

Introduction

Switzerland may be neutral but it's far from flavourless. The fusion of German, French and Italian ingredients has formed a robust national culture, and the country's alpine landscapes have enough zing to reinvigorate the most jaded traveller. Nope, Geneva is not Switzerland's capital, despite what many think. This chic, sleek, cosmopolitan lakeside city is, in fact, only Switzerland's third-largest city and has an overwhelmingly international feel: 43.4% of the population is from elsewhere. We know what you're thinking, but honestly this is not the boring banking capital it's reputed to be.



In fact Zürich is - whisper it softly - surprisingly hip and trendy. Hundreds of new bars, restaurants and clubs have opened since planning laws were changed in the late 1990s and Zürich now hosts Europe's largest annual street party. The city is crowded with museums, has many excellent cultural events and is ideally placed for quick hops to the Swiss and French Alps. Basking in the sunshine of its peaceful setting on Lake Geneva's banks, this acclaimed neutral territory displays an obvious self-confidence. It is in pristine condition, clean, efficient and safe, yet spirited in its style and love of adventure. Admittedly, the first impression, of a small, clean and orderly metropolis with church steeples above a crystal-blue river and lake, is pleasant rather than exciting. But then you're struck by the happy noise of the cobbled Niederdorfstrasse, on the eastern riverbank, and won over by the hedonism around the lake.

Weather Overview

The mountains are mainly responsible for the variety of local and regional microclimates. Ticino in the south has a hot, Mediterranean climate, but most of the rest of the country has a central European climate. Summer temperatures are typically in the low-to-mid 20°Cs (60-70°F) and between 2°C (36°F) and 6°C (42°F) in winter. Travellers need to be prepared for a range of temperatures dependent on altitude. There is perennial snow cover at altitudes above 3000m (9842ft). Summer is the most pleasant time for outdoor pursuits (with the exception of skiing). Strong winds from the south, known as the Föhn, bring high temperatures (and sometimes red dust from the Sahara) and are a major cause of avalanches.

Visa Overview

Citizens of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the EU and the USA do not require a visa. A maximum stay of three months applies, though passports are rarely stamped.

Pre 20C

The first inhabitants of the region were a Celtic tribe, the Helvetia. The Romans appeared on the scene in 107 BC by way of the St Bernard Pass, but owing to the difficulty of the terrain their conquest of the area was never decisive. They were gradually driven back by the Germanic Altemanni tribe, which settled in the 5th century. The territory was united under the Holy Roman Empire in 1032 but central control was never very tight. That was all changed by the Germanic Habsburg family, which became the most powerful dynasty in Central Europe. Habsburg expansion was spearheaded by Rudolph I, who gradually brought the squabbling nobles to heel. Upon Rudolph's death in 1291, local leaders saw a chance to gain independence. Their pact of mutual assistance is seen as the origin of the Swiss Confederation, and their struggles against the Habsburgs is idealised in the familiar legend of William Tell. Encouraged by early successes, the Swiss gradually acquired a taste for territorial expansion themselves and gained independence from the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I in 1499. After a number of military victories, the Swiss finally over-reached themselves when they took on a combined force of French and Venetians in 1515. Realising they could no longer compete against larger powers with better equipment, they renounced expansionist policies and declared their neutrality.

The Reformation in the 16th century caused upheaval throughout Europe. The Protestant teachings of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin spread quickly, although central Switzerland remained Catholic. While the rest of Europe was fighting it out in the Thirty Years' War, the Swiss closed ranks and kept out of trouble. At the end of the war in 1648 they were recognised in the Treaty of Westphalia as a neutral state. Nevertheless, the French Republic invaded Switzerland in 1798 and established the Helvetic Republic. The Swiss, however, did not take too kindly to such centralised control. Napoleon was finally sent packing following his defeat by the British and Prussians at Waterloo. The ensuing Congress of Vienna guaranteed Switzerland's independence and permanent neutrality in 1815.

In 1848 a new federal constitution was agreed on and it is largely still in place today. Bern was established as the capital and the federal assembly was set up to take care of national issues. Switzerland was then able to concentrate on economic and social matters. It developed industries predominantly dependent on highly skilled labour. Networks of railways and roads were built, opening up previously inaccessible Alpine regions and helping the development of tourism. The international Red Cross was founded in Geneva in 1863 and compulsory free education was introduced.

Modern

The Swiss have carefully guarded their neutrality in the 20th century. Their only WWI involvement lay in the organising of Red Cross units. In WWII, however, Switzerland played a more insidious role as an amenable money launderer for Nazi Germany. Switzerland's quiet anti-Semitism included shutting its borders to Jewish refugees and forcibly repatriating many of those who escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, in full knowledge of the fate which awaited them. While the rest of Europe underwent the painful process of repairing the ravages of war, Switzerland was able to expand from an already powerful commercial, financial and industrial base. Zürich developed as an international banking and insurance centre, and many international bodies, such as the World Health Organisation, based their headquarters in Geneva.

Afraid that its neutrality would be compromised, Switzerland declined to become a member of the United Nations (though it currently has 'observer' status) or NATO. It did, however, join EFTA (the European Free Trade Association). In the face of other EFTA nations applying for EU (European Union) membership, Switzerland finally made its own application in 1992.

Recent

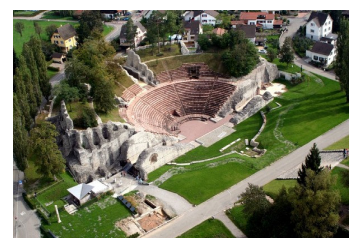
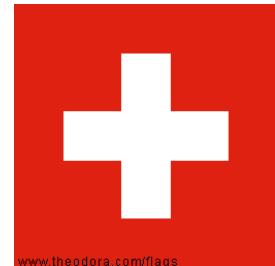
As a prelude to full EU membership Switzerland joined the EEA (European Economic Area), yet the government's strategy lay in ruins after citizens rejected the EEA in a referendum in December 1992. Switzerland's EU application has consequently been put on ice; in the meantime the government has been laying groundwork for closer integration with the rest of Europe. In 1998 the Swiss government agreed to pay CHF1200000000 compensation to relatives of Holocaust victims whose funds were deposited in Swiss banks.

In 2002 Switzerland became a member of the United Nations (despite the UN being founded and headquartered in Geneva for aeons), and a year later an enormous milestone was reached with a referendum backing the EU's Schengen and Dublin agreements, thus making Switzerland part of the EU's passport-free zone and pushing Switzerland closer to the EU in matters of crime and asylum. Months later, another referendum gave the OK to eastern European workers seeking work in Switzerland as the country opened its job-market doors to 10 of the newest EU member countries.

Places of Interest

Augusta Raurica

These Roman ruins by the Rhein are Switzerland's largest, and the last remnants of a colony founded in 43 BC that had grown to 20,000 citizens



by the 2nd century. Today, restored features include an open-air theatre and several temples, plus the Roman Museum, which features an authentic Roman house among its exhibits.

Swiss National Museum

A great cream cake of a museum, this mammoth but riveting turreted affair built in 1898 is a tough job to digest in one visit: The permanent collection takes visitors on a heady tour of Swiss history while temporary exhibitions entice the curious with a colourful clutch of local subjects such as Hermann Hesse or Swiss archaeology.

Web: www.musee-suisse.com



Château de Chillon

This extraordinary, oval-shaped castle was brought to the attention of the world by Lord Byron, and the world has been filing past ever since - they say the castle receives more visitors than any other historical building in Switzerland.

Web: www.chillon.ch

Attractions

Geneva

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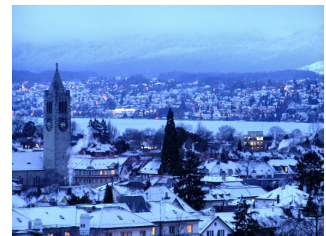
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Zurich

We know what you're thinking, but honestly this is not the boring banking capital it's reputed to be. In fact Zürich is - whisper it softly - surprisingly hip and trendy. Hundreds of new bars, restaurants and clubs have opened since planning laws were changed in the late 1990s and Zürich now hosts Europe's largest annual street party. Admittedly, the first impression, of a small, clean and orderly metropolis with church steeples above a crystal-blue river and lake, is pleasant rather than exciting. But then you're struck by the happy noise of the cobbled Niederdorfstrasse, on the eastern riverbank, and won over by the hedonism around the lake.

You'll be bowled over by the many galleries. You'll discover the waterside lido bars, the chocolate salons and the hip Züri-West district's shops, restaurants and clubs. A policeman cuts a striking figure on rollerblades (an occasional summertime sight). Bankers ride home on Italian scooters. And by the time you start musing how cool but easy-going and unpretentious this place is, Zürich has converted you.



Health Conditions

Altitude sickness

At altitudes higher than 2500m (8202ft), the lack of oxygen affects most people to some extent until they become acclimatised. The effect may be mild or severe and occurs because less

oxygen reaches the muscles and the brain at high altitude, requiring the heart and lungs to compensate by working harder.

Symptoms of acute mountain sickness (AMS) usually develop during the first 24 hours at high altitude but may be delayed up to three weeks. Mild symptoms include headache, lethargy, dizziness, difficulty sleeping and loss of appetite. AMS may become more severe without warning and can be fatal. Severe symptoms include breathlessness, a dry, irritating cough (which may progress to the production of pink, frothy sputum), severe headache, lack of coordination and balance, confusion, irrational behavior, vomiting, drowsiness and unconsciousness. There is no hard-and-fast rule as to what is too high: AMS has been fatal at 3000m (9842ft), although 3500m (11482ft) to 4500m (14763ft) is the usual range at which it becomes dangerous. Treat mild symptoms by resting at the same altitude until recovery, usually a day or two. Paracetamol or aspirin can be taken for headaches. If symptoms persist or become worse, however, immediate descent is necessary; even 500m (1640ft) can help.

To prevent acute mountain sickness, note the following: ascend slowly - have frequent rest days, spending two to three nights at each rise of 1000m (3280ft). If you reach a high altitude by trekking, acclimatisation takes place gradually, and you are less likely to be affected than if you fly directly to high altitude; if possible, sleep at a lower altitude than the greatest height reached during the day. Once above 3000m, care should be taken not to increase the sleeping altitude by more than 300m (984ft) per day; drink extra fluids. The mountain air is dry and cold and moisture is lost as you breathe. Evaporation of sweat may go unnoticed and result in dehydration; eat light, high-carbohydrate meals for more energy; avoid alcohol as it may increase the risk of dehydration, and avoid sedatives.

Hypothermia

This occurs when the body loses heat faster than it can produce it and the core temperature of the body falls. It is frighteningly easy to progress from very cold to dangerously cold due to a combination of wind, wet clothing, fatigue and hunger, even if the air temperature is above freezing. If the weather deteriorates, put on extra layers of warm clothing immediately: a windproof and/or waterproof jacket, plus wool or fleece hat and gloves, are all essential. Have something energy-giving to eat and ensure that everyone in your group is fit, and feeling well and alert.

Symptoms of hypothermia are exhaustion, numb skin (particularly toes and fingers), shivering, slurred speech, irrational or violent behaviour, lethargy, stumbling, dizzy spells, muscle cramps and violent bursts of energy. Irrationality may take the form of sufferers claiming they are warm and trying to take off their clothes. To treat mild hypothermia, first get the person out of the wind and/or rain, remove their clothing if it's wet and replace it with dry, warm clothing. Give them hot liquids - not alcohol - and some high-energy, easily digestible food. Do not rub victims: instead, allow them to slowly warm themselves. This should be enough to treat the early stages of hypothermia. The early recognition and treatment of mild hypothermia is the only way to prevent severe hypothermia, which is a critical condition.

Sunburn

At high altitude you can get sunburned quickly and seriously, even through clouds. Use a strong sunscreen, hat and barrier cream for your nose and lips. Calamine lotion and aloe vera are good for mild sunburn. Protect your eyes with good-quality sunglasses, particularly if you will be near water, sand or snow.

Getting there

Overview

The main entry points for international flights are Zürich and Geneva. Basel, Bern and Lugarno airports also receive international flights. There is no departure tax when flying out of Switzerland. Trains are a popular and convenient way to travel to Switzerland, and European rail passes make train travel affordable. Buses tend to be slower and less comfortable, though sometimes cheaper.

Getting to Switzerland by road is simple, since there are fast, well-maintained motorways through all surrounding countries. If you have time and money, it's possible to get to Switzerland by boat along the Rhine all the way from Amsterdam. Switzerland can also be reached by lake steamer ferries from Germany via Lake Constance, from Italy via Lake Maggiore and from France via Lake Geneva.

Getting around

Overview

Switzerland has a fully integrated and comprehensive public transport system incorporating trains, buses, boats, funiculars and cable cars. Internal flights are not of great interest to the visitor, owing to the excellent ground transportation. The Swiss rail network covers 5000km (3106mi). Trains are clean, reliable and frequent. Yellow postbuses supplement the rail network and their stations are next to railway stations. There are car-rental agencies in most sizeable towns. Roads are well maintained, well signposted and generally not too congested, though you may find it hard to concentrate with such wonderful scenery unfolding around you. Bicycles can be hired from most railway stations and returned to any station with a rental office. You'll need calf muscles the size of an ox to get very far though. All the larger lakes are serviced by steamers, and rail passes are valid on most steamer routes.

Fast Facts:

Time Zone

GMT/UTC +1

Weight measures

Metric

Area Sqkm

41,290 sq km

Area Code

Country Code: 41

Population

7,461,100

Spoken Language

German (official)

German (most commonly the dialect known as Schwyzertütsch) is spoken by about 63.7% of the population.

French (official)

spoken by 20.4% of the population.

Italian (official)

Spoken by 6.4% of the population.

Raeto-Romance (official)

spoken by 0.5% of the population, mainly in the canton of Graubunden.

Religion

41.8% Roman Catholic, 35.3% Protestant, 4.3% Muslim, 1.8% Orthodox Christian, 11.1% no religion, 5.7% other.

Currency

Swiss Franc (CHF)

Electricity

230V 50Hz

Electrical Plug

European plug with three circular metal pins