



Out and about in the grand old town of Basel

The Swiss city of Basel sits on the Rhine in what is known as the three countries triangle of Switzerland, France and Germany.

This city rightly prides itself on a long, illustrious and impeccably preserved past - and on its status today as Switzerland's 'capital of culture'.

This is a city to get out and about in, whatever the season.

During the summer months, residents and visitors alike will spend as much time as possible along and even in the Rhine

In winter, the city's Christmas markets combine to make the largest festive season celebrations in Switzerland.

And *Basler Fasnächt* (carnival), which takes place over three days from the Monday after Ash Wednesday, is a tradition unique to Basel

www.basel.com/en

Ashley Gibbins
Commissioning Editor
AllWays Traveller





A city with a really lasting allure

By Ashley Gibbins

Basel, Switzerland's third largest city after Zürich and Geneva, has the ability to make a lasting impression on the visitor.

We have now made two visits to the city and both were really enjoyable.

The first was for *Basler, Fasnächt* its unique annual carnival, and the second for what is, the largest gathering of Christmas markets in Switzerland.

And so, on both occasions, it was a case of dressing to embrace the winter weather for Basel is a city to be out and about in.

Basel Old Town

Getting through EuroAirport Basel Mulhouse Freiburg is quick and easy with all the efficiency that one expects, and indeed appreciates, with the Swiss.

Then it's on the waiting bus for a short ride to the city centre, which is free with a printed out hotel confirmation.

From then on, and throughout our stay, we used the city's excellent tram service, which is also free to those booking hotel accommodation.

The Basel Card

Another bonus for the visitor is that everyone who stays in a hotel or Airbnb in the city receives the Basel Card upon checking in.

This gives, among a host of benefits, free travel on public transport and free access to guest WiFi and a 50% discount on admission to the Basel Zoo and Theatre and the city's many museums.

The same discount applies when arranging a walking tour of the old town, the two-hour sightseeing bus tour and scheduled trips on cruises by *Basler Personenschiffahrt*.

Taking a tour

Those who know us know we always look to start a break with a guided tour, preferably on foot.

This invariably provides an excellent way to develop a feel for a place along with the chance to get ones bearings for the days ahead.

In Basel we were lucky enough to be given a fascinating and highly enjoyable walking tour of the Old Town by Béa Tschopp, one of the city's tour guides.

An actor and theatre director, Béa really helped us to appreciate this historic city and its people.

And so we meandered through one of the most well-preserved 'old town' districts in Europe, and learnt about the life and times of those who lived in buildings dating back to the fifteenth century.

Basel, as I now also realise, embraces two hills with the Old Town area on one and Basel Cathedral (Münster), overlooking the Rhine, on the other.

In the valley between these is the *Marktplatz*, the main thoroughfare through the city centre, which is dominated by Basel's grand and historic town hall.

The Swiss standard of living

The Swiss enjoy a particularly high standard of living and, as such, there is a range of upmarket stores, coffee shops and fine dining restaurants.

Head into the old town and the emphasis is on 'back to small' with a string of charming little shops selling cards, arts and crafts and hand made goods.

Given the quality of life enjoyed here, Basel is not a short break for the strictly budget conscious traveller.

But for those who appreciate a city that offers culture, heritage and sophistication, in equal measure, it is well worth the extra Swiss francs you will spend during your time here.



A unique display of coordinated cavorting

Our first visit to Basel was one cold and snowy February, for *Basler Fasnächt*, or carnival.

This unique event is the city's major, annual, cultural get together and the biggest of its kind in Switzerland.

Its traditional importance and relevance is such that *Basler Fasnächt* has been included on the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list.

Morgestraich

Basler Fasnächt officially starts with Morgestraich, on the Monday that falls five days after Ash Wednesday.

This is the moment the city's *Fasnächtler* (carnivalites) have spent almost a year planning and preparing for - and eagerly awaiting.

Crowds throng the city centre which, is plunged into complete darkness at precisely 4am.

This makes the arrival of the parade of illuminated, oversized, hand-painted lanterns all the more dramatic.

Each of these lanterns is escorted through the streets by brass bands and the *Cliques* (carnival guilds) and *Gugge* (fife and drum bands), before being displayed on the *Münsterplatz* for the duration of Carnival.



And so, for the next 72 hours, Basel's historic old town becomes the domain of the 18,000 *Fasnächtler*, who will march and perform pretty much as, when and where the mood takes them.

For the visitor there is, literally, always something of interest around the next corner.

Even the *Cortège*, the carnival parades, that take place on the Monday and Wednesday have the participants joining the circular procession route at a time and place of their choosing.

If this lack of overall organisational control suggests a recipe of confusion and complete mayhem, well that is very much the point.

For this festival belongs fairly and squarely to the *Fasnächtler* who resist all but the minimum of regulation.



And by the way, it all works just fine as it is.

We are talking Switzerland, so self-restraint and good behaviour is never far from the surface.

And so, while many of the bars and restaurants stay open day and night throughout, there is no hint of drunkenness or unsocial behaviour.



The masks

The other essential element of *Basler Fasnacht* is the masks worn by all the participants.

As well as adding colourful and very dramatic effect, it provides an anonymity that allows people of all age and social standing to take part.

All *Fasnächtler* are equal.

My final abiding memory of *Basler Fasnacht* is the confetti - hundreds of tons of the stuff.

It is hurled by those aboard the carnival floats, along with flowers, sweets and oranges, and thrown over bystanders by the mischievous *Waggis*, who see it as a badge of honour to get a handful of confetti down the back of your shirt.

The Stubete

One of the lesser known, but equally enjoyable, handed down, traditions of *Basler Fasnacht* is the *Stubete*, with residents opening 'pop up' pubs in their homes.

Look for a mask or lantern over the door and a *biezli* (pub sign), walk in and have a good time.

Carnival customs

Although there are no official rules of behaviour during *Basler Fasnacht*, certain customs prevail.

Me het e Blaggedde - you wear a badge.

As this motto suggests, visitors as well as locals are encouraged to buy a *Fasnacht* badge and pin it on their lapels.

The badges come in copper, silver and gold or the premium *Bijou*, is a visual sign of support for Carnival and goes some way to covering the costs.



Not fancy dress

Only *Fasnächtler* wear costumes and masks, and others attending are not expected to don silly garb to take part.

The exception is during the children's *Fasnacht*, when youngsters are encouraged to do so.

Mehlsuppe

Eating *Mehlsuppe* (flour soup) for the first time after *Morgenstreich* is another tradition, and a particularly welcome one given the likelihood of low temperatures.

Endstraich

Basler Fasnacht ends as abruptly as it started, at 4am on the Thursday morning 72 hours later and Basel cloaks itself in serene sophistication once again.

But behind the scenes, the *Fasnächtler* have already started planning for next year.

More information

www.baslerfasnacht.info



Dates for Basler Fasnacht

- 11 to 13 March 2019
- 2 to 4 March 2020
- 22 to 24 February 2021
- 7 to 9 March 2022
- 27 February to 1 March 2023

Christmas in Basel



Our second visit to Basel was in early December for a city in fine festive form.

Its two Christmas markets combine to form the largest in Switzerland, and are real social occasions laced with Glühwein (hot mulled wine).

The Christmas markets at *Barfüsserplatz* and *Münsterplatz*, are both a stroll from the city centre and the festively decorated Old Town.

Over 180 traders offer their arts and crafts, Christmas gifts and refreshments from small, rustic wooden chalets.

A huge Christmas tree, which takes pride of place on the *Münsterplatz*, is chosen by Johann Wanner, who also decorates it.

The Johann Wanner Christmas House, on Spalenberg in the Old Town, is also a must.

For over forty years, Johann has been selling his Christmas baubles, which are created in specialist glassblower workshops in Thuringia, Poland, Bohemia and the Czech Republic.

Diana, Princess of Wales, was a customer as was Hilary Clinton, who used Johann's decorations for the White House Christmas tree while Bill was President.

www.johannwanner.ch/en

There is a festive atmosphere in the cafes, restaurants and pop up bars along *Claraplatz* in *Kleinbasel*, on the right banks of the Rhine.



Basel is also a great place to find the special gifts for those you really care about, with a wide range of upmarket stores selling designer goods and luxury chocolate and sweetmeats.

To complete the Basel festive season, the city's museums and galleries stage special Christmas events and activities.

And the city's ferries get 'lit-up' to give a festive feel to crossings.





The Rhine, which for centuries has played a dominant role in the economic life and prosperity of this city, acts as a veritable magnet for pleasure seekers come the warm weather of late spring and summer.

Basel residents and visitors alike will sunbathe and promenade the river banks.

And a range of open air bars and restaurants, many with live music, pop up to serve customers late into the evening.

The Rhine swim

It is also possible to swim in the Rhine and, although locals take a dip at any time during the summer months, the most sensible thing to do is to join the thousands for the official Rhine swim.

This event takes place once a year during August and is fully supervised.

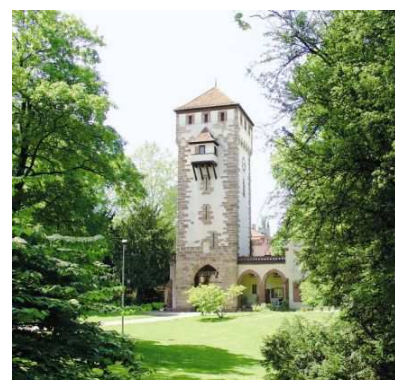
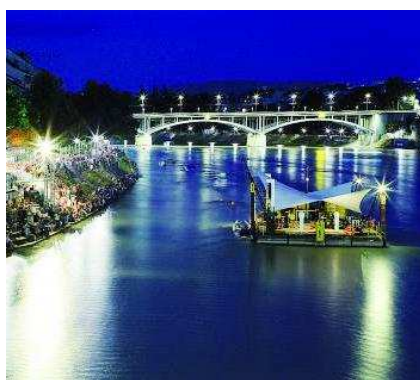
You just need to be a good swimmer and in good health and follow the few rules.

It is also the time when you can buy the Basel *Wickelfisch*, which is a watertight sack that keeps clothes dry whilst swimming.

The four ferries

The warmer weather is also a better time to take a ferry to cross the river.

The small fleet of ferries use a process of natural current power that has been employed for over 150 years.



The Basel museums



Kunstmuseum Basel

Basel is rightly proud to claim status as Switzerland's city of museums, with over 40 large, small and quirky to choose from.

Hoosesagg Museum

The smallest, and most unique, of these must be the *Hoosesagg Museum* (trouser pocket museum), which comprises the glass display case in the front door of Dagmar Vergeat's home in the Old Town.

The museum came about because Dagmar noticed passers by stopping to gaze through the glass into her living room.

Wishing to have a little more privacy, without disappointing anyone, she started creating displays instead.

The result has been to create a tourist attraction in its own right.

Dagmar changes her displays every two or three months and also hosts visiting exhibitions.

In late November she places a bare Christmas tree next to the front door

By Christmas Eve others will have festooned the tree with their own decorations in what is a real community celebration of the festive season.

Kunstmuseum Basel

At the other end of the scale, *Kunstmuseum Basel* (Museum of Fine Arts) houses a collection of 4,000 paintings, sculptures and 300,000 drawings and prints spanning seven centuries.

A museum of international renown.

www.kunstmuseumbasel.ch



Swiss Museum for Paper, Writing and Printing

Swiss Museum for Paper, Writing and Printing

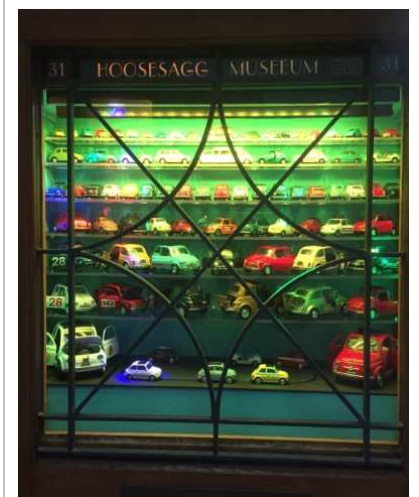
In the time available, and being journalists, we chose to visit the Swiss Museum for Paper, Writing and Printing.

This museum, located in a restored building that began its life as a paper mill some 500 years ago, is dedicated to papermaking, the art of book printing and writing in general and is fascinating.

www.papiermuseum.ch

More museums

www.basel.com/en/art/Museums



Hoosesagg Museum



Novotel Basel City

By Ann Mealor

This modern, chic hotel is ideally situated for a short break in Basel.

Located just three minutes from the railway station and 15 minutes from the airport, it is very easy to reach giving the visitor maximum time to explore the quaint cobbled streets and squares of Basel.

We walked with our cases from the tram stop, no need for cabs, and left our luggage with reception before heading into town for the Christmas Markets and a couple of small jugs of the aromatic, and very alcoholic, *gluwein*.

On returning to the hotel, we found our room large, light and airy, with a very comfortable bed and large shower.

The fridge was a bonus, as was the daily complimentary water and the tea/coffee.

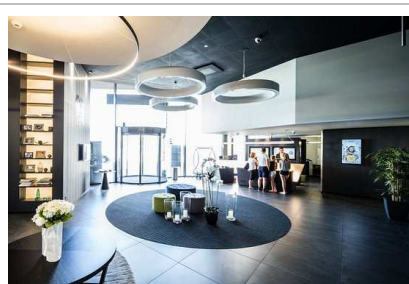
There was a cosy little sitting area, where the sofa doubled up as a single bed. Nice for enjoying a glass of wine in the evening before heading out.

Breakfast

The breakfast here was exceptionally good.

Each morning we tucked into fresh fruit, yoghurt, smoked salmon, scrambled eggs, roasted tomatoes, a selection of cheese, cold meats, olives, fresh bread and pastries.

There was even an easy to use machine for making pancakes so they could be enjoyed warm and fluffy.

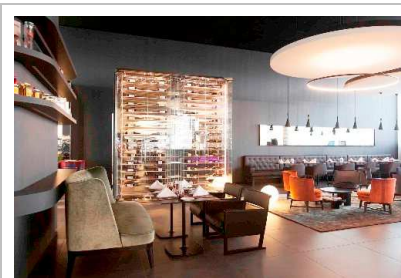


The dining room was pleasant, spacious and never overly busy, so no queuing for the coffee or toast.

All the food was well laid out and looked colourful and appetising.

The restaurant was kept clean and tidy by the staff and used dishes removed promptly.

We filled up at breakfast and this kept us going for the rest of the day, with just a few coffee or *gluwein* stops needed to rest the feet, relax and re-generate before continuing our city tour.



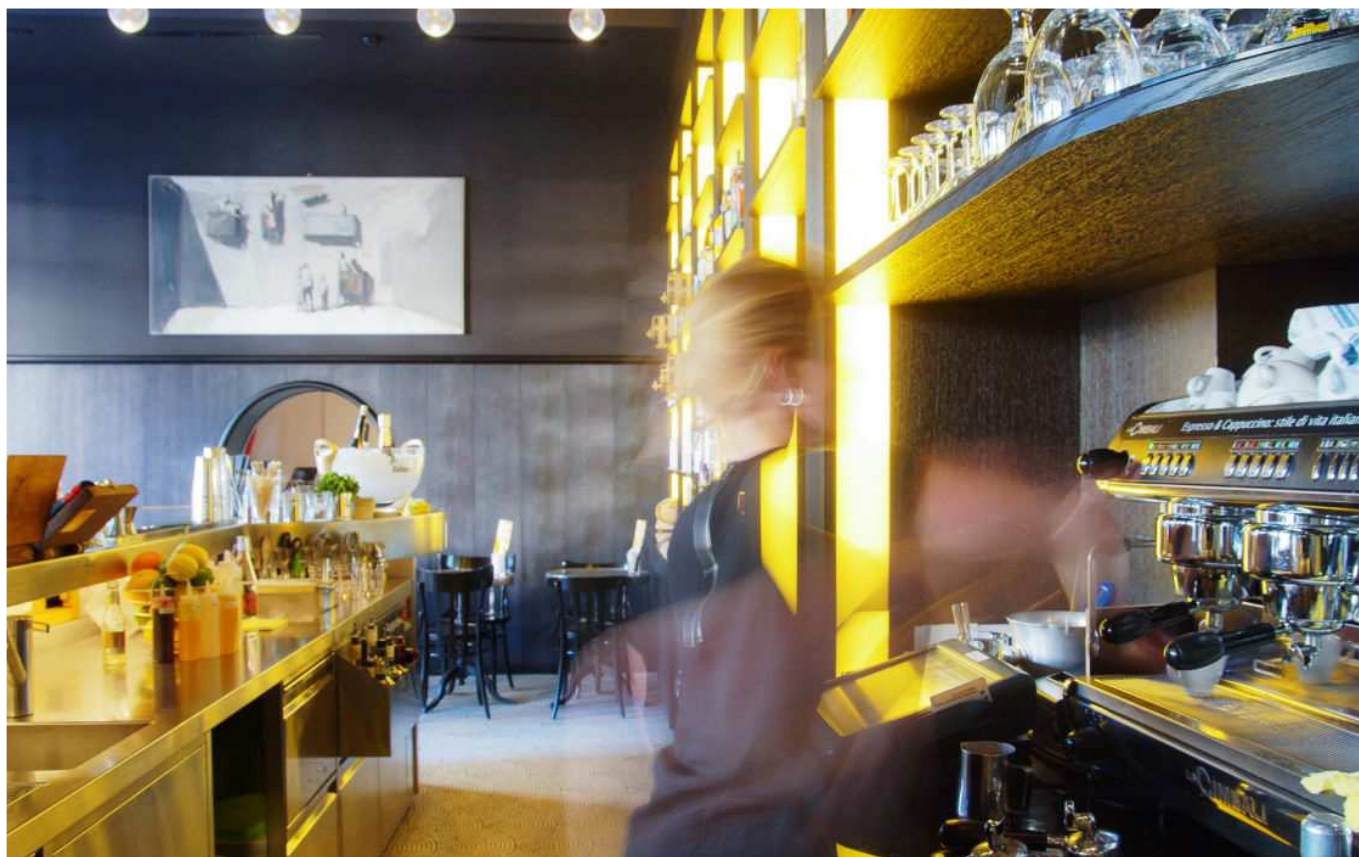
The staff at the hotel were very helpful, friendly and professional. The barman providing us with fresh milk for our coffee and tea each evening and the reception team giving us directions and advising which trams to catch.

All this was very much appreciated and helped make our visit even more enjoyable – as did the complimentary iced tea each day in the lobby.

More information

www.accorhotels.com/gb/hotel-8215-novotel-basel-city/index.shtml

Dining in Basel



Volkshaus

By Ann Mealor

There is no shortage of dining options in Basel, with quaint coffee shops, chic brasseries, rustic Swiss beer houses and cool cafes scattered throughout the city.

There is always somewhere close-by to eat and everywhere looks inviting.

Walliser Kanne

Our first meal in Basel was at *Walliser Kanne*, a traditional Swiss restaurant with wooden tables, stone floors and a lively atmosphere.

Waiters moved swiftly between tables taking orders, cooking schnitzel, pouring wine, and lighting burners to keep the cheese fondue hot.

Needless to say, heady aromas attack the senses as soon as you walk in.

The restaurant is famous for its local specialties including three types of fondue, cheese raclette, and wiener schnitzel that is expertly and flamboyantly prepared over flames at the table.

The menu is interesting and varied. After much deliberation, Ashley chose the river trout with a crisp rosti which was delicious.

I went for the cheese fondue which was hot, moorish and filling. Dipping the crusty cubes of bread into the gooey wine and cheese mix was addictive and I ate more than I thought I could.



Walliser Kanne

We still managed to share a dessert – three round, sugary doughnuts on a pool of vanilla custard sauce. Real winter comfort food.

Full of old world charm this is the go to place for traditional Swiss fare, but it's very popular, so you will need to book for your cheesy fondue fix.

www.walliserkanne-basel.ch



Volkshaus

Volkshaus

Set in a grand building, *Volkshaus* is a French brasserie and classic bar, with courtyard beer garden.

It is a dining 'must' when in Basel.

The restaurant itself is modern, vibrant and charming with candlelit tables and glistening light bulbs hanging from the ceiling.

We sat in the bay window with views over the pretty courtyard and its trees sparkling with fairy lights.

As we looked through the menu, warm bread with a garlic cheese spread was brought to the table.

I always appreciate little treats like this.

We both chose pumpkin soup to start, which was smooth, hot, light, rich and scattered with crunchy pumpkin seeds and topped with a swirl of oil.

It was so tasty, I could have eaten double - everything a good soup should be.

For mains, I chose the pumpkin ravioli with pear and pumpkin pesto. It was superb and one of the most flavoursome ravioli I have tasted.

Ashley chose the grain cream cheese risotto with fried savoy cabbage and grapes - a really inventive vegetarian dish that was given a big thumbs up.

Eating out in Basel is not cheap, but *Volkshaus* is well worth splashing out for, especially as a treat or celebration.

www.volkshaus.ch

Nomad Eatery



The bustling *Nomad Eatery* is ideal for a healthy business lunch or a hearty brunch.

There are a range of mouth watering options and it's all good for you too.

www.nomad.ch/en/eatery

Schlüsselzunft



Schlüsselzunft is one of the oldest Guild Halls in Basel.

As such it's well worth popping in for lunch or for a drink just to admire the architecture and soak-up the history of the place.

However, the food is worth sampling too.

www.schluessezunft.ch

More dining options in Basel

www.basel.com/en/Eating-Going-out

A snapshot of Basel



AllWays traveller and the International Travel Writers Alliance



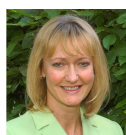
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www.itwalliance.com



Ann Meador is a professional travel writer and photographer and Managing Editor of *AllWays Traveller*



Ashley Gibbins is a professional travel writer and photographer and Managing Director of the International Travel Writers Alliance.