

## Basel



Tradition-conscious, open-minded and full of contrasts, Basel is regarded as one of Switzerland's centres for art, music and architecture. Thanks to its central location at the 'three-countries-corner' where Switzerland, Germany and France meet, the city on the elbow of the Rhine is also an important center for fairs and congresses.

Basel is Switzerland's oldest university city. Historic landmarks of the city include the large market square with its richly decorated red sandstone town hall and the late Romanesque-Gothic cathedral. During a walk through the old town, past small boutiques, antique book shops but also shops of modern designers, a visit to the "Läckerli Huus" to try the traditional Basel honey cake is well worth your while. Basel is tradition-conscious and open-minded at the same time, a fact born out by several modern buildings designed by renowned architects such as Herzog & de Meuron, Mario Botta, Diener & Diener and Richard Meyer.

Almost 40 museums make Basel the city with the highest density of museums in the country. Internationally known museums, such as the Basel Art Museum, the museum devoted to the iron sculptor Jean Tinguely, the Fondation Beyeler and the Museum of Cultures attract a great many visitors, as do several galleries and playhouses. Basel is among other things home to the symphony orchestra and the chamber orchestra as well as the musical theatre featuring international productions. And a wide range of classical and contemporary productions are shown on the stages of the Basel Theatre and the Playhouse.

Basel is a green city. The Botanical Gardens, several parks and the banks of the Rhine are perfect places to relax and linger for a while. And the Etoscha House at the biggest zoo in Switzerland offers spectacular insights into the Namibian Savannah.

At nearby Augusta Raurica near Augst impressive ruins and a great many finds at the museum bear testimony to the busy lives of the Romans in the region in the past. The charming countryside of the Basel region with its many cherry trees in spring boasts a particularly beautiful display of blooms. Germany and France, the Black Forest and Vosges Mountains are only a stone's throw away from the border city of Basel.

The yearly Fasnacht (Carnival) is the most important celebration for the people of Basel. On the Monday following Ash Wednesday the city rises with the "Morgenstraich". At four in the morning on the dot all the lights in the city go out and a colorful and brilliant procession through the streets of the city begins.

### Highlights

- Basel Art Museum - one of the oldest public art collections and biggest Holbein collection in the world.
- Jean Tinguely Museum - the glass hall was designed by the Ticino architect Mario Botta and houses the unique metal sculptures by Tinguely.
- Fondation Beyeler – a variety of art collections and special exhibitions are displayed in the 127-metre-long modern building designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano.
- Museum of Cultures - one of the biggest collections in Europe devoted to life in European and non-European

cultures.

- Zoological Gardens - about 600 animal species housed in eleven hectares of grounds featuring exotic flora right in the heart of the city.
- Musical Theatre Basel - delights a wide audience with extravagant productions of international musicals.
- Rhine Cruises - excursion boats provide opportunities for views of the city from the Rhine and operate all the way to the big freight ports of Basel and Rheinfelden.

Top Events

Basel Fasnacht (Carnival) - once a year the cultural city loses its head and spends three days celebrating the biggest street party (February/March).

Baselworld - at the worldwide leading watch and jewelry fair international companies provide an insight into current trends (March/April).



### **Basel - Loerrach**

Another important shared heritage is Fasnacht (Carnival) which retains amazing archaic elements, such as winter fires on the hills or flaming carts paraded through medieval walled towns. The "Waggis" and harlequins are masked characters dating to Napoleonic times while the famous `Basel lanterns´ reflect recent political events so describing an arc from the Celts through the Middle Ages to modern times.

Co-inciding with the Roman Catholic calendar, the season usually begins on the third Sunday before Ash Wednesday and usually ends on the day before Ash Wednesday. But here in the Rhine-valley surrounded by the German Black Forest, the French Vosges and the Swiss Jura, parts of the carnival traditions probably reach back to pre-Christian times. Carnival starts in November in the Black Forest with some traditional events while the high peak carnival with street parades, burning fires and Mardi Gras in Basel goes on for 14 days, ending a week after Ash Wednesday.

Black Forest villages and towns capitulate to seemingly endless processions of devils, gnomes, bears, frogs, cocks, witches and all these creatures of the underworld. Some good, some mischievous, they release showers of sweets or confetti over startled visitors. It´s known as the 5th season of the year, the so-called "most wonderful days of the year" – featuring `Gugge-Explosion´, with crazy brass-band music, `Night Caps´ Parade, when the whole town parades in nightclothes, Sunday Street Parade with tons of confetti and sweets or Rose Monday. These are only a few of the best-loved events during the "crazy days – närrische Tage". At night burning wooden disks are launched from the hills to chase away the winter. Huge bonfires, aflame carts and brooms, all give the sign that spring is due.

On the Monday after Ash Wednesday, the lights go out across the city at exactly 4.00 a.m., and the Basel Carnival begins with the traditional Morgenstraich parade. For three days, the city is in turmoil, living to the sound of thousands of piccolos, drums and an atmosphere like no other.

The origins of Basel's Fasnacht are rather obscure, partly because of the terrible earthquake of 1356 which destroyed large parts of the city and many official archives.

The earliest records date back to Ash Wednesday in 1376, when a jousting tournament on the Münsterplatz was the scene of a row between citizens of Basel and some knights. The argument escalated into a blood bath and the local

citizens chased off the noblemen, killing four of them in the process. Retribution was harsh: 12 citizens were beheaded and Emperor Charles IV placed a ban on the city, which meant the city was no longer afforded the protection of the Holy Roman Empire. This fateful day went down in the annals of Basel's history as the "Böse Fasnacht" and is the oldest record of Fasnacht activities.



### **Welcome to Basel Fasnacht**

If you are already familiar with Basel's famous carnival, Fasnacht, you may already know most of the following information. But if this is your first visit to our splendid event, which locals like to call the "most wonderful three days", here are some valuable tips about what to see.

Fasnacht is like one big family party for the whole of Basel, although guests are obviously more than welcome. You are sure to be fascinated by the incredible party atmosphere, the vivid colors of the carnival costumes, the stirring tunes of the drummers and piccolo players, and the weird and wonderful "Guggen" music played by the brass bands. Perhaps you will simply enjoy wandering around the city's lively streets, alleys, bars and restaurants, absorbing this unique mixture of celebration and melancholy, and the haunting enactment of medieval ritual: the dance of death (Totentanz) and the masquerade (Mummenschanz). The best way to enjoy things is simply to wander around the streets and go with the flow.



### **Processions**

There are two main processions, starting at 1.30 p.m. on Monday and Wednesday. More than 10,000 masked carnival members parade along a set route through the city center displaying their "sujets" or special carnival topics, accompanied by the sound of drums, piccolos and "Gugge" music. They travel by foot, on carnival floats or horse-drawn carriages, carrying lanterns and many other comical accessories. People in the procession throw confetti and distribute oranges, yellow mimosa and many other things to the spectators along the route. Most groups also hand out their own colorful sheets of paper ("Zeedel") which make fun of local events and personalities in verse form, written in the unfathomable local Basel dialect.

### **Schnitzelbänke**

On the Monday and Wednesday evening, more than 100 groups of Schnitzelbank singers tour the city's bars and restaurants, reciting their verses on local topics from the past year. The melodies vary, but the playful and ironic content is always written in the local dialect. The central point is usually only touched on indirectly, and the real object of ridicule only becomes apparent towards the end.

### **Tuesday and the exhibition of the lanterns**

Tuesday is a day for children, with no main procession but rather groups of adults and children in costume wandering at random around the streets, some of them playing instruments. The highlight of Tuesday evening is the Exhibition of the Lanterns on Münsterplatz, where over 200 lanterns provide an impressive illuminated display under the shadow of the cathedral.

### **Exhibition of carnival floats and accessories**

From the evening of the Monday of Fasnacht until the Wednesday morning you can visit the barrack square („Kasernenareal“) in Kleinbasel to take a closer look at the incredible carnival floats and colourful accessories that feature in the two main processions of Monday and Wednesday afternoon. While this exhibition goes on there are a number of other activities, such as free confetti for children, Gugge music concerts, etc.

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