

Zurich, Switzerland : A City of Wealth and Wonders

by Cheryl Pendry , PassPorter Featured Columnist

Think of any city around the world and no doubt something will immediately come to mind. For New York, undoubtedly the Big Apple, Empire State Building, or the Statue of Liberty are things you'd associate with that city. Think of London and ideas like the Royal family, Tower of London, and Big Ben come into your head.

So what did I think of Zurich before we headed there? I'll be honest, the only thing I knew about it was that it was very much a centre for international banking. That's not far from the truth, with foreigners making up around a quarter of the city's population and the city's economy thriving, even with the events of the past couple of years.

Zurich's wealth started to first appear in the 13th and 14th centuries, as merchants traded wool, linen, silk, and leather, but it was after the Second World War that the city took off. Thanks to the country's neutrality, it became a centre for finance and today is the base of the world's largest gold market. As we toured the city, we saw what's affectionately known as Insurance Mile for all the insurance companies based there and we also saw the stock exchange, unsurprisingly renowned as one of the most influential in the world.

The city is located on the edge of Zurich Sea, with the River Limmat cutting it in two. If the name Zurich Sea sounds a bit pretentious, then think again, as this is no ordinary lake. It is more like a mini-sea, at around 40 miles long and reaching up to five miles at its widest points. Like all the lakes we saw in Switzerland, it's amazingly clear and the water is reputed to be almost good enough to drink, as laws forbid any waste water or sewage from being pumped into it.

Many of the most important sights are to be found along the various waterfronts of the city and perhaps the one that most people head to first is the [Grossmünster](#) or Great Minster, the former Cathedral of Saints Felix, Regula and Exuperantius. Look around in Zurich and you'll see the spires from most points of the city. This masterpiece certainly took time to create, with work starting in about the year 1100 and continuing until the 15th century, when the towers were finally completed.

Almost opposite, on the other side of the river, is part of Zurich's old

town, which sprawls along both sides of the river. This one is surrounded by colourful guild houses, but the main attraction is to be found on the corner. This is home to another stunning church, the Fraumünster, but its fame comes from something that was only added in the latter part of the 20th century. Despite the fact that parts of this church date from the mid 13th century, everyone here was heading for one thing, the stunning stained glass windows that were only made in 1970. They depict different biblical themes, with one colour predominant in each window. It's a refreshing change, as the modern look to them makes them very different to the stained glass windows you usually encounter in churches. We were lucky enough to see them with the morning sun streaming through them and it was a superb sight.

A little further up the river and you come to the city's main railway station. Think of the likes of New York's Grand Central Station and you get the idea of the scale of this thing. It's a massive place with many railway platforms on different levels. Unlike most other stations in the world, you can actually drive up almost alongside the trains as they pull into the station, which was an odd experience. Here, you can catch trains to many other parts of Europe, including Germany, France and Austria. If you want to take a vacation on a train, this is the one country in the world to do it. Not only is the service quick and efficient, but it takes you on some of the most stunning routes in the world.

Just opposite the station is the [Swiss National Museum](#), which highlights the country's rich archaeological past, with models showing aspects of Swiss life. Also not far away from the station is Bahnhofstrasse, the main shopping street in Zurich. It's packed with department stores and restaurants and, despite the high number of foreigner financiers in the city, we didn't find the prices too pricey, which was a pleasant surprise. Like any huge city, it's often tough to find cheap places to eat, but Zurich certainly wasn't as expensive as I'd thought it might be.

Something else about the city surprised me, the size of their university. It sprawls over a vast area, with beautiful old buildings and modern ones alongside. They boast a huge range of Nobel prize winners, the most famous of which, by far, was Albert Einstein. Today the university has an excellent reputation, particularly for medicine, science, and economics. That perhaps helps to explain its huge impact on the city, with one in every ten people in Zurich associated with the university in some way, either as a student or working there.

To get the full flavour of this vast city, the best view point is from high above Zurich, from one of the mountains surrounding it. We took the

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train up to the end of the *Uetliberg* line, a pleasant journey, which gave tantalising glimpses of the city beneath us and green valleys surrounding it. However, that was just a taster. The real treat was the view from the top of the mountain the train was named for, a back breaking 15 minute walk, not for the faint hearted. However, the reward was huge. From here, you could easily pick out the city skyline, Zurich's collection of churches and the old town and see the Zurich Sea spread out as far as your sight went.

There's certainly a lot more to Zurich than just international banking. It's home to a rich history and offers plenty to see for any visitor to the city. Now when I think about it, I'll be thinking about its old town, cathedrals and churches, sprawling train station, thriving shopping areas, and the view down to it from the mountains above.

About The Author: Cheryl is the author of the e-book, PassPorter's Walt Disney World for British Holidaymakers, and is the co-author of PassPorter's Disney Vacation Club Guide: For Members and Members-To-Be. Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to Disney, and they have travelled around the world, visiting every Disney theme park on the way.

Article last updated: 05-06-2010

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