

Switzerland

FRIENDSHIP TOUR HITS HIGH POINT IN THE ALPS AS VIBRANT ZÜRICH SHATTERS 'BLAND' SWISS MYTHS

About Switzerland

Switzerland is famous for its Alps, which cover 60% of the land area. German, French and Italian are all widely spoken, reflecting the three major ethnic groups and who its neighbours are. It also shares a border with Austria.



When To Visit

Any time of the year. Summer lasts from June to September. Ski resorts operate from November to April.

Visa Requirements

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

Getting There

The main entry points for international flights are Zürich and Geneva. From within Europe, you can also use train, bus or ferry.



Bahrain Connection

Around the world, Switzerland is synonymous with banking; on a smaller scale, Bahrain is the banking capital of the Middle East with dozens of international banks, including Swiss, setting roots on the island.



THE POPULAR IMAGE OF SWITZERLAND IS ALMOST too perfect and timeless: spectacular Alpine scenery, cozy mountain chalets, dazzling ski runs, window boxes spilling over with red geraniums, tidy cities set on serene lakes, elegant grand hotels.

Though you'll undoubtedly encounter these along the way, they don't present a complete picture of this modern country. Switzerland may guard its neutrality but it is anything but bland; in fact it has more flavour than anyone who hasn't visited the country might believe.

The first of our preconceptions evaporated when we drove through a town and saw signs in some stores that said simply: "Shop Closed. Out on Holiday." The Swiss may be hardworking, but they find time to enjoy themselves too.

Few countries have such diversity in terms of culture and language: German is prevalent in Zürich and



The Mitsubishi parked outside Stefano's house.

the northern, central and eastern regions; French in Geneva and the western region; Italian in Lugano and the southern region; and Romansh in St Moritz and the southwestern region.

One thing you should know: If you speak German,

PAGE OPPOSITE:

This Geneva garden pays flowery tribute to the term Swiss timing with a perfectly functioning lawn clock.



People enjoying a beautiful morning in Lucerne.



don't expect all German-speaking Swiss to speak standard German (Hochdeutsch) with you. They are proud of their dialect, and many would prefer to speak English or French with foreigners rather than speak standard German.

Zürich is regarded as the new Berlin. This formerly

staid banking capital has experienced such a creative explosion in recent years, and such a mushrooming of innovative bars, restaurants and shops that it resembles Berlin's salad days of the mid-Eighties and early Nineties.

We were lucky to have Ali's good friend Stefano



Cuzza living in Zürich. Stefano used to work at the Ritz Carlton, Bahrain Hotel and Spa. He now owns an incentives company with major clients like the Royal Bank of Scotland and UBS. Stefano hosted us at his house and was delighted at the journey we were undertaking.



A swan swims in the calm waters of Lake Geneva.

From Zürich, we drove to Geneva with its famous lakes. There are plenty of tourists here, including many Arabs. Switzerland is one of those fortunate countries that gets tourists all the year round, some who enjoy the glorious summers, the others to ski at the resorts during the winter.

Driving around in Switzerland is not as challenging as it could have been, thanks to the excellent roads, but mountainous terrain still means you need to give yourself more time than you think you might need.

Fortunately none of us were afflicted by a fairly common problem for those unused to these conditions: altitude sickness. At altitudes higher than 2,500 metres (8,202 ft), 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.

Altitude sickness can manifest itself through breathlessness, a dry cough, severe headache or a lack of coordination and balance. In most cases, this is easily treated though, merely by resting at the same altitude until recovery, or descending to a level about 500 metres or more.

Before leaving Switzerland, we all did what any self-respecting tourist to this beautiful country would do: bought Swiss watches!

