

## **Chapter 5 – Sex in the city: on making space and identity in travel spaces<sup>1</sup>**

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When I moved to the city of Basel in Switzerland from Australia in 2005, one of my first impressions was the high visibility of the sex industry. In Sydney, outside of the red-light district of Kings Cross, explicit signage to mark the presence of a nightclub, strip bar, or adult video shop is muted, and I had gone about my daily life for years without being particularly aware of the presence of the sex industry in the city. In Basel, and other continental European cities, such ignorance is almost impossible to maintain. Beate Uhse, the German sex store chain, has shops marked in bright red signage at many petrol stations and convenience stops on the continent's highways. Shop windows with life-size dolls dressed in lingerie, pictures of women in sexual poses, and explicit language on shop signage seems to be distributed all over the city space. At one point, early during my stay in Basel, my partner and I were house-hunting in a middle-class neighborhood and between viewing appointments had half an hour to spare for a coffee break. Not knowing the neighborhood, we set out in search of a coffee shop: before we came upon one, we had come across two sex shops and a brothel – and had of course become doubtful about the suitability of the neighborhood for a young family. Explicit displays can sometimes be unavoidable as I found when I took my then 3-year-old daughter along to the central offices of the road and traffic authority and the only way to get there from the tram stop

was to walk past a huge kinky display window of a nightclub with space-themed dolls in bright colors.

Initially, it seemed to me that the sex industry was everywhere and this led me to wonder whether I had ended up in some particularly sex-obsessed place. Regular sex-related headlines in the free daily papers such as ‘Germany: 500,000 are suffering from addiction to sex’ (*20 min*, 5 July 2005, p. 11; my translation) and ads for nightclubs and brothels even on the front page did nothing to change that impression. However, as I got to understand the city space better, it became clear to me that the sexualization of public space is restricted to travel spaces, i.e. spaces where people circulate and where mostly non-local people go about their business. In this paper I will first describe the sexualization of public spaces and I will show that sexualization is one way to mark a space as travel-related. In a second step, I want to explore the relationship between the semiotics of the sex industry and the semiotics of Swiss tourism, particularly the ways in which multilingualism is associated with the sex industry. Overall, I will argue that high levels of mobility are connected to a high visibility of the sex industry and that signage for sexual services is a way to mark spaces as spaces of mobility. Furthermore, the ways in which Swiss travel spaces are sexualized is specific to the discursive construction of Swiss tourism and Swiss national identity as upper class, high quality and multilingual.

### **Sex tourism in Switzerland?**

If asked for your associations with Switzerland as a tourism destination, it is unlikely that 'sex' would spring to mind. Although tourism is undoubtedly associated with love, romance and sex, Central and Northern European destinations are probably amongst the least sexy and erotic destinations internationally. Sex tourism can be defined as travel with the primary purpose of entering into 'some form of sexual-economic exchange with women, men or children resident in the host destination' (O'Connell Davidson, 2001, p. 7). Additionally, even if sex may not be the primary purpose of travel, holidays are often associated with 'sun, sand, sex' and tales of romance have become a separate genre of travel writing (Wylie, 1998) and 'flirt guides' have made their appearance in the guide book market (Einhart & Muschiol, 2005). During the world cup in Germany in 2006, Swiss Tourism ran a campaign aimed at women, in which Switzerland was presented as a romantic and erotic destination: Swiss men were described as less interested in football than in 'you girls' and Switzerland thus as a destination that women could escape to from their local men's negligence.<sup>2</sup> This attempt to use eroticism to market Switzerland as a tourism destination was tongue in cheek and exceptional. The more widely held stereotype about (the lack of) Swiss eroticism is probably best summed up by the joke making the rounds on the internet that says:

Heaven is where the Police are British, the Chefs are French, the Mechanics are German, the Lovers Italian and it's all organized by the Swiss. Hell is where the Chefs are British, the mechanics are French, the lovers are Swiss, the Police are German and it's all organized by the Italians.

If sex and romance are used in general tourism marketing in the Swiss context, they are not usually associated with Switzerland as a destination but with other – Mediterranean or tropical – destinations. The chain travel agency l'tur, for instance, ran a billboard campaign in Switzerland in 2005, which depicted the torso of a woman with the contours of her large erect nipples visible through her jumper. The associated headline asked 'Frostbeulen?' 'Frostbeulen' are *chilblains* in English but the literal translation would be *chill bumps*. Metonymically, the word also refers to people who feel the cold easily. The message then goes on to advise that 'a beach holiday helps.'

While Switzerland is not a sex tourism destination per se or even a particularly erotic or romantic destination, Switzerland's sex industry is an ancillary business to other forms of travel, mostly conference travel. Basel, the city which is the focus of this paper, is a major regional exhibition center and hosts a number of high profile trade fairs each year such as the international jewelry show *Basel World*, the art show *Art Basel*, or the building industry's trade exhibition *Swissbau*. The latter in particular is said to contribute to a significant expansion in commercial sex services each year, as explained by an advertising placement agent:

'During the Swissbau trade fair we've got a massive increase in sex ads' says Meral Metinoglu of Publicitas Basel. 'Pimps invest more money, commission designed ads and also advertise in papers they usually ignore. That is a trend that

can be observed during every event that brings business people into the city.’

(Loser, 2005; my translation)

It is not only the case that the sex industry follows exhibition and conference facilities. On the contrary, the sex industry is seen as enhancing a conference destination. In a published focus group interview with a range of actors in the Swiss sex industry, the owner of a brothel chain argues that the availability of commercial sex provides a competitive edge in the competition between different exhibition and conference destinations:

Q: What’s the authorities’ position with regard to prostitution?

A: They only act when there are excesses. Because an attractive prostitution sector is useful for the community; for instance, it increases congress tourism. The authorities know that from experience. Because in my brothels guests from the highest ranks meet, people whose faces are known from magazines. (Mingels & Gimes, 2006; my translation)

The overall size of the sex industry in Switzerland is staggering. The 2005 police report on national security provides the following numbers:

Everywhere in Switzerland the number of prostitutes and relevant establishments increased in 2005. In Zurich, for example, the number of prostitutes has risen by

almost 20% since 2003; in Basel a new brothel opened on average every two weeks in 2005. For the whole of Switzerland, the profits of the sex industry are estimated to be around CHF 3.2 billion per annum. (Bundesamt für Polizei, 2006; my translation)

## **Data**

It is against this background that the sexualization of public space needs to be understood. In order to explore how travel spaces in Basel are sexualized and how the sex industry in Switzerland is semiotized, I collected data from four sources: (1) shop fronts; (2) advertising in local newspapers; (3) prostitutes', nightclubs' and escort agencies' websites; and (4) clients' blogs. All these data are in themselves evidence of the sexualization of public space. This is most obviously the case for shop fronts of adult entertainment stores and night clubs, which were collected on walks through the city. I took pictures of sex industry outlets and marked them on a map. Advertising in local newspapers also enjoys a high degree of public visibility, particularly front page ads in free newspapers such as *Baslerstab* and *20 min*, which can be picked up from distribution points located mostly at bus and tram stops. Sampling of ads for commercial sex, which in addition to ads for sex shops, nightclubs and brothels, includes ads by individual prostitutes, was done on an opportunistic basis. After an initial database of such ads was collected over one week in May 2005, additional ads were included over the next 18 months whenever I happened to come across a new one. Overall, ads changed very little during that period.

Websites and clients' blogs, which are usually read in private, may seem to be less relevant to an enquiry into the sexualization of public space. However, even in a context where the sex industry is relatively visible, such as the one described here, the very nature of the sex industry ensures that most of it 'goes on behind closed doors' so to speak and is not readily perceptible to a traveler, who may spend only a day or two in a city. Thus, prospective punters from out of town will need to draw on information sources beyond accidental encounters with shop fronts and newspaper ads in order to find venues where they can obtain commercial sex. This may be particularly true of time-poor conference travelers seeking high quality – and less visible – escort services. Drawing on Symanski (1981), Jackson (1989) explains the reduced visibility of 'high class' commercial sexual services with reference to the geography of prostitution and its internal hierarchies, which he relates to the class structure of the wider society:

'High-class' prostitutes (or 'call-girls') visit their clients' home, hotel, or party;  
'lower-class' prostitutes (or 'street-walkers') work in more public places and take their clients to their own home, hotel, or rented room. (Jackson 1989, p. 115)

The sociological literature on the sex industry is now in unison that the internet can no longer be ignored by any investigation into commercial sex (Davies & Evans, 2007). In May 2006, the data set was therefore expanded to include 120 websites of brothels, escort services, nightclubs, swinger clubs, massage parlors, and self-employed prostitutes

operating in Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> These websites were used to collect descriptions of the location of the venue (Basel ones only) and all of them were analyzed for their language use and any references to multilingualism. Additionally, I visited the Word Sex Guide site at <http://www.worldsexguide.com/guide/Europe/Switzerland/index.htm> on May 06 2006 and collected 15 narratives by English-speaking punters about their experiences using prostitution services in Switzerland. The World Sex Guide site – and many similar ones – are used by punters to rate and rank the service they have received in much the same way that other consumer sites are dedicated to sharing experiences with services and to recommend services or complain about them (Durkin & Bryant, 1995; Holt & Blevins, 2007).

### **The sexualisation of public space**

In order to explore the semioticization of Basel travel spaces as spaces of commercial sex, one needs to first take a closer look at the geography of Basel. Specifically, I will now explore how the spatial organization of Basel is related to the sexualization of its public spaces. The interrelationship between sexuality and space and the spatial organization of sexual practices has received increasing attention in the sociological literature in recent years (Betsky, 1995; Binnie & Valentine, 1999; Green et al., 2008; Laumann et al., 2004; Stansell, 1986; Walkowitz, 1992). This work has increasingly moved away from a view of space as a physical container where sexual practices occur. Rather, space is increasingly seen as serving ‘an active, productive and socializing function in sexual sociality’ (Green et al., 2008, p. 2). In order to understand how Basel



as a travel space produces spaces for the sex industry, I take my cue for the description of Basel's geography from the city's tourism website.<sup>4</sup> The page about 'location and arrival' has five sections: 'situation', 'by air', 'by car', 'by rail' and 'public transport.' In terms of Basel's location the web page points out that 'Basel is situated in the heart of Europe, at the border triangle where Germany, France and Switzerland meet.' The fact that the border to France and Germany runs through the city - the French municipality of St Louis and the German municipality of Lörrach can both be considered part of the Basel conurbation - or in close proximity is a major factor in making car travel around Basel more marked as 'travel' than might otherwise be the case. As Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, the border checkpoints are still staffed and travelers can expect to have to show their passports when traveling in either direction. I will now explore the sexualisation of each four means of arrival as identified by Basel Tourism separately.

### *Airport*

The EuroAirport, which serves Basel, as well as the French city of Mulhouse and the German city of Freiburg, is located on French territory, about 10 km from the city centre of Basel. Maybe due to its location, the airport is the only arrival and departure point that does not feature actual sex industry outlets such as nightclubs or sex shops in its immediate environs. However, it features a significant amount of advertising in the form of billboards and fliers for such outlets in the city. These materials serve two explicit functions: to advertise for the availability of commercial sex services and to provide

travelers with names, addresses and phone numbers so that they can actually find the venues where the services are available. As an example, I will describe a billboard not from the EuroAirport but from Zurich Airport, which is about a 100 km away and the main hub for long-haul travelers from and to Basel. In September 2006 I took a photo of the huge billboard ad for a gentlemen's club (see Figure 1). The billboard is striking for a number of reasons: to begin with, it is about 8 meters wide and 3 meters high and thus fills the entire view out of the exit door of the arrivals terminal opposite which it was displayed. This exit, which leads to a car park, taxi ranks and bus services, is located only a few meters after customs and so the billboard could well be described as the first sight of Switzerland a passenger might ever get. The billboard is almost entirely filled by the image of a lingerie-clad woman lying on a bed and staring straight at the viewer. Above her legs and buttocks, the slogan 'let's talk about ...' is printed in a curved line. The billboard also contains the address and name of the nightclub. The size of the billboard and its prominent location combine to not only advertise for this particular nightclub but to give a high level of prominence – there is almost a sense of urgency about it – to commercial sex generally. Indeed, the level of advertising for the sex industry is so high, that sometimes the viewer needs to look a second time in order to establish whether a given billboard is an ad for the sex industry or some another product or service. In March 2006, for instance, a billboard very similar to the one in Figure 5-1 was on display in the departure hall of Basel Airport: the poster is dominated by the image of a lingerie-clad woman in a suggestive pose against the slogan 'Pour vous servir' 'To serve you'. However, the ad is actually not for a nightclub but for the lingerie chain Lise Charmel.

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FIGURE 5-1  
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Figure 5-1: Billboard of a Zurich gentlemen's club a Zurich airport

### *Checkpoints*

Arrival in or departure from Basel by car is punctuated by international border checkpoints. These border checkpoints are marked in a number of official ways, such as the presence of buildings to serve various custom purposes, uniformed personnel, marked police and border patrol vehicles, and official signage indicating entry into another national territory. In addition to these official markers, the border is also marked by the presence of sex shops and nightclubs in the immediate vicinity of the checkpoints on the German and, to a lesser degree, the French side of the border. The strong presence of the sex industry close to the border can be explained by the fact that goods and services are generally cheaper in France and Germany than in Switzerland. In the same way, that many Swiss residents choose to do their weekly grocery shopping in France or Germany, price-conscious punters obviously also choose to seek sexual services across the border. Checkpoints are not only sexualized by the presence of outlets of the sex industry in their environs but also by references to the checkpoints in ads for such services. An ad for a brothel that appeared two to three times per week during most of the 18 months of data

collection provides its location in the following way: ‘Weil a. Rhein/Zoll Otterbach’,  
‘Weil a. Rhein/Checkpoint Otterbach’.

### ***Central station***

The central station and its surrounding area is another space that is highly sexualized through the fact that numerous sex shops and nightclubs with explicit displays and signage can be found there. Again, advertising frequently identifies the position of an outlet relative to the central station. The phrase ‘wenige Gehminuten vom Bahnhof SBB’, ‘only a few minutes’ walk from the Central Station’ can be found in numerous newspaper ads and on websites.

### ***Public transport***

Public transport cannot be conceived of as a fixed space in that same way that the airport, checkpoints and the central station are. Public transport takes passengers through the ‘heartland’ of the city and it is consequently sexualized differently. Trams and buses certainly take passengers past outlets of the sex industry and sometimes through streets where these are heavily concentrated – for instance, around the central station (see above) or the exhibition square (see below). However, largely confined to specific corridors cutting across and distinct from the public areas they intersect, the two main mediums through which public transport participates in the sexualization of public space are free newspapers and graffiti. Containers of free newspapers can be found at almost every tram and bus stop – for most of 2005 and 2006, there were two morning papers, *Baslerstab* and *20 min*, and in late 2006, a free evening paper, *heute*, became available, too. These

papers are obviously financed through advertising and a significant portion of the ads are for the sex industry. These ads range from highly visible quarter-page front-page ads for major nightclubs to the classified ads where self-employed prostitutes offer their services. Uptake of these newspapers is high – at many stops none are left by 8am – and with them advertising for the sex industry keeps circulating.

Graffiti also contribute to the pervasive sexualisation of public space: trams, busses and waiting areas are mostly clean and well-maintained by anyone's standards but even so no one seems to be able to keep up with the countless little engravings of 'sex' and the crude texta drawings of genitalia. Some of these graffiti seem to serve the purpose of establishing contact for a sexual encounter such as 'fuck me [phone number]' or 'I need sex I'm a bitch call now [phone number]', which I've both seen on the back of tram seats. However, scribbles of 'sex', 'fuck' or 'sex is geil' ('sex is horny') do not even serve the potential purpose of establishing contact. While they may serve some adolescent purpose of emotional release for the writer, the overall effect is their contribution to the wider sexualisation of public space.

### **Travel spaces and tourist spaces**

In this section, I have shown that the four travel spaces of Basel as identified by the Basel Tourism Board – airport, checkpoints, central station, and public transport – are all highly sexualized spaces. However, travel spaces are not equal to tourism spaces. While all tourists obviously need to travel, i.e. make use of transport, travel spaces are not usually

destinations per se. Rather, they are the non-spaces of globalization (Ritzer, 2007) that keep people circulating to and from their destinations. Tourists use these non-spaces to come to Basel mostly for two reasons, either for business or culture. Business travelers would typically attend trade fairs, conferences or exhibitions. Unsurprisingly, another Basel space where many of the sex industry outlets are clustered is around the Messeplatz ('exhibition square'), the site of Basel's trade fairs. Cultural tourists, on the other hand, are attracted to Basel because of its historical architecture, its museums and art galleries. In contrast to the exhibition square, key cultural tourism spaces such as the areas around the town hall or the cathedral are 'marked' by the absence of sex industry outlets.

### **Sexing multilingualism**

The sexualization of non-spaces can be considered a generic phenomenon that can be observed in many spaces of high mobility that may be geographically, culturally, socially or historically very diverse. Ringdal (2004), for instance, speculates that prostitution historically first developed in ancient Mesopotamia and spread from there along the Silk Road and other trade routes. However, while the high visibility of the sex industry in travel spaces may be generic, its actual semiotics are always specific to a particular socio-historical context. I will therefore now move on to consider the ways in which the Swiss sex industry is eroticized and argue that it is consonant with the overall image of the country projected nationally and internationally. Red light districts and sites of commercial sexual activity are often seedy, shady and marked as lower class (as pointed out by Jackson (1985) in the quote above) However, this is not the way the sex industry is

semioticized in Switzerland. Rather, advertising for sexual services focuses on quality and cleanliness, in a way that is very similar to the exploitation of these national stereotypes in tourism advertising more generally. Multilingualism is often presented as an aspect of quality, evidence of the industry's 'high standards'. The slogan of a Geneva brothel, for instance, says 'Quality for gentlemen since 1968.' If one didn't know that the slogan referred to a brothel, it could just as well refer to a Swiss watch (although one would expect a date a century or two before 1968). References to quality and cleanliness also abound in the punters' evaluations on the World Sex Guide site, with statements such as 'I found the standards of cleanliness and hospitality in the studios and brothels to be second to none', 'big swimming pool, saunas all with usual Swiss cleanliness and quality' or 'the most elegant Swiss clean establishment with big swimming pool Jacuzzi, sauna, steam baths, showers, bar and some 15-25 of the most gorgeous women 8-11 to please a man.'

Multilingual proficiency emerges as a key aspect of high quality. My data show that multilingual proficiency is eroticized, if not fetishized. Using English advertising and describing the sex workers' language skills in English, German and French is one way to associate the industry with 'quality'. Of the 120 sex service websites in my data set, 72 (60%) were monolingual and 47 (39%) bi- or multilingual (there was also one website that did not use any language at all and consisted purely of pictures). Figure 5-2 shows the languages and language combinations used.

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FIGURE 5-2  
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Figure 5-2: Language choice on websites of commercial sex providers in Switzerland

In comparison to an analysis of the languages used on the websites of Swiss tourism boards (Piller, 2007), the high incidence of monolingual websites is striking, as is the more limited role of English. However, on closer inspection most of the German monolingual websites are websites of swinger clubs and self-employed prostitutes. One way for night clubs, brothels and escort services to signal their higher level of professionalism (for want of a better word) is the use of multilingualism on their websites.

In addition to the languages in which the websites appear, there is frequent explicit mention of multilingualism. Many of these websites provide a profile of the sex workers employed there. Sometimes, this is a general profile of the type of woman employed, and these general profiles often feature references to the sex workers' language skills. The following is a good example of the ways in which multilingualism and quality can be linked in such profiles:

Beautiful, sensual, well-groomed from top to toe, elegant and cultivated, mostly multilingual and of perfect education – their distinction and femininity means that



they know how to make your encounters incredible moments of high-spiritedness, of happiness and of bliss. (French original; my translation)

These websites also frequently provide individual profiles through a link to 'our ladies' or 'our girls.' Mostly, these individual profiles consist of a first name and on one or more pictures of a semi-naked woman in sexual poses. Sometimes, additional information is provided about the featured women, and if there is, it often lists their languages, as in these examples: 'Donna: Conversation: German, English, French, Spanish' or 'Hi, I'm Michelle! I am a young and charming Swiss lady. I speak 4 languages (German, English, French and Italian), so I'm sure we will not have communication problems!'

Multilingualism is not only valued on the websites of sex service providers but also by punters as the following quote from the World Sex Guide site demonstrates: '[...] fucked there a couple of girls, some of the near Eastern area like Victoria from Latvia and another girl (whose name I forgot) from Slovenia [sic], but the girls are classy, speak German and/or English and/or French.'

This association of sex work with multilingualism and quality occurs in a context where multilingualism is stereotyped as a central aspect of the national identity. It also needs to be placed in a context where the majority of sex workers are actually migrant women from Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean (Le Breton & Fiechter, 2005); as is apparent from the quote above and the way how origin from 'the near Eastern area' is

set in opposition to class ('but'). Multilingualism – or rather proficiency in the Western languages German, English and French – is adduced as evidence of 'classiness'. Much of the advertising for the sex industry draws on sex workers' Otherness, i.e. their Russianness, Brazilian-ness or Asian-ness. Ethnicity is often used to promise extraordinary feminine beauty, hotness and – most frequently - 'taboolessness.' At the same time, it almost seems that the Other's overwhelming sexuality is contained in institutions which semiotically align themselves with the national stereotypes of quality, cleanliness and multilingual proficiency in their advertising.

## **Conclusion**

Internationally, a significant portion of tourism revenue is generated through sexual exploitation and the burgeoning sex industry has become a key emblem of globalization (Cohen & Kennedy, 2007). Travel creates the market in which the sex industry flourishes and the incidence of travel is directly linked to the availability of commercial sex (Seabrook, 2007). Unsurprisingly then, the non-spaces of mobility become semioticized as sexual spaces. In one sense, this sexualization of travel spaces is a response to the needs of travelers. 'Knowing where to go' is a recurring topic in the punters' narratives on the World Sex Guide site, as in this one, who writes: 'if you know where to go Zurich can be a paradise in Europe.' However, at the same time, the coincidence between travel spaces and sex industry outlets normalizes the sex industry. This normalization of the sex industry sexualizes the public space for everyone, irrespective of where you stand on the sex industry and commercial sex. The sexualization of public space occurs in a wider

context where the representation of women as sex objects has become acceptable again as part of 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005).

While I see the sexualization of travel spaces described in this chapter as a global phenomenon, it plays out in locally specific ways. Localization in the Swiss context occurs through the association of commercial sex with quality, cleanliness and with multilingualism as an aspect of quality. While it may be surprising to see this high level of visibility of the sex industry in Swiss travel spaces, their style nonetheless also fits in with the glamorous, high-end, international (business) travel image of the country, which – like many other tourism destinations and, indeed, products of all kinds – has long relied on the adage that 'sex sells' in their marketing:

By 1900 the 'first posters selling goods began to appear, and their visual style was determined by the conventions of official art, including the affixing of meaning – any meaning – to a pretty girl – any pretty girl' (Warner, 1985, p. 86). The message though was always the same: buy the product, get the girl; or buy the product to get to be like the girl so you get your man. (Wykes & Gunter, 2005, p. 41)

Also in the context of globalization, sex work has become yet another contemporary employment sector where language and communication skills are key employment skills (Cameron 2000; Heller, 2003; Piller & Pavlenko, 2007). While prostitution used to be

conducted in ways that limited any exchange between punter and sex worker to the sexual act, conversation has become part of the service, particularly at the upper end of the market. As punters are increasingly on the look-out for a 'girl-friend experience' when procuring sexual services (Bernstein, 2005), the ability to communicate is obviously central. Language work in the global sex industry centering around travel is thus another locus that contributes to the spread of English as a lingua franca. As the billboard in Figure 5-1 says: 'Let's talk'

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Webpage for the Swiss tourism authority:

<http://www.myswitzerland.com/en/movies/wm/> (accessed 10/05/2008)

<sup>3</sup> These websites were accessed through five portal sites, namely [www.rotlicht.ch](http://www.rotlicht.ch), [sexnet.ch](http://sexnet.ch), [www.amateurinnen.ch](http://www.amateurinnen.ch), [www.honeybunny.ch](http://www.honeybunny.ch) and [www.auktionsex.ch](http://www.auktionsex.ch).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.basel.com/en.cfm/baselinfo/lageanreise/> (accessed 10/05/2008).