



Switzerland

Switzerland, or the Swiss Confederation to give the country its official name, is made up of 26 cantons and is the smallest federal state in the world. The country came into being in 1848 when an alliance between a group of autonomous cantons created a constitution aimed at balancing the interests of the state with the interests of each separate canton. The Swiss people today still enjoy much of their autonomous freedoms and each canton has its own constitution, government, courts and laws, with major issues often decided by referendum.

With the Alps making up three-fifths of Switzerland's surface area, many visitors are attracted to the country by the sports and scenic opportunities on offer – whether skiing in the winter or climbing, cycling and walking in the summer. Several of the most famous resorts are situated in the Valais canton, which is home to the Matterhorn, one of the most well known mountains in Switzerland. Skiers can enjoy virtually year-round skiing on the 230 kilometres of runs surrounding the car-free resort of Zermatt, while a cog-wheel railway is available to take more sedentary visitors to Gonergrat to see breathtaking views of the Matterhorn and the surrounding peaks.

The Jungfrau region, above Valais and just south of Interlaken, boasts impressive scenery with the mountains of Jungfrau, Mönch and Eiger dominating the area. Visitors can take cable cars, funiculars, cog-wheel railways and hiking trails to panoramic vantage points, and those visiting in July can attend the yodelling festival held at the skiing and hiking centre of Grindelwald.

Switzerland has a number of distinctive national symbols, including cuckoo clocks, watches, chocolate and cowbells, and the picturesque town of Lucerne provides visitors with a truly traditional image of the country. Mountains, lakes, alpine villages and meadows

full of wildflowers surround the town, making it an ideal area for walking, and visitors can also partake in water sports on the nearby Lake Lucerne and Reuss River. The old town centre contains 15th-century buildings with painted facades and picturesque covered bridges decorated with medieval paintings. For a truly modern experience, visitors can see all the sights of Switzerland in 20 minutes at the Transport Museum in Lucerne, where the Swissorama – a 360-degree film – takes visitors on a whistle-stop tour by air, sea, road and foot.

The capital city, Berne, is one of Europe's smallest national capitals and is home to the Federal Palace, which is the seat of the Swiss Parliament. According to legend, the city was named Berne – meaning bear – by its founder, Duke Berchtold V von Zähringen, after the first animal to be caught there. Visitors can still see live bears in bear pits in the city.

Zürich, located in the north of the country, is Switzerland's largest city and is reputed to be the country's intellectual and cultural capital. It is also host to the annual *Sechseläuten* festival which dates from the Middle Ages and is held in April to celebrate spring's victory over winter. During the festival, an effigy known as "Boogg", representing the old man of winter, is paraded through the town and burned on a bonfire at the Bellevue Platz overlooking Lake Zürich. The city has a lively nightlife scene with bars and cafés clustered in the old town, overlooking the River Limmat.

Switzerland's huge international importance is most obvious in Geneva, the country's centre of banking, finance and international affairs, which is located near the French border in the southwest. Over 200 international organisations have their headquarters there, including the Red Cross, which was founded in Geneva in the 18th century. Tourists can truly experience the local life of the town by visiting one of its varied open air markets. The flower market on the Place du Molard and the book market on the Place de la Madeleine are open daily.

On one of the hillsides that slope down to Lake Geneva is the town of Lausanne which is the destination for many sports enthusiasts. Lausanne is the headquarters of the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Museum houses one of the largest collections of Olympic research materials in the world.



"The sea frozen in a storm is the image which most nearly describes [Switzerland] to me. Whether you look up at its awful solitudes or down where it rests its icy tongue in the valley. Wherever and whenever you see it, it is the miracle of nature, the wonder of the alpine world."

M.E.W. Sherwood (1826-1903),
US traveller and author