

Do you think J.R.R. Tolkien's Misty Mountains are just fantasy? Then you have never been to the Interlaken District of Switzerland. Tolkien visited the region as a teenager and based his masterpiece *The Hobbit* on this magical, enchanting land.

Only two miles long, Lauterbrunnen (LOW-tur-broon-un), in the Interlaken District of Kanton Bern, contains 72 waterfalls. The name of this U-shaped valley means "many" or "high" (*Laut* means both of these) "fountains" (*brunnen*). Some, such as Mürrenbach Falls, which, at 1,300 feet, are the highest in Europe, stream like tears against the mountain face. Others, like the 984-foot-high Staubbach (STOWB-bach) Falls, the highest in Switzerland, cascade straight to the ground from overhanging crags. The poet Lord Byron described these falls as "the tail of a white horse blowing in the breeze."

The most famous of Lauterbrunnen's waterfalls are completely hidden. People heard the 10 Trümmelbach Falls long before they could see them. That explains their name — "stream" (*bach*) "that sounds like a drum" (*trümmel*). These thunderous falls have been carving corkscrew-shaped gorges inside the limestone Jungfrau (YUNG-frow) Mountain since the end of the last Ice Age, more than 15,000 years ago. They were invisible until 1877, when a tunnel was chiseled into the mountain.

Today, you can ride an underground **funicular** and hike lighted walkways to see, hear, and get soaked by Trümmelbach. You

can, that is, as long as you visit in the summer, when the glacial ice melts. Then, about 5,000 gallons of water gush past you every second. The force drags about 20,000 tons of boulders and sand each year from within the Jungfrau. Churning and foamy, the water appears opaque white. Geologists call the falls "the milk of the glaciers." In winter, however, only a trickle of water dribbles under sheets of ice.

Lauterbrunnen is the name for both the valley and a village of 900 people. The walls rise 1,500 feet above the valley, which was gouged by receding glaciers. It is surrounded on three sides by the Eiger (I-ger, meaning "ogre"), Monch ("monk"), and Jungfrau ("maiden") Mountains. Another village, Wengen (VEN-gen), perches 4,000 feet above Lauterbrunnen. From Wengen, you can take a train to Jungfraujoch (YUNG-frow-YOKH). At 11,332 feet, the station there is called "The Top of Europe." A third village, Mürren, allows no cars, only skis and sleds.


The dramatic cliffs and falls have inspired musicians and writers. Johann Goethe (GRR-teh) wrote a poem, "Song of the Spirit of the Waterfalls," which Franz Schubert set to music. In 2001, UNESCO named the region a World Natural Heritage Site.

Lauterbrunnen is famous also for klöppeln (KLUP-eln) — lace-making. Martina Zurschmiede, 11, takes lessons at the Swiss Lace Making Association. She is the association's youngest member. Martina weaves fine linen or silk thread, wound around wooden bobbins,

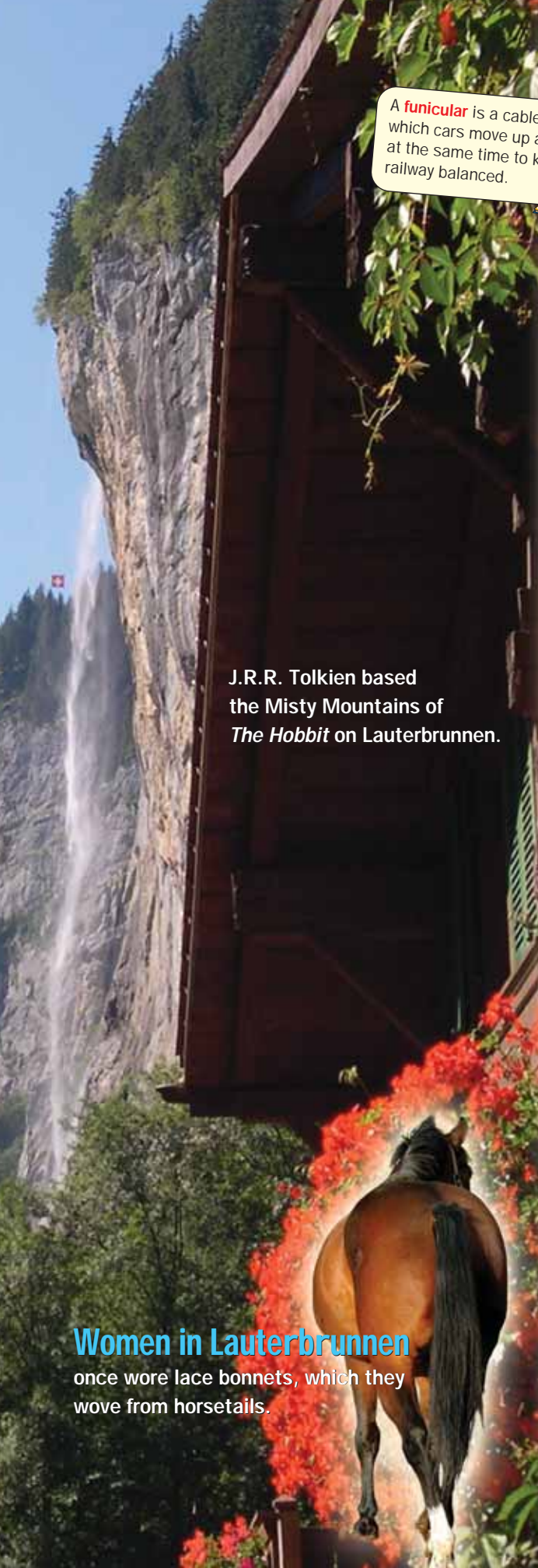
by Cynthia Levinson

Lauterbrunnen

Valley of Waterfalls and Lace



A **funicular** is a cable railway in which cars move up and down at the same time to keep the railway balanced.



J.R.R. Tolkien based the Misty Mountains of *The Hobbit* on Lauterbrunnen.

Martina Zurschmiede is the youngest member of the Swiss Lace Making Association.

to make traditional patterns such as acorns and oak leaves. As she works, she pins the klöppel-spitze (KLUP-el-shpitse), or lace, to a klöppelkissen, a cushion.

Martina enjoys making coasters and table linens for her family and for presents. She is lucky she can make lace as a hobby. Women and children have been weaving lace in the valley for 340 years, and by the middle of the 18th century, it was a major industry. Families depended on the income from selling lace made by very young children. Today, most lace is machine-made — except in Lauterbrunnen!

Like everyone in the valley, Martina speaks several languages. She learns High German in school. In addition, she speaks Swiss German and Bärndütsch (bern-DOICH), the dialect of Bern. Speakers of dialects in other cantons would understand most — but not all — of what she says.

Visitors come not only from Switzerland but also from around the world for Lauterbrunnen's scenery and handmade lace. When they arrive, Martina and her friends say, *Grüsse!* ("Greetings!")

Women in Lauterbrunnen

once wore lace bonnets, which they wove from horsetails.

Cynthia Levinson visited Lauterbrunnen and hiked down the Trümmelbach Falls when she was 12 years old. She enjoys traveling and writing about different places for FACES.