Your Trip to Switzerland: The Complete Guide
SEE FULL GUIDE >
Read Seven Trips Studies

EUROPE > SWITZERLAND

One Week in Switzerland: The Ultimate Itinerary

By LISA DUNCAN | Updated: 12/08/2021

Share Tweet Pin Email

ADVERTISEMENT

Switzerland is a small country compared to many of its European neighbors, but you'll still need more than a week to take it all in. It's a week in all you've got, this itinerary will give you a taste of the best the country has to offer, taking you from cities to mountains and lakeside towns. Spend your time in the Swiss capitals of Zurich, Lucerne, Bern, and Geneva for exploring Swiss history and culture, taking in the stunning scenery, and sampling Swiss cuisine. Your time will be split between both French and German-speaking Switzerland, so you'll also get a feel for the two cultures blend and at odds.

Skip the metal car for this itinerary, which we've specifically designed to be done via public transportation. Switzerland's Swiss Travel Pass will have nearly unlimited use of Switzerland's extensive network of trains, buses, and ferries. Some mountain cable cars, ski gondolas, and cog railways are also included with the pass, making car-free sightseeing in Switzerland a breeze.

Day 1: Zurich

Photo: Lisa Duncan

Hopefully, you caught some shut-eye on your flight to Zurich, so you can enjoy a full day exploring Switzerland's largest city. Zurich offers an engaging mix of history and innovation, and it turns the young and old alike of Switzerland. From the airport, take the Swiss Zurich Express train station, where you can walk, train, or cab to your central hotel—we recommend you make your choice a base in or close to the Altstadt, or Old Town, so you can easily explore the city on foot or via trams. In the Altstadt, don't miss the mighty Grossmunster cathedral, and take time to wander the main drag, the Niederdorf, and the mostly pedestrian streets that run off from it.

Cross the Limmat River, pausing to take in the views and the sight of swans, swimmers (depending on the time of year), and tour boats along this pretty waterway. Head for the Lindenhof hill overlooking the river and impressive shopping street—even if it's just for window-shopping, and duck into Zurich's other grand cathedral, the Fraumunster. In the afternoon, head down to the Limmatquai for a tour of Lake Zurich, or hit one of the city's top museums.

That evening, plan on dinner at the convivial Zeughauskeller, famous for its metro-long sausages and setting in a 14th-century armory.

Day 2: Zug Trip to St. Gallen and Appenzell

This morning, hop on a train headed east for the hour-long ride to St. Gallen—trains depart about every an minute from Zurich Main Station. Once there, spend some time exploring the Abbey of St Gall, a complex that dates back centuries and which has also been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Abbey Library of St Gallen houses nothing less than one of the oldest, which includes a library that contains more than 2,000 volumes, including priceless early medieval illuminated manuscripts, and the Baroque abbey cathedral.

In St. Gallen town, wander among the half-timber houses of the pedestrian only Old Town, and take in the Textilmuseum, with its displays of historic clothing and textiles.

If you're up for a longer day, jump down to the town of Appenzell after lunch—just a 30-minute ride from St. Gallen—for a delightful afternoon of exploring the quaint streets and shops of this traditional. Spend a couple of hours in this charming town, then transfer back to St. Gallen and on to Zurich for the night.

Day 3: Lucerne

Photo: Lisa Duncan

Today you'll catch guns and locations, from Zurich to Lucerne, a 45-minute train ride—for the next two-miles. The largest city on lake Lucerne is worthy of a visit on its own, and is also a stepping off point for exploring the surrounding Alps and lake region. Lucerne town is a pretty centre filled with half timber houses and very time and sunstone—Weisshaus Turlin is a good place to start, and the Lucerne Tourist Office is nearby. The Viktoriapassage has hiking historic presentations that will interest kids and adults, and a short walk from the Swiss Transport Museum is easily one of the top museums in the country's most famous landmark, the 14th-century Chapel Bridge, is a must see.

Once you've explored Lucerne in the morning, head out on a mountain railway or cable car to see all around depressed more than 2,000 meters above sea level. From Kriens, a short bus ride from Lucerne, take the Pilatusbahn Gondola on a breathtaking 30-minute ride to the top of Pilatus, where you'll find hiking, an interpretive park, restaurants, and soaring views.

Day 4: Boat Ride to Rigi or Rufi

Photo: Lisa Duncan

Spend at least part of the day on the waters of Lake Lucerne, with a scenic boat ride around one of Switzerland's most beautiful lakes. Your Swiss Travel Pass grants you free boat rides on the boats of the Lake Lucerne Navigation Firms, which ply the lake year-round.

Head to Vitznau, where you might be tempted to spend the night at the 5-star, Inkeriest Fuji Hotel Vitznau or at least consider a meal at the Restaurant Rigi Kulm, a 19th-century chalet the historic certified Swiss 5-Star Kulm at the top of Rigi. Rigi and take an easy hike back down, at least part of the way—there are places to eat at several of the railway stops.

For a big dose of Swiss history, take the boat from Lucerne to the Rütli Meadow, the birthplace of the Swiss Confederation in 1291. The journey here is more than half the fun—the boat ride is more dramatic, and traverses nearly the full length of Lake Lucerne.

Day 5: Bern

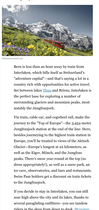


Photo: Lisa Duncan

Take a morning train from Lucerne to the Swiss capital of Bern, about a two-minute ride. From Bern's main station, you're about a 10-minute walk to the Old Town. Bern's Old Town is one of the best-kept and-to-date of anywhere in Switzerland's UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Bern is built into a sharp bend in the Aare River, which historically made it easier to defend and, aesthetically, placed it in a beautiful setting. Make sure you visit the Zytglogge historical clock tower, which dates back to the 15th century and the tourist crowing and the complicated display of dances of mechanical moving figures.

Other highlights of Bern include the spiral and century Minster with its elaborate facade, and the Bundeshaus, seat of the Swiss Parliament. Science and history fans will enjoy a visit to the Einstein House, where the physicist lived for two years and set known should head to the Zentrum Paul Klee, the museum and research center dedicated to the artist's extensive work.

If you visit Bern in the summer, be sure to take a swim in the Aare River—it's a favorite warm-weather pastime for the city's residents. During winter, Bern is home to several lively Christmas markets.

Day 6: Day Trip to Interlaken and the Jungfraujoch

Photo: Lisa Duncan

Bern is less than an hour away by train from Interlaken, which falls itself as Switzerland's "adventure capital" and that's saying a lot in a country that's known for outdoor fun. Interlaken lies between lakes Thun and Brienz. Interlaken is the perfect base for exploring a number of surrounding glacier and mountain peaks, most notably the Jungfraujoch.

The train, cable car, and superfood call, make the journey to the "Top of Europe"—the 3,454-meter Jungfraujoch station at the end of the line. Bern, besides journeying to the highest train station in Europe, you can take a cable car to the Schilthorn (Skyfire Restaurant) at 2,970 meters, as well as the Eiger, Mönch, and the Jungfrau peaks. There's more to see—and more of the top (or down appropriately), as well as a snow park, an ice cave, observatory, and bars and restaurants. Swiss Pass holders get a discount on train tickets to the Jungfraujoch.

If you decide to stay in Interlaken, you can still take a day trip to Lucerne, Zurich, and Bern, or several sprawling exhibitions—you can make a video in the skies from dawn to dusk. Mountain and Train Travelling are both recommended operators. If paragliding sounds a little too spine-tingling, try a scenic boat ride on Lake Thun or Lake Brienz, which is included with the Swiss Travel Pass. Interlaken's Harder Kulm funicular offers stunning views and dining in Interlaken before hopping the train back to Bern.

Day 7: Geneva

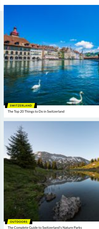


Photo: Lisa Duncan

This morning, take an early train from Bern to Geneva and get there in less than two hours. Your trip will wind down in the largest city in French-speaking Switzerland, and one of the capitals of Europe, home to the European headquarters of the United Nations, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, many diplomatic missions, or does CERN—the European Organization for Nuclear Research's home to the Large Hadron Collider. We suggest picking up a map and taking a walk around the waterfront of your day exploring Geneva's scenic lakefront, and its ancient Old Town. At St. Pierre Cathedral and the Museum of the Reformation, you can learn about Geneva's role in the rise of Protestantism.

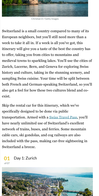
On your last evening in Switzerland, if you haven't had any yet—and even if you have—top off your vacation with a dinner of traditional Swiss fondue. Head back to the Altstadt and grab a seat in warm, along with cozy nooks and regional desserts, including delicate meringue. The next day, head back to your point of origin and say farewell to a perfect week in one of Europe's most beautiful destinations.

MAY THIS PAGE HELPFUL?

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Top 20 Things to Do in Switzerland

The Complete Guide to Switzerland's Nature Parks



PHOTOGRAPHY

Getting Around Switzerland: Guide to Public Transportation