food par excellence, which moulds the nation's agricultural character so much, that stands in closest relation to the Laotian rocket arsenal.

The Mekong, the biggest river in Southeast Asia, crosses through Laos on its serpentine route from China to Cambodia and Vietnam acting as a fertile vein, but without rain the Laotian people would die of thirst and hunger.

It is for this reason that fear accompanies the wait for the arrival of the monsoons at the end of May, which will once again transform the hot parched fields of the dry season into fertile marshes, providing the prelude for the sowing of rice. This nutrition depositing moisture is so important that the sky has to be given a helping hand...with rockets, whose propulsive force, size and roar dwarf each and every August 1st celebration (Swiss national day). What's more, these rockets are not of Chinese production, but are, in a manner of speaking, homemade.

The rocket celebration in Nakha, where the sky has to be "pollinated" tonight, announces itself to the visitor in a carnival-like fashion. The potholed thoroughfare is congested with cars, mopeds, and crowds of people. The rocket brigades - mostly gangs of adolescents in haggard clothing who carry their sky bound creations on their shoulders or in a wooden handcart - are surrounded by musicians who give it their all, improvising on guitars, whistles, and drum instruments. Soon the hooting procession turns in the direction of a path that is lined with all kinds of food shops, fruit stands, and wandering children as well as stray chickens. This path leads to the rice paddies, which stretch out to the horizon. From here you have a clear view of wooden scaffolding craning its neck to the sky just 100 meters beyond the settlement. It is a launching pad where agile figures are already clambering around, and from which the spectacle will soon reach its climax.

Animistic/Hindu Origins

At the first sight of sparsely clad men dressed as women jokingly making obscene gestures, it becomes evident that there is a folk festival underway, at which rather unrestrained fertility rites will be performed with gusto. The homemade rockets imitate Phalli that are supposed to tickle the water out of the clouds, which during the 6th month of the moon calendar, at the end of the dry season, is so eagerly sought to resuscitate the crops. Not coincidentally, the rocket festival, which is called Boun Bang Fai here, is also observed in a similar fashion in the adjacent Chinese province of Yunnan as well as in the northeast of Thailand.

Even though many monks participate in this festival, distinguishing themselves from their frolicsome compatriots with their bright orange robes and their discipline, the party does not have a religious or Buddhist character. Instead, historians identify a centuries old animistic or Hindu origin that can be traced back to the time of the Khmer reign.

Even so - and irrespective of the ruling communist party that was derived from Pathet Lao in 1975 - today the Lao People's Democratic Republic presents itself as a country where all aspects of life are shaped by a deep rooted Buddhism that has existed since the 14th century.

Black as a Chimney Sweep

While some rockets are carted in already charged, others are only loaded in their stand-by position shortly before being transported to the scaffolding. A black sticky mass consisting of sulphur, potassium nitrate, and coal is pressed into the main cylinder with bare hands and then compressed with pole blows. A big pipe made of plastic or arm thick bamboo holds the burning mass, while longer and thinner bamboo poles affixed to the sides act as stabilizers.

Only when the rocket lies on the launching platform and rises to the sky at approximately an 80 degree angle is the fuse attached. The smaller rockets are still lit by hand with a lighter, but a specialist with a moped battery around his neck waits for the bigger ones. Cheered on by a mass of people and black as a chimney sweep from the smoke, he perseveres on the scaffolding and daringly fires one missile after the other into the evening sky. Before each shot his helpers wave bundles of grass to drive away the evil spirits, careful to be away from the threat of the fire stream in time.

Celebrated or Pushed in the Mud

Most of the rockets whiz off on a white stream straight to the sky. Out of sight, several hundred meters high, they reach the rain god, (or so is the assumption) who will hopefully send his suppliant farmers his precious raindrops soon. Other missiles' movements quickly turn to lurching, changing their

direction, or even heading off in a wide flat arc towards the far away rice fields. While the successful rocket builders celebrate wildly and bellow riotously, the others are exposed to raucous mockery and are showered with water, dirt, and beer or thrown into the nearest puddle. The unsuccessful rockets' sponsors, observing from a safe distance, are overtaken

by the same fate as the builders; they have lost not only their money, but also their honour for the evening.

NZZ South East Asia Correspondent
Manfred Rist

Translated from German by Camila Koepfer

Inaugural Event – Raclette

On the evening of May 19th, members and guests of the *Swiss Association of Singapore* gathered for an outdoor “Raclette” dinner to commemorate the inauguration of the Association. A pavilion located at Bottle Tree Park in the middle of a pond was the ideal Singapore setting for the event.

The members of the Committee of the brand new Association, wearing typical Swiss aprons, were welcoming all participants. Their spouses and many helpers spoiled us with a home-like aperitif, made up of delicious Swiss wines, sponsored by Ambassador Woker, air dried beef, typical Swiss cold cuts such as “Landjaeger, Bantly, Mostbroeckli” etc.

The gastronomic highlight of the evening was clearly the Raclette which was served by 5 teams, again made up from the committee and their helpers. Desserts sponsored by Swiss Bake nicely rounded off the typical Swiss meal.

Later in the evening, two lucky draws took place, one for adults and one for children. The wife of the Ambassador, Mrs. Woker was drawing the lucky winners.

The first and second prizes were 2 tickets each, from Interlaken to the top of Europe, the Jungfrauoch, which by lucky co-incidence was both won by my husband and me.

One month later, my husband, our two children and I took the train from Interlaken via

Wengen to the Jungfrau. The temperature at 3571 m was minus 7 degrees, what a contrast to the tropical climate of Singapore where the tickets were won. Unfortunately, the weather was not perfect; however the whole family enjoyed the trip to the Jungfrau.

We would like to thank the sponsor for the great prizes and especially all Committee members of the *Swiss Association of Singapore* for the great job they did in organizing this evening and also for their tireless efforts throughout the year.



The Pochon family

Raffles Night Out

Raffles Culinary Academy was the venue for a comfortable and pleasant evening for fourteen members of the Swiss Association on Saturday 16th June. Christopher Lau, the Sous Chef at Raffles hosted the evening. He demonstrated a very interesting menu, which we all enjoyed afterwards. Of course, he had prepared the actual dinners earlier in the day in the Raffles kitchen.

Singapore Laksa, steamed Seabass and Sago for dessert made up the menu. The Laksa was prepared with coconut milk, spices, prawns and quail eggs; the Seabass was steamed in a sweet soy sauce; the Sago was served with palm sugar, pandan leaves and coconut milk as a creamy sauce. The pandan flavour was very subtle! Many people had not tasted Sago before and this was a great talking point. A culinary dictionary was produced and we looked up Sago and palm sugar to see where they came from and how they were grown -- palm sugar does come from a palm tree! Sago is made from the pith of the Sago palm.



Great care was taken by Christopher to indicate the measurements of the ingredients and the method of preparation and cooking of the food. He also was very generous in answering questions for the guests.

Dinner was served on attractively decorated tables, highlighted by beautiful roses and ginger flowers. The food was delicious and well received by the participants. (Sago was still under consideration by some.) Some of us also enjoyed a glass or two of Sauvignon Blanc from the Adelaide Hills in South Australia to accompany our meal, as selected by Felix and Thomas.

This was the final presentation in this particular kitchen, as the Raffles Culinary Academy is now moving to a new "state of the art" kitchen on the 4th floor. Pity, really, as this kitchen was full of nostalgia with old pots and tea pots adding to the ambiance. We received a lovely certificate for taking part in the evening.

Well done to Raffles and the Swiss Association!



Swiss Association Member
Fleur Dickinson

HDB Estate and Flat visit – August 24th 2007

After visits to a Buddhist temple in March and to the Parliament of Singapore in May, SAS members got to experience yet another

quintessentially Singaporean institution last August. On 24 August, approximately 15 SAS members and interested parties left their gated

expatriate communities temporarily behind and took a plunge into the Singaporean mainstream when they visited a Housing and Development Board estate located near Circuit Rd., a 20-minute walk northeast from the Aljunied MRT station.

Public housing in Singapore is synonymous with the Housing and Development Board (HDB), which was set up in 1960 in order to address the acute housing crisis faced by the country at the time. Singaporean public housing is “public” not only because of the financial subsidies involved, but also because of its architectural layout (by Western standards, surprisingly little privacy is afforded to dwellers) and the fact that about 85% of Singaporeans live in HDB-flats. It is thus no wonder that much of the life of most Singaporeans is centred on the purchase and sale of HDB-flats and that public housing has been an important instrument for social engineering and securing political influence over the past four decades of accelerated economic and social change.

The visit was made possible thanks to Amy Tan, who introduced the group to her sister-in-law who lives with her family in a typical 4-room HDB-flat in one of the earliest HDB estates. The 42-year-old estate has undergone a number of upgrading projects, and being located in a “mature” township it is within reasonable reach of all the standard amenities like food centres, a wet market, small shops, primary and secondary schools, a community library, a neighbourhood police post, and a public swimming pool.

Amy shared some insights regarding life in an HDB estate and answered our questions. The group learned about the intricate rules and regulations for purchasing and selling an HDB-flat, the ethnic quotas and income requirements, the monthly “meet the residents” sessions held by a Member of Parliament and the aspirations of most HDB-dwellers to eventually own an apartment in a private condominium.

After having been treated by the host to some local delicacies, Amy took us to the second destination of our visit. Her parents-in-law run a small corner shop in the vicinity, selling convenience goods and Chinese medicine. We learned, like in many other cities, the Mom-and-Pop stores find the going increasingly hard as they face stiff competition from the bigger grocery chains and are left to cater to an aging population in the neighbourhood. It was also interesting to see that the shop houses provide convenient living quarters on the second floor of the premises and to learn that the HDB was willing to reduce the rent for the shop house in view of the economic difficulties.

Unfortunately the excursion was cut short by the onset of rain, and thus the group did not get to visit common HDB fixtures such as a wet market, a food centre and a makeshift shrine for the Hungry Ghosts festival of the seventh lunar month. However, those who opted for a walk through the HDB heartland in search of the nearest MRT station would still have caught further glimpses of everyday HDB-life: children in school uniforms walking home; aunties returning from the market, pulling shopping trolleys replete with produce; domestic workers taking care of elderly Singaporeans in wheel chairs; foreign workers sweeping walkways and pruning trees; toddlers being introduced to the art of rhythmically bowing in front of a shrine and waving joss sticks without getting burnt themselves; retirees watching TV or practicing karaoke songs in public.

For those interested in learning more about the role of the HDB in Singapore, the official website provides some useful information (www.hdb.gov.sg). For a scholarly analysis of public housing in Singapore see, for example, B. H. Chua's *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore*, New York: Routledge, 1997.

Swiss Association Member
Bruno Trezzini

Nadia's Sri Lanka Kitchen – Cooking Demonstration

For me and probably most Swiss people, Sri Lanka is either a dream holiday destination or the country of origin for the diligent and reliable Tamils who work in restaurants and other businesses in Switzerland. That Sri Lanka also offers the most mouth-watering dishes I have tasted for years was quite a discovery to me and the other participants of Nadia's Sri Lanka Kitchen class.

Nadia is an energetic Swiss lady who has lived in Sri Lanka with her husband for six years. Her mother-in-law, an exceptionally gifted cook, taught her how to prepare the genuine specialties of Sri Lanka. Nadia explained that only the inhabitants of the North (one third of the population) are called Tamils, and the majority are actually the Sinhalese. Sinhalese cooking is what she originally learned and now teaches in her classes.

A typical Sinhalese meal consists of rice, lentils, meat, fish, vegetables and a salad. The two main spice mixtures are un-roasted curry and roasted curry, which may be used in combination with spices like cardamom, coriander, cumin, cinnamon, chillies, curry leaves, turmeric, lemongrass, ginger etc. Another typical ingredient is coconut milk that gives dishes a particularly smooth and almost sweetish taste.

Nadia demonstrated step-by-step how to cook a typical family meal, consisting of basmati

rice, chicken curry, paripu-dahl curry, fried leeks, beetroot curry, salad and chutney, followed by yoghurt with jaggery. What surprised me most was the simple cooking style that delivered such a tremendous result. In a nutshell, Nadia put all ingredients like chicken, spices and water in a pot, lit the fire and simply stirred from time to time. Then a quick check on the taste and tenderness of the meat - and that was it! Quite different from the sequential procedure that we know from Western cooking.

At the end of the cooking demonstration, we sat down for lunch and enjoyed an absolutely harmonious and succulent meal. We used our right hand to eat, which was quite a challenge for most of us. Even though we had the impression that more or less the same spices had been used in all dishes, every food item tasted different. It was like a well-organized orchestra playing the same beautiful piece of music, yet you still notice the different instruments playing individually. Being myself a great admirer of Indian cuisine, I must admit that the Sinhalese curries appeared even tastier and more diversified to me. Nadia did a great job getting Sri Lankan culture and cooking knowledge across, and the whole group is looking forward to the next class.

Swiss Association Member
Gabriela Bassili

Editor's Notes

Remember to visit the Swiss Association website, www.swiss-sg.org. It is a wonderful way to keep abreast of our upcoming events, messages and monthly activities.

Mary Mapp