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The Federal Palace or Parliament Building is one of Switzerland's most attractive sights. Over 110,000 young people and adults visited the time-honoured institution in 2012. This doubling of visitor numbers over the past ten years presents a challenge for the "Parliament Visits" team, which conducts tours of the neo-Renaissance-style building.

The Federal Palace is in vogue and Andreas Blaser, Head of Public Relations at the Parliamentary Services, is delighted: "This public enthusiasm represents an excellent opportunity to bring fellow citizens closer to the Federal Assembly." The architecture and works of art convey Switzerland's legends and history better than any book. A glance upwards in the domed hall or a walk through the lobby gives visitors a sense of the power of the Swiss confederation and its political system.

The guides from the Parliamentary Services provide visitors with tours of the building in German, French, Italian, English and Span-

ish as part of their normal duties. During parliamentary sessions, guests have the choice of commentary in one of the three national languages or English. They are accompanied to the visitors' galleries from where they can follow the parliamentary debates. Visitors who book in advance even have the opportunity to speak with their member of parliament. The "Parliament Visits" team also works during the annual Museum Night and on the Open Day that takes place every year on 1 August, the national holiday. Both events regularly attract large visitor numbers.

This building, over 100 years old, has exuded a renewed splendour since 2008 following a three-year renovation project. It has three additional floors, two underground and one at the very top. Thanks to glass roofing between the cupolas, daylight floods into the building, which is fully accessible to the disabled. Ten professional guides conduct the tours, which are regularly adapted to the requirements of old and young, tourists from Switzerland and abroad, as well as delegations from Swiss and foreign parliaments and government bodies.

MARIE-JOSÉ PORTMANN

Virtual tour: www.parlamentsgebaeude-tour.ch



Around 4,000 visitors during the Museum Night.



A visitor takes the microphone during the Open Day.

ILLUSTRIOUS GUEST LIST

Filippo Lombardi, President of the Council of States, received 25 foreign delegations in 2013. Switzerland's "highest-ranking person", Maya Graf, President of the National Council, welcomed guests including Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, the Swiss winners of the WorldSkills Competition and the Dalai Lama. The spiritual leader of the Tibetan people posed impromptu with a school class. The pupils swore they would never wash their hands touched by His Holiness again... Other prominent guests, who visited the Federal Palace in 2012, were Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commis-

sion, and Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

In 2010, all the members of the Public Relations service were called upon to accompany around 1,000 politicians from all over the world belonging to the International Parliamentary Group. Leading world tourism experts visited the seat of the Swiss government in early 2013.

DEFENDING ONE'S OWN IDEAS

"Oh, how beautiful! Like a church!" exclaimed overwhelmed school pupils during a Federal Palace visit. The trip to Berne is often the highlight of politics courses. Around 750 school classes come to the Federal Palace each year. Around 400 classes visit the parliament and poli-

ticians from their region during the parliamentary sessions. The "Schools to Berne" association arranges for around 30 school classes a year to gain an insight at first hand into the legislative work carried out here under the guidance of former Federal Councillors.

In the run-up to the federal elections, the game "Mein Standpunkt" (My point of view) attracts over 1,000 young people at secondary school level. In the recreated "parliamentary chambers" in Berne's Käfigturm, young people engage in parliamentary and ideological debates chaired by the presidents of both councils.

Further information is available at www.juniorparl.ch/besuche-im-bundeshaus

AHV/IV worldwide

Under certain circumstances, Swiss living abroad can remain insured under the AHV/IV (old-age and survivors' insurance and invalidity insurance) system and thus avoid gaps in insurance cover. However, this does not apply to anyone resident in the EU/EFTA area, and has not done so since 2001. The Swiss Compensation Office (SCO) manages just under 110,000 eligible Swiss pension recipients and around 18,000 contributors abroad.

AHV/IV contributions

Contribution assessments are carried out annually. The SCO sends out the income and asset declaration forms by no later than the beginning of December, and these have to be completed, signed and returned by post by the end of January. If the file is incomplete reminders, for which a fee is charged, are sent out in March and May. If information required for an accurate calculation has still not been provided by June, the insured party is assessed ex officio. The SCO must be in receipt of full contributory payments by 31 December.

The SCO is aware that adherence to deadlines can present problems for those insured abroad because local tax authorities and postal services work to different deadlines in some cases. Solutions to individual problems are sought and the situations in the respective countries of residence are taken into account where legally possible and logistically feasible. However, the SCO is also bound by legal requirements and instructions from the Federal Social Insurance Office. A correspondence address in Switzerland can help in the event of problems with postal delivery. Payments on account can prevent the initiation of exclusion proceedings in the event of a nega-

tive balance on 31 December. (Full details can be found at www.zas.admin.ch > Voluntary insurance.)

Pension benefits

An officially endorsed life certificate is required each year to ensure that pension benefits are paid out correctly. These documents, numbering more than 70,000, are automatically registered before they are individually checked by the SCO. The Swiss representations abroad attest life certificates from the SCO or a Swiss pension fund free of charge, though the attestation may be restricted to just the person himself or herself (without attestation of residence and civil status). If the life certificate has not been returned within 90 days of being sent by the SCO, pension benefits are suspended for security reasons.

The insured party must immediately notify the SCO directly of changes affecting pension benefits. Violations of this mandatory notification requirement may result in prosecution.

The following must be reported:

- Changes of address
- Deaths
- Changes to civil status
- Changes to foster child circumstances
- Interruption or completion of children's education
- Enforcement of prison sentences and other penalties (with invalidity insurance pensions)
- Changes to earnings situation, capacity for work and state of health (with invalidity insurance pensions)

Pension benefits are paid out on the fifth working day of each month. The actual date

may vary due to public holidays or weekends. (Payment dates at www.zas.admin.ch > Swiss Compensation Office > Payment > Payment dates.)

Constant improvement to processes

The SCO puts its resources to the best possible use and improves processes on an ongoing basis. As part of this, cases are freely assigned to employees so that the same person does not always manage the same insured parties. Every enquiry, whether electronic or on paper, is processed according to date of receipt. Clear information about the person and his/her AHV number facilitate the work and reduce processing times. An experienced team works hard to provide an optimal service on a daily basis despite geographical distances and the challenges that these pose.

FLORIAN STEINBACHER, SCO,
HEAD OF VOLUNTARY INSURANCE

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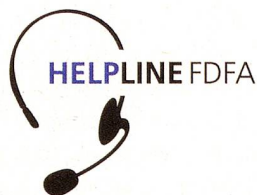
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Online registration for Swiss citizens
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www.fdfa.admin.ch/itineris

Publication

Switzerland – EU: Free movement of persons – Salaries, immigration, AHV/IV... Questions and answers

The brochure provides key information on the importance of the free movement agreement and on issues concerning salaries, employment, business, immigration and social welfare institutions.

The brochure in German, French and Italian can be ordered free of charge (Art. No. 201.600.D/F/I) – BBL, Verkauf Bundespublikationen, CH-3003 Berne, www.bundespublikationen.admin.ch, or downloaded at www.eda.admin.ch/publikationen > Europäische Angelegenheiten (German version)



FEDERAL REFERENDA

Three proposals will be put to the vote on 9 February 2014:

- Federal decree of 20 June 2013 on the financing and expansion of the railway infrastructure (direct counterproposal to the popular initiative "Für den öffentlichen Verkehr" [For public transport])
- Popular initiative of 4 July 2011 "Abtreibungsfinanzierung ist Privatsache – Entlastung der Krankenversicherung durch Streichung der Kosten des Schwangerschaftsabbruchs aus der obligatorischen Grundversicherung" (The funding of abortion is a private matter – relief for health insurance through the removal of abortion costs from mandatory basic insurance)
- Popular initiative of 14 February 2012 "Gegen Masseneinwanderung" (Against mass immigration)

All information on the proposals (voting pamphlet, committees, party statements, electronic voting, etc.) can be found at www.ch.ch/abstimmungen.

Further referendum dates in 2014: 18 May; 28 September; 30 November.

POPULAR INITIATIVES

At the time of going to press, the following new federal popular initiative had been launched (deadline for the collection of signatures in brackets):

- "Radio und Fernsehen – ohne Billag" (Radio and television – without Billag) (12.05.2015)

The list of pending popular initiatives can be found at www.bk.admin.ch > Aktuell > Wahlen und Abstimmungen > Hängige Volksinitiativen.

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