



If you thought the hinterland would lack cutting-edge accommodation, think again, says **Albert Hill**

Alpine style

Foreign tourists have largely shunned the region around the town of Neuchâtel in northwest Switzerland. No busy cities, no glamorous ski resorts, not even a yodelling festival have put this modest place on the international map. Yet it's for all these reasons, and plenty more, that there's much to recommend the discreet charms of Pays de Neuchâtel, not least the fact that it's home to some of Switzerland's more interesting hotels.

Attracted by its gentle blend of beautiful lakes and historical architecture, the surroundings of Neuchâtel have traditionally played host to visiting Swiss families and the elderly. Last year, though, visitors travelled to the region for something a little more unusual. Expo 02, a series of exhibitions, events and, most talked about of all, incredible architectural experiments, brought about some amazing sights in the area.

To accompany the Expo and accommodate the influx of visitors, three hotels, as daring as the structures on show, were built. First there was the Art & Plage in Yverdon-le-Bains, a building made from pre-fabricated blocks, each a room, stacked on top of one another. In Biel-Bienne, five silos were set, three on the bottom, two on top, on a small wasteland near the train station. Each cylindrical silo was converted to hold six beds and the structure became the Swiss Tubes hotel. It was in Neuchâtel, though, that the most ambitious hotel was built. The Palafitte comprises 40 pavilions set on stilts in Lake Neuchâtel and incorporates enough technology in each room to make James Bond jealous.

All three hotels were constructed from modules, the idea being that at the end of the Expo they could be dismantled and moved on. Since the Expo is now over, the Swiss Tubes and the Art & Plage are sadly no longer in service, but the Palafitte has recently,

after much pleading, gained permission from the local council to stay open indefinitely.

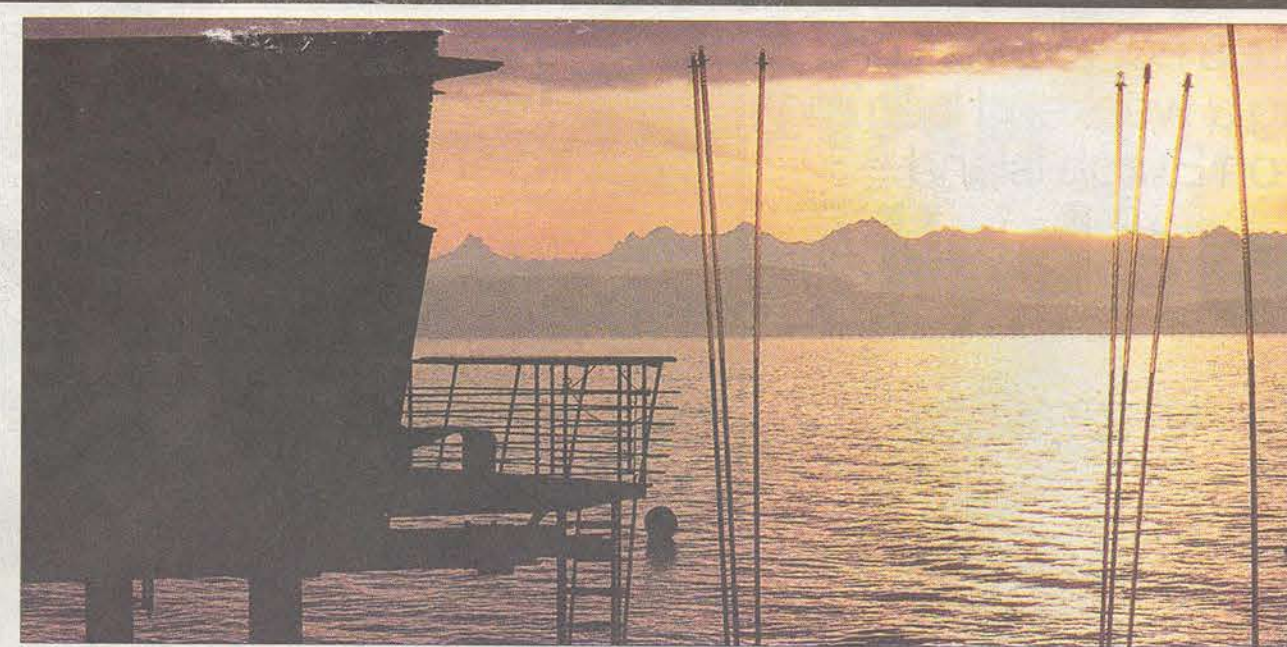
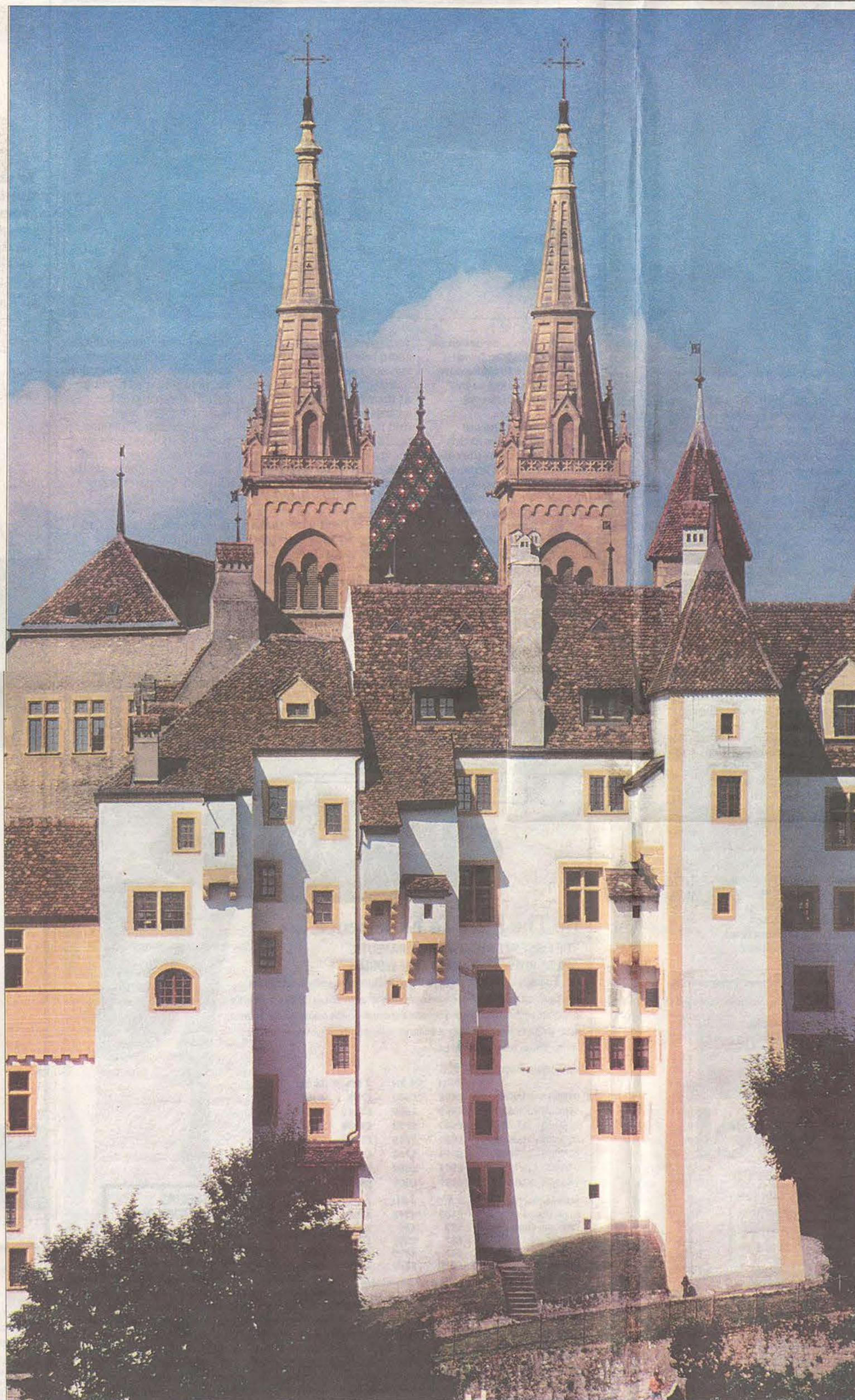
Accommodation at the truly unique Palafitte is discussed in greater depth below, but aside from the three experimental hotels built for the Expo, there are many more hotels in the Pays de Neuchâtel with their own appealing idiosyncrasies. They might not trip off the tongue of global jetsetters, but that shouldn't be a reason to leave them off your itinerary.

Auberge L'Aubier

If you're desperate, staff will bring you a TV, but they are frowned upon in L'Aubier, a hotel that's possibly the only one in the world based on the principles of philosopher Rudolf Steiner. The corridors in this converted 200-year-old farmhouse are filled with bulging bookshelves, hinting at what you are supposed to be doing for entertainment, although visitors also like to explore the busy farm that's part of L'Aubier, too. Fully organic, the crops and cows on the farm provide nearly all the ingredients for the hugely popular restaurant at the hotel.

Ownership of L'Aubier is a highly complex matter. Over 1,000 shareholders have bought bonds in the business, allowing the people that run it to bypass the banks for funds. Ever ethically motivated, the hotel also earns income from selling its organic farm produce. Indeed L'Aubier only became a hotel as an afterthought. Originally, it was bought to be only a farm. Whoever had the idea to make the place into a hotel, though, was clearly a clever sort.

The 25 rooms — most in the farmhouse but some in an architecturally startling outbuilding — all have yawning views out to Lake Neuchâtel and the Alps beyond. Each room has a different theme — terracotta, say, or poplar — and is decorated accordingly. The building itself is set in particularly cosy



Way to go

►►► **Getting there:** Swiss International Air Lines (0845 6010956, swiss.com/uk) operates 20 flights daily from London Heathrow, London City, Birmingham and Manchester to Zurich from £101 + £31 taxes. Easyjet (0870 6000000, easyjet.com) flies to Zurich from London Stansted from £60 return inc taxes. Train from Zurich to Neuchâtel: 2 hrs. ►►► **Further information:** MySwitzerland.com or call the Switzerland Travel Centre on freephone 00800 10020030. Country code: 00 41. Flight time London-Zurich:



1hr 50mins.
Time difference: +1hr.
£1 = 2.13 Swiss francs.

Neu order (clockwise from far left) ... Auberge L'Aubier; the town of Neuchâtel; Hotel Palafitte on Lake Neuchâtel and La Maison du Prussien

alpine surroundings. Staff are refreshingly informal but, this being Switzerland, are always efficient and courteous with their service.

Almost all visitors to L'Aubier are from the German-speaking parts of Switzerland, or from Germany itself. Understandably, there are some locals that view the place with deep suspicion — organic farming hasn't quite caught on in Switzerland like it has in the UK — but gradually the community is beginning to appreciate what they call the "eco-hotel".

►►► Montezillon, tel: 032 732 22 11, aubier.ch. Single room Sfr125-140, double Sfr160-220.

La Maison du Prussien

Pays de Neuchâtel has a rich architectural history, from the 12th-century castle towering over Neuchâtel to the 20th-century masterpieces created by Le Corbusier in his home town of La Chaux-de-Fonds. La Maison du Prussien might not be as renowned as either of these but the 18th-century ex-brewery building, set among the ruins of three old mills, is an impressive, and particularly Swiss, sight nonetheless. The cutely decorated shutters animate the building's tall, flat facade, while eight spreading steps welcome visitors up the hotel lobby.

The hotel's French owners, Astrid and Jean-Yves Drevet, have aimed unashamedly at making this an exceptionally romantic location in which to settle down for a few nights. They offer special "Dream for Two" packages especially for lovestruck couples. The building is a good start for a fairytale break but the surrounding site of Gor du Vauseyon really

makes for some breathtaking moments. Nearby footbridges cling to rocks, waterfalls gush into plunging gorges, and there's even an animal park and climbing wall not too far away.

On a more prosaic note, the hotel is also equipped to deal with business conferences. All guests, whether honeymooners or junior managers, get to stay in ancient-looking rooms with plenty of exposed wood and stone. The restaurant at the hotel is a splendid affair, too, set in a glass annex. Jean-Yves, the owner, is also the chef and serves some of the area's best French cuisine. Views from the restaurant to the garden only heighten the fantastical atmosphere of the hotel. In winter, the frosted garden can look straight from the pages of Hans Christian Andersen, especially after a few bottles of the local Neuchâtel pinot noir. ►►► Gor du Vauseyon, tel: 032 730 54 54, hotel-prussien.ch. Single Sfr135-170, double Sfr155-220.

Hotel Palafitte

For the considerable amount of money you pay to stay at the Palafitte, you should expect something a little extraordinary, and that is what you get. "The only luxury hotel in Europe constructed on a lake," says the literature, and by that they don't mean just by the side of the lake. Most of the 40 pavilions that compromise the hotel rooms jut out into Lake Neuchâtel and guests can, should they be brave enough, climb down the ladder from their balcony and take a dip. The less adventurous can merely sit and watch the swans and moorhens bobbing on the water below.

The pavilions were designed by the Lausanne-based architect Kurt Hofmann, and the style of each is of a modernist garden-shed. The gorgeous silver-grey wood that Hofmann has used gives them a shimmering appearance, in sympathy with the similarly coloured lake. In winter,

the pavilions that are set back from the water become crowded by swaying rushes, while in the summer stunningly coloured flowers swarm the banks.

The pavilions are reached from reception by a buggy that hums along the boardwalks. It's a novel experience being driven to your hotel room after check-in, but Palafitte prides itself on such quirks. The pavilion's interiors are executed in a rather generic contemporary style, but kids should enjoy the glass wall that divides bedroom from bathroom. Lights pulse along the length of the wall, the colours continually changing. Philippe Starck-designed fixtures fill the bathroom and all the toiletries are from the nearby Bulgari factories. Image, clearly, is very important in the hotel.

Those with a love for technology will revel in the amount, and range, of gadgets available in the rooms. Entry is gained via fingerprint recognition rather than a more traditional key. Each room has its own Simpad, a computer from which you can adjust the light, heat and blinds. Then there's the gargantuan TV, along with DVD and CD player, surround-sound Bose speakers and another computer for internet access. It's no surprise to find out that the hotel was originally sponsored by electrical giant Siemens to test out its new technology.

Technophobes might be advised to keep a wide berth of the Palafitte because a simple task such as turning on a bedside light can become a complex mission. Guests at the hotel, though, tend to be well-versed in such procedures. Neuchâtel holds the HQs of some of the world's biggest watch manufacturers, and people on business trips can often be found at Palafitte, although families and young couples are also a common sight.

►►► Neuchâtel, 032 723 02 02, palafitte.ch, all rooms Sfr600-800 in season and Sfr500-650 off-season.