



From the

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From hikers wandering into Iran to American tourists with H1N1, from a new double taxation treaty to resettling former Guantanamo detainees, from expanding trade and investment with our stalwart partners to working together to combat terrorist financing and weapons proliferation, the job of ambassador will be the honour and the adventure of a lifetime.

– Ambassador Beyer at his swearing-in ceremony in Washington, D.C.

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Potomac to the Aare

Appointed by President Barack Obama, Don Beyer has travelled from Virginia to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein. For the first time in years, there's a whole family living in the residence next to the American Embassy in Bern. *Swiss News* caught up with the ambassador for a fireside chat.

By Susan Vogel-Misicka | Judging by the ice skates and ski boots stationed in the cloakroom, it's clear that this is an active household. In the sitting room, I'm welcomed by a crackling fireplace and a friendly poodle who wants to cuddle on the couch.

Out the window, an American flag flutters in the backyard. But it's my beverage that proves that this is a slice of U.S. property in the heart of Switzerland. Having asked for plain tap water, I nearly burst out laughing when the butler brings it to me; it has ice cubes in it!

Moments later, the ambassador enters the room and settles into an armchair. At nearly 60, Donald S. Beyer Jr. looks younger in person than he does in photographs. Chili the poodle jumps onto his lap – and the ambassador doesn't flinch at all, despite being dressed in a dark suit. After all, the non-shedding dog also made the leap across the Atlantic.

A great adventure

"I love it here – it's a great adventure for us," says Beyer, who arrived in Bern last August with his wife Megan and their daughters Clara (17) and Grace (14). Visitors from their home state of Virginia have helped keep homesickness at bay; at Christmas-time, the Beyers hosted 22 relatives and friends at the residence.

"Everyone wants to come to Switzerland," says Beyer, who is expecting more guests in the spring and summer.

As a successful businessman and former Lieutenant Governor of Virginia, the ambassador has put a lot of effort into preparing for his new role – including five weeks of intensive German before arrival. Beyer now has language lessons three nights a week plus homework.

"I have this rule that, outside the embassy gate, I only speak German. And the Swiss are so forgiving that I get away with it," he chuckles. Meanwhile, he's also getting familiar with the local culture and learning to like Röstli and fondue.

Sources of inspiration

Beyer has adapted his mode of transportation, too.

"We've gone from three cars to one. We barely drive because we walk and take the train," says Beyer, whose family owns a chain of car dealerships in northern Virginia. He admits that the United States is very much caught up in the concept of auto-mobility, but he predicts that climate change will alter that.

In fact, long before he landed in Bern, Beyer recalls praising the Swiss mass-transit system. While serving on the Virginia Governor's Commission on Climate Change, Beyer chaired the Taskforce on Transportation and Land Use Planning.

"We came up with recommendations and I essentially said, 'Let's design our landscape and our transportation like Switzerland' – not realising that I was going to come and actually see it,"

says Beyer, who is also impressed by how the Swiss preserve their village landscapes.

Coming from the multicultural melting pot of America, Beyer appreciates the Swiss version, too.

"I like the fact that everybody gets along. Somehow a culture and ethic has developed – both politically and socially – where people from very different villages, languages, and therefore, cultures have nevertheless agreed for some hundreds of years to work together. It's inspiring," Beyer states.

Work to be done

Beyer has three primary missions as U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The first is to continue and to expand America's traditional diplomacy – i.e. maintaining relations with the host governments. In fact, Beyer was the first



Ambassador Beyer hiking in the Swiss National Park with park director Heinrich Haller

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Ambassador Beyer in the residence with his poodle Chili

ambassador to meet with Didier Burkhalter, Switzerland's newest federal councillor: "We had a great conversation about cost control in healthcare and social security."

The second mission is vigorous public diplomacy, which Beyer describes as the most fulfilling part of his job. Although his predecessor, Peter R. Coneway, had to cope with a fair amount of negativity during the Bush administration, Beyer has benefited from the European popularity of President Barack Obama. While "listening, learning and leading" form one side of American foreign policy as Beyer sees it, telling America's story is also important.

Last but not least, Beyer's third priority is "to stimulate trade, investment and job growth between the U.S. and Switzerland".

Strong economic ties

Whether he's speaking to the media or to business people, Beyer is quick to cite the strong ties that link the two global economic powers.

"The U.S. is the number one investor in Switzerland, with more investment than Russia, China, India and Brazil combined," Beyer says. He also notes that, after Germany, the United States is the world's best customer for Swiss products. As he told a group of Bern-area business consultants at a recent event:

"The Swiss advantage is that American businesses and consumers view Swiss products as being of the highest quality, regardless of product line. This perception is equally applicable to new and innovative robotic technology as it is to watches and clothing items."

Meanwhile, Switzerland is the seventh largest investor in the United States and creator of about 500,000 jobs there. As Beyer muses, it's remarkable how big the connection is, considering the disparate sizes of the two nations.

"Background check"

On June 20, 1950, Donald S. Beyer Jr. was born in Trieste, where his father was serving as a peacekeeper. A long-disputed territory, Trieste was an independent city state under UN protection between 1947 and 1954, before it finally became a part of Italy.

After growing up in Washington, D.C., Beyer attended Williams College in Massachusetts. He graduated magna cum laude in 1972 with a B.A. in economics, before starting work for the family car business. The highly successful "Beyer" brand now comprises eight franchises and four brands, including Volvo.

From 1990–1998, Beyer served as Lieutenant Governor of Virginia and as president of the state senate. While in office, he cracked down on child molesters and fought for people with disabilities.

Beyer chaired Bill Clinton's presidential campaigns in Virginia in 1992 and 1996. During 2007/2008, he campaigned for Barack Obama, raising more than \$500,000 in donations for the presidential race.

In addition to Clara and Grace, Beyer has two adult children from a previous marriage: Don (34) and Stephanie (29).

Beyer's hobbies include reading, playing bridge and hiking.

Sense of community

While Beyer admits that he misses his friends and colleagues back home, the experience of living abroad helps him to appreciate the importance of community.

"I've often preached to my children how incredibly important it is to be part of a community or communities. It gives you a context for meaning in your life – it gives you a richness to be able to go anywhere and know people and to be part of them in some way," he says.

Reflecting on the fact that he had spoken to half a dozen people on his walk to lunch that day, Beyer notes, "I'm actually becoming part of a community here, too! It's not instant but it's real."