



CORRESPONDENTS



Ben W. Heineman, Jr.

Sep 14 2009, 7:54AM

[CULTURE / MEDIA](#)

[In Search of Charlie Chaplin](#)

by Ben W. Heineman, Jr. and Cristine Russell

A trip to Europe invariably includes a quest (large or small) for an atmospheric corner of history.

But for many observers, it also involves remarking (with a light or heavy touch) on the ineluctable irony of past glories buried under present banalities.

Condos for sale with "cathdl vu."

On the way to Basel and Budapest for work, we recently spent four days in Vevey and Montreux, two picturesque towns at the eastern end of Lake Geneva which for the past 200 years have been a favored watering hole for reknowned artists.

Here Lord Byron wrote the "Prisonor of Chillon" about an outspoken advocate of the Reformation incarcerated for six years in the 16th Century deep in the dungeons of the imposing chateau jutting out into the Lake. (" But this was for my father's faith/I suffer'd chains and courted death".)

Here Henry James lived while writing **Daisy Miller**---setting her initial coquettishness in the prim world of the 19th century lakeside Vevey hotel where he lived (des Trois Couronnes---still grand but quite dowdy).

Here Igor Stravinsky wrote "The Rite of Spring" in the early 20th century, and Swiss native Corbousier built a famous modernist, one-story home for his parents in 1923 at the edge of Lake Geneva.

Here Hemingway lived and hiked, letting his lost generation couple, Catherine Barkeley and Frederic Henry, have a last moment of happiness in the wintry Swiss hills after they had said farewell to arms and to the mindless brutality of the Italian front in World War I and before they had moved down the lake to Lausanne and death in childbirth. ("The snow lay all over the

country, down almost to Montreux.")

And here came Shelley and Flaubert and Tolstoy and Hans Christian Anderson and Oskar Kokoschka and.....Anita Brookner who, in 1984, wrote a Booker prize-winning novel , **Hotel du Lac**, set (like Henry James' hotel down the street) where she stayed in Vevey.

Of course, in some ways, the 21st century doesn't just obscure but obliterates evocations of times past. Vevey and Montreux are not small burghs but little cities with fierce traffic, faceless high rises piled one on another and stately quays turned into flea markets and tee shirt stands. It can be hard to find the historic old town amidst the hyper-markets, the designer stores and swarming tour buses.

Yet, at least in the bright, clear days of early September when the August invasion has retreated, this small corner of Europe still has a powerful capacity to transport the traveler back in time, to convey the calm and beauty which attracted so many famous writers and musicians. A small train, pulled by a steam engine, runs between towns. Drive a few miles out of Vevey and Montreux and you find yourself in true villages perched on the hillside, with narrow streets and small stores. Much of the coast has been declared a historic district, and vineyards cover the hills falling to the lake with soothing patterns of lush green (allowing nary a condo).

White sails dot the lake with the French Alps as looming backdrop on the far shore, while lines created by the wakes of steamers connect the towns dotting the coastline. The old Montreux-Oberland Bernois train line carries hikers to dramatic peaks several thousand feet above the towns to see the whole sweep of the lake and the surrounding mountains. Grand, Edwardian hotels stand guard over the past, bedecked with yellow awnings to shield patrons and shops from the slanting afternoon sun.

Yet in one respect the contemporary arts trump the older ones. Charlie Chaplin, who was born in the U.K. and found fame and fortune in the U.S., was forced to leave America during the McCarthy era, settling near Vevey in the early fifties where he lived with his family until his death in 1977. Today, a small, life-sized bronze statue of the Little Tramp is almost hidden in a tiny park set back on a quiet part of the Vevey waterfront.

By contrast, directly down from one of Montreux's busiest intersections on an open, bustling lakeside promenade, towers a much larger than life statute of Freddie Mercury, a lead singer of the rock group Queen, who died here in 1991 (where he had a second home). In keeping with Mercury's prominence, the Montreux and Vevey corner of Lake Geneva are best known today for a July festival of jazz and modern music----now the towns' world famous Rite of Summer.

Wouldn't Stravinsky have approved?

Cristine Russell, former national health and science writer for *The Washington Post*, is senior fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School.

###