

The Titlis Glacier Park: a unique experience in the Swiss Alps



No need to say cheese first for a Swiss smile

Trust the Swiss to get it right. If ever a country had worked out how best to appeal to visiting tourists and businessmen alike, Switzerland has to be the most visitor-friendly nation bar none.

By BRIAN SALTER

As a truly global city you would be hard pushed to find anywhere more international than the capital of the French speaking part, namely Geneva. With its numerous international organisations including the headquarters of many of the agencies of the United Nations and the Red Cross, plus acronymed bodies like CERN, WHO and WTO, a 2007 survey by Mercer Consulting found Geneva to have the second highest quality of living in the world (narrowly outranked by its northern big brother, Zürich).

It is certainly not a cheap destination, but the city does cater for both the highest of tastes as well as the lowest of budgets, and it has over 14,000 beds in the city centre alone, ranging from student hostels to luxury five star hotels.

With over 1,000 restaurants, the city is the undisputed capital of cuisine in Switzerland. Local specialties include fondue, raclette, lake fish dishes, smoked sausage and a variety of casseroles. In Geneva food is a serious occupation and diversion.

Virtually surrounded by the Alps and the Jura mountain ranges, and sitting at the south western end of Lac Léman where the lake meets the River

Rhône, Geneva has so many must see destinations that you'd be hard pressed to fit them all in in a week, let alone on a long weekend. And that's not counting all the out-of-city excursions that the area has to offer.

Geneva's world famous lakefront is the centerpiece of the city and offers plenty of opportunities for recreation and relaxation throughout the year. The Jet d'eau at the Quai du Général-Guisan, thrusts 500 litres of water into the air every second to a height of 140 metres at over 200 km per hour. It's the world's tallest jet and symbolises Geneva's heritage as a leader in the field of hydraulic power. (The fountain off Jeddah in Saudi Arabia was modeled on the Geneva Jet.)

Originally a security valve at the Coulouvrenière hydraulic factory in the 19th century, it was transferred in 1891 to its present location to become a major tourist attraction; and in 1951 it was provided with its own autonomous pumping station. Only much more recently was it given the benefit of eight 9,000-watt projectors to light the fountain's majestic column as the water soars to the heavens.

The Promenades along the left and right banks of the lake are filled with cafés, parks, street markets and other

diversions from lake cruises to amusement rides to water skiing. And taking pride of place on the eastern bank since 1955, in the English Garden (Jardin Anglais) is the giant Floral Clock - a tribute to Geneva's world famous watch industry. The dial is composed of some 6,500 flowers in eight concentric circles of different plant species and is updated with new arrangements several times each year as the seasons change. The seconds hand, at over 2.5 metres long, is the largest in the world.

Geneva is often referred to as the "city of parks" due to the fact that over one quarter of the city is covered by public parks. Many were once grand estates that were later dedicated to the city. Most are situated along the lake with stunning views of the surrounding mountains, and the best way to see them is on one of the three "minitrains" powered by solar energy

which leave from the Jardin Anglais and head for the Port-Noir.

Geneva's ancient Old Town is a maze of sloping cobblestone streets and alleyways filled with cafés, boutiques and historical landmarks. A former Roman marketplace, the Bourg-de-Four is the oldest public square in Geneva and remains a hub of activity.

The 15th century Hotel De Ville still serves as the seat of government in Geneva and is the site of many political milestones including the first Geneva Convention in 1864 and the founding of the League of Nations in 1920. It was only nine years later than construction started on the Palais des Nations to house the League of Nations, later to become the headquarters of the United Nations in 1946 when the former organisation was dissolved. The vast wooded park overlooking the

lake, where it is located, was donated to the UN by the City of Geneva. Its assembly room seats 2,000 and is as large as the Paris Opera House; over 25,000 delegates meet here annually.

The town is also home to more than 30 museums and galleries presenting a wide array of cultural and historical offerings. From the ultra modern Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art to the ancient Maison Tavel, Geneva's museums capture the full spectrum of the city's history and major cultural influences. Free admission is offered the first Sunday of every month at most city sponsored museums and new exhibits are constantly added throughout the year.

Shopaholics, bargain hunters, collectors and curiosity seekers should make their way early on Wednesday and Saturday mornings to the stalls on the Plaine de Plainpalais. Here professional dealers in antiques, curios or bric-à-brac stand cheek by jowl with occasional sellers offering a wide range of objects from rare one offs to unusual and worthless items.

Public transport by bus, trolleybus or tram offers extensive coverage of the city centre, whilst boats link the two banks of the lake within the city, and serve more distant

destinations such as Nyon, Yvoire, Thonon, Evian, Lausanne, Vevey and Montreux using both modern diesel vessels and vintage paddle steamers.

Not only does the public transport system run on time almost to the second - a rarity in this modern world - but in true keeping with the town's visitor-friendly stance as of January 1, 2007, for visitors staying at a hotel, youth hostel or camping in Geneva can benefit from the free Geneva transport card enabling all holders free use of the entire public transportation network across the city without restriction (bus, train and boat), with validity for the entire duration of his or her stay including the day of departure.

Of course, once you have done with the metropolis, you could turn your attentions to the numerous out of town attractions such as the Château de Chillon (surely one of the most picturesque châteaux in the country and popularised by Lord Byron), Montreux with its famous jazz festival, Lausanne and Vevey with their equally beautiful lakeside waterfronts, and mountain villages too numerous to mention. But then, of course, you'd have to book yourself yet another break in this most beautiful corner of Europe. ■

