

Switzerland

Switzerland's distinctive landscape – 60 per cent of the country is covered by mountains – is what makes this country unique, creating a wide range of different climates and the possibility for various outdoor activities. The lowest point is only 196 metres above sea level and experiences a Mediterranean climate, while 70 kilometres away at Dufour Peak, which is 4,634 metres above sea level, the climate is distinctly arctic.

The country's mountain ranges provide the main focus for Switzerland's tourism and every winter thousands of visitors arrive to stay in one of the many ski resorts. Activities such as skiing, sledging, snow boarding, riding on skidoos and heli-skiing are popular during the winter months, although these are by no means the only attractions.

Near the town of Interlaken, on the banks of Lake Thun, the intricate St Beatus cave system allows visitors to descend to a depth of 300 metres below ground level. Legend has it that a dragon lived in the caves 1900 years ago and was banished into the lake by St Beatus. Now, tourists come to see the Koh-i-noor, a huge stalactite that is at least 40,000 years old, as well as a subterranean waterfall.

Hiking and climbing up the highest mountains are also popular pastimes during the summer months and the distinct climate created by the Alps has created a unique ecosystem of flora and fauna. A number of animals are often seen grazing on the mountainsides, including the ibex, a mountain goat with huge curved horns, and the chamois, a horned antelope.

Higher up the mountains, plants have had to develop special mechanisms to survive the extreme climatic conditions. Many have a very short growing season and can even flower underneath the snow to make the most of the short growing season. The Schynige Platt Alpine Garden can be reached via a cog railway from Wilderswill and is home to a huge variety of distinctive alpine flora.

At the other extreme, areas of Ticino on the Italian border are more closely associated with Mediterranean countries, with strong Italian influences to be seen in the local cuisine and culture. The town of Ascona, on the edge of Lake Maggiore, has a reputation for artistry and creativity that dates from the 16th century when the Casa Serodine was built. During the 19th century, the town attracted revolutionaries, painters, poets, philosophers and writers who founded a colony on Ascona's hillside that they called *Monte Verità* [mountain of truth]. This group of idealists wished to return to a natural way of life and welcomed the exiled Lenin for a time. The *Museo Comunale D'Arte Moderna* contains paintings of artists connected with the town, including Paul Klee.

Lakes and rivers are a common feature throughout Switzerland and often provide the backdrop for stunning scenery. The River Rhine is the country's most famous river and runs from Lake Toma in the middle of Switzerland to the North Sea, 1,320 kilometres away. The river provides the boundary between Switzerland and Germany, and, at the Rhine Falls in Schaffhausen, forms the largest waterfall in Europe. Carved out by glaciers, the falls measure 23 metres high and 150 metres wide. Visitors can take a boat ride to an island in the middle of the falls where there was once a customs post.

Switzerland's capital city, Bern, is situated on the River Aare and provides a glimpse of times gone by with some of its architecture dating from the 15th century and its city plan from medieval times. The city appears on the Unesco list of world heritage sights and has over 100 fountains within its city limits. Bern also claims the distinction of being the place where Einstein developed his theory of relativity and where Tobler created his world famous Toblerone chocolate bar.

Sampling the local food is an important part of any trip to Switzerland and in Bern the traditional dish is *röschti*, consisting of grated potatoes made into a pancake shape and fried with other ingredients such as bacon, onion and cheese. Cheese is often involved in traditional dishes and the country produces Sapsago, Emmental and Gruyère. The most famous cheese dish, which can be found throughout the country, is the fondue, where pieces of bread are dipped into a communal bowl of melted cheese – usually Gruyère and Emmental.

“As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light of meaning in the darkness of mere being.”

Carl Jung, Swiss psychologist, (1875-1961)

