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36 HOURS

# 36 Hours in Bern, Switzerland



Rebecca Marshall for The New York Times

From left, the terrace at Altes Tramdepot overlooks the River Aare; Lötschberg serves a traditional fondue; Zehendermätteli is a working farm and restaurant where visitors can buy produce. [More Photos »](#)

By TIM NEVILLE  
Published: September 8, 2011

ASK a Swiss to describe [Bern](#) and you may hear a joke about how the people move so slowly that even their souls take centuries to reach heaven. While it is true that this city of about 130,000 people in western [Switzerland](#) must be counted among the most relaxed of [Europe's](#) capitals, Bern is also one of the most beautiful, a pocket-size [Prague](#) of arcades and whimsical fountains, all framed by leafy hills and the glacial-green currents of the Aare River. The urban and rural mingle closely here. Forests of ash and oak push up against a clutch of embassies off a city square. You can dance till dawn or rise early and

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take a walk under the gaze of the Alps and be back in time for lunch. Why rush through that?



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[Bern, Switzerland](#)

## Friday

**5 p.m.**

### 1) MOUNTAIN VIEWS

The terrace bar of the [Bellevue Palace](#) (Kochergasse 3-5; 41-31-320-45-45; [bellevue-palace.ch](#)), a luxurious Art Nouveau hotel whose guests have included Nelson Mandela and Winston Churchill, offers sweeping views of the Alps to the south, and is one of the few places in the city that sells stiff cocktails. Try the Fancy Hendrick's with cucumber syrup and lemon juice (18 Swiss francs, or \$22 at \$1.20 to the Swiss franc) or a tumbler of Swiss Highland single malt (54 francs), aged in an ice cave on the Jungfrau, a 13,000-foot mountain you can see from the deck.

**7 p.m.**

### 2) ABOVE THE RIVER

Few restaurants can offer riverside dining like the [Schwellenmätteli](#) (Dalmaziquai 11; 41-31-350-50-01; [schwellenmaetteli.ch](#)), where swift currents course beneath a deck cantilevered over the Aare. The terrace menu tips toward Mediterranean with dishes like tilapia and polenta (24.50 Swiss francs); go inside for Italian cuisine like tagliatelle with scallops and saffron (26.50 francs). For dessert, walk up the hill to Restaurant Luce (Zeughausgasse 28; 41-31-310-99-99), where the portions of creamy rich tiramisù are big enough for two (9.50 francs).

**11 p.m.**

### 3) NO YODELING

In 1987 anarchists and leftist groups commandeered a defunct horse-riding school near the main train station. Since then the [Reitschule](#), a graffiti-covered complex, has evolved into one of Bern's most colorful performance and entertainment centers. On Friday nights white-collar professionals sit next to purple-haired punks over bottles of Einsiedler beer inside the Sous le Pont restaurant, while bands from all over the world rock late into the night in the Dachstock venue upstairs. In the heart of the compound you'll find the Frauenraum, one of the city's few lesbian-centric hangouts (Neubrückestrasse 8; 41-31-306-69-69; [www.reitschule.ch](#)).

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## Saturday

9 a.m.

### 4) MARKET MEAL

Every Saturday and Tuesday morning, artisan butchers and cheesemakers converge on Parliament Square (Bundeshausplatz in German) to sell smoked meats, [cheese](#) and pastries. For breakfast, head to the northwest corner of Parliament Square and look across the street, Schauplatzgasse, where you'll see Bernese lined up for bulbous loaves of zopf, a traditional bread, and warm raisin pastries called schnägge, or snails, named for their spiral shape (2 to 6 Swiss francs). Grab a coffee (4.20 francs) from the [Beck Glatz Confiseur](#) a few blocks east at Marktgass-Passage 1 (41-31-300-20-24; [mandelbaerli.ch](#)) and fuel up for the walk ahead.

10 a.m.

### 5) CITY STROLL

At more than 800 years old, Bern has had plenty of time to develop architectural quirks that most visitors never notice. Don't be one of them. Head to the Bern Tourism Office in the main railway station (Bahnhofplatz 10a; 41-31-328-12-12; [berninfo.com](#)) and rent an [iPod](#) (18 francs for six hours) preloaded with a multimedia guide (complete with local [music](#) and photos) that complements a self-guided walking tour of the oldest parts of the city. You'll wander by a section of the former city wall and see the house at Mattenenge 2 that bears a cannonball mark made by Bernese rebels who fired on the city during an uprising in 1802.

12 p.m.

### 6) OF BEARS AND BREWS

Visit [BärenPark](#), a 64,500-square-foot grassy enclosure that houses the city's mascots, brown bears named Björk and Finn (free, Grosser Muristalden 6; 41-31-357-15-15; [baerenpark-bern.ch](#)). The [Altes Tram Depot](#) (Grosser Muristalden 6; 41-31-368-14-15; [altestramdepot.ch](#)) next to the park brews the best Hefeweizen in town (7.20 Swiss francs, half-liter) and serves a decent bacon and onion spaetzle (19 francs). Climb the steep cobblestone path across the street, Alter Aargauerstalden, for views of the city from the [Rosengarten](#) (Alter Aargauerstalden 31b; 41-31-331-32-06; [rosengarten.be](#)), a park with 220 types of roses and a restaurant that serves a fine lunch. Items like the pork saltimbocca and saffron risotto cost less than 20 francs.

2 p.m.

### 7) UNDERCOVER

With more than 3.5 miles of arcades, Bern offers some of the longest covered-shopping promenades in Europe. Madeleine Lüthi stocks her shop, Glanz & Gloria (Brunngasse 48;



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41-31-311-19-50), with vintage women's clothing. The Tschirren family has been making chocolate in Bern since 1919, and you can taste their Champagne truffles and pralines at their shop, [Confiserie Tschirren](#), on Kramgasse 73 (41-31-812-21-22; [www.swiss-chocolate.ch](http://www.swiss-chocolate.ch)). Heimatwerk (Kramgasse 61; 41-31-311-30-00; [heimatwerk.ch](http://heimatwerk.ch)) carries 140-franc fondue pots, edelweiss neckties and Mondaine clocks designed to look like those used at Swiss train stations.

**4 p.m.**

### **8) SNACK TIME**

So many Swiss Germans stop what they're doing at 4 p.m. for a snack break that the tradition even has a name: z'vieri, not to be confused with z'nüni, the 9 a.m. version. Swing by [Adriano's](#) (Theaterplatz 2; 41-31-318-88-31; [adrianos.ch](http://adrianos.ch)), a lively cafe where hip baristas pull espresso shots through ground beans roasted no more than 72 hours ago. The Meh-he-he sandwich (bûche de chèvre cheese with dried figs, arugula and acacia honey on whole-grain bread, 12.50 Swiss francs) is a fine way to ruin your dinner.

**7 p.m.**

### **9) MELTING CHEESE**

No self-respecting Swiss would eat a meal of melted cheese before winter, but fall is a good time for tourists to get away with it. [Le Mazot](#) (Bärenplatz 5; 41-31-311-70-88; [mazot-bern.ch](http://mazot-bern.ch)) remains popular for its numerous fondues (about 25 Swiss francs a person), but if you're willing to trade the cozy wood-wall ambience for a more modern one, head to Lötschberg (Zeughausgasse 16; 41-31-311-34-55; [loetschberg-aoc.ch](http://loetschberg-aoc.ch)), where the fondues (about 25 francs a person) are more traditional — true Gruyère-vacherin mixes with garlic and fendant, a Swiss white wine. Call ahead to reserve a table in a gondola car parked outside.

**9 p.m.**

### **10) JAZZ TIME**

While Montreux, on Lake Geneva, might host the most well-known jazz festival, Bern is home to a jazz school, its own festival and [Mahogany Hall](#), a club started in 1968 on the riverbank where Swiss musicians like Philipp Fankhauser and Stephan Eicher once played. Next to the BärenPark (Klösterlistutz 18; 41-31-328-52-00; [mahogany.ch](http://mahogany.ch)), Mahogany Hall today has room for 180 people, and the music ranges from Dixie jazz to funk and soul. The fall concert series kicks off in mid-September with the first Saturday night show going to 007 Only, a Swiss band (scenes from the 1969 James Bond movie "On Her Majesty's Secret Service" were filmed in the Bernese Oberland). Tickets typically cost 25 Swiss francs.

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**10 a.m.**

## **11) BERN ROLLS**

Sundays are slow in Bern, with most shops closed: a good day for a [bike](#) ride. Three rental stations offer free bikes for up to four hours; each additional hour costs 1 Swiss franc. The main pickup point, located on Milchgässli, on the southwest corner of Bern's main train station (41-79-277-28-57 on-call service; [bernrollt.ch](#)), also rents electric bikes at no cost for the first two hours (1 franc for each additional hour).

**10:30 a.m.**

## **12) EGGS AND RUINS**

The Marzilibrücke (Gasstrasse 8; 41-31-311-27-80; [taberna.ch](#)), in Bern's riverside Marzili neighborhood, offers a brunch buffet that includes grilled tomatoes, pancakes and jams (31 Swiss francs), starting at 10 a.m. For bicyclists, the [Zehendermätteli](#) (Reichenbachstrasse 161; 41-31-301-54-47; [zehendermaetteli.ch](#)), a working farm and restaurant on the far north side of town, is about three and a half miles from Bern's main station. To get there, the route goes through the woodsy Enge peninsula, where Roman roads lead past the ruins of an ancient bath, and to a drift ferry that shuttles hikers across the Aare. The Zehendermätteli's cheese selection is enormous and comes accompanied with the brunch trimmings you'd expect (35 francs).

## **IF YOU GO**

After a two-year renovation, the opulent **Hotel Schweizerhof** (Bahnhofplatz 11; 41-31-326-80-80; [schweizerhof-bern.ch](#)) opened its grand doors in April. The 99-room hotel has a 150-year history of welcoming guests like Grace Kelly and Albert Schweitzer. Rooms, often appointed with chandeliers, start at 450 Swiss francs.

The **Hotel Landhaus** (Altenbergstrasse 4-6; 41-31-331-41-66; [landhausbern.ch](#)) on the eastern tip of the old city, offers basic but comfortable rooms at some of the more affordable rates in town. Double rooms with private baths start at 160 Swiss francs.

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