

TRAVEL AND ADVENTURE

Small towns dotting Switzerland's Lake Geneva have a French feel

By John Blanchette



FEELS LIKE FRANCE - The town of Montreux is draped along Lake Geneva and offers a jaw-dropping view of the Alps. It boasts a mild climate that supports palm trees and lovely floral gardens that has earned it the nickname Pear of the Swiss Riviera. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



SOAKING UP SUN - Vineyards in the French-speaking quadrant, one of Switzerland's finest wine-growing regions, cascade down steep hills absorbing sunrays reflecting off Lake Geneva. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



BYRON'S BAD BASEMENT - Chateau de Chillon, a 13th century fortress built on rocks jutting into the lake, was notorious for its dungeon. It was immortalized in Byron's poem "The Prisoner of Chillon." CNS Photo by John Blanchette.



CUISINE-FRIENDLY CLIMATE - Food and wine are enjoyed year round at outdoor restaurants thanks to the mild climate of southwestern Switzerland. CNS Photo by John Blanchette.

MONTREUX, Switzerland - Sprouting above the center of Europe, Switzerland is surrounded by France, Germany, Austria and Italy. It is a land of four national languages, reflecting the influence of its neighbors.

Despite Harry Lime's assertion in Graham Greene's "The Third Man" that Switzerland's contribution to world culture is the coo-coo clock, there is a long tradition of artistic achievement in this tiny country of 6 million. In fact, Greene lived here for many years and is buried in the town of Vevey.

Many other creative souls have produced some of their greatest masterpieces here and thrived on one of the world's most beautiful and inspiring canvases. T.S. Eliot wrote "The Wasteland" while living in Lausanne. James Joyce, Herman Hesse, Paul Klee, Henry James, Voltaire, Dickens, Charlie Chaplin, Stravinsky, Vladimir Nabokov and Peter Ustinov have called Switzerland home, and right now Tina Turner, Shania Twain and Phil Collins have homes.

Hanging like a sporty beret upon the western region of Switzerland is the French-speaking quadrant. Here the influence of its neighbor can be found in Belle Epoque architecture, fine wines, restaurants and a love of jazz.

I began my tour of the area in the southern town of Montreux, spectacularly draped along Lake Geneva with a jaw-dropping view of the Alps across the water. The town boasts a mild climate that supports palm trees and lovely floral gardens running along a pristine lakeside promenade that has earned it the nickname Pearl of the Swiss Riviera.

Every July for the past 39 years, Montreux is home to the Jazz Festival, attracting hundreds of thousands to its harmonious shores for the two-week event.

Also perched on the edge of the lake is the famous Casino, the subject of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water," which describes a suspicious fire that destroyed the original building during a Frank Zappa concert.

Just east of the town is Chateau de Chillon, a 13th

century fortress built on rocks jutting into the lake. It was notorious for its dungeon and was immortalized in Byron's poem "The Prisoner of Chillon." You can still see Byron's name etched by his own hand in one of the castle beams.

This is one of Switzerland's finest wine-growing regions, with vineyards spilling down the steep hills, especially west of Montreux above the villages of Vevey, Chexbres and throughout the Lavaux region. For a safe, if not sober, trip through the area, take the wine train and enjoy tastings in local cellars. The grape of choice is Chasselas, a white also cultivated in Austria.

The Lake Geneva ferry departs regularly during the day from Montreux, visiting neighboring towns. It's a relaxing way to take in the scenery and arrive in Vevey to start your tour of the wine region. Vevey is a beautifully preserved town with a lot of character and intellectual appeal. It has been home to more than 40 internationally known writers, including Dostoyevsky, Rousseau, Hugo, Chaplin and Hemingway.

The other great wine region of Switzerland lies to the west and sweeps up north of Lausanne through the Watch Valley to the town of Neuchatel, at the northern tip of Lake Neuchatel, the largest body of water entirely inside of Switzerland. Here the pinot noir grape is also an important player. Every September a three-day wine festival over the last weekend of the month celebrates the harvest with parades, tastings, concerts and a wide range of activities.

Also, don't miss the Absinthe Festival, celebrating that most-maligned aperitif, once again legal in Switzerland and made in the area around Neuchatel.

Called the City of Fountains, more than 100 are sprinkled throughout Neuchatel, and townspeople regularly splash water on their faces and drink from spigots that deliver fresh water from the mountains. Dominated by yellow sandstone buildings, Alexandra Dumas called Neuchatel the

city made of butter.

A prosperous region, largely because of the watch industry, its history began in the 16th century when jewelry was banned in Geneva by the Calvinist government and the designers took up watch making as a way to survive. Farmers to the north established it as a cottage industry during the winter months. Now nearly every watch in Switzerland is manufactured in the Watch Valley, which spreads between Geneva and Basal.

The true center of the industry is in the town of La Chaux-de-Fonds, about 15 miles northwest of Neuchatel. All the Swiss watch companies have their manufacturing plants in the surrounding area, from Tag Heuer to Piaget, Cartier and Rolex among many others.

The town is also famous for its architecture. It was the first city to be designed on a grid of crisscrossing streets, which later gave birth to many American city designs, most notably Manhattan.

Corbusier, one of the fathers of modern architectural design, was born and raised in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Three of his buildings survive in the city, the most famous being La Villa Turque, a circular building that is now the public relations office for Ebel watchmakers.

The lovely Musee des Beaux-Arts, a neoclassical structure designed by Corbusier's teacher, L'Eplattenier, contains three of Corbusier's artworks and a surprising number of major artists, from Van Gogh to Renoir.

If you've got a little time on your hands, visit the International Watch Museum, a fascinating voyage through the history of timepieces with thousands of watches and clocks dating from the beginning of the industry. Even a few coo-coo clocks for the Harry Limes of the world.

IF YOU GO

The Swiss Pass costs about \$200 for a week and allows you to travel on all the public trains, buses, streetcars and ferries. But be warned, they are never late and depart on time.

Hotel suggestions in Montreux include Hotel Eden Palace Au Lac and Raffles Le Montreux Palace, a Belle époque masterpiece where Nabokov spent the last 20 years of his life.

In Vevey, the Hotel de Trois Couronnes is where Henry James set his novel "Daisy Miller." Auberge de la Crochettaz is a wine-country restaurant and hotel in Epesses, and nearby is the Cave de Vieux Bourg for wine tasting.

In Neuchatel, Le Cafe Hotel offers complimentary coffee in the first-floor coffeehouse and the stunning Hotel Palafitte is the only five-star hotel in Switzerland built over water. Its restaurant, appropriately enough, features seafood. Le Petit Paris and the Brasserie du Cardinal are popular watering holes.

In La Chaux-de Fonds, the Athmos Hotel has four stars. The restaurant L'orologio (timepieces) has watches imbedded in its tables, so you can't lose track of time over dinner. La Cheminee is a rustic restaurant that cooks over a wood fire.

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