

# Travel

## THE BIG WEEKEND

**H**opefully you're hot on your capital cities – hot enough to know that Bern is the capital of Switzerland, rather than Zurich or Geneva. It's the birthplace of the Toblerone and the opposite of what you'd expect from a capital: no traffic, no noise (unless you count the tweeting sparrows that sit in the hundreds of trees) and a river so clean and clear that locals spend their summers in its water. Bars line the pretty cobbled streets, the museums are at the top of their game and the locals are laid-back. Yes, the Swiss may have watches, but the Bernese have time.

### FRIDAY

#### Evening

Annoyingly, there is no longer a direct flight from the UK, so head to Zurich, a 75-minute train ride away (£80 return; sbb.ch). Drop off your bags and wander through the Unesco-listed old town – handily laid out in a series of grids and straight roads – to **Tredicipercento**. Like many of the city's best eating and drinking spots, it's underground. Try the seasonal tasting menu, which features dishes such as flan with nettles and asparagus risotto (three courses from £50; tredicipercento.ch).

### SATURDAY

#### Morning

Bern isn't crammed with blockbuster sites – the joy of it is strolling past the grey-green baroque buildings of the old town, tucked into a loop of the River Aare. Start on Marktgasse, where figurines top ornate octagonal 16th-century fountains. You're heading for the **Zytglogge**, or Clock Tower, which was built in 1218. Just before the hour, the figurines on the tower spring into life. A rooster crows, a jester dances and bears whizz around a carousel.

The streets are lined with four miles of arcades. Many shops are closed on Sundays, so make the most of the independent boutiques today. Mix a bespoke perfume at **Art of Scent**, or buy a prêt-à-porter signature blend (from £54; artofscent.ch).

Depending on the time of year, locals gather every Saturday on Münstergasse to buy strawberries, cheese or asparagus from local farmers. Try some samples, then stop at **Jumi**, a popular place to stock up on cured meat and cheese. Nearby is **Münsterplatz**, a peaceful square that's home to the tallest cathedral in Switzerland. If you're longing for a red-rooftop view, heave yourself up the 312 stairs (£4; bernmuenster.ch).

#### Afternoon

Glammed-up grannies and book-reading students gather behind the cathedral at the **Münsterplattform**, a tree-dotted square overlooking the Aare. From here, head east and cross the river to start the steep ascent to the **Rosengarten** park. Your reward is the best panorama in town: the adjoining restaurant's outdoor terrace is on the edge of a multicoloured rose garden – a great spot for a salad and a spritzer (mains from £15; rosengarten.be).

This is the tail end of the season for the Bern pastime of taking to the Aare in an inflatable rubber ring. Catch the S1 train to Uttigen (22 minutes; £9 one-way), where, by yourself or in a group, you'll clamber into a ring and start to bob back towards the city. Jump in, float on your back and listen out for *aareräuschen* – the sound of stones rolling on the river bed (from £43; aaretubing.ch).



Ride a rubber ring downriver in the city that gave us relativity and the Toblerone. By Hannah Summers



#### WHERE TO STAY

The luxury option is the **Hotel Schweizerhof** Bern, opposite the railway station, which has glam modern bedrooms, a swanky spa and a roof terrace (doubles from £332, B&B; schweizerhof-bern.ch). Nearby, **Am Pavillon** is a light-filled guesthouse with nine bedrooms, a meditation area and free bike hire (doubles from £118, B&B; ampavillon.ch).

#### GETTING THERE

There are no direct flights from the UK. Fly to Zurich with Swiss or BA, from Heathrow; or with easyJet, from Gatwick. KLM flies via Amsterdam from regional airports including Manchester and Glasgow. Then take the train.

The writer was a guest of Bern Tourism (bern.com) and Switzerland Tourism (myswitzerland.com)

You'll finish at **Eichholz**, a vast patch of grass on the outskirts of Bern, where locals barbecue sausages and drink beer. The cafe here serves homemade cider (£4; campingeichholz.ch). Next, take a 25-minute stroll along the river path back towards Bern, pausing for a scoop of lemon and pepper ice cream from **Gelateria di Berna**, on Marzillistrasse (from £2.50; gelateriadiberna.ch).

#### Evening

Dinner is with the cool crowd at the **Altes Tramdepot**, a former tram station that's been converted into a copper-tank-filled brewery and bar, with yet more old-town views. Share an outdoor table and go for a Tram-Helles beer (£6) and a potato rösti topped with cheese, bacon and apple purée (mains from £16; altestramdepot.ch). For something swankier, the bar at the historic **Bellevue Palace** hotel has been the preferred drinking spot of everyone from stealthy Second World War spies to Bruce Springsteen (cocktails from £13; bellevue-palace.ch).

Time for one more? **Turnhalle**, a high-ceilinged converted school gym hall – with the original rings hanging from the ceiling and a pretty, spacious courtyard – is the hangout for the young at heart. Impress the staff with your best Berndeutsch, the Bern dialect, by ordering "Zwoi Bier, bitte" (beer £5; turnhalle.ch).

### SUNDAY

#### Morning

Anyone staying in a hotel here gets a voucher for free bus and tram travel, so hop on bus 12 to the **Zentrum Paul Klee**. Beneath the undulating roofs of the Renzo Piano-designed structure, you'll find rotating exhibitions of the Swiss artist's colourful work: *Cosmos Klee* (until October 28) showcases 200 of his diverse offerings, including a clown hand puppet and other rarely seen pieces (£15; zpk.org).

Catch the bus back into town, grab a quick espresso on the outdoor patio of **Volver** (£3; barvolver.ch), then cross the Aare to the spiky, Hogwarts-esque **Bern Historical Museum**, part of which is dedicated to the Einstein Museum. The physicist developed his theory of relativity in Bern and the space is crammed with insider info: he hated working in formal clothes and instead preferred the 1900s equivalent of a tracksuit. The larger museum tells the history of Bern and has collections of everything from ancient Egyptian jewellery to medieval tapestries, as well as an exhibit of the city's greatest hits – including the Toblerone (£14; bhm.ch).

#### Afternoon

Most of Bern's museums are handily clustered together – the **Swiss Alpine Museum** and **Natural History Museum** are nearby – but if fatigue sets in, you're minutes from the trendiest lunch spot in town. Take the path down to **Terrasse**, beside the weir of the Aare – lunch dishes include fried perch with lemon, lemongrass and chilli (mains from £18; schwellenmaetteli.ch).

A woodland path curves around the side of the Aare; follow the trail until you reach the **BearPark**. Yes, real-life bears. Bern and bears have history – supposedly, the city's founder hunted one in the nearby woods – and today they're a symbol of the city, featured on the coat of arms. At the BearPark, you can see Finn, Björk and Ursina lazing in the sunshine, munching fish and posing for pictures (free).