Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 32 (2005)
Heft: 6

Artikel: Anticipation of Christmas : Christmas markets, or the anticipation of Christmas
Autor: Wey, Alain
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906623

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Christmas markets, or the anticipation of Christmas

With their stalls and twinkling lights, Christmas markets bring a sparkle to the streets and alleys of towns and cities across Switzerland during the Advent season. In Alsace and Bavaria they date back hundreds of years, but in Switzerland they have only existed for thirty years. Alain Wey selects a few

The longer nights herald the approach of the Christmas Market season, when the streets sparkle and glisten and the cold winter air is awash with the aroma of mulled wine, gingerbread and freshly baked cookies. From November onwards, these markets sprout like mushrooms, and unless you know that the first Swiss Christmas market was held in Berne just under thirty years ago, you might easily imagine that they were an age-old tradition. Christmas magic and business go hand in hand – and if you add authenticity and ambience, the right mood is automatically created.

A fire crackles in the hearth of a wooden hut. A centuries-old custom brings back happy memories. Advent is the time when people open their hearts and children with shining eyes can't get enough of fairy tales. And just to make sure that physical pleasures are also catered to, the air is filled with smells and aromas that have almost been forgotten. Here someone is making candles; there Father Christmas is holding court. Were one to attempt to count the number of Swiss Christmas markets, it would prove a never-ending task. Their popularity has steadily grown over the past ten years. Small or large, authentic or less so, they have conquered the hearts of the Swiss. With their rows of wooden huts and stands, they breathe life into winter, bringing a brisk trade to streets that were formerly in virtual hibernation. Here you can buy whatever takes your fancy, discover novel ideas and share impressions. Whistle-stop tourists have given way to quiet, contemplative visitors who take the time to absorb this magical landscape. The enchantment of these markets owes much to the simple wares fashioned from wood or other virtually forgotten materials.

A huge variety on offer

Christmas magic for young and old

Father Christmas between the lake and the mountains

One of the most splendid examples of a successful Christmas market is the "Montreux Noël" in Montreux. One of the first markets in French-speaking Switzerland, it will be held this year from 25 November to 24 December. Created eleven years ago on the initiative of friends and entrepreneurs of the Vaud Riviera, its 120 chalets and variety of crafts attract more visitors than almost any other Swiss Christmas market. With its backdrop of Lake Geneva and the Swiss Alps, it offers a wide range of attractions. One of these is The Magic World of Father Christmas, who has his headquarters on top of the 2032-meter-high Rochers-de-Naye and runs a toy workshop in the market. Other attractions include the Magic Garden, a Woodsman's Village and various animals. The vast array of colours, sounds and images all combine to create a unique mood of enchantment. In 2004 the market attracted some 300 000 visitors: 70 000 more than in 2002. Yves Cornaro, President of the Christmas Market, believes this is the upper limit and that it will be difficult to increase capacity any further. He estimates that the market generates revenues of CHF 15 to 18 million. And it's easy to believe him when he says that hotel operators along the Vaud Riviera also do well. But let him speak for himself: "Apart from the weeks during the Jazz Festival, Montreux is at its busiest during the Christmas Market. It owes its origins to the realisation that our city used to be regarded as more of a destination for summer holidaymakers rather than for winter vacations. What was originally created for business reasons gradually became more of a tourist attraction. After only 5 or 6 years we had to fetch people from further afield. Now we advertise our Christmas Market in Italy, France, Germany and the UK! But we also make sure that the business aspect does not overshadow the sheer pleasure of browsing, discovering new things and enjoying a unique experience."

From Alsace to Basle

The Basle Christmas market, which is in partnership with Montreux, will be held this year for the 26th time, making it one of the oldest Christmas markets in Switzerland. This is due to its close proximity to Alsace and Germany, because it is also partners Colmar, Mulhouse and Freiburg im Breisgau, all of which issue a joint brochure. The 120 stalls and small wooden huts sell handicrafts and agricultural produce from Basle's rural regions and the Black Forest. Several hundreds of thousands of visitors – perhaps as much as a million nowadays – come from far and near to the market on Barfüsserplatz between 29 November and 23 December. "Anyone who happens to be in the city centre stops off here," says Beat Wüthrich, the organising director. Here you will see a baker from Dresden baking his Dresdner Stollen. And like him, lots of craftsmen (including glass blowers)

The covered mar

SWISS REVIEW December 2005 / No. 6
Translated from German. Photos: by courtesy

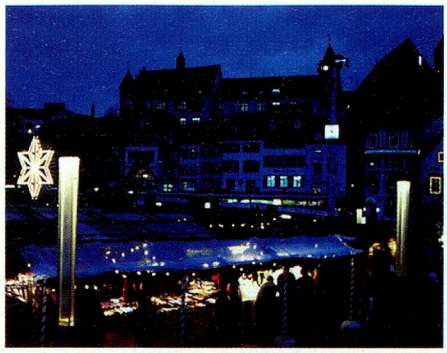
set up their workshops on Barfüsserplatz. Two restaurants set up business here for the duration of the Christmas market: the Alpen with its Christmas rösti (hash browned potatoes), and the Restaurant Zum Engel. The longest Christmas street in Switzerland runs between the German railway station and the French and Swiss railway station, with decorated pathways, exhibitions and concerts to delight all the senses.

The enchanted capital

Berne has two Christmas markets, both dating back 27 years. Christmas articles and everyday items are sold from the 51 stands set up on Waisenhausplatz from 3 to 29 December. From 3 to 24 December, the Christmas market on Münsterplatz features 33 stands with handicrafts and agricultural produce from the regions around Berne. And if you want to get to know Bernese cooking, you can buy the Berne Christmas Market Cookbook. Berne Tourism advertises its two Christmas markets throughout Europe and in the United States. It even attracts tour operators from France and Italy.

Europe's largest covered Christmas market

The concourse of Zurich's central railway station is transformed into a market village from 25 November to 31 December. This year's 12th "Christkindli" market will feature some 150 stalls and a 15 meter high Christmas tree, turning Zurich's railway station into Europe's largest covered Christmas market for just over a month. Its reputation has spread well beyond Switzerland's borders: small wonder, when you consider that more than 350,000 passengers pass through here every day. Many of the stallholders are from outside Switzerland, including Russians, French, Germans, South Americans, Austrians, Italians and Japanese.

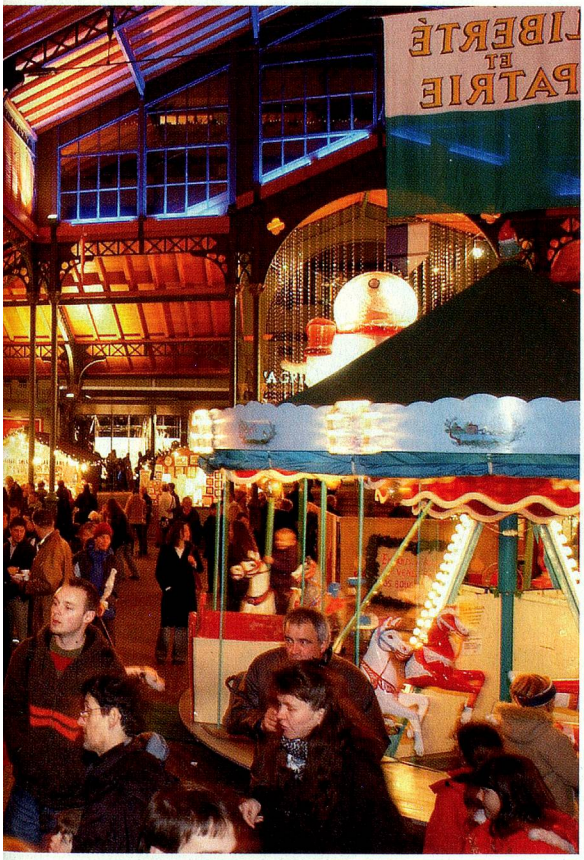


Basle, Barfüsserplatz

For the third consecutive time – this year from 2 to 18 December – Lucerne will also be turning its railway station over to the "Christkindli" market, with thirty wooden stalls selling products from central Switzerland to the daily crowds of 60,000 commuters.

International Christmas

This year marks the eighth Geneva International Christmas Market. Held from 25 November to 24 December, the market serves as a platform for Swiss and European exhibitors. The city stages a Christmas parade featuring artistes from the Cirque de Noël, which will be spending a week at the Plainpalais complex. One of the many attractions is a demonstration of chocolate making, and there is a colouring contest for children.



Montreux

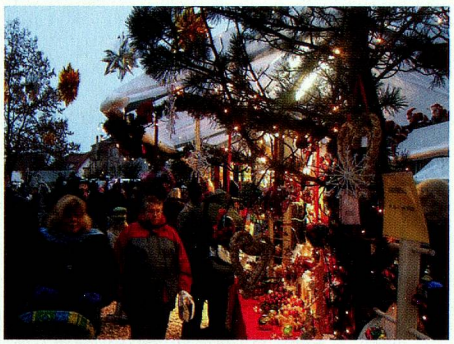
Central Switzerland, home of Christmas markets

Nowhere else in the country are so many Christmas markets held as in central Switzerland: Lucerne, Einsiedeln, Willisau, Brunnen, Stans (for the 14th year), and even Mount Pilatus have their own Christmas markets.

The Christmas market in the small monastery town of Einsiedeln in canton Schwyz has found itself a very impressive location: the square in front of the splendid 18th century Benedictine monastery. Surrounded by Lake Sihl to the east and the peaks of the Hoch-Ybrig to the south, this picturesque location attracts between 10 000 and 12 000 visitors in the period from 26 November to 4 December. This year – its third – 150 stalls and huts will be lending enchantment to the square. Visitors can combine their shopping with a visit to the monastery. Those who like Christmas carols should visit on a Sunday, when the 90 Stimmen (90 voices) choir goes through its paces. Their angelic voices, borne along by echoes, ring out across the country.

On 19 and 20 November Mount Pilatus turns into a Christmas market and a fairytale world. This market is the highest of its type in Europe. At an altitude of 2132 meters, 50 exhibitors from across the region sell their handicrafts. The "dragon mountain" looks like an island of sparkling light, and alphorns give way to Advent choirs.

From 1 to 4 December the historic city of Willisau/LU will be running its 9th Christmas market, with some 100 stalls, in the city centre – where the weekly market has been held since the Middle Ages. The Christmas market in Brunnen, canton Schwyz, takes place in an unusual setting: an old champagne cellar set into the rock. More than 40 stalls sell their wares in this fairytale grotto. www.myswitzerland.com



Stans, village centre

Our tour has taken in only a few of Switzerland's many Christmas markets. St. Gallen, Winterthur, Fribourg, Bulle, Bremgarten, Brienz, Chur and other cities and villages also hold attractive Christmas markets. Their old-fashioned Christmas magic offers a welcome relief from the hustle and bustle of modern life.

INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

Montreux: www.montreuxnoel.ch
Basle: www.messen-maerkte.ch
Berne: www.weihnachtsmarktbern.ch
Zurich: www.christkindlimarkt.ch
Geneva: www.wwsa.ch
Einsiedeln: www.einsiedler-weihnacht.ch
Pilatus: www.pilatus.ch
Willisau: www.christkindlimarkt.willisau.ch
Brunnen: www.brunnentourismus.ch

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Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

Christmas market in front of Einsiedeln monastery

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