



36 HOURS

Zurich

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By **Noele Illien**

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Noele Illien, a financial journalist based in Zurich, spent many holidays there visiting family before she decided to make it her home in 2020.

Despite being Switzerland's largest city, Zurich is often overlooked as a stopover between the airport and the winter playgrounds in the mountains, but this picturesque banking hub bordering Lake Zurich has much to offer visitors who choose to stay awhile. Its strong cultural scene includes world-class museums and a much-lauded orchestra, the Tonhalle. A converted brewery harbors contemporary art galleries, and surprisingly beautiful frescoes hide in a most unexpected place. While there is something happening year-round in Zurich — such as photography exhibitions, festivals like ZüriCarneval and architectural open houses — there's plenty of seasonal fun to be had in the colder months, whether it's eating fondue on a vintage tram or hiking to a winter wonderland atop a local mountain, before tobogganing down.

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Recommendations

Key stops -

- **Löwenbräukunst**, a former brewery that has been converted into a contemporary art complex, features galleries, museums and a bistro.
- **Pavillon Le Corbusier** is a museum dedicated to and designed by the Swiss-French Modern architect Le Corbusier, in an unparalleled location right on the lakeshore.
- **Sprüngli** is a high-end cafe with a decadent version of bircher muesli, a breakfast dish of oats and fruit, and quite possibly the best hot chocolate in town.
- **Freitag**, the Swiss accessories brand known for making bags out of recycled truck tarps, has its flagship store in a tower made out of shipping containers.

Attractions +

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Itinerary

Friday

4 p.m. **See a colorful fresco in a police station**

A trip to the police station is not usually a good start to a weekend, but Zurich has a worthy exception. Hidden inside the police headquarters' entrance hall is one of the city's most important artworks, a vibrant fresco completed in 1926 known as Blüemlihalle, which translates as "flower hall." The abstract floral shapes and patterns were painted on the station's vaulted ceiling by Augusto Giacometti, whose last name you may recognize. The Swiss painter hails from the same artistic family as Alberto Giacometti, best known for his spindly figurines. The space is officially open to visitors only between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday, during which time there are free tours available.



5 p.m. **Admire watches in a landmark former bank**

Wander south along Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich's upscale main shopping street, that stretches from the central train station to the lake. Signs of Switzerland's longstanding ties to watchmaking and finance are everywhere. Stop at the AP House, a store opened in 2022 by the luxury watchmaker Audemars Piguet and housed in the marble-clad former cashier hall of what was once Switzerland's oldest bank, Bank Leu. Today the majestic building, with its mosaic flooring and imposing columns, is under historical protection. To try on the watches, make an appointment ahead of time.

7 p.m. **Sample new Swiss cuisine or ride the rails with a fondue fork**

Zurich's food scene today is more than just hearty Alpine fare. Bauernschänke, in the old town, is a modern, cozy bistro and the first

restaurant owned by Nenad Mlinarevic, a Swiss chef who has earned several Michelin stars over his career. Order the house favorite, shareable pulled pork (27 francs), which is marinated with lime, sweet chile and soy, and eaten like a wrap with a lettuce leaf and pickles. If you are craving the classics, opt for a ride on the Fondue Tram. Be ready to hold onto your wine glass and plate on the uphill stretches to stop them from sliding across the table, but it is a fun way to explore the city center and beyond while getting your cheese fix (109 francs for three-course set menu). The first dinner seating leaves from the Bellevueplatz tram stop at 5:30 p.m. for the two-hour ride, and the second at 8:15 p.m. Book ahead; it runs through the end of February.





Zurich's old town, which is divided by the Limmat River, has many narrow, cobblestoned streets in which to wander.

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Saturday

10 a.m. **Step back in time**

Many of Zurich's historic restaurants and bars have faded away, replaced by trendier or more upmarket establishments, but Odeon, which opened in 1911, has hung on. The all-day cafe and bar was one of the first places in town to serve champagne by the glass, ensuring its popularity, and over the years it attracted the likes of Albert Einstein, James Joyce and Vladimir Lenin, to name just a few. While you are unlikely to spot literary hotshots or political masterminds there these days, many of the Art Nouveau details, including the curved mahogany bar, remain. Start your day with a coffee (from 6 francs) and a croissant (2.50 francs), or opt for one of the heartier breakfast options, and get a sense of Odeon's bustling glory years.



12 p.m. **Discover the lakeside (and take a dip, if you dare)**

Cross Bellevueplatz, make your way along the lake's eastern shore and pass the Seebad Utoquai bathhouse, open to hardy cold-water swimmers between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. on winter weekends (8 francs). Farther along the path is Pavillon Le Corbusier, a museum that is the final work by the Swiss-French architect for whom it is named, and his only building made of steel and glass. The museum, which has housed Corbusier's artworks and designs since 1967, is closed for the season until May, but it is striking even from the outside. Also on the path is Jean Tinguely's "Heureka," a large outdoor kinetic sculpture made of wheels and other bits and bobs. This is a great spot to enjoy the view: On a clear day, you can see the snow-covered mountains across the lake.

2 p.m. **Taste Swiss classics, hot off the grill**

“Cheap” is a word rarely used to describe anything in Zurich, but Sternen Grill, back at Bellevueplatz, offers an affordable lunch — by Swiss standards, at least. Skip the full-service restaurant on the second floor and head to the ground-floor counter to order the same food for almost half the price. The third-generation family business remains popular with locals (don’t be deterred by the line; it moves quickly), who may be ordering the St. Galler bratwurst (8.50 francs), a veal and pork specialty from eastern Switzerland, or the stubby savelat (7.80), another Swiss classic synonymous with camping trips and made mainly out of pork. Each sausage comes with a bürli, a roll with a deceptively hard crust. There is an ongoing debate in Switzerland as to whether or not a sausage should be dipped in mustard. If you dip, know that Sternen Grill’s mustard has a kick.



3 p.m. **Explore contemporary art in a former brewery**

Zurich's art scene may not have the same international reputation as Basel, with its world-famous art fair, but it can more than hold its own. While the crowds flock to Switzerland's largest art museum, the Kunsthaus, with its extensive Impressionist collection, those in favor of more cutting-edge art head to Löwenbräukunst. Wander through the different floors of the former brewery turned cultural complex, now home to a number of stand-alone art spaces, including international galleries like Hauser & Wirth (free) and contemporary art museums like the Kunsthalle (12 francs). Check out the limited-edition prints and monotypes on view at Edition VFO, a nonprofit organization dedicated to making quality art more accessible; most works are priced under 1,000 francs. Visit Löwenbräukunst's website for a list of current exhibitions.

5 p.m. **Climb an unusual landmark**

Stroll through the formerly industrial Escher Wyss area, where factory buildings have been repurposed to include a theater, a performing arts center and the Moods jazz bar. The colorful Freitag tower, made from a stack of 19 recycled freight containers, is hard to miss. Built in 2006, the tower is the flagship store of the accessories brand Freitag, which started in Zurich and makes bags (starting at around 130 francs), wallets, phone cases and more out of recycled truck tarps. When the shop is open, you can climb the stairs inside the tower to the top.



8 p.m. **Get your evening going with an apero and steak frites**

On weekends, Zurich's nightlife moves away from the centrally located bars and out to the loud and lively Langstrasse, a street and surrounding area where people dress expressively and the city's stereotypical polished image falls away. In a century-old building, Schnupf is perfect for transitioning between different stages of the evening: Start with an apero at the bar, dig into steak frites (48 francs) with a zesty Béarnaise sauce for dinner, then people-watch with a Negroni Sbagliato (15 francs) as the music turns up later in the night. The menu isn't big, but almost everything, including the ketchup, is made from scratch. The whole artichoke that comes with a gravy boat of vinaigrette on the side (19 francs) is a crowd pleaser. The restaurant's owners kept some of the building's older design features, including a mosaic of two monkeys, which adds to its charm.

11 p.m. Dance at a vinyl bar

Make your way up Langstrasse to the relatively new Stereo, a bar that plays vinyl records over a high-fidelity sound system. The midcentury modern interior uses a lot of wood and gives the place a warm feel. Grab one of the specialty cocktails on tap, such as the creamy espresso martini or the fresh ginger-and-yuzu Moscow Mule (18 francs each), then join the dance floor and enjoy the tunes, which, depending on the night, might include electronic, house and funk.



Limmatquai, a picturesque street that follows the river through Zurich's old town and ends at the mouth of the lake.

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Sunday

9 a.m. Try an indulgent take on a Swiss breakfast favorite

Head to the high-end chocolatier Sprüngli's flagship cafe — not just for its mini-macarons and its position overlooking Bahnhofstrasse and Paradeplatz, the square at the heart of Switzerland's financial world — but for its bircher muesli, the Swiss dish of oats, typically mixed with yogurt, juice, nuts and fruit (dine-in, 12.50 francs). Sprüngli's creamy version of

the breakfast staple — invented by a Zurich-based doctor in the early 1900s as a health food — is rich, flavorful and pink, made with raspberries, bananas, apples and red currants. There is also a Sunday brunch buffet (until 1:30 p.m., 65 francs) which comes with a glass of prosecco. Don't miss the decadent hot chocolate (starts at 7.90 francs), made from the same 70 percent dark chocolate that goes into Sprüngli's truffles; it's very likely one of the best you've tried.



11 a.m. **Gain a new perspective, then sled all the way down**

Although the Swiss Alps are easily reachable in a day, Zurich has its own mountain closer to home. At 2,850 feet, Uetliberg may not be a giant, but it offers a few hiking and snowshoeing routes. From the last stop on the No. 13 tram, you can reach the top on foot in under an hour (be warned, the paths can get a bit icy). The summit, which has a lookout tower, has a view over the whole city and the lake. Then visit one of the winter food stands (through Feb. 28), which sell raclette (cheese melted over boiled potatoes and pickled onions, 12 francs), or warm up inside one of the restaurants,

which include a fondue chalet, at the Uto Kulm Hotel. To see the view without working up a sweat, the S10 train from Zurich's main station will take you most of the way up. Get out at the Uetliberg station; the top is a 15-minute walk from there. When there is enough snow, it is also possible to rent a toboggan (25 francs) at the hotel and slide back down to town.