

# FROM THE FOOTHILLS TO THE SWISS ALPS

with René Welti and Suzanne Cairns

By Abbie Burgess | Photos provided by René Welti



“**L**ike a fairytale” is Suzanne Cairns and René Welti’s description of how they first met. In September 2014 they were both riding the Jungfrau railway in Switzerland. René, a Swiss travel guide, was leading a group back down to the town of Grindelwald. Suzanne and her friend were sitting opposite him on the train. Suzanne commented that René had surprisingly good English. He responded by saying “I should; I grew up in the USA.” Specifically, Mountain View, California. Suzanne and friend said that they lived in Mountain View and Los Altos Hills! Soon they discovered that all three of them worshiped at Peninsula Bible Church. Also coincidentally, they were all bound for Lugano the next day, so they made plans to travel together.

Four months later, back in California, they met up for lunch at Stanford Shopping Center. Many hikes around the area soon followed. When René discovered Suzanne had a Swiss heritage connection, he came up with the suggestion they lead Swiss tours together in the summer. A year and a half later, in October 2016, they married in the Mt. Hermon Chapel in the Santa Cruz mountains.

**SWISS TOUR SPECIALISTS**

Today Suzanne and René organize and lead rail and hiking tours in Switzerland, guiding each summer from June through September.

ECHO Rails & Trails tours take participants on twelve-day rail excursions on Switzerland’s legendary trains traveling through the Swiss towns of Lucerne, St. Moritz, Andermatt, Zermatt and Grindelwald, concluding at Zurich airport. For those seeking a shorter kind of adventure, ECHO Trails also offers day hiking tours throughout Switzerland.

The hiking tour is an eight-day trip that they scouted together, looking for hikes right through the heart of the Swiss Alps in the Jungfrau mountain region. These hikes are moderate with a few strenuous sections, averaging six miles per day in two to three-hour hiking segments. René and Suzanne always offer options for people who would rather take public transportation to the next stop. This way they can accommodate all ranges of fitness levels, so everyone has an enjoyable time. The pace is kept slow to keep the focus on the scenery and allow participants to “inhale” the beautiful Swiss Alps, as René and Suzanne say. “One of the aspects we love about being guides is the bonding we create with our group,” René says. “We have lots of laughter and goofing around on the trains!”

Over the years, a number of Los Altos Hills residents have participated in René and Suzanne’s Swiss tour. On one trip, three women from Los Altos Hills posed holding a copy of the Los Altos Courier newspaper in the mountain village of Grindelwald.

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Suzanne and René organize and lead rail and hiking tours in Switzerland.



A group of hikers who meet at Cuesta Park in Mountain View joined an ECHO Rails &amp; Trails tour in Switzerland.



A tour on top of the UNESCO Jungfrauajoch Aletsch glacier.



## HOW RENÉ GOT STARTED IN THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY

Before launching his own company, René had established himself as an expert in the tourism industry. It all started during his senior year at San Jose State University when he co-founded a company offering charter flights and Eurail passes to students. After graduating, René relocated to Switzerland for his first official travel and tourism job.

He went on to have a 12-year career with Trans World Airlines in Zürich where his last assignment was Manager of International Marketing. This led to a position with the State of Florida tourism board, where he was responsible for managing Florida's four tourism departments. He then moved on to form his own business.

For the next 22 years, René ran his own company in Atlanta, Georgia, contracting with Swiss travel companies to generate travel from the USA to Switzerland. A career highlight was winning the Odyssey International Marketing Award.

René started the ECHO Trails business in 2012 when he lived full time in Lucerne, Switzerland. He has come a long way since his early days of organizing day trips in the mountains of the Lucerne region. He is now listed in the Lonely Planet Discover Switzerland Guide as the Central Swiss Alps specialist. While living in Lucerne, he took advantage of his fluency in both High German and Swiss German, he volunteered as a Friendly Host helping visitors find their way around Lucerne and Switzerland.

## LOCAL ADVENTURES

"While running ECHO Trails is a year-round job, we both take the time to enjoy the things we do locally too," Suzanne says. She and René are members of the Los Altos Newcomers Club and have hosted the group at their Los Altos Hills home.

René is also a substitute High School teacher and enjoys subbing at Los Altos and Mountain View high schools. Both René and Suzanne volunteer at their church at every opportunity.

Though the local foothills can't compete with the Swiss Alps, Suzanne and René keep up their hiking regimen at Rancho San Antonio and on the trails along Skyline Boulevard. They hike with the Cuesta Park group who travel to local parks on a weekly basis. "This is a group that meets Tuesday and Thursdays at 9:00 at Cuesta Park in the parking lot in Mt. View," René says, adding that it is free and open to the public. Some particularly dedicated members of this hiking group have even accompanied René and Suzanne to Switzerland on their hiking tours.

René recently competed in the Half-Moon Bay Sprint Triathlon. He's won his age group for the past two years and enjoys the comradery of his El Camino Y Tri-Club fellow triathletes.

With his USA travel industry connections, René is also the USA Ambassador of the World Tourism Forum Lucerne, where global leaders in the travel & tourism hospitality meet the next generation of tourism leaders in Lucerne on a bi-annual basis.

## RENÉ'S FAMILY HISTORY

Rene can trace his family heritage all the way back to Southern France in 1000 AD and then Switzerland in 1538. "According to my family tree book, I'm the 14th generation of my clan," says Rene, who was born in Basel, Switzerland. When he was a child his family emigrated to North America and he attended Ventura Elementary School in Palo Alto and later graduated from Mt. View High School located on Castro street.

René has two children from a previous marriage. His daughter now lives in Australia, is married with two children and works as a scientist with the

Commonwealth Science Research Institute of Australia. René's son is also married and lives in Zürich working for Credit Suisse as a foreign exchange specialist.

### SUZANNE'S FAMILY HISTORY

Suzanne was born in San Francisco where her father was a principal at one of the top high schools in California. She loved playing sports, especially team ice-skating.

As a child, her interest in adventure and the outdoors was sparked by exploring many National Parks with her family. Seeking a respite from the San Francisco summer fog, her family purchased a small cabin in the Santa Cruz mountains. She has many fond memories of summers there spent fishing for crayfish, wading in the creek, hiking the area, building sandcastles at the beach and swimming in the local pool. Today, it makes her happy to see her nine grandchildren enjoying many of these same activities.

Suzanne graduated from Oregon State University and taught Home Economics in high school. She and her husband at the time traveled throughout Europe and enjoyed visiting their relatives in Switzerland.

### "THIS IS HOME"

Suzanne moved to Los Altos Hills in 1978 for her husband's job and raised her three children here. Suzanne says she loved having people over with families to have her children grow up with family values and lots of fun! Her three children still live locally with their families.

After her first husband died of cancer, Suzanne decided she wanted to reach out to children in poorer countries. She taught in schools in India for the "untouchable" caste children and in Kenya.

Suzanne loves living in Los Altos Hills because of the hiking paths available close to home. "We have wonderful neighbors that I often have over for Christmastime open houses and street barbecues."

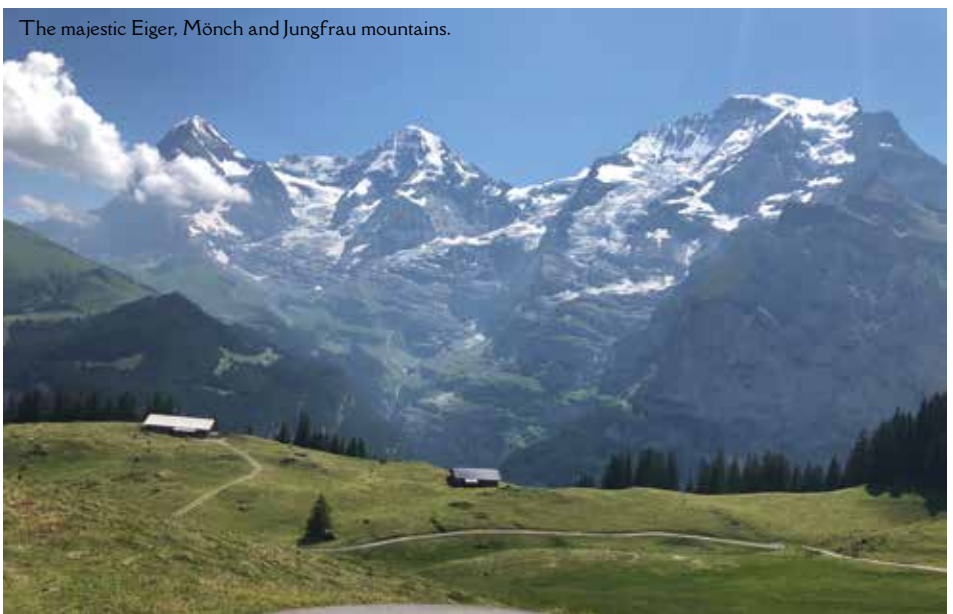
"We walk on the paths with our neighbors, go to different functions and support each other in any crisis," René adds.

Although Suzanne and René have lived in many different areas and cultures, they both agree that Los Altos Hills gives them the feeling that this is home.

Los Altos Hills residents pose with a copy of the Los Altos Town Crier newspaper while on an ECHO Trails tour in Switzerland.



The majestic Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau mountains.



Suzanne and René show their Swiss pride in front of the Matterhorn.

