



BERN & IT'S BEARS

/// TAMARA THIESSEN

Bears – stout, powerful and proud – are a fitting symbol for the Swiss capital. Soak up its 12th century medieval charm, noble history and breathtaking backdrop

American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once mulled over the meditative effect of the Swiss Alps, with “one snow-crowned summit” after another “higher and whiter”, and valleys unfurling out of view. Eyeing up the distant Bernese Oberland peaks from the city of Bern, that feeling is sure to strike you.

Wandering between the Old Town’s medieval landmarks and vantage points, the mountains are ever-present. Though they’re matched by one other stalwart companion – the bears. Bears, bears everywhere. The emblem of both the city

and Canton of Bern, beloved bears are found on the Canton’s flag and coat of arms, on candy boxes, bear-shaped cookies, clocks, fountains, statues, shop insignia and buildings. (A bear is even used by Bern.com as its website hourglass icon).

Legend has it that the city’s founder, Berthold V, the Duke of Zähringen, settled on naming the city in 1191 after the first animal he hunted in the woods, which just so happened to be a brown bear. The animals loomed at large in the town until 1857, when they were allocated a special home – the famous bear pit, or Bärengraben, which closed in 2009.



*Bear statue
near Bärengraben*



IMAGE CREDITS: SHUTTERSTOCK

ONE OF THE RESIDENT BEARS IN THE BÄREN PARK

These days you can coo over the critters at the new BärenPark, which stretches along the river Aare for some 6,000sqm, giving its resident family - Finn, Björk and daughter Ursina - more space to roam free, hide in grottos and catch fresh fish. The bears in fact enjoy one of the best views of Bern's Altstadt from their riverbanks. The UNESCO-classified Old Town sits within a looping bend of the Aare, on a pendant-shaped promontory.

An even better vista of the Aare loop comes from the Rosengarten, a lofty park whose 200 plus rose varieties, 200 iris and dozens of rhododendrons bud up from a former cemetery. Here you can take a selfie with Bern's most famous former resident, a youthful Albert Einstein, who is captured seated on a park bench in a lifesize bronze sculpture.

Back down in the Altstadt, life radiates around its spiritual heart, the Münster, the most important late-Gothic cathedral in Switzerland, dating back to 1421 (though the tower came much later, in 1893). The view from the Münsterplattform extends over the tiled roofs of the old artisan district, the Mattequartier, below, through to the lush green pastures of Switzerland's west-central region.

Come rain or shine, you won't get wet strolling around the city's remarkably intact medieval core. The six kilometres of sandstone arcades skirting the cobblestone streets make this one of the longest sheltered shopping promenades in Europe, the Swiss flag-hung Kramgasse. It's lined with medieval and baroque facades, and some of the town's finest



shopfronts, bars and cafe terraces.

It's also home to the Einsteinhaus, where the great scientist lived from 1903 to 1905 as he worked out the Theory of Relativity. Get ready for some more bear encounters. Almost alongside is the Zähringerbrunnen - a dazzling statue of a bear in shining red and gold armour, hoisted up on a pole in the middle of a fountain.

The federal city has about 100 fountains; 11 are elaborate, allegorical fountains dating to the mid-16th century. Come face to face with the scary Kindlifresserbrunnen (child eater fountain) on neighbouring Kornhausplatz, which depicts an ogre devouring a sack of tots. From here it's a short walk to the landmark clock tower, Zytglogge, whose astronomical clock dating to 1530 was once the city's main timekeeper. On the hour, with quaint Swiss style and mechanical precision, its figures - a whimsical troupe of revolving bears, a jester, and Chronos the god of time - swing into action to the sound of a golden rooster crowing.

In this same neighbourhood is the copper-domed Bern Bundeshaus, where the national parliament has met since Bern was declared

de facto capital and seat of government in 1848. Before that it was the patriarchs who ruled. Their castles dot the surrounding countryside, which is in view from the Bundesplatz (parliament square).

Less than an hour's drive east is the undulating Emmental region, home to the ultimate (and you might say very holy) Swiss cheese. Along the small backroads of the Emmental Cheese Route you will pass dozens of family cheese producers. Many have shopfronts selling Emmentaler AOP made from unpasteurised milk and matured for at least four-months. During a visit to a show dairy, you'll get a look in at the traditional cheesemaking process, using wood-fired copper vats - and learn how those famous holes are made.

Now it's time to Alp-watch to your heart's content. Further south, alpine meadows give way to the Bernese Oberland foothills, then the mighty mountain massifs. The Jungfrau Region begins in Interlaken. From here, the Jungfrau mountain train will sweep you up to the highest railway station in Europe, the 3,454m Jungfraujoch. En route it scales the north face of the craggy Eiger, traverses the Mönch and negotiates the Jungfrau.

Two viewing points along the way offer outlooks onto pure Swiss bliss scenery all around: glacier-carved valleys, glistening lakes, snow-kissed summits and thousands of speck-like dairy cows. Rug up, because even in summer at these altitudes, baby it's cold outside. But, at any time of year, the views make it bearable.



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