






36 Hours in Basel, Switzerland

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For a few days each year, Basel briefly turns into the capital of the world — or at least of the art world. But even when the giant Art Basel fair isn't taking place (June 19 to 22 this year), this small city in northwest Switzerland offers plenty of pluses for fans of culture: wonderful museums, world-class architecture, quirky bars and polished restaurants, as well as easy access to France and Germany, its two neighbors in the so-called Dreiländereck, or “three-country region.” Fly into Basel’s airport, technically situated on French soil, and take the public transportation links out to Weil am Rhein, a German suburb. While many of the traditional timbered houses proudly display 13th-century construction dates, many of the best attractions arrived just in the past few years.

FRIDAY

1. Worldly Design | 4 p.m.

From their main office in Basel, the architectural team of Herzog & de Meuron has influenced the look of cities like London (with Tate Modern), San Francisco (the de Young Museum) and Munich (the Allianz Arena). Not far from Basel’s soaring Münster church, the Museum of Cultures contains impressive exhibitions on topics like the civilization of the Amazon and the golden age of exploration, as well as a new layout and entrance courtesy of the celebrated architectural team’s extensive 2010 renovation. Another reason to visit at the end of the day on Friday: the 16 Swiss-franc admission (about \$17 at \$1.08 to the Swiss franc) is reduced substantially for the last hour, from 4 p.m.

2. Boutique Buys | 5 p.m.

Basel’s best boutiques have long been found on Spalenberg, close to the university, where one of the typical residents, Schwarz Modes, has been selling its handmade straw hats for over a century. But in recent years, unusual new shops have branched out to the up-and-coming area along St. Johanns-Vorstadt, a short walk away, where the fabric designer Fabia Zindel opened her funky Matrix boutique in 2010. Ms. Zindel’s multicolored geometric-patterned scarves of hand-printed silk, cotton and wool cost between 100 and 350 Swiss francs. Pair one with the modern men’s and women’s fashions by Bernadette Koch, whose cool boutique stands just across the street.

3. Artful Cuisine | 8 p.m.

Considering Basel’s tiny area and oversize footprint in terms of art, you sometimes can’t go 10 steps without bumping into a gallery, museum or atelier. Right on St. Johanns-Vorstadt, the recently renovated Ackermannshof complex served for many years as the studio of the Fluxus artist Dieter Roth. Today, it is home to a publishing house, offices and the two-year-old Ackermannshof restaurant, where the most striking artwork must be the 13th-century building’s original Renaissance-era painted ceiling beams and wall frescoes. Frequently changing menus include dishes like breast of black foot chicken from Burgundy in morel sauce, and dry-aged Swiss pork in sherry sauce with black rice, backed up by excellent French and Spanish wines. Dinner for two without wine: about 150 francs.

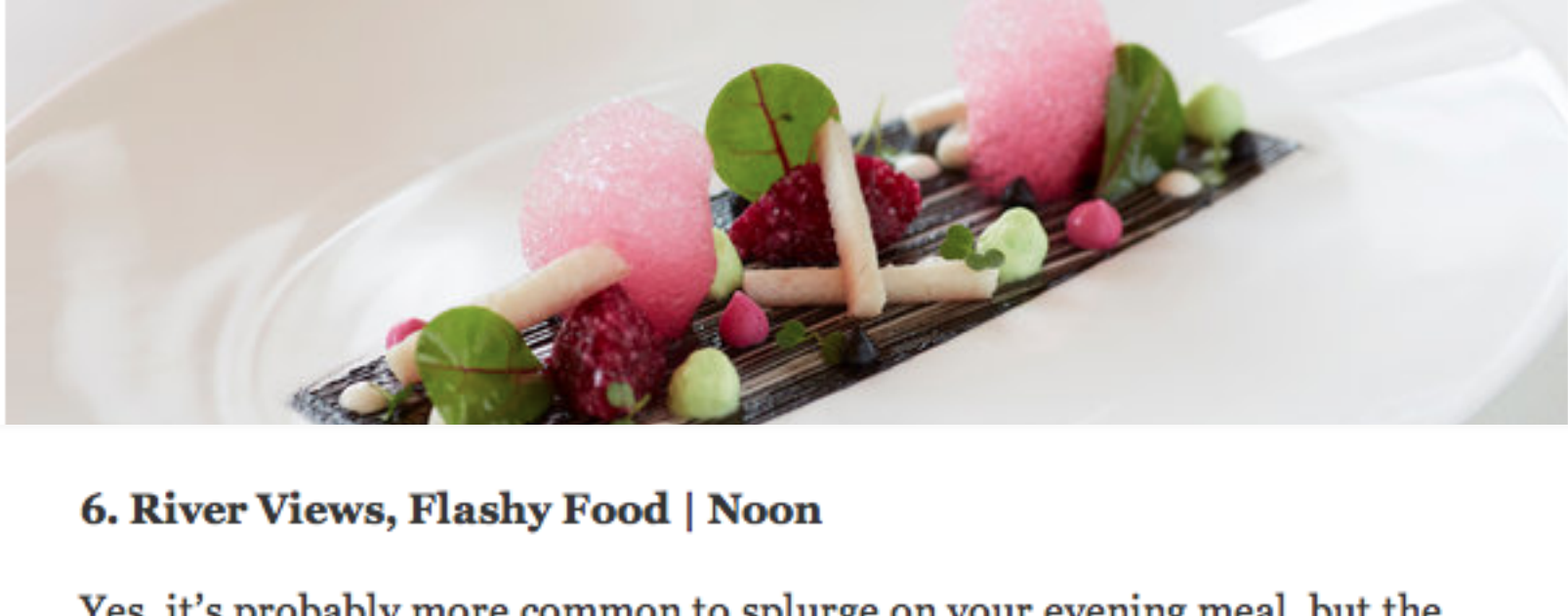
4. Garage Music | 11:30 p.m.

Giving new purpose to old buildings is a common theme in Basel, where one of the best clubs for deep house and electronic music is Garage, a former auto garage on a quiet street near the zoo. Though the dance floor is limited, when visiting D.J.’s like Germany’s Peer Kusiv start playing their late-night sets after the club opens at 11 p.m., the atmosphere more than makes up for any lack of space.

SATURDAY

5. Antiques and Oddities | 10 a.m.

Start the day hunting through the old clothes, used books and unusual bric-a-brac at the city’s biggest flea market, which takes place every Saturday under the shady trees of Petersplatz, just off Petersgraben street. Then, check out the even weirder collection of antique medicine jars, ancient surgical tools and such bizarre old-school remedies as dried fox tongue (once used to treat asthma) and snake skins (for toothache) at the fascinating Pharmacy Museum nearby.



6. River Views, Flashy Food | Noon

Yes, it’s probably more common to splurge on your evening meal, but the panoramic views at the remarkable Cheval Blanc are prettiest during the daytime. Book a table on the riverside terrace overlooking the Rhine, and sample the bright flavors of the chef Peter Knogl, who picked up his first Michelin star here in 2007 before graduating to his second star the next year. It’s not just the flavors, as even the colors also seem oversaturated, with the neon pink of an earthy beet macaroon paired with peppery wasabi mayonnaise matched by the nuclear green of a Granny Smith purée topped with shavings of foie gras. Considering the flashy cuisine and unflappable service, you might expect to pay far more, but the current three-course “business lunch” is just 88 francs, without wine.

7. Crossing Borders | 2 p.m.

Not everything worth seeing in Basel is actually in Switzerland. From the Schiffände stop, take bus No. 604 to the Carrefour stop in the sleepy French town of St.-Louis, just across the border, where an old Fernet-Branca distillery has been turned into a sprawling exhibition space for contemporary art, the Fondation Fernet-Branca. If you want to buy a ticket from the bus driver, you’ll need euros, not francs. Alternatively, get a ticket from a Swiss vending machine before you board. The current exhibition, running until March 23, features a wide-ranging collection of over 60 artists, including Cy Twombly and Josef Sudek.

8. Small City | 4 p.m.

Though Basel’s old town holds many tourist attractions, much of modern life centers on Kleinbasel, the “small” section of the city across the river from the old town, just north of the Rhine. After checking out the Saturday shopping at bustling Claraplatz, cool off in the private courtyard of the Volkshaus, a theater and restaurant complex from 1925 that was stylishly renovated in 2012. To make like a local, order a panaché, a refreshing mixture of lager and lemon soda, but be sure to pronounce it as a “panasch.” Everyone else does.

9. Rare Records, Hip Bags | 5 p.m.

The many creative businesses in trendy Kleinbasel recently formed a group, REH4, with a website (reh4.ch) and a free printed map to the neighborhood. Pick up a copy at Marinsel, which sells bags from Qwstion and baby clothes from What I Like, both Swiss companies, then head down the street to Plattfon and Stampa, with rare records, posters and obscure music books.

10. At the Golden Barrel | 7 p.m.

While the name Zum Goldenen Fass — or At the Golden Barrel — sounds hopelessly old-fashioned, this popular Kleinbasel restaurant and bar has a reputation for excellent contemporary cooking. Main courses are limited to just a handful of options, like veal fillet stuffed with smoked trout or sea bass with salsa verde, though adventurous locals swear by the multicourse surprise menus. Dinner for two without wine: about 100 francs.



Concierge Bar.
Elisabeth Real for The New York Times

11. A Lengthy Crawl | 10 p.m.

Kleinbasel has enough edgy bars for a lengthy crawl. Start out at the year-old Ladybar, a former erotic club — though the dancing poles are still in place, the current performances are by artists, writers and indie-rock bands. Half a block up, the quiet, introspective Agora draws in a conversational crowd, thanks to a no-live-music policy. Closer to the Mittlerer Brücke bridge, the tiny Concierge Bar boasts just a half-dozen tables, bottles of obscure grappa and comf schnapps, and its own online arts magazine. Stop for a rest on the comfy couches at the hunting-themed Jägerhalle, staring at the framed paintings on the ceiling or entering one of the bar’s occasional table tennis tournaments. Finally, finish things off right where you started: the upstairs “Sääli” hall at Zum Goldenen Fass, one of Kleinbasel’s coolest places for experimental live music, bring-your-own-vinyl dance parties and theatrical performances.

SUNDAY

12. Cultural Brunch | 10 a.m.

Much of Basel is closed on Sunday — other than churches, of course. But an artsy crowd assembles for services of another order at the intimate Zum Kuss, a former cemetery chapel rebuilt as a trendy cafe in 2011. At the edge of a shady park, Zum Kuss — also known as Totehüüsli, akin to “Little Death House” — serves a Sunday “cultural brunch” from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., with plenty of Sunday newspapers and a “Hangover Breakfast” for 17 francs. Don’t be put off by the Totenbeinli. Although the name means “dead legs,” it’s just a hazelnut cookie.

13. Design Infusion | 2 p.m.

What’s the source of Basel’s impressive sense of design? It might just be America, by way of Germany. Just across the border in the German suburb of Weil am Rhein, large bequests from American designers like George Nelson and Charles and Ray Eames form part of the influential Vitra Design Museum, which opened its stunning gallery space in 2011. On Sunday, buses go about once an hour from Basel’s Claraplatz to the Vitra stop. For timetables, check bvb.ch.

THE DETAILS

1. Museum of Cultures, Münsterplatz 20; mkb.ch.
2. Schwarz Modes, Spalenberg 23; schwarz-modes.ch. Matrix, St. Johanns-Vorstadt 38; matrixdesign.ch. Bernadette Koch, St. Johanns-Vorstadt 23; bernadettekoch.ch.
3. Ackermannshof, St. Johanns-Vorstadt 21; ackermannshof-restaurant.ch.
4. Garage, Binningerstrasse 14; garagebasel.com.
5. Flea market, Petersplatz. Pharmacy Museum, Totengässlein 3; pharmaziemuseum.unibas.ch.
6. Cheval Blanc, Blumenrain 8; lestroisrois.com.
7. Fondation Fernet-Branca, 2, rue du Ballon, St.-Louis, France; fondationfernet-branca.org.
8. Volkshaus, Rebgeasse 12-14; volkshaus-basel.ch.
9. Marinsel, Feldbergstrasse 10; marinsel.ch. Plattfon and Stampa, Feldbergstrasse 48; plattfon.ch.
10. Zum Goldenen Fass, Hammerstrasse 108; goldenes-fass.ch.
11. Ladybar, Feldbergstrasse 47; ladybar.fm. Agora, Feldbergstrasse 51; cafebaragora.org. Concierge Bar, Utengasse 28; concierge-bar.ch. Jägerhalle, Erlenstrasse 59; jaegerhalle.bs. Zum Goldenen Fass, Hammerstrasse 108, goldenes-fass.ch.
12. Zum Kuss, Elisabethenstrasse 59; zumkuss.ch.
13. Vitra Design Museum, Charles-Eames-Strasse 2, Weil am Rhein, Germany; design-museum.de.

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