Travel and Adventure: Indulge in Zurich

by Mary Martin Niepold

Elegant shopping along the Bahnhofstrasse is legendary, chocolates from the Sprungli shop should be required for good health, but the culture of Zurich is much older and more profound than its well-known indulgences. Zurich, situated in the center of Switzerland, is a renowned center for art VISIT ZURICH - Church towers etch Zurich's skyline with the Alps as a backdrop. Fraumunster is at the lower right, St. Peter's, with its enormous clock face slightly above it, and the twin towers of the famed Grossmunster across the Limmat River. CNS Photo courtesy of Zurich Tourism. TECHNO TIME - During the first weekend in August, close to a million partygoers - the 'ravers' - flock to Zurich for the famed Techno Street Parade. CNS Photo courtesy of Zurich Tourism HERE AND THERE - Walking is not only easy, but recommended to get the most out of Zurich, where modern and traditional influences gently interface. CNS Photo courtesy of Zurich Tourism. and education, as well as modern advancements like its "Plan Lumiere," a program where international light architects illuminate buildings in various districts to make nighttime strolling feel like Christmas. Last February, the city's Rietberg Museum opened its spectacular new extension, a modern green, etched-glass jewel of a building that houses some of the oldest and finest Southeast Asian art in the world.

Home to some 50 museums in all, Zurich, as Switzerland's largest city, is at the forefront of a cultural itinerary in Europe.

Its scale alone is refreshing. At around 1 million inhabitants, Zurich dates back to 15 B.C. when the Romans dug in with a customs outpost in the center of the city, now called the Lindenhof. The Romans called it Turicum, and today you can visit the area in Zurich's Old Town. The Lindenhof sits at the top of a hilly plateau and has a small park where the elderly move child-height chess pieces and other visitors sit under linden trees. Overlooking the Linmat River, the Lindenhof is not far from the famed Bahnhofstrasse and offers views of the river below.

Nearby are the famed towers of three churches that etch the city's skyline with the Alps as a backdrop: The Grossmunster (Great Church) was commissioned by Charlemagne; St. Peter's boasts the largest church face in Europe; and the intriguing Fraumunster (Church of Our Lady) is a former convent for aristocratic women, now adorned with windows by Marc Chagall.

Lake Zurich, some 17 miles long, edges the southern end of the city, and the Linmat River runs out of the lake to cut the center of the city into two districts, referred to as Left and Right Banks. Among the old edifices and winding cobblestone streets on both banks are more than a thousand fountains with water so fresh that you can drink from them. On the Right Bank, you'll find the University of Zurich, which Albert Einstein and 26

other Nobel professors called home. James Joyce made a home on the Left Bank, and the James Joyce Foundation located here has probably the world's finest collection of his works. Even Joyce's beloved Jury's Antique Bar in Dublin was reopened in Zurich in 1978.Such is the gentle interface of modern and traditional influences in this city where walking is not only easy, but recommended.

When summer comes, the Lido (the shore along the Linmat) does a somersault. During the day, people swim in the city's 26 public baths, most of which are along the river, and then, suddenly at night, the baths become bistros decked in lights where people sip and dine. A good way to experience Zurich by night is to join Zurich Tourism's "Night-Time Stroll," a two-hour walk through Old Town that runs until Sept. 28 (www.zuerich.com).

Culture unfurls both indoors and out during summer. In addition to performances at Zurich's famed Opera House and Schauspielhaus, Switzerland's largest theater, the Zuricher Festspiele (Zurich Festival) ran from June 15-July 8 this year and showcased major theatrical and musical events, including performances by the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Odeon Theatre de l'Europe out of Paris.

Culture went modern during the first weekend in August when Zurich's famed Techno Street Parade lets loose. Close to a million partygoers turn this elegant city into a European version of Carnival except that many of the participants - the "ravers" - actually pitch tents on the grass around the lake. Another delectable, any season of the year, is a visit to the new spa inside the Globus department store where Asian technique brings art to body treatment.

But as entertaining as the city can be, Zurich, at its heart, is a city where culture is revered. The true essence of this city is in its refinement, as reflected in its many fine museums, hotels and restaurants. Strolling at a leisurely pace is the best way to experience the true flavor of the city's center. In many ways, Zurich's scale and modesty is like that of Philadelphia - vibrant, but not showy.

There are probably eight or nine five-star hotels in Zurich, among them the Eden au Lac near the Opera House, the Savoy on Bahnhofstrasse and the Widder Hotel nestled in the Left Bank. A bit further from Zurich's center is the four-star Engimatt Hotel, a peaceful enclave of modern rooms and afive-star restaurant that is within walking distance of the Rietberg Museum, a rolling estate with three buildings that hold the venerable collection of the late Eduard von der Heydt. In addition to its breathtaking new $37 million glass building, the original Museum Rietberg is a former villa where Richard Wagner wrote "Tristan and Isolde."

The Rietberg's collection of Tibetan, Indian, ancient American and Oceanic art is vast.

Their impressive "Kannon" exhibit, honoring the Bodhisattva of Compassion by the same name, runs through Sept. 4. "This was my three-year dream," said curator Dr. Katharina Epprecht.

The Kunsthaus, Zurich's Museum of Fine Arts, houses extensive collections, among them works by Alberto Giacometti whose early period is featured in an exhibit that runs through Aug. 26. In nearby Winterthur (about 30 minutes by train), museums like the Museum Oskar Reinhart and the Art Museum Winterthur - home to a vast collection including Rodin, Miro, Leger, Van Gogh, Monet - are well worth a visit.

Visits to upscale stores and small boutiques in the heart of Zurich provide major designer collections and some Swiss confections. Sprungli chocolates (founded in 1859) is not only home to the famed confections, but its upstairs cafe is a must for people watching and the freshest of salads, even in winter. Around one corner from Sprungli is probably the city's finest perfumerie, Osswald. Around the other corner is the city's first vegetarian restaurant, Hiltl. It seats 250 people, and one drink of mention combines freshly squeezed juices from lychee, pineapple, orange and tangerine.

Prices are in Swiss Francs (currently, $1 U.S. is approximately $1.19 Swiss Franc). Hotels can run from about $150 per night for a single room in a three-star hotel in Old Town to about $300 and up for a five-star hotel.

Food prices, accordingly, are like those in most European cities: the better the meal, the higher the cost.

Besides many business visitors, Zurich lures others on their way to skiing on nearby slopes. St. Moritz, where sybaritic pursuits are the stuff of daily life, is mere hours by train. The famed baths of Baden are mere minutes away.

For whatever their reasons, people who come here will find that Zurich feels very comfortable - and refreshes their sense of what's beautiful in the world.

IF YOU GO

Major airlines with direct flights to Zurich include Delta, Swiss and American Airlines: www.delta.com; www.swiss.com; www.AA.com.

Zurich Tourism: www.zuerich.com

Engimatt Hotel: www.engimatt.ch

Widder Hotel: www.widderhotel.ch

Rietberg Museum: www.rietberg.ch

Kunsthaus Zurich Museum: www.kunsthaus.ch

Sprungli: www.spruengli.com

St. Moritz: www.stmoritz.ch

Winterthur: www.winterthur-tourismus.ch

James Joyce Foundation: www.joycefoundation.ch

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