

THE HEART OF EUROPE

At the base of the Swiss Alps and surrounded by breathtaking vistas, Zurich is a fairytale destination

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZURICH TOURISM



As Switzerland's largest city, Zurich is an idyllic year-round destination against the backdrop of the spectacular Swiss Alps. In summer months, you can boat on Lake Zurich, bike and walk in the city, swim the lakes and rivers, and relax in expansive outdoor spaces. Winter brings a unique charm, too, with some of Europe's best ski resorts less than 90 minutes away, warm mineral springs for soaking, and a vast array of cultural experiences. Although it's an ideal base while exploring the rest of Switzerland, it's well worth it to spend a few days discovering Zurich's own charm.

Exploring the Town

Zurich is a quintessential storybook lakefront town, with Lake Zurich on one end and the Limmat River winding its way through Old Town past the massive Grossmünster (meaning "great minister") church founded in the 8th century by Charlemagne. Climb to the top of the Karlsturm (the southern tower of Grossmünster) to see the city and look across the river for the inspiring tower of Fraumünster Zurich, which dates back to 853. Be sure to cross the river for a visit to gaze quietly at the stained-glass windows by Marc Chagall.

As you explore, notice the fountains everywhere – there are about 1,225 public fountains in the city, each offering clean drinking water. Also be sure to walk up the winding cobbled drives on the Right Shore to Lindenhof park, an ideal spot to see down the river to Lake Zurich and the snow-capped Alps.

In summer months, visit bathing areas along the river and lake by day, and be sure to return in the evenings when the baths transform into "Badi bars" (open-air bars) offering cocktails and entertainment.

The city boasts 50 museums and more than 100 galleries. The National Museum Zurich, located behind the Main Station (Hauptbahnhof, or HB Zurich for short), houses Switzerland's largest cultural history collection. It's a great place to get a first glimpse of Zurich's rich history.

Guided walking tours (www.zuerich.com) offer a chance to learn the city's history while discovering local favorites. If you purchase a Zurich Card, available from the tourist information booth at HB Zurich or at the Zurich Airport, you get up to 50 percent off on tours as well as unlimited travel on Zurich's public transportation including buses, boats, trains, trams and cableways.

Winter Wonderland

You can best experience Zurich's winter magic at one of the many Christmas markets from mid-November through Christmas Eve. The Hauptbahnhof Christkindlimarkt is the largest indoor

Christmas market in Europe with more than 160 stalls and a larger-than-life tree decorated with 7,000 Swarovski crystals. Zurich's oldest Christmas market is outdoors in the center of Niederdorf in Old Town. For something different, check out Wienachtsdorf at Sechseläutenplatz, the largest Christmas market overall (indoor and outdoor), with 100 chalets selling upcycled products and ice skating for all ages.

Winter is also the ideal time to enjoy a Swiss classic: fondue. While it's available year-round, there's something warm and soothing about a traditional Swiss fondue of rich wine and cheese sauce served with a selection of housemade pickles and breads. Another Swiss classic is Zürcher Geschnetzeltes – sliced veal in a white wine cream sauce – served with a side of rösti potatoes. In addition to traditional dishes, Zurich is home to more than 2,000 restaurants with international cuisine.

Luxury Shopping

For retail lovers, Zurich is a shopper's paradise. Stroll down Bahnhofstrasse – the main downtown street and also one of the world's most exclusive shopping avenues – to discover luxury brands. If you want to take home a Swiss timepiece, step into watch retailer Bucherer and take your pick of top Swiss brands, or go to nearby flagship Piaget or Mont Blanc.

For fashion finds, stop into Maison Gassmann, an iconic department store housed in a historic Bahnhofstrasse building. Nearby Grieder, situated inside a Gothic building, is also popular for everything from clothing to housewares. If you prefer more traditional shops, wind along the cobbled streets of Old Town where you can find boutiques filled with clothing, jewelry, arts and crafts.

Stay & Soak

B2 Boutique Hotel + Spa (www.b2boutiquehotels.com), located on Zurich's Left Shore, is quiet and hip, only about five minutes by train from Hauptbahnhof and three tram stops to shopping at Paradeplatz, an area at the center of Bahnhofstrasse. B2 is located in what was once Switzerland's largest brewery, the Hürlimann Brewery.

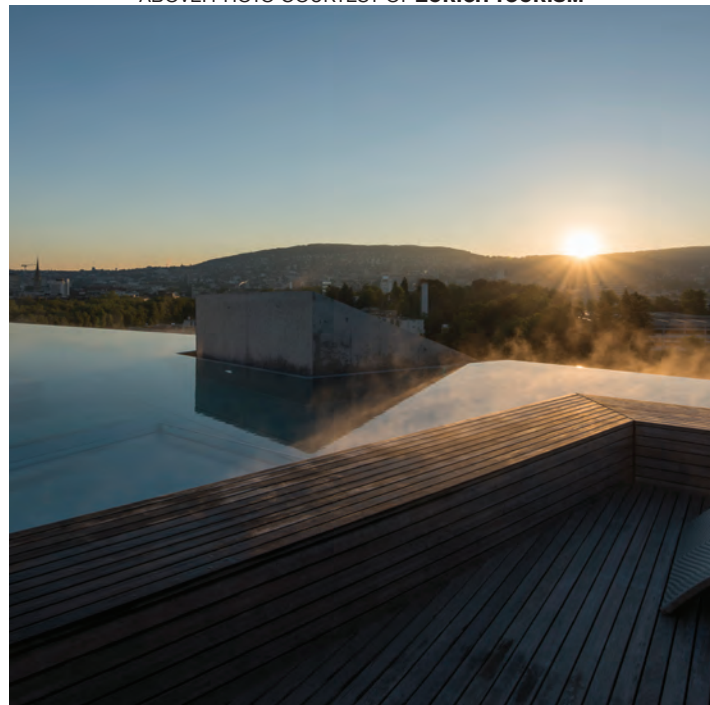
Order local bites, sample wine and beer, and enjoy complimentary brunch each morning in the wine library, surrounded by 33,000 collectible books and chandeliers made from original Hürlimann beer bottles. All 60 rooms and suites are unique, filled with paintings reflecting the building's industrial heritage along with classic design elements.

Make your way downstairs to Thermal Bath & Spa Zurich, where you can bathe under hundred-year-old stone arches. Soak in the wooden mineral pools or follow the Irish-Roman circuit, where you soak your way through 10 water stations toward ultimate relaxation. The rooftop boasts an open-air infinity pool with breathtaking panoramic views overlooking Zurich. Hotel guests can access the spa through a private elevator and receive a 50 percent discount on admission to the spa plus access to the pool.

Discover more information about Zurich at www.zuerich.com.



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