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## Bathing in Basel

BY SIMON RUMLEY ON JULY 30, 2023

TRAVEL

Switzerland might not be considered one of the crazier countries in the world, nor Basel one of the crazier cities in Switzerland, but there can surely be few places where the sight of a naked man walking down a side street raises so few eyebrows. Or a woman doing the same in a dripping bikini. Or a man, for that matter, in damp swimming trunks.

Where have they been? Where are they going? What are they doing? And why do they look so serene and content? The answer's very simple; the Rhine cuts through the centre of the city and its population uses the river as a source of relaxation, well-being, exercise and even travelling to work. Throughout the day, and to a lesser extent, the evening, the river is full of locals floating by, usually in pairs or groups, chatting and laughing, sometimes drinking beer and occasionally eating. It's a beautiful, endearing sight, a great illustration that humanity can still be pure of spirit.



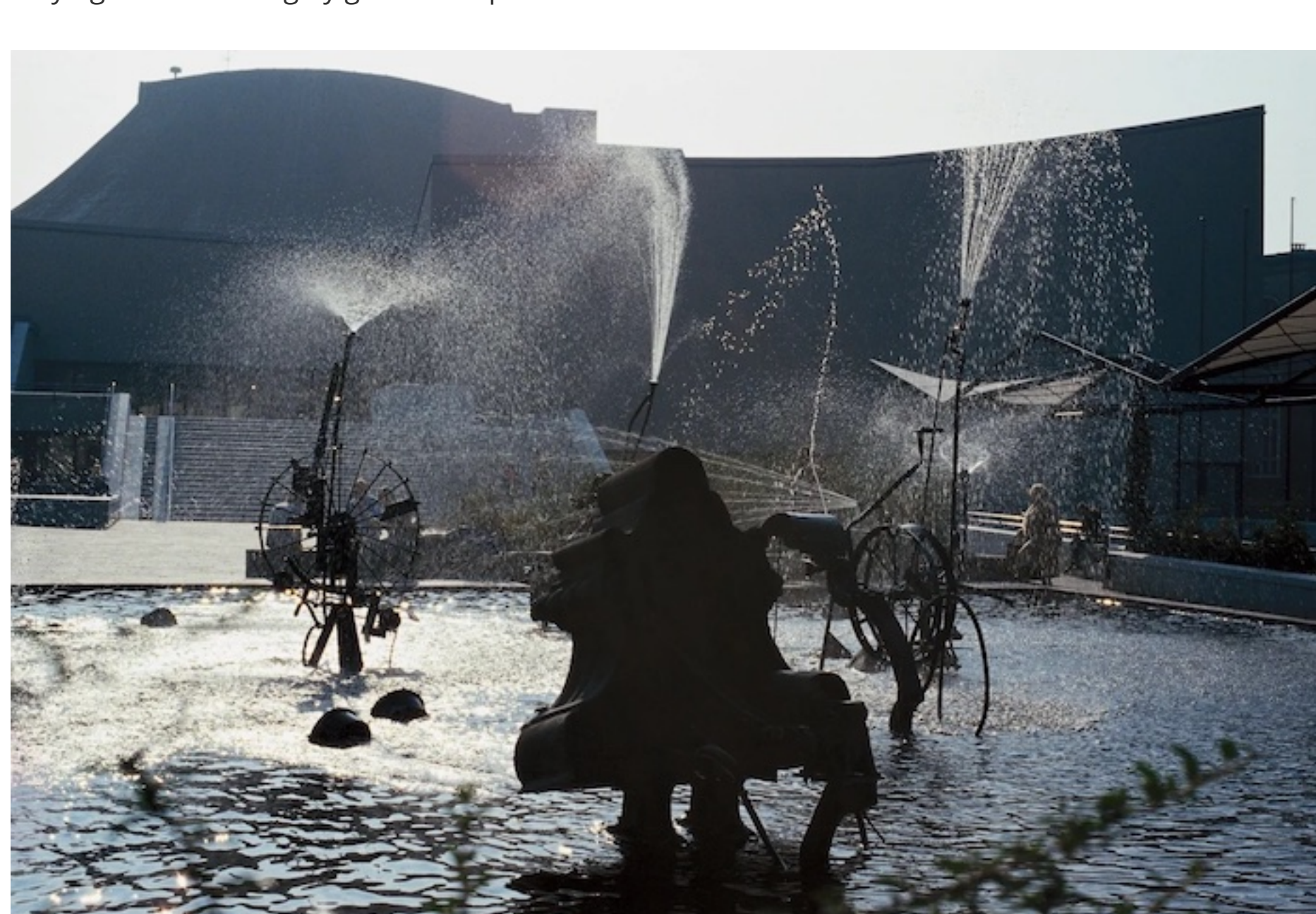
The allotted stretch starts at the Einstieg Rhyschwimme beach which lies immediately below the [Museum Tinguely](#). If you're worried about what to do with your clothes (or indeed walking home naked), no problem; this is a metre long waterproof bag shaped like a child's rendition of a fish. At its top, a band of fabric snaps together and you roll that over itself six or seven times, attach both ends together and hey-presto, waterproof bag! It's genuinely waterproof and you can store phones as well as wallets and any other valuables.

I do this journey twice, the first how the locals do it; using the Wickelfisch as a float to hold onto. I change from facing the sky and floating on my back to facing the water and lying on my front. The Rhine's current is sufficiently strong that you don't have to swim to reach your destination but not strong enough to be dangerous. Once you get the hang of floating with your Wickelfisch, it's like a long, calming journey through a Disney-esque landscape with a bit of leg-kicking to steer you in the right direction.



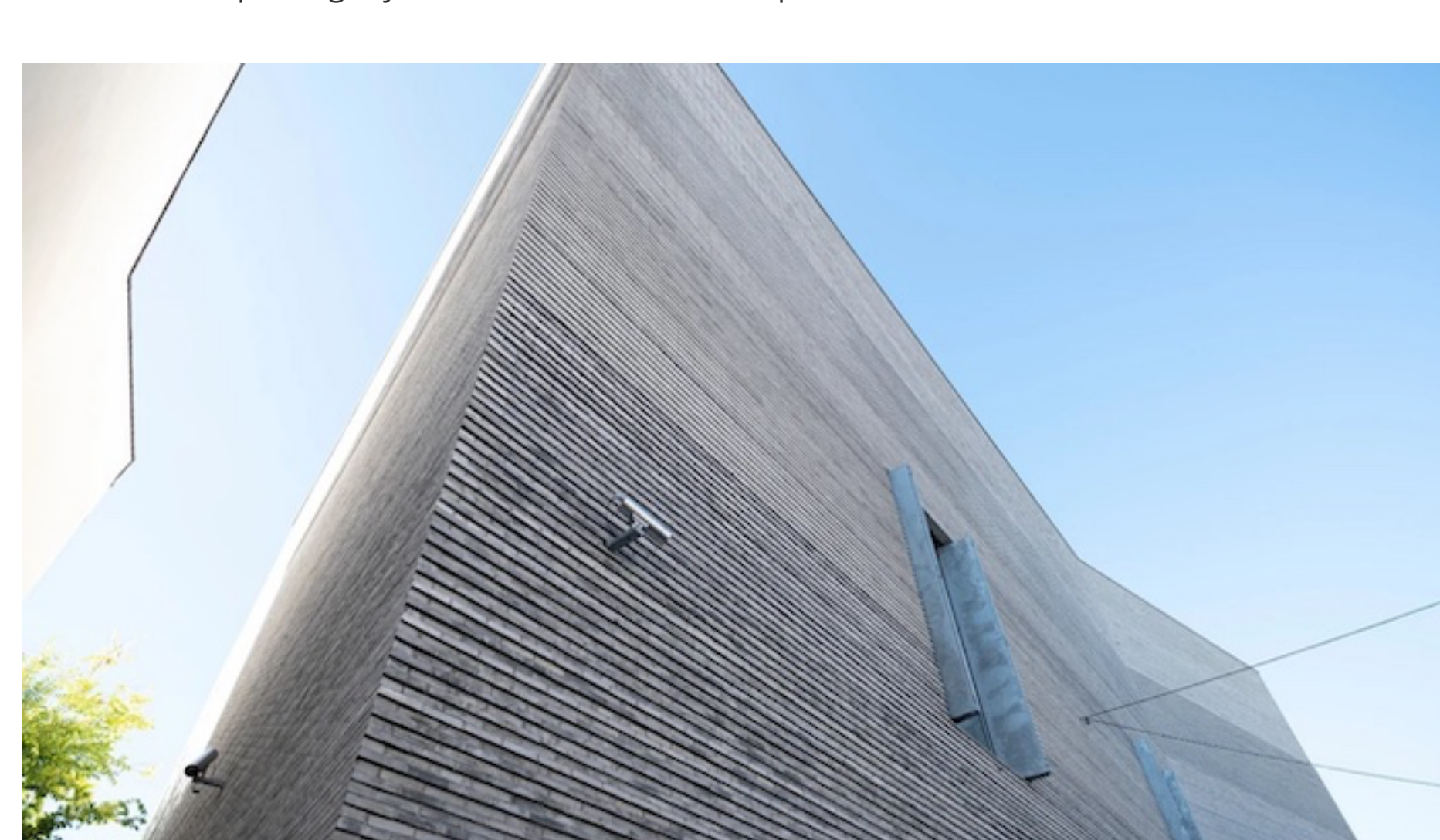
On the South side, locals (Basilians?) bask on small rocks and stretches of pebbled stones like lizards or seals. There's a great stillness about them as they sunbathe, listen to music, drink, chat, smoke, stare, ponder. There are unofficial nudist spots but in reality, no-one seems bothered about something so trivial as clothes or the lack thereof. On the North side, dark hued buildings loom like cliff-faces out of the water. They include residential properties, universities, restaurants, hotels and even art-like scaffolding from a defunct swimming pool. Most were built centuries ago and have lasted impressively, some are more recent.

I repeat the journey the next day but strap the Wickelfisch around my waist and actually swim. The Wickelfisch doesn't get in the way and doesn't drag either, just floats obediently behind me. The swim is at about 9.30am but no-one else is in the river and only a few people bask on its bank. The experience feels purer somehow, more at one with nature and it's the sounds that stand out. The churning of the river, the bird's chirping, duller noises from construction sites, traffic, the occasional piercing of a laugh or punching of a shout. Both journeys last about 40 minutes and end just before Basel's industrial port. The water is cool but not cold. The overall effect is calming, meditative, edifying and a thoroughly glorious experience.



Should the idea of floating or swimming 40 minutes down one of Europe's most famous rivers not be for you, why not dip in one of the city's many fountains instead? There's a massive selection of almost 300 and they range from the elegant to the dainty to the almost unanimously historic. The conceit is completely legal and positively encouraged by the local authorities; you can even bring a drink should you so desire. It's a great way to enervise your day (or indeed evening) though, without your Wickelfisch, you'll most likely be the one walking home in sopping wet underwear.

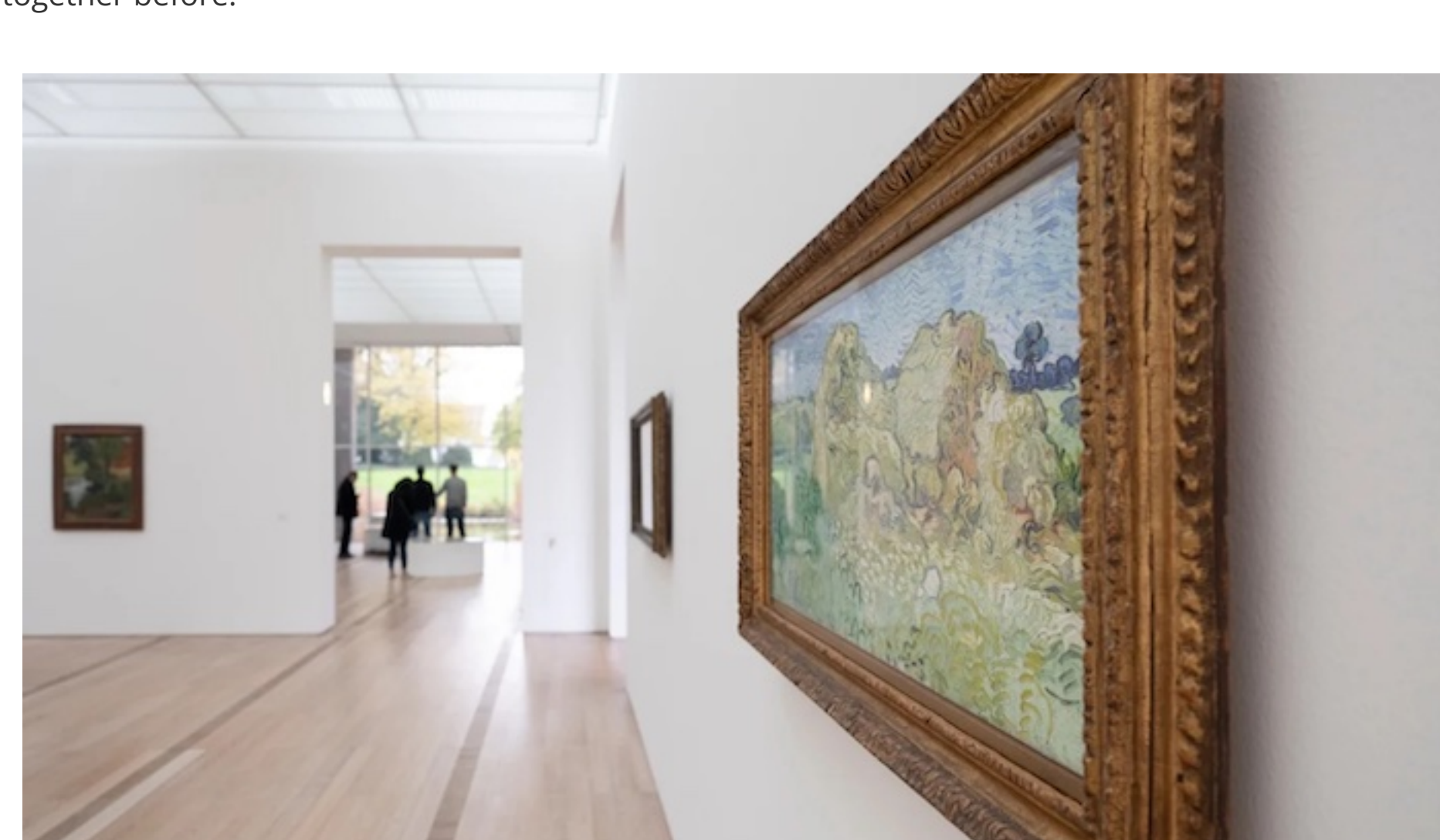
The Mühlenberg, St Alban is a rectangular fountain and generally considered to be one of the best for such activities while the fountain outside the Kunstmuseum is ornate and shaped like a doughnut which means you can actually swim around it. It's also in the middle of a busier thoroughfare so expect people to ogle, albeit in an amused and pleasant way. If you're an aquaphobe, Basel is also renowned for its art institutions of which the Kunstmuseum is the most celebrated and quite rightly so as it houses the oldest public art collection in the world.



Kunstmuseum, Basel

Joined together by an underground tunnel, there's a new building and an old building split on opposite sides of the road. The former is a contemporary design by Christ & Gantenbein which was completed in 2016 and is a massive construction housing some of the world's leading artists from last century. It favours minimalism and includes Jasper Johns, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, and Mark Rothko but also boasts Warhol and Lichtenstein, amongst others.

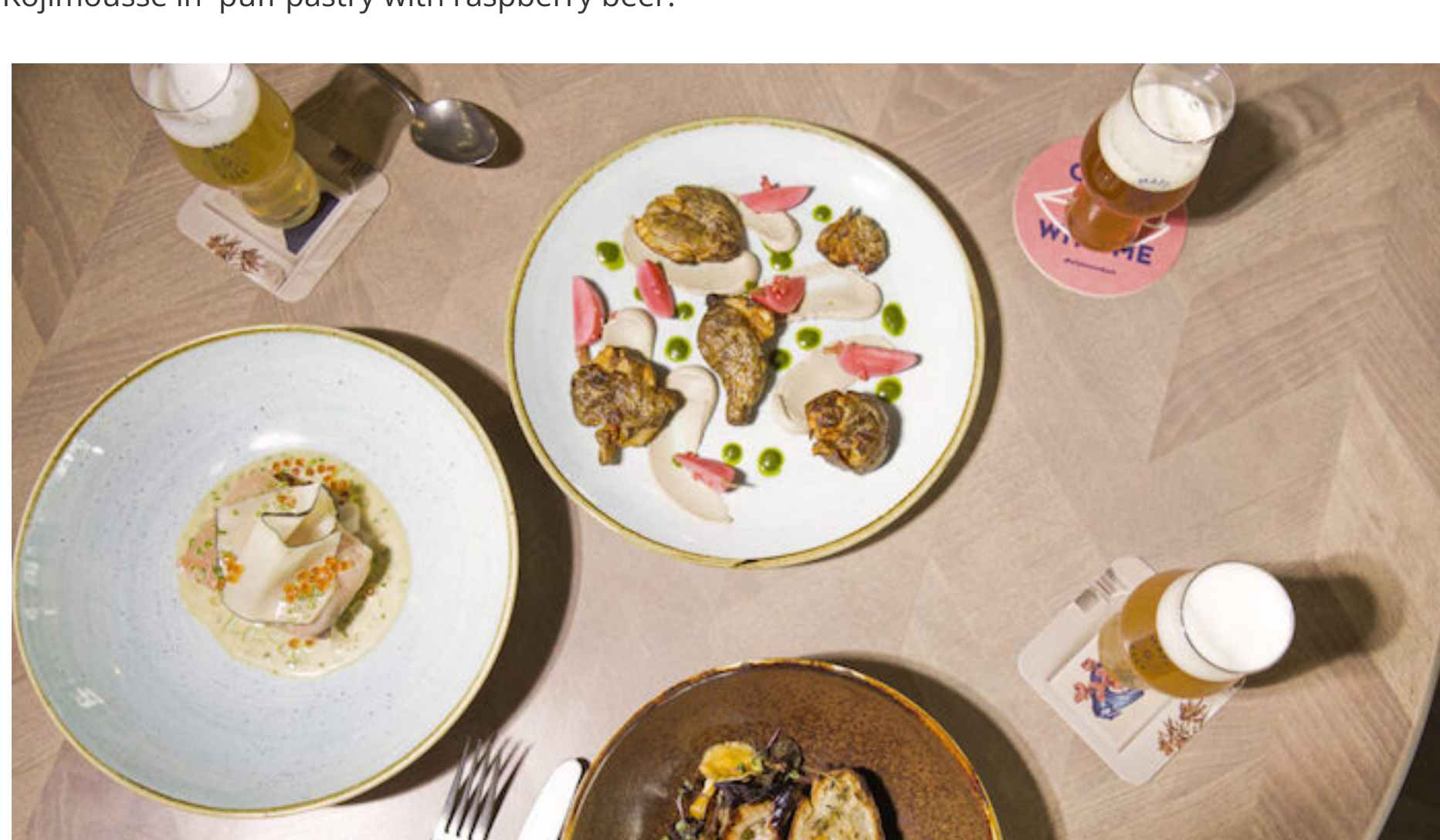
The older building is probably even larger but more traditional in style and content. It houses heavyweights such as Monet, Renoir, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Dalí. The whole experience is nothing short of jaw-dropping, as is the Fondation Beyeler museum which is currently showing eight Basquiat paintings he created in a factory in Italy's Modena and which have never been shown together before.



Fondation Beyeler

After a tough day swimming down the Rhine, bathing in the fountains, checking out the world's most celebrated artists, there's only one place to head for dinner and that's [Matt & Elly](#), a local brewery and kitchen/restaurant built into one. This relatively new venture is based next to what looks like a Corbusier type modern estate, and is thus less Swiss chocolate than many of its competitors. Its pairing of food with different types of craft beer also sounds less chocolate box-y and more like an English drunkard's excuse for lazy dining but, thankfully, the reality couldn't be further from the truth.

The pièce de résistance is the surprise menu. For starters we're given a cucumber and cashew chilled soup with sweet potato and pickled mustard seeds; it's a revelation, creamy and bursting with flavour. It's paired with a New England IPA. Both complement the other perfectly, as you'd hope, and so the surprises continue – the most sublime duck and cauliflower purée with Stout, Kojimousse in puff pastry with raspberry beer.



The evening is guided expertly by co-owner Denise Furter and her partner Jarin Huber. It's playful, tasteful, and full of joy and one can't help but think a Michelin star might be in sight. Certainly, it's a great way to end any day and proves Basel is crazier than one might have imagined, a location full of world class surprises.

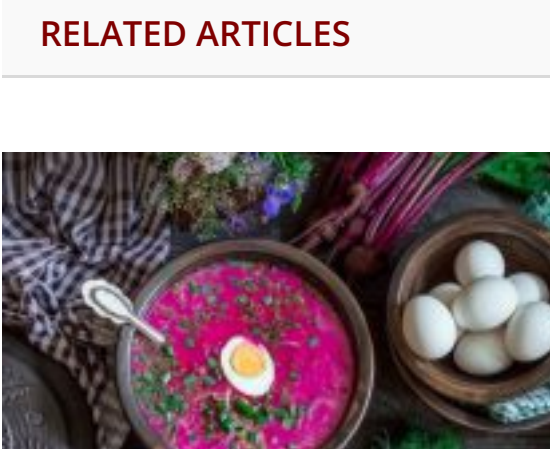
For more information on Basel, and to start planning your trip, including details of accommodation and activities, please visit [www.basel.com](#). For more information on Switzerland, visit the official tourism website at [MySwitzerland.com](#).

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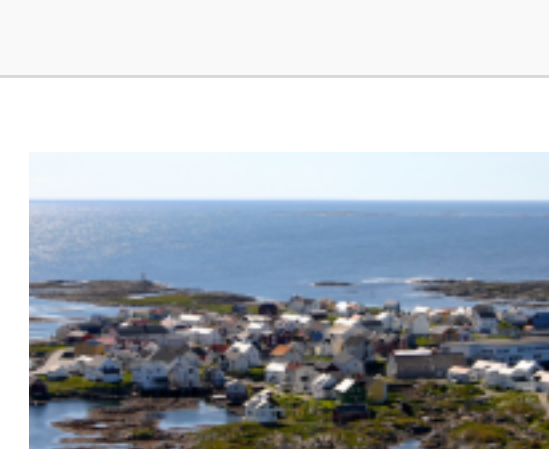
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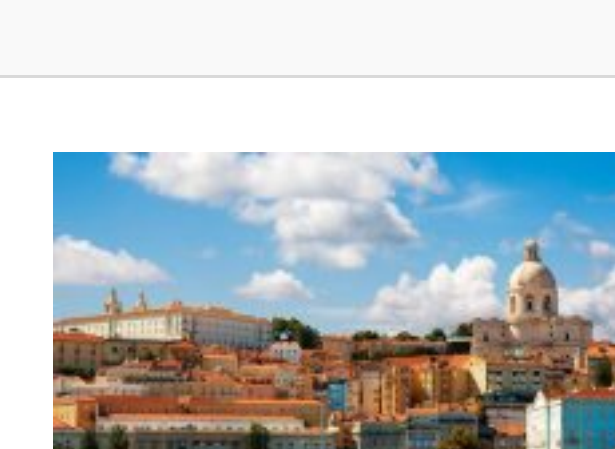
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