



FIRST DEGREE BERN

Le Carre plots come alive in a Swiss city too good to miss

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The train crossing the gorge of the Aare River brings the glorious baroque old-town precinct of Switzerland's capital Bern into view, so it's no surprise I'm channelling Michael Portillo. But not his tailor. The sort of garb favoured by TV's most colourful train and history buff would stand out too much in a city where discretion is almost mandatory. That doesn't mean there isn't intrigue bubbling below the surface, because instead of perky Portillo's ever-present Bradshaw's railway guide, my references are books by, and about, spy-turned-spy writer John le Carre.

It was to Bern where the still-teenaged David Cornwell (John le Carre's real identity), abandoning his last year of school, journeyed to escape the humiliations of a conman father and where he was talent-spotted by British intelligence. Significant passages of two of his finest novels are set in Bern, so I'm here on a personal le Carre discovery tour, to see what shaped his life and his work. And arriving on a sunny Sunday morning is serendipity, because it is such a time and place when le Carre delivers the denouement of what's taken three novels to achieve — his Bunter-esque hero George Smiley, the professor emeritus of British espionage, triumphantly probing the weak spot of his Soviet nemesis Karla.

In the novel *Smiley's People*, it begins on the large terrace called the Platform fronting Bern's late-gothic minster. While watching locals playing on a pavement chessboard with outsized pieces, Smiley's veteran legman Toby Esterhase, backed by his team of lamp-lighters (spook-speak for watchers and couriers), quietly confronts Bern-based envoy Anton Grigoriev about activities performed on behalf of Karla that would displease their superiors in Moscow, and so begins the burning of "Tricky Tony".

This Sunday, the Platform is indeed a place of Bernese leisure. There are rocking horses and a sandpit, table tennis tables, and outdoor settings for a cafe in the corner overlooking the Aare River. But no chess. Le Carre has taken literary licence here. The Bernese do play giant chess on a Sunday, but up in Baren-

platz, a plaza lined with restaurants, coffee houses and bars, which makes for a more vocal spectator crowd, which in Bern merely means discreet gesturing and polite applause. I hope my next stop rings more true.

Elfenau is a short tram ride from Bern proper and its elegant villas house dozens of embassies. It feels a little furtive to be wandering around its quiet streets on a Sunday afternoon, taking notes and photos and looking for St Ursula's English-Speaking Church. This modest building sits shielded by a grove of trees on a triangle of land on Kirchenfeldstrasse, and here at least Cornwell fact lines up with le Carre fiction. The young David, having enrolled in the university with scant schoolboy German, would attend services mainly to hear voices linked to the home he'd fled. At a Christmas Day service, "Wendy" and "Sandy" from the embassy invite him to lunch the next day, where the topic of service to one's country is raised.

This was virtually the scene painted by le Carre in his most autobiographical novel, *A Perfect Spy*, in which young Magnus Pym is so recruited. Pym becomes a Czech double agent, while Cornwell in a way also swaps sides, later moving from MI5 to MI6. Only le Carre completists might be interested in Langgassestrasse, which the author called "a long, dull road behind the university". It's here, in a safe house, that Smiley deftly turns Tricky Tony. Magnus Pym also resided in a Langgassestrasse boarding house. Neither sounds salubrious.

I query its significance with Christof, a Bern guide giving a historic tour of the city and by chance also a le Carre fan. "But Langgassestrasse is where David Cornwell lived when he came to Bern," he says. "It's No 45, next to the tea shop." There's nothing telling about the building, so we'll have to wait for the author's demise for the commemorative plaque to be posted.

Hotel Bellevue Palace is Bern's best place to stay, and Cornwell splashed out to spend his first night as a "refugee" here. It's also where George Smiley bases himself during the burning of Tricky Tony. In *Smiley's People*, le Carre describes the Bellevue as "an



enormous, sumptuous place of mellowed Edwardian quiet”, and its Bellevue Bar has the sort of solitary corners into which Smiley could spirit himself. But it’s such a lovely evening that I choose the Bellevue’s terrace, order a glass of chasselas, the local dry white, and look across the river to the towers of the Bern History Museum, which holds a display of the work of a more out-there Bern resident, Albert Einstein.

While Einstein the scientist leaves most of us relatively bewildered, Albert the man is far more tangible, and an alternative site is the Einstein Haus in the old town. He and his scientist wife, Mileva Maric, lived here for two of their seven years in Bern, and the place is decorated for the era and festooned with memorabilia and letters, such as the one Albert penned to Mileva not professing undying love (he eventually left her for his cousin) but his joy at discovering “a very simple method for deciding whether the latent heat of metals is due to the ponderable matter of electricity”.

Cornwell’s biographer, Adam Sisman, cites an old saying that “everything is forbidden in Bern”. Which, of course, it isn’t, but it does have a significant underground scene. Lining both sides of Kramgasse, the central spine of the old town, are a series of wooden trapdoors. When opened they reveal, in cellars

dating back to the Middle Ages, subterranean businesses that range from hair-dressing salons and shoe boutiques to a tango studio. Even one of Bern’s finer restaurants, Kornhauskeller, resides in what 300 years ago was the cellar for the Bern corn store. Since then it’s been a wine cellar — once, each Bern resident was entitled to 1.5 litres of free wine a day — and a sausage market. Last century it was refurbished with walls decorated by painter and heraldist Rudolf Munger (1862-1929) who had several influences, so it’s a bit Pre-Raphaelite, a bit art nouveau. But down here you’re missing old Bern’s colonnaded beauty.

The highest view is from the tower of the Minster, 313 steps up a tight stone spiral staircase, while the widest vista is when seated on the rosebush-filled terrace of the Rosengarten restaurant across the Aare River.

More edgy is the open-air Sky Lounge atop Hotel Schweizerhof near the main station, where cigars of the size favoured by Smiley lookalike Winston Churchill are consumed alongside drinks the colour of almost any Portillo jacket you’d care to name.

But the least-appreciated view, at least to its original inhabitants, is the Kafigturm (prison tower) on Barenplatz, where inmates occupied the top levels. The prison had been moved from a neighbouring tower, the Zytglogge, possibly to allow for yet another Bern marvel. From 1530, blacksmith Kasper Bruner took three years to construct an astronomical clock driven by a massive system of wheels, cogs, bars and ropes as convoluted as any le Carre plot. “This is nothing but pure mathematics,” enthuses Christof on our private tour. He urges me to touch a bar rising from the mechanism “and feel the pulse of time”.

The clock still maintains that pulse perfectly, so Toby Esterhase and his lamplighters could surely have used it to synchronise their watches when they set off to burn, in Bern, Tricky Tony. It was a triumph that, in the end, George Smiley wore very humbly. It wasn’t his style to gloat, and it certainly isn’t Bern’s.

Jeremy Bourke was a guest of Switzerland Tourism and Bern Welcome.

IN THE KNOW

Swiss Travel Pass includes journeys on most transport modes, from intercity trains to ferries and even local buses, plus discounts on travel up Swiss mountains, and free or discounted entry to 500 museums and attractions. In Bern, it includes access to the Einstein Museum, the main art museum and one dedicated to acclaimed early 20th-century cubist and surrealist artist Paul Klee. If visiting only Bern, stay at least one night in tourist accommodation for a Bern Ticket, which covers transport in most parts of the city.

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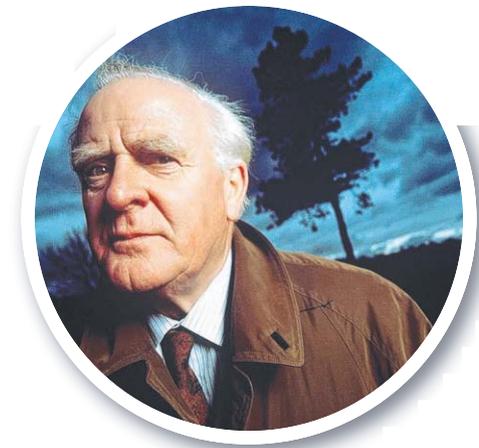
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**Kramgasse in
Bern's old town,
main; St Ursula's
English-Speaking
Church, above;
Einstein Haus, left;
Kornhauskeller
restaurant, above
right; the city from
the air, far right;
John le Carre,
inset**



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