



REFLECTIONS

BASEL, SWITZERLAND



BASEL EARNS STRAIGHT A'S IN ART AND ARCHITECTURE THIS MODEST-SIZED CITY'S CREATIVITY GETS NOTICED 'ROUND THE WORLD.

In Vienna, it's music and pastries. In Milan, fashion and design. In Bruges, it's cobblestones and canals. In Cannes, film and yachts. And in Edinburgh, it's castles, woolens and whiskey.

Every European city of note has things it does best, signature aspects for which it is universally admired. And Basel is no exception: here, the incontrovertible claims to fame are art and architecture – with a definite accent on the contemporary. In fact, the entire world is affected by ripples that emanate from Basel's outsized profile in these esthetic arenas.

Truth be told, that impact is sometimes more like a tsunami. Case in point: the now-legendary annual phenomenon known as Art Basel. For one week each year, the city is positively inundated by hordes of top international gallerists, museum curators on the prowl for acquisitions, and well-heeled private collectors looking to expand their holdings – a sea of art pilgrims gathered for a massive, star-studded celebration and marketplace of the best of the best in Modern and emerging art. Thousands of paintings, sculptures, photographs, installations, and multimedia and performance works are on display within some 300,000-sq. ft. of exhibition space (itself created by renowned architects). All the most famous names are amply represented – from Picasso, Miró and Klee to Koons, Warhol and Hirst. Asking prices for some of the works are so stratospheric they are not only not shown but are whispered delicately for fear of being overheard – presuming you have the gumption to ask.

CRYSTAL ADVENTURES

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IN ADDITION, PLEASE NOTE THE INTERNET AND TV SATELLITE COVERAGE CAN BE INTERRUPTED WHILE WE SAIL THROUGH NARROW LOCKS AND UNDER BRIDGES.

The New York Times and London's Telegraph have labeled this trendsetting fest "the Olympics of the art world," while Vogue calls it "the world's most beautiful temporary museum." Art Basel's runaway popularity and sales success have spawned sister shows in Miami and Hong Kong, each now drawing its own huge throngs, as jet-setting collectors scramble to soak up two additional weeks of unbridled art joy each year.

Needless to say, this all has had the residual effect of making Basel a year-round art gallery and museum destination par excellence. It would take weeks to take it all in. And, quite a few of the buildings in which this city's collections are presented are themselves significant works of art – of the glass, steel, wood, brick and cement variety.

From the elegant Renzo Piano-designed Fondation Beyeler, to the Museum Jean Tinguely building designed by postmodern brick-master Mario Botta, to the provocative and unusual Schaulager museum/warehouse designed by Basel-based superstar architects Herzog & De Meuron (more about them in a minute) – this city is absolutely studded with world-class architectural showplaces for its creativity.

In some instances, the roster of structural heavy-hitters involved is so deep, they're practically jockeying with each other for your attention. Like on the campus of the Vitra Design Museum in Basel's German-side suburbs, where Frank Gehry's breathtaking main building shares the spotlight with structures by Zaha Hadid, Tadao Ando, Nicholas Grimshaw, Alvaro Siza, Buckminster Fuller, and Herzog & de Meuron. The sublime result is a visual feast for the design-inclined.

But this town's love affair with architecture doesn't stop with its museums. Basel is also home to the headquarters of several key players in the global pharmaceutical, chemical and banking business – names like Novartis, Hoffmann-La Roche, Ciba, and UBS. Each seems to have surrendered to the prevailing local passion willingly, commissioning top-tier architectural firms to design their corporate campuses and soaring towers (including the tallest in Switzerland).

More than a fair share of those commissions has been earned by a single firm: Herzog & de Meuron, the hometown heroes who've been making huge waves in the design world for decades. Even if you don't realize you've seen their work, you've likely seen it.

Remember the huge, organic-looking "Bird's Nest" stadium where the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games took **place?** Herzog & de Meuron. Been to the ground-breaking Tate Modern, or Tate Modern 2, along London's Thames bank? Herzog & de Meuron.

Maybe you've toured the striking Parrish Art Museum in the Hamptons, shopped Prada Tokyo, visited the foliage-pillared Perez Art Museum Miami, or parked in the seriously-cool open-air garage footing Lincoln Road in South Beach? Yep, all Herzog & de Meuron – along with an impressive number of other prize-winning, eye-catching, imagination-sparking H & de M buildings popping up in cities all over the world.

Here in Basel, their work is seldom far from where you are. But then, wherever you are within this "City of Culture," you're never far from wonderfully designed art and architecture. It's the Basel trademark.

DIP INTO SWITZERLAND'S MULTICULTURAL FONDUE POT BASEL, WHERE THREE COUNTRIES MEET ALONG AN ESPECIALLY ELEGANT BEND IN THE RIVER

The Swiss are well-known for their polished professionalism and reserved demeanor. Impregnable bank vaults, on-time trains, and heirloom timepieces come to mind. But here in Basel, all that famous orderliness relaxes (a bit, anyway) into a more liberated, adventurous character. Must be the influence of France and Germany, which both house sections of this multi-geographic city on the Rhine. Not to mention the bohemian undertones of a gallery scene that's second to none – and an annual Art Basel event that sets the standard for the world, attracting museum curators and art-collecting glitterati in droves.

Home to Switzerland's oldest university (1460), this city has been a safe haven for scholars, writers, artists and philosophers ever since – yet today's Basel infuses its rich historic patina with some of the most forward-looking architecture in all of Europe. The result is quite the urban mélange – as Old Town's medieval market squares and soaring Gothic Munster cathedral share the skyline with bold new structures conceived by contemporary masters like Renzo Piano, Zaha Hadid, Mario Botta, Frank Gehry, and hometown superstars Herzog & de Meuron – responsible for groundbreakers like the Tate Modern in London and the oddly magnificent "Bird's Nest" Olympic stadium that became the landmark for the 2008 Beijing Summer Games. Threading its graceful way through the heart of it all, the River Rhine flows as it has for millennia. The city's six bridges unite neighborhoods each flavored with their own character – from cobbled-yet-formal Grossbasel stacked scenically along the south and west bank, to the mellow riverside cafés and hopping bar scene of Kleinbasel across on the German side.

Exploring Basel on foot is an ideal way to delve into its diverse personalities; even a brief amble can be amply rewarding. In Old Town, browse the colorful central market square at Marktplatz, where vendors offer up artisanal foods, flowers, and local produce daily. Here, too, Basel's gilded, deep crimson Rathaus (town hall) lords over the setting with its 16th-century clock tower, gargoyles aplenty, and mural-clad courtyard.

Capture fabulous Rhine views and snap a formidable selfie in front of the hilltop Munster, Basel's trademark twin-spired cathedral dating back to 1019. Along stately Theaterstrasse, encounter an elaborate 1977 fountain-contraption crafted from scrap metal parts by famed Swiss kinetic sculptor Jean Tinguely. To see more of his very curious work, board a quaint wooden cable ferry – powered by little more than the Rhine's current – and cross over to the opposite bank, where the Museum Tinguely showcases a substantial collection of his quirky, mad-scientist-style sculptures.

If you're up for something a bit intrepid, soak up the true atmospheric character of old Basel by wandering up into some of Grossbasel's tiniest, winding side streets. But be prepared for a cardio workout: they're occasionally steep, and always photogenic. Alternatively, if shopping is more your sport of choice, you'll find the requisite big names and luxe labels along the Freie Strasse – but don't miss out on visiting the smaller, sophisticated boutiques arrayed along Spalenberg, near the university. There's joy to be found year-round at Johann Wanner Christmas House, a storied shop in this area that's delivered to Popes, Presidents, and Queens. And if your retail tastes run to the less traditional, seek out the shops and galleries along trending St. Johannis-Vorstadt, closer to the river and further from the status quo.

In the quiet St Alban Quarter, hidden away between the Rhine and the city center, a romantic "little Venice" awaits – replete with narrow canals, historic timber-frame and stucco buildings, even a medieval paper mill museum with a working waterwheel.

Tempting cafés and restaurants – from intimate to ambitious – are scattered city-wide to help fuel your wanderings; this town is all about culinary diversity, and proud to be home to a generous helping of Michelin-starred establishments.

That said, no Basel interlude is complete without sampling the Swiss gingerbread treat known as Läckerei. And to quench your thirst like a local – aka a "Basler" – be sure to sip at least one refreshing panaché, a shandy-style mix of lager and lemon soda.