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EUROPE & ASIA-PACIFIC: Super-Nelly promotes sensuous Swiss: There will be scarcely a cow or a chocolate at the Expo.02 exhibition, reports Frances Williams

By FRANCES WILLIAMS
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To a foreigner, the most striking thing about Switzerland's Expo.02 national exhibition is how un-Swiss it is. Cows, chocolate, banks and watches are scarcely to be seen - except in parody - at the event, which opens today at four lakeside sites in the north-west of the country.

Instead, the displays bring to mind words which might be regarded as oxymorons when combined with the adjective "Swiss": fun, futuristic, audacious, imaginative, surprising. Even sensuous.

Among the 40-odd exhibits, visitors can sip mineral water on top of a real (artificially produced) cloud, experience what it is like to be blind, commune with intelligent robots, or opt to spend 24 hours in an unknown environment with another person.

(For those who find the togetherness experience unbearable there is an emergency escape door.)

The organisers say the idea of the exhibition, held once in a generation, is not so much to reflect the Switzerland of today but to open visitors' minds to future possibilities and encourage them to think differently, about themselves as individuals and in relation to others and society.

Nelly Wenger, Expo's director, says that rather than sending a particular message Expo should be considered a work of "fiction" that visitors can interpret for themselves.

One star exhibit, designed by Jean Nouvel, the French architect, is a rusting metal cube 35m high floating on the lake at Morat, to which visitors are ferried by solar-powered navette to see its spectacular interior panoramas.

Meanwhile, more than 10,000 cultural, sporting and other events are planned over Expo's five-month life, including a SFr15m opening pageant involving 1,800 performers and no fewer than seven orchestras.

Moroccan by origin and a francophone who speaks scarcely any German, the country's majority language, Ms Wenger argues that her appointment two years ago was itself a demonstration that Switzerland is capable of far more openness and daring than suggested by the smug inward-looking image more familiar to foreigners (and, it should be said, to most Swiss).

Dubbed Super-Nelly by the media, Ms Wenger has earned plaudits for rescuing the Expo project from near-collapse after private sponsors pulled out and the previous director was forced to resign. However, Expo.02 is smaller than originally planned, and central and local governments rather than the private sector are putting up most of the SFr1.4bn (Euros 960m) cost of the temporary exhibition. Only about a third will be recouped by ticket sales.

This has led to much grumbling from rightwing politicians, not helped by media glee at every glitch and setback, notably when during early tests the cloud (known as "Blur") failed to appear on cue.

However, as work on the sites has proceeded, public apathy has turned into interest. Advance ticket sales have topped the 1m mark. About two-thirds of Swiss say they intend to visit Expo.02, with nearly 5m visitors expected in total, 1m of them foreigners.

Meanwhile, advance press reviews have been largely favourable, leaving the organisers to worry chiefly about a scarcity of accommodation nearby and of course the weather. www.expo.02.ch