

Travel and Adventure: A chocolate sampler includes in- and out-of-body experiences

by Marilyn Zeitlin

HERSHEY, Pa. - As you approach the intersection of Cocoa and Chocolate Avenues, your nostrils are filled with the smell of chocolate. The smell is so enveloping that you'd swear you could actually taste the sweet stuff.

WELCOME KISS - A Kiss and three big smiles greet visitors at Hershey's Chocolate World, celebrating the 150th anniversary of the birth of Milton Hershey. CNS Photo by Marilyn Zeitlin. KISSES CAST IN STONE - Hershey's Kisses in stone decorate the premises at Hershey Gardens. CNS Photo by Marilyn Zeitlin. THE FATHER OF MILK CHOCOLATE - Milton Hershey, the man credited with being the first to add milk to chocolate, can be seen in photos and statues all over the park and around town. CNS Photo by Marilyn Zeitlin. This is Hershey, home of the Hershey Bar, where all the street lamps are shaped like Hershey Kisses, and where nearly every restaurant or hotel for miles around has complimentary bowls of minibars. Visit Hershey's parks and gardens, and you find smooth stone sculptures shaped like giant Kisses.

This is the year that the town celebrates the 150th anniversary of the birth of Milton Hershey, the man credited with being first to add milk to chocolate - something the early Aztec priests were drinking straight and bitter, derived from the cocoa bean. (The Swiss might argue that they were first to successfully combine milk with chocolate, but my research appears to show that Hershey was two years ahead of them.)

At any rate, Hershey introduced his famous bars to the American masses. While in Hershey, I did as the locals do - I ate chocolate in many forms and shapes. Hot cocoa was my drink, day and night. I tried some of the newer, darker and reportedly heart-healthy chocolates now being introduced by local processing plants.

If you've lived as a hermit in the past few years, isolated without radio, TV or newspapers, you may not be aware that various medical studies have recently shown that dark chocolate has heart-healthy properties. Like the studies on red wine, chocolate, it is said, can be good for you, making lots of chocoholics merrier.

Chocolate has been credited with "happy feelings," stamina and even sexual prowess. Now researchers are saying it will even help you live longer. So being an objective reporter and non-chocoholic, I decided to investigate. My research took me to Switzerland, a country where chocolate is an art and a craft. Visiting St. Moritz, I dined at a restaurant that featured 27 different chocolate desserts, all amazingly decorated.

At the Alprose chocolate factory in Casiano, on the south side of the Alps, I watched chocolate being made and packaged. Chocolate-making is serious business here; the workers, dressed in white with bakers' hats, went about their business in strict fashion, setting and checking on temperatures as the chocolate went through stages from boiling hot to icy cold. As I sampled a cookie dipped in Alprose chocolate (and asked for another), I learned that Alprose produces 27,500 chocolate bars per hour; they ship all over the world. After watching the processing, I headed for the chocolate minimuseum, where very old chocolate molds are displayed.

After leaving the factory, I toured the Alprose store and stocked up on dark chocolates and chocolate-covered marzipan. A Swiss gentleman, watching me fill my shopping cart, approached and warned me: "Madam, do not overbuy. Chocolate must be eaten while fresh. We buy only what we can consume in a reasonably short period. And you know, of course, not to store chocolate in the refrigerator for it may lose taste and turn gray."

In Baden, my sightseeing exhaustion was miraculously cured upon returning, each night, to Les Trois Rois, my hotel over the Rhine. That's where I'd find two dark bonbons on my pillow. It was what the Swiss had told me chocolate should be: "Melt in your mouth without leaving any unpleasant aftertaste." I discovered that the bonbons came from the Schiesser shop and cafe down the street. One afternoon, I visited the cafe and interviewed Herr Schiesser, whose family has been in the chocolate business for four generations.

I got a minilecture about making chocolate from buying the best beans, or "grand cru," which he imports from Cuba, and he imports almonds from Italy or Spain, "for the best chocolate-covered marzipan."

Schiesser chocolates are high-end in taste and price, but as he advises, "It is best to eat less, but eat the best."

"Which chocolates are the most popular chocolates in Switzerland?" I asked.

"Dark chocolate pralines; they're the most trendy," Schiesser replied.

What if you like chocolate, but can't ignore the sugars and fats in it? One answer is to put chocolate on the body rather than in it. And spas worldwide are doing just that. As Barbara Gauthier, previous owner of Gauthier Total Image Spa in Sherman Oaks, Calif., told me: "The aroma of chocolate takes you back to childhood and triggers happy thoughts in the brain. And no calories."

At a Hyatt spa in Los Angeles, I had a chocolate manicure with a complimentary chocolate martini. At the Huntington Beach Hyatt, I was scrubbed in strawberry and chocolate and had the signature chocolate pedicure complete with chocolate chip and walnut scrub. I smelled like a sundae. One spa in Ireland gives dark chocolates to all clients in the relaxation room. In Switzerland, they massage with chocolate creme. Talk about aroma therapy!

All of the chocolate spa treatments were wonderfully relaxing for mind and body; my blood pressure, I noticed, dropped significantly. But whether it was due to the chocolate in the treatments or the treatments themselves, I cannot say. Guess I'll need to continue my research!

There are chocolate festivals around the world. I found about 50 on the Internet featuring everything from chocolate tastings to eating contests to cooking lessons. Ever try asparagus dipped in chocolate? There's art, music and even chocolate poetry contests. From two poets:

- "Chocolate is good, chocolate is sweet; I eat it with my hands, and even with my feet."

- "Truffles for your snuffles,

Chocolate fondue, when you're feeling blue,

A chocolate éclair because life isn't fair."

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© Copley News Service The skinny on chocolate: Is it really good for you?

Chocoholics have been celebrating recent media reports that chocolate might be part of a healthy diet. Recent medical studies have indeed shown that chocolate can lower cholesterol and blood pressure. One study conducted through Tufts University found that certain compounds, called flavonoids or polyphenols, in chocolate "help the blood vessels work better," thus reducing risk of heart disease. The possibilities of chocolate's health properties continue to be studied.

According to Navindra P. Seeram, assistant director of the UCLA Center for Human Nutrition, there have been various studies published in the medical literature, but the key word common to all studies about chocolate is dark. Adding milk to chocolate may make it more palatable, but it also dilutes the heart-healthy compounds, he said.

So far as white chocolate goes, it has no cocoa solids and is just sugar and fat (and calories), say the experts. In my interview with Marion Nestle, professor of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health at NYU, he said, "Chocolate is candy, for heaven's sakes. I wish marketers would stop hyping it as a health food."

So as with the studies of red wine, have some chocolate - in moderation. But don't give up a healthy diet that might have some dark brown chocolate, but should also consist of "foods of all the colors," according to Seeram.

Cardiologists would add: Chocolate spa services might feel great, but make sure you also visit the gym down the hall.

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