

# 36 Hours

BASEL, SWITZERLAND

This riverside city is known for its art, history and chocolate. Roger Federer knows it as his birthplace.

By DAVE SEMINARA

Basel is, perhaps, the only city in the world that's best experienced at 4 a.m. on a Monday. On a particular Monday, that is: the one after Ash Wednesday, when nearly every local with a pulse turns up in the Old Town for a parade known as the Morgenstreich. Then, on the fourth chime of the bells at Basel's oldest church, all the lights of the city are turned off and costumed marching bands called cliques fire up a tune to signal the start of Basel's Fasnacht. This uniquely exhilarating, 72-hour Lenten Carnival illustrates an essential truth about this cosmopolitan riverside city of 170,000 that hugs Alsace and the Black Forest. Basel may be best known for Art Basel, the world's biggest art fair (June 18 to 21 this year); for its museums and pharmaceutical companies; and as the birthplace of the tennis legend Roger Federer. But it is, above all, a city of traditions. And in an era in which the most popular global destinations are often under siege with too many tourists, underrated but equally alluring places like Basel deserve a look.

## Friday

### 1 3 P.M. > RHINE TIME

Start your weekend adventure in Kleinbasel along the banks of the Rhine, the lifeblood of this city since a Celtic tribe first settled along this bend in the river during the Bronze Age. The Kleinbasel (Lesser Basel) side is great for a riverfront ride on an ebike, available at the main train station for 20 Swiss francs per day, or about \$20.50 with a BaselCard (free with any hotel stay, also includes 50 percent off museum admissions and other perks). But if you want to become an honorary Basler, you've got to also feel the current of the river. In the summer, swimming in the cool, clean Rhine and then repairing to a riverside buvette (stall) for a drink or snack is the quintessential Basel tradition. Another tradition, which can be done year around (weather permitting), is crossing over to Grossbasel (Greater Basel) on one of the city's four wooden ferry boats (1.60 francs), which use only the natural power of the river's currents.

### 2 4 P.M. > MEDIEVAL POWER COUPLE

Basel's cathedral, Basel Münster, was consecrated on Oct. 11, 1019, on the site of an earlier church and in the presence of the Holy Roman emperor Henry II (who became the patron saint of Basel) and his wife, Cunigunde. The two were a medieval power couple with a cult following. The cathedral is an awe-inspiring place best seen with a knowledgeable guide like Dr. Helen Liebendörfer (liebendoerfer@bluewin.ch), a charming, English-speaking guide who will show you fascinating sites here and elsewhere in the city you'd otherwise walk by without a second look. Inside, don't miss the grave of Erasmus of Rotterdam, who settled in Basel and lived for a time in a home that's now a pharmacy museum.

### 3 6 P.M. > HOW THE OTHER HALF LIVES

You might not have the francs to splurge on a room at the opulent, five-star Grand Hotel Les Trois Rois, but you should absolutely change into your least wrinkled outfit and head over to the hotel bar for a drink. This chandelier-filled grande dame, founded in 1681, is one of the oldest and finest hotels in Europe. In fine weather, try to score a seat outside with a sweeping view of the Rhine, otherwise, cozy up by the fireplace and soak up the elegant atmosphere. A glass of the house rosé costs 9 francs; a cheeseburger and fries, about 48.

### 4 8 P.M. > STEEPED IN ATMOSPHERE

Schlüsselzunft is an Old World charmer of a restaurant in a guildhall building that dates to 1306 on a pedestrian street in Basel's delightful Old Town. The upstairs has a pleasing Knights of the Roundtable ambience, and the ground level has a ceramic stone oven that dates to 1850. The menu changes frequently. Recent standout items included Kalbsleberstreifen (sliced veal liver with madeira sauce; 36 francs) and Regeschnetzeltes (venison strips with forest mushrooms in a cream sauce; 38 francs).

## Saturday

### 5 9 A.M. > A BRIDGE TO SOMEWHERE

Start your Saturday with a slow walk across Mittlere Brücke (Middle Bridge), just as Baslers have since it opened in 1226. Take note of the small chapel (Käppelijoch), a reproduction of an old bridge chapel where criminals and people suspected of being witches or adulterers were tossed into the Rhine. Make your way on foot to Andreasplatz, a charming square that comes alive during Fasnacht. There's a collection of interesting shops, and tucked in the back corner, Holzofenbäckerei Bio Andreas, a terrific and rather quirky organic bakery that has a love letter to its wood oven on its website. ("Dear oven, you are so hot and smoky . . . you turn me on.") They have good, strong coffee and delicious croissants, pastries and great bread.

### 6 10 A.M. > JUST LIKE THE OLD DAYS

Basel's Old Town is a paradise for aimless wandering. Three of the city's original seven gates are intact, and many homes have their year of construction painted above their doorways. Venture down to the irresistible Hoosesagg Museum. It's tiny and features a different themed collection of miniatures each month. There are more hidden stories on every block — for example, English speakers might pass a fascinating alley called Elftausendjungfern Gässlein (11,000 Virgins Lane) without a second glance. The name speaks to a cher-



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ished legend about 11,000 virgins, followers of St. Ursula, who arrived in town by boat in medieval times and were eventually martyred in Cologne.

### 7 12:30 P.M. > ROGER'S NEIGHBORHOOD

With apologies to Erasmus, Roger Federer is Basel's most famous native son. He grew up in the suburb of Munchenstein in a townhouse in the Wasserhaus housing estate and honed his game first at the long bulldozed Ciba-Geigy club and later at the still-thriving Tennis Club Old Boys, where Court 1 is named after him. Get on the No. 8 tram to the Bernerring stop to visit the club, where you can take a tennis lesson (call in advance) and then enjoy one of the best-kept secrets in town: a 20-franc, three-course lunch at La Vongola, the club restaurant. The pastas are all great; if you don't fancy the daily menu, try the strozzapreti with fresh seafood (29.50 francs).

### 8 3 P.M. > EROTIC CHOCOLATE

Now it's time to buy all the Swiss chocolate you can afford at Läderach, one of the country's leading chocolatiers. Basel has a small red light district in Kleinbasel, but the most erotic experience in town is simply walking into this shop and inhaling the smell of fine chocolate. The blocks of frischschoggi — silky Swiss milk chocolate with giant Piedmont hazelnuts — could have won the Cold War (if only Switzerland hadn't been neutral). If you'd like to bring something home that won't melt, pick up a box of Basler lækkerli — a gingerbread biscuit that has inspired devotion in these parts since the Middle Ages — at Läckeri Huus (three locations). Walk it all off on Spalenberg, one of

the city's nicest shopping streets, home to stores like Hejkoh, which has stylish women's clothing, home décor, gifts and a cafe where the avocado-toast-loving set likes to gather for treats and conversation.

### 9 7 P.M. > CORDON BLEU PARADISE

At Zum Gifhüttli Bier & Weinstube in Old Town, you'll find a convivial atmosphere of

From top: the banks of the Rhine in Basel; Volta Bräu, a brewpub that features live music; and Hejkoh, which sells home décor and other items in one of Basel's notable shopping districts.



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### IF YOU GO

- 1 Leu Ferry** (Münsterfähre Leu); basel.com/en/Media/Attractions/Sightseeing/Ferries.
- 2 Basel Münster**, Munsterplatz; baslermuenster.ch/.
- 3 Grand Hotel Les Trois Rois**, Blumenrain 8; lestroisrois.com/en.
- 4 Schlüsselzunft**, Freie Street 25; schluesselzunft.ch/en/.
- 5 Holzofenbäckerei Bio Andreas**, Andreasplatz 14; bio-andreas.ch/.
- 6 Hoosesagg Museum**, 31 Ginger Street; hoosesaggmuseum.ch/.
- 7 Tennis Club Old Boys**, St. Galler-Ring 225; tcob.ch/.
- 8 Läderach**, Marktplace 18; laderach.com/en/. **Läckeri Huus**, Gerbergasse 57; laeckerli-huus.ch/en/. **Hejkoh**, Spalenberg 15; hejkoh.ch/.
- 9 Zum Gifhüttli Bier & Weinstube**, Schneidergasse 11; gifthuettli.ch/. **Volta Bräu**, Voltastrasse 30; voltabraeu.ch/. **Matt & Elly Brewery & Kitchen**, Erlenmattstrasse 93; matt-elly.com/en/.
- 10 Basel Paper Mill**, St. Alban-Tal 37; papiermuseum.ch/.
- 11 Kunstmuseum**, St. Alban-Graben 16; kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/kunstmuseum-basel. **Fondation Beyeler**, Baselstrasse 101, Riehen; fondationbeyeler.ch/en/.
- 12 Villa Wenkenhof**, Bettingerstrasse 121, Riehen; wenkenhof.ch/.

### LODGING

Vacation rentals are popular in Basel. But if you stay at a hotel, you'll get a BaselCard, which gives you free public transportation and half price at all museums. (Prices on Airbnb start at around \$100 a night for a small apartment.) Krafft Basel is a hotel with lots of character, river-view rooms and a great location in Kleinbasel, close to the Middle Bridge. There's an excellent restaurant with a patio that's a people-watching paradise on a sunny day. (Rooms from 144 francs.) Another option is the Grand Hotel Les Trois Rois, established in 1681 on the Rhine, overlooking the Middle Bridge. It includes furnishings that wouldn't look out of place at Versailles. (Room rates start at 545 francs.)

good times, spilled beer and undo-a-notch-on-your-belt gluttony. The specialties of the house are cordon bleus of various meaty assortments. Menu items include venison steaks, boar pepper steak, deer cordon bleu and the like. Try the veal cordon bleu schwinger filled with farmer's bacon and nördlis cheese (34 francs). If you passed on Läderach, you're entitled to the chocolate lava cake with housemade vanilla ice cream, which is worth the nine-mile walk you'll need to take to work off the calories. Keep the good times rolling with a craft beer or two at Volta Bräu, a fun brewpub that frequently has free live music, or at Matt & Elly Brewery & Kitchen, a newly opened hot spot in Kleinbasel with seasonal beer and food menus.

## Sunday

### 10 10 A.M. > PAPERBOYS' BRUNCH

Basel became a center for humanism and publishing following the establishment of the University of Basel in 1460, attracting a host of writers and scholars, most notably Erasmus, who published the New Testament in Greek in 1516. Basel's tourism office operates an excellent Sunday brunch tour (50 francs) that includes a tour of the Basel Paper Mill and a delicious brunch at the museum's restaurant. Set in a lovely canal-side paper mill that was operational for more than 500 years in the charming St. Alban-Tor neighborhood, the child-friendly museum offers fun hands on exhibits that illuminate the history of printing, paper and writing.

### 11 NOON > PICASSO HIMSELF

Basel has some 40 museums to choose from, including a powerhouse: the sprawling Kunstmuseum Basel (25 francs, half price with BaselCard; children free), which is free the first Sunday of each month. Also, there is the smaller Fondation Beyeler (25 francs, half price with BaselCard; free for 25 and under) in a light-filled Renzo Piano-designed building in a pretty area of Riehen, north of the city. The Kunstmuseum started as a private art cabinet in the 16th century and is now a world-class museum that's known for its collection of six works by Pablo Picasso, including one of his "Seated Harlequin" works. In 1967, after the museum was about to lose two Picassos — the private collector who owned them was in debt and needed to sell — local art lovers mobilized, spearheading the passage of a referendum allowing the city to buy them for 8.4 million francs. Picasso was so moved that he gave the museum three more paintings and a drawing. The museum will commemorate the 50-year anniversary of the gift with a special Picasso exhibition that opens March 2 (free).

### 12 2 P.M. > GARDEN WALK

Just a few minutes south of Fondation Beyeler, you'll find a lovely, relaxing place to cap your weekend: the underrated Villa Wenkenhof, a stately English-style estate built in 1735 with beautiful gardens that are free and open to the public every day but Saturday. Mr. Federer and Mirka Vavrinec were married here; you can roam the grounds and take photos in the same spot they did in front of the grand former horse stable to the left of the main villa.

### ONLINE: AN OVERVIEW

Our interactive map: [nytimes.com/travel](https://nytimes.com/travel)