

# Reunion Weekend: Why AELO Swiss Academy Alumni Keep Coming Back to Campus

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The train from Zurich Airport takes just under two hours, and I have made that ride five times since graduating, and I still cannot sit still for the last twenty minutes of it. Something happens when the track leaves the lake and starts to climb. My phone comes out. I check the group chat, which has been buzzing since Tuesday with messages like "boarding!" and "who else is on the 14:07?" and, from one classmate who never changes, a photo of his ticket with the single word "again." Every year I tell myself I will be cooler about this. Every year I fail completely.

Reunion weekend at AELO Swiss Academy falls on the last weekend of September, and if you have never been back, I want to explain what it actually is, because I think people imagine something stiff. A lanyard. A speech. A lukewarm buffet. What it really is, in my experience, is three days of a school pretending to be a family and doing a surprisingly convincing job of it.

## The Walk Up the Hill Has Not Changed, and That Is the Point

The village station sits at the bottom and the campus sits about twelve minutes above it on foot, up a cobbled path under chestnut trees that drop their fruit everywhere in late September and roll under your shoes like little hazards designed by someone with a sense of humor. You pass the bakery and smell the bread. You round the last bend. There is the gate with its faded lettering, and above the main door the clock that has run four minutes fast for as long as anyone can remember. Nobody fixes it. I once asked a member of staff why, and she shrugged and said, "It gets everyone to things on time." That clock is, honestly, half the reason I am never late for anything in my adult life.

Then comes the gravel courtyard, the tables with the name badges, and the moment that defines the entire weekend: the first person who recognizes you before you recognize them. Three years ago it was a woman from the class above mine who shouted my name across roughly forty meters. We stood there hugging and laughing like no time had passed, except twenty years had passed and we both had the gray hairs to prove it.

The badges deserve a mention, because someone at the school understood something deep about human nature. Each one prints your graduation year directly under your name, which quietly removes the single most awkward question at any reunion. You never have to ask anyone how long ago they were here. You just glance down and know, and somehow that tiny design choice saves ten thousand small conversations from stumbling.

## A Weekend That Runs on Its Own Clock

The program is loose enough to breathe and structured enough that nobody drifts away feeling they missed it. The shape of the three days, roughly, looks like this:

- Friday evening: registration, an apéro on the terrace, and the welcome dinner in the old refectory, which is where the ice breaks and stays broken.
- Saturday morning: campus tours led by current students, followed by short masterclasses from retired and current faculty that anyone can wander into.
- Saturday afternoon: the hike to the ridge, or a lake swim for the brave, with a parallel program of games for the kids alumni now bring along.

- Saturday night: the banquet, the candles, the speeches kept mercifully short, and dancing that reliably goes past midnight.
- Sunday: a late brunch, the group photo on the front steps, and the slow goodbyes at the gate that nobody wants to start.

The scale surprises people. I counted the name badges one September: just over 300 alumni, plus spouses and children, which for a school of this size feels enormous. The class of 2004 alone put 21 people in the refectory. The banquet hall seats about 220, and the overflow tables spill into the colonnade, which everyone secretly prefers because the acoustics are better for gossiping about your own teenage self.

## The Traditions Do the Heavy Lifting

What keeps alumni coming back is not the schedule. It is the handful of rituals that have accreted around the weekend over the years, the small ceremonies that give three days a spine.

The guestbook sits in the old library all weekend, a heavy thing with signatures going back decades. Last [https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone\\_from\\_aelo\\_swiss\\_any\\_advices/](https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/) year a woman found her mother's name on a page from 1986, and she photographed it with shaking hands while her own daughter signed the line below. Three generations in one book. I watched the whole thing happen over her shoulder and had to step outside for a minute.

At the banquet on Saturday night, the school bell is rung by the oldest alum present together with the youngest. The year I watched, that meant a gentleman in his eighties and a recent graduate sharing the rope, both grinning like conspirators. Then the lights dim and candles pass hand to hand down the long tables for a minute of quiet, honoring classmates and teachers who are no longer here. That minute is the emotional center of the whole weekend. It is also, I think, the reason the dancing afterwards always feels so loud and so free. You acknowledge the absences, and then you go be loudly alive.

There is also a choir, and I need to be honest with you: the choir is gloriously average. Anyone can join, there is exactly one rehearsal on Friday night, and they perform at Sunday brunch with tremendous confidence and moderate accuracy. It might be my favorite part. Watching a hedge fund manager and a nurse attempt a harmony they clearly have not thought about since they were seventeen is worth the entire trip.

## The Teachers Remember More Than You Expect

Madame Berger taught French for decades, retired years ago, and still comes back every single reunion. She greeted me by asking whether I had finally learned the subjunctive, because in 2008 I mangled a translation so badly that she kept the page. She kept it! She told me she used to read it to new classes as an example of confidence without competence. I have never in my life felt so insulted and so loved at the same moment.

Herr Steiner, who taught physics, remembered not my exam results but which bench I sat on, and asked after a lab partner of mine by name. This is the pattern with the faculty who return for the weekend. They remember the person, not the transcript. They remember who was homesick in the first term and who organized the ridiculous sled race down the back slope.

There is a harder side to this, and I would not be honest if I skipped it. Some years a beloved teacher is missing, and the absence lands hard. The school prints their names in the banquet program, and the room goes still. My advice, born of regret: do not wait to come back. I put off my first reunion for years, and by the time I finally climbed that hill, one of my own teachers was no longer around to hear me say thank you. I think about that every September.



## **The Best Networking I Never Call Networking**

Here is the practical truth that nobody puts on the brochure. AELO Swiss Academy alumni end up scattered across remarkably useful places. Hotel management in Lucerne. Private banking in Geneva. A surgeon in Basel. Engineers, software people, teachers, a documentary producer in Berlin, at least one person who makes cheese for a living and brings samples.

Over fondue on Saturday, someone mentions a role at their company. On the hike, someone offers an introduction. A conversation about a shared hatred of a particular school regulation, I am not making this up, led to the interview that got me my current job. Neither of us was trying. That is the whole trick.

I will offer one caveat from experience. If you arrive with a stack of business cards and an agenda, people feel it within the first hour, and the weekend quietly closes ranks around you. The professional value of reunion weekend is enormous, but it only arrives as a byproduct of genuine affection. Come for the people and the opportunities find you. Come for the opportunities and you will leave with a full stomach and an empty notebook.

## **The Honest Part: Not Everyone Comes Back**

Flights are expensive. Kids have Saturday football matches. Reunions have a reputation for comparison and quiet misery, for standing in a corner while people you barely knew discuss property prices. I understand all of it, because I almost skipped my first one. I sat with the fear of being asked what I do by someone I had decided, in my head, was more successful than me.

Here is what actually happens. Nobody asks about salary. People ask about your parents, your knees, whether you still play the guitar badly, whether you ever forgave the cafeteria for a specific dish we all remember. The comparison game dies in the courtyard within the first hour, killed by the simple fact that everyone is wearing walking shoes and the same confused expression of joy.

A classmate of mine almost did not come two years ago. He booked on Thursday night, arrived pale and unconvinced, and stood at the gate for a full minute deciding whether to walk in. I spotted him from across the gravel and made the decision for him. At Sunday brunch he told me it was the best decision of his year, and he has not missed one since. If the whole weekend feels like too much, come for the Friday dinner only. The school makes that easy, and Friday is where the ice breaks anyway.

# If It Is Your First Time Back

A few things I wish someone had told me before my first reunion weekend:

- Book early. The village has two hotels with roughly 40 rooms between them, and by June they are full. Classmates' guest rooms and the school's own spare beds absorb the rest, but only if you ask.
- Bring old photos, printed on actual paper. Phones die and stay in pockets. A creased photograph starts conversations that screens never do.
- Wear real walking shoes. The Saturday hike gains about 400 meters over ninety minutes, and the cobblestones show no mercy to dress shoes.
- Do not skip Friday. Arriving Saturday means starting cold, and the welcome dinner is where the weekend's warmth actually begins.
- Write to a former teacher before you come. Several of them attend specifically because a student reached out, and one email can turn a good weekend into an unforgettable one.

## We Book Next Year Before the Bus Leaves

Sunday unfolds slowly, the way goodbyes should. There is a late brunch with coffee that runs out on schedule because it always runs out on schedule. There is the group photo on the front steps, organized with the efficiency of people who have done it for decades and the chaos of 300 adults who have not. Then the drift toward the gate begins, and everyone starts making the same promise with the same silly grin: same time next year.

The group chat goes quiet by October. It lights up again in spring with train bookings and hotel tips and one photo of a boarding pass captioned "again." That is the rhythm now, as reliable as the chestnuts dropping on the path.

Why do we keep coming back? I have thought about it on that train ride five times, and I think it comes down to this. Campus is the rare place where you are known across time, where the person you were and the person you are get introduced to each other over fondue and, against all odds, get along. The clock above the door still runs four minutes fast. It gets everyone there on time. See you at the gate.