

FROM BUCKEYES TO NEWLY SWISSED

What's it like returning home? Ashley Roque sits down with Newly Swissed Founder Dimitri Burkhard to share a pizza and learn about his inspiration for covering the quirky aspects of Switzerland.

When rumors swirl about someone's demeanor, positive attributes are rarely on the tongue. This is not that type of story. From writers to those who have heard the fabled tale through the rumor mill, all repeated a simple phrase, "He's the nicest guy you'll meet."

"It's one of his most enduring qualities," Newly Swissed's Community Manager Christian Langenegger told me.

And so on a warm afternoon in Zurich West, I had the opportunity to grab a bite to eat with the man behind the myth — Dimitri Burkhard, the founder of Newly Swissed. Over a shared pizza and reminiscing about some of the easier aspects of United States culture (like walking into a bar alone, and leaving with new friends) we dovetailed into the inspiration behind his online, English-language magazine covering Swiss trends and local quirks.

Since 2010, Dimitri has been building a pool of volunteer writers covering a breadth of topics from videos capturing "When Americans try Rivella for the first time" to articles on the "10 most annoying Swiss problems." Born, in part, as a bid to readjust to daily life in Switzerland after nearly a decade abroad, Dimitri's project is helping tourists and expats alike find the lighter side of life under the white cross.

"I saw my home country from the perspective of a tourist."

RED, WHITE (AND BLUE)

Growing up in Canton Zurich, Dimitri's path to expat life began when he was still in school and decided to spend a year as a foreign exchange student in the US. Placed with a host family in rural Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Dimitri recalls his first glimpse of his life abroad arriving in the mail — a photo of a black bear crossing a driveway in front of his host family's log cabin.

Back in Switzerland after a taste of life in the States, Dimitri decided to join his parents on a permanent move to Columbus, Ohio, where he enrolled in the communications program at Ohio State University — home of the high profile US football team dubbed the Buckeyes, a type of brown nut.

"I made lots of friends from all over the world, learned about American corporate culture and created a second home base," he says.

But in addition to earning his degree, creating a second home and launching a career, during his stint in the US he also met Japanese-native Mamiko while giving German lessons.

"She was in my mom's English class and one day decided to learn German," he recalls. "Our running joke is that I never completed the first lesson with her, but that she never paid her tuition, either."

After saying 'I do' and building a life together in the US, the economic recession ripped through the States and Switzerland's appeal began to grow. In 2009, Dimitri returned to his homeland with Mamiko ready to practice her German.

Photos: © Newly Swissed

HOME SWEET HOME

US writer Thomas Wolfe's 'You Can't Go Home Again' rings true for many who have ever left the city they grew up in, especially for those who have set up home abroad. For many expats, the longing for home and its familiar rhythm is strong. I miss boozy weekend brunches with friends, permissibility to wear yoga pants to a Sunday morning farmer's market and amazing Cuban food.

But the occasional visit 'home' always reveals a stark reality — in my absence time has moved on, or maybe I have. Sundays are now for hiking, and my black beans and rice now taste better than many Cuban restaurants.

Dimitri's return to Switzerland, now as a working adult, also brought with it a fresh perspective. Nearly a decade of US life had left its mark and "things that once seemed commonplace suddenly stood out," he recalls.

"I saw my home country from the perspective of a tourist," he adds. Grappling with the realities of his new life, Dimitri turned to writing and exploring Zurich through the eyes of a newbie.

"Call it a creative process, call it therapy: One day in February 2010, I published my very first blog...and I've never stopped since," Dimitri explains.

As for the name, he laughs, that was Mamiko's influence. "One night at dinner when she told me, 'your train was late three minutes? You are so Newly Swissed!'"

THROUGH A TOURIST'S EYES

Nearly six years into the online magazine, Dimitri is splitting his time between his career in the marketing world and churning out quality content on Newly Swissed that is garnering nearly 60,000 visits each month.

While many members of Switzerland's international community turn to the website to read about events around the country, articles devoted to top-10 lists and quirky facts are also garnering a group of readers abroad.

So why English? Dimitri says the "English language comes natural to me."

"It felt right to share my updates in English," he explains. "Little did I know that Newly Swissed was filling a niche market."

"Fairly quickly, the project has grown greater than myself and I find much satisfaction in providing a platform for other writers," he adds.

As with many ventures, especially those with strong leadership, Dimitri credits success to his team of more than a dozen international contributors, as well as Mamiko.

"It's important that Newly Swissed content provides a look of Switzerland from the outside in," Dimitri explains. "We often get feedback from Swiss readers that they had learned about an interesting tradition or a new place to visit. This shows that our writers share an open mind to discovering ever new details and quirks about Switzerland."

Many of his writers are looking to build a career in journalism, while others simply enjoy the freedom of writing about topics close to their heart for a broad audience.

Christian, who now owns a bar in Zurich, recalls that he contacted Dimitri nearly five years ago when Newly Swissed was getting off the ground.

"I was impressed with the quality," he recalls. Dimitri is "tirelessly committed to Newly Swissed and creating quality content."

This is clear from the website's content and for anyone who has the opportunity to chat with him about the project. And while he enjoys spending his lunch breaks walking through Zurich in search of inspiration and devoting his weekends to exploring the country with Mamiko, he says turning the online magazine into a full-time gig is not a top priority right now.

However, he cautions that "we have some exciting projects in the pipeline, but we cannot disclose any details yet." So keep an eye out for new and exciting projects by this former expat as he continues to lift the veil on daily life in Switzerland.

Now, if Dimitri could round up a list of Cuban or Mexican restaurants throughout the country, I would be forever indebted. ●



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To check out Newly Swissed, visit www.newlyswissed.com