Switzerland

Berne - capital

Switzerland is a European country uniting three major cultures: Italian, French, and German. Four different languages are spoken and they are German, French, Italian, and Roman. The greater part of Switzerland is to the north, and the lesser part to the south where the Alps cut across Europe. In only a few hours you can drive north to south and east to west and see all that this wondrous country has to offer. Palm trees in the south, north through the alpine glaciers to the fertile midlands, valleys in the east and vineyard in the west. Throughout history Switzerland has gained national control in relations with the neighboring regions and developed a political culture known the world over. These include individual liberties, democratic processes, multicultural balance, cosmopolitan outlook, the rule of law and a fondness for tidiness and authenticity.

If you wanted to find Switzerland on a map, you would find it between 6 and 12 E, and 48 and 46 N. Switzerland has three main land areas - the Jura Mountains, the Swiss Plateau, and the Swiss Alps. The mountains are nearly seventy percent of the land area, but the plateau hold seventy percent of the population.

The Jura Mountains are home to Switzerland’s watch making industry, dairy, and logging industry. They consist of a pair of parallel ranges separated by a narrow valley. The highest mountain in this range is 5,518 feet.

The Swiss plateau is home to Switzerland's crops and grazing, including most large cities and manufacturing. Once ancient glaciers passed through this area and they left behind a fertile area with several lakes and streams.
The Swiss Alps are the county’s pride. They cover sixty percent of the land area, with sharp peaks, jagged edges and steep gorges. They are also home to spectacular waterfalls, including Staubbach, falling 984 feet. The Swiss Alps are divided into north and south by the Rhine and Rhone rivers.

The Swiss Alps are Europe’s main drainage divide. The Rhine and Rhone rivers come fifteen miles from each other but flow in opposite directions. The Rhine flows into the North Sea, the Rhone into the Mediterranean. The Inn River joins the Danube River, and the Ticino is a tributary of the Po River which flows into the Adriatic Sea.

The country is broken down geographical in the following ways: Forest and Woodland 30%, Grazing and Arable Land 23%, Glaciers and Rocks 21%, Alpine Dairy Farming 14%, Settlements 4%, Lakes and Rivers 4%, Transport 2%, Fruit and Horticulture 2%.

Switzerland has a population of over seven million eight hundred thousand people, all of which have differing ethnic backgrounds, and religious beliefs. The population is growing at 0.2% per year, with the average person living seventy-four years. The Swiss resident population is near six point five million, and since there are so many permanent foreign residents they include them in the population (which accounts for one point two one million). The population is fifty percent Protestant, forty-three percent Catholic, and six percent non-denominational. During the 1500’s, Calvinism spread and as a result the Protestants split into Calvinism and Lutheranism.

The Swiss Constitution recognizes three official languages, and four national languages. The official languages are German, French, and Italian. Because of this, Switzerland has three official names: Schweiz (in German), Suisse (in French), and
Svizzera (in German). Seventy percent of the people speak German, mostly in the north, east and central area. Twenty percent speak French (mostly in Western Switzerland), and ten percent speak Italian (in the South).

Switzerland has no uniform educational system. Much like its political structure, the educational system has evolved into a network of independent controlled canton-run schools for primary, secondary, and vocational schools, and universities. For example, the types of schools and curriculum differ in the various cantons. Swiss children start school at age seven. They also spend more time in school, forty hours per week for more weeks than neighboring countries. This last for eight years. Compulsory schooling begins at the primary level and involves children of the same age. They are taught a wide range of subjects: Swiss Language, Math, Physical Education, Music, Art, Local History, Geography, and Biology. Going on to the second level (which lasts four to six years), is marked by pressure to achieve and is based partly on entrance exams. There are other branches beyond the primary level that prepare young children for a variety of apprenticeships. One advantage of a compulsory state educational system is its broad base at the elementary level. Everyone, no matter whether they are rich or poor, receive a basic education for ten years. This is done with the help of a well-developed infrastructure. Swiss schools are said to have exceptionally high standards with regard to buildings, equipment, teaching, and learning aids.

Switzerland is a very prosperous country with one of the highest standards of living in the world. Switzerland has more jobs than its citizens can fill. They trade mainly with Western European counties and the United States. The Swiss import more than they export, but they gain this back in banking, tourism, and insurance.
Switzerland’s greatest natural resource is its hydroelectric power. The rivers produce almost all the power in Switzerland. The manufacturing sector is one of the most industrialized in the world. The Swiss make such engineering products as generators, electrical equipment, industrial equipment, machine tools, precision instruments, and transportation equipment. Swiss agriculture provides only three fifths of their needs. The rest of the nation’s food must be imported. Livestock raising is the most important agricultural activity because of limited crops and the climate. Dairy farming provides for seventy percent of Swiss agriculture’s income. Most of the cattle are raised on the mountain pastures during the summer and down in the valleys during the winter. Most of the milk is used to make cheese for export, the most famous being Swiss cheese. Swiss farms are small. Crops include fruits, wheat and potatoes. Grapes and olives are grown, but not as in as great a quantity as the others.

Before the time of Christ, the Helvetians lived in what is now Switzerland. By 400 A.D., two Germanic tribes, the Alemannians and the Burgundians, settled there. In the 1200’s the Hapsburg family gained control of Switzerland. The canton “states” of Schwyz and Uri feared that the Hapsburgs were gaining too much power. In 1291 they invited the neighboring canton of Unterwalden to join them in fighting the Hapsburgs. The three leaders met and signed the Perpetual Covenant. The Perpetual Covenant was the start of the Swiss Confederation, which is now know as Switzerland. During the 1400’s the Swiss were great expansionists, and entered several wars to gain more land. In 1515, the French defeated the Swiss in Italy, where they suffered great losses and began to question their policy of expansion. Switzerland then pronounced a policy of permanent neutrality, and has stayed out of foreign wars ever since. World War I began
in 1914, and Switzerland immediately declared its neutrality. The warring nations respected this policy because Switzerland acted in a strictly neutral manner throughout the war. Food imports decreased during the war, but Swiss farmers increased their grain production to feed the people. After World War II began, Switzerland again declared its neutrality. German forces did not invade Switzerland. During the war, Switzerland cared for more than 100,000 refugees from a number of countries. Switzerland still avoids membership in international organizations that might endanger its neutral state, but not so much as in the past. In 1971 Swiss men voted to give women the right to vote in national elections.

Important dates in Swiss history

58 B.C. Roman armies under Julius Caesar conquered Helvetia
400 A.D. Germanic tribes occupy Helvetia
962 Most of Switzerland became part of the Holy Roman Empire
1291 Three Swiss cantons “states” signed the Perpetual Covenant, which established the Swiss Confederation
1315-88 Switzerland defeated Austria in three wars of independence
1499 Switzerland won independence from the Holy Roman Empire
1500 The Swiss were defeated by the French in Italy, and began their policy of permanent
neutrality

1648 The Holy Roman Empire recognized Swiss independence

1798 French forces occupied Switzerland and established the Helvetic Republic under their control

1815 Congress of Vienna expanded Switzerland to 22 cantons, and restored the old confederation

1848 Switzerland adopted a constitution that established federal power over the confederation

1849 The Red Cross was founded in Switzerland

1872 Constitutional changes increased federal power

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1898 The League of Nations met at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland for its first session

1958 Basel became the first Swiss city to let women vote in local elections

1960 Switzerland help form the European Free Trade Association

1963 Switzerland joined the Council of Europe

1968 Geneva became the first Swiss city to have a woman mayor

1971 Swiss women get the right to vote in national elections

1979 Jura canton established