

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 51 (2024)  
**Heft:** 4: The burden on Swiss farmers : they feel powerless - and are speaking out  
  
**Rubrik:** Notes from the Federal Palace

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# The Swiss Guard, a centuries-old community of Swiss Abroad in the Vatican

Did you know the pope has been guarded by young Swiss citizens for more than 500 years? Almost all the 160 Swiss Abroad in the Vatican are connected to the Swiss Guard.

Resplendently clad in a blue, red and yellow uniform, the colours of the Medici family, with head held high, the young men stand for several hours a day before the Domus Sanctae Marthae, to guard the head of the Roman Catholic church. The entire population of Vatican City is about 800 people, 135 of whom serve with the Swiss Guard. But why is it only Swiss citizens guarding the Holy See? What is it that sets the Swiss Guard apart as a community of Swiss Abroad?

## The historical background

The Swiss Guard dates back to the 16th century, when Switzerland's brave soldiers were known throughout Europe. In a time when war and unrest was commonplace in Europe, Swiss mercenaries were very highly thought of and a valuable "export product". Although Switzerland didn't have a centralised military at the time, the foot soldiers knew exactly how to defend their areas from the unwelcome attention of neighbouring ruling houses. Swiss mercenaries were, for example, provided to foreign armies by the powerful Zurlauben family (Zug) from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

That is what made Pope Julius II seek the services of Swiss soldiers in 1505. He made a request to the Swiss Diet for a contingent of Swiss soldiers to protect the Vatican. On 22 January 1506, the first 150 guards entered Rome and received the pope's blessing. That was the day when the Pontifical Swiss Guard was founded, and it has been in charge of guarding the pope and the Papal Palace ever since.

The Pontificia Cohors Helvetica is the only military unit from those days to still be operational. It achieved great fame on 6 May 1527 when Rome was attacked and plundered by 24,000 German, Spanish and Italian mercenaries – known as the Sack of Rome. The Swiss Guard resisted the attackers and gave Pope Clemens VII the space and time to get away. Only 42 of the 189 guards survived. The Swiss Guard saved



Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis at the opening of the Swiss embassy at the Holy See in 2023. Cardinal Pietro Parolin is to his left, between them is Denis Knobel who was Swiss ambassador to the Holy See at the time.

Photo: Keystone

the pope's life. New recruits are still sworn in on 6 May, the anniversary of the Sack of Rome.

## The current duties of the papal guard

Their role has not changed much over the years. Today's guards must be vigilant and protect the pope from new threats, terrorist attack for example. If the Holy See is vacant (sede vacante) the Swiss Guard also assumes responsibility for protecting the College of Cardinals. In addition, they secure the official entrances to Vatican City and perform formal and ceremonial duties. Their representative duties include forming a guard of honour for state visits.

The Swiss Guard's values are one reason why the pope has retained their services over the centuries despite diplomatic challenges in bilateral relations between Switzerland and the Holy See. The soldiers stand out through their respect, discipline, professionalism and high quality. Members of the Swiss Guard are trained in Switzerland

and in Vatican City. Their training includes regular shooting practice, combat sport and learning how to use the halberd.

## A special community of Swiss Abroad

Not everyone can join the Swiss Guard. To be eligible, you must be a practising Catholic, a Swiss citizen, male, single, between 19 and 30 years old, at least 174 cm tall, in good health, the holder of a professional apprenticeship or Matura, have completed basic military training with the Swiss Armed Forces and have a category B driving licence, as well as being prepared to commit to 26 months of service. That makes the Swiss Guard the world's most homogeneous community of Swiss Abroad. There are also 25 other Swiss citizens living in the Vatican besides the 135 guards, mainly comprising the soldiers' family members plus a few members of the clergy. Another distinguishing feature of the Swiss Abroad in Vatican City



An officer in the Swiss Guard on a copper engraving by Francisco Villamena (1613): the guards have hardly changed since then. Photo: Keystone





The Swiss Guards' uniform is a splendid and colourful blue, red and yellow. It is based on Renaissance clothing and especially the frescoes of the painter Raphael. Photo: Keystone

is that anyone who works in or for the Vatican receives Vatican City citizenship for as long as their work lasts. That means the guards quickly gain citizenship in their country of emigration, albeit only for a limited period. Vatican City also has an unusual form of government as the only elective absolute monarchy. The Holy See has observer status in the UN. The Holy See maintains diplomatic relations with over 180 states, over 90 of which have a representation on site. With more than 1.3 billion believers plus a large, global network, the Holy See has political power as large as the territory itself is small.

### Papal Guard as a symbol of Switzerland in the Vatican

Despite this political significance and the existence of the Swiss Guard, it was not until 2021 that the Swiss government decided to open an embassy at the Holy See in Rome. The Holy See, on the other hand, has been represented in Berne by a Nunciature ('papal envoy') since 1920. Due to complicated bilateral relations, not least domestic polit-

ical tension between the Protestant and Catholic camps, it took some time until Switzerland was ready to have its interests represented on Vatican City territory. In 2023, the new Swiss embassy at the Holy See was inaugurated by Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis and Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin in Rome.

The Swiss Guard has existed for five centuries – 518 years to be precise. That makes it the oldest standing army in the world.

Up to the 1990s, bilateral relationships were covered unilaterally via the Nunciature in Berne. In 1991, the Federal Council nominated an ambassador to serve as special envoy and from 2004 designated a plenipoten-

tiary who resided in another state and dealt with the Holy See in multiple accreditation; the most recent residence was in Slovenia. The opening of the Swiss representation at the Holy See in Rome marked a new chapter in Switzerland's bilateral relations, as shown by the regular diplomatic visits. The president of the Swiss Confederation regularly attends the swearing-in ceremony for members of the Swiss Guard on 6 May in the Vatican. The high-ranking Vatican visit also provides an opportunity for official discussions at the highest level. Various popes have also visited Switzerland in the past: John Paul II, for example, went there three times. Pope Francis also visited Geneva in 2018. He attended the World Council of Churches and met with members of the Swiss government during his visit.

The Swiss Guard has been a cornerstone of our bilateral relations for over 500 years. They still open doors for Switzerland in the Vatican and thus contribute to consolidating ties. (FDFA)

[www.schweizergarde.ch](http://www.schweizergarde.ch)

# The Swiss are in every continent, especially Europe

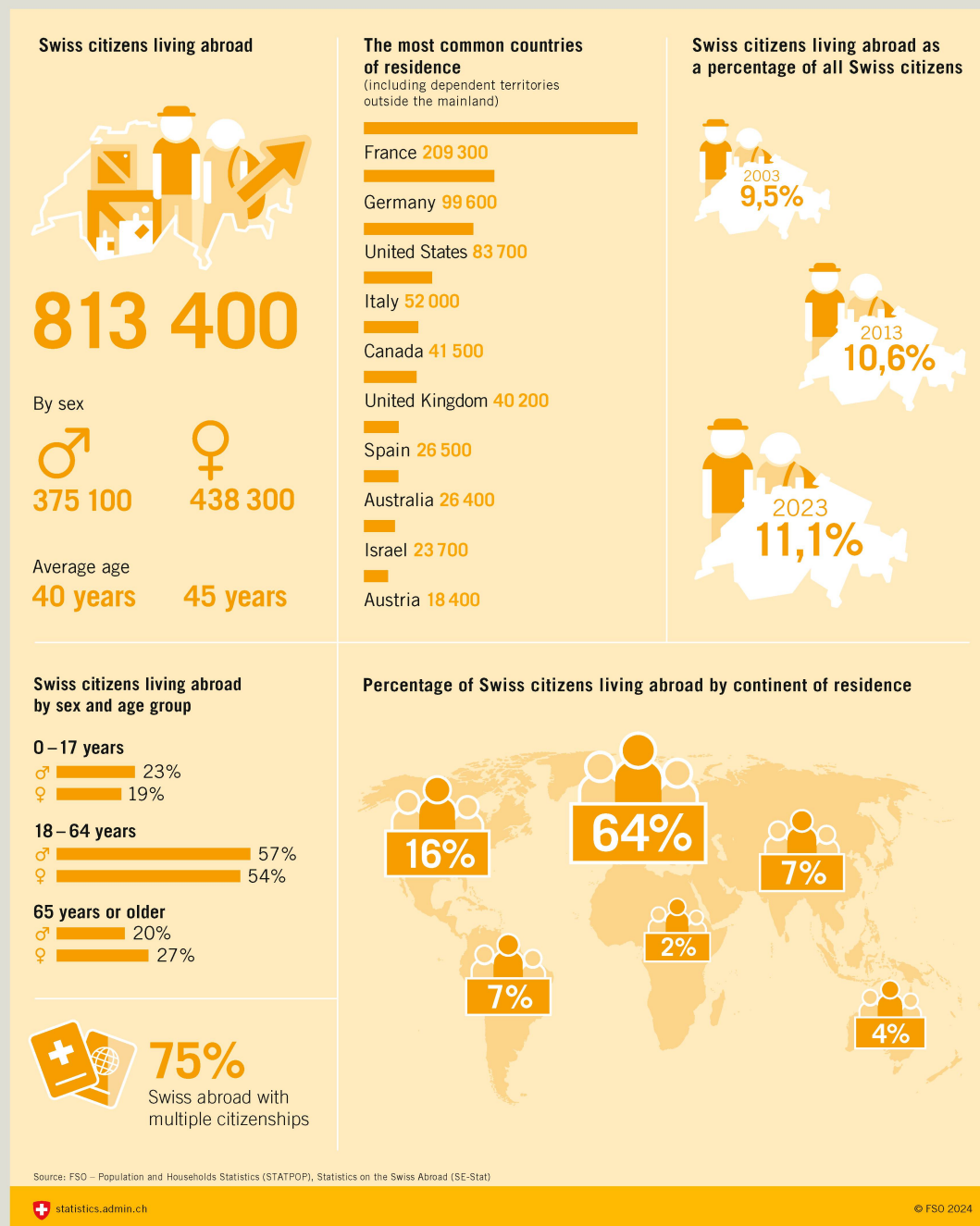
At the end of 2023, there were 813,400 Swiss nationals living abroad. Almost two-thirds of them were living in Europe and over a quarter were in France, but there are also plenty of Swiss on the other continents. The following statistics on the Swiss Abroad were published by the Federal Statistical Office (FSO).

On 31 December 2023, 813,400 Swiss nationals were registered with a competent Swiss representation abroad: 1.7% more than in 2022. Numbers are on the rise in most continents: in Asia (up by 3.1%), in Europe (up by 1.9%), in Oceania (up by 1.2%), in North America (up by 1.0%) and in Latin America and the Caribbean (up by 0.4%). In Africa, the number was lower (down 0.2%).

## Swiss expatriates' favourite countries on each continent

Of the 813,400 Swiss Abroad, 520,700 live in Europe (64%). The largest community of Swiss Abroad is in France (209,300). This community alone represents over one quarter of Swiss Abroad. Around 292,700 Swiss nationals are spread out over the other continents: 16% in North America, 7% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 7% in Asia, 4% in Oceania and 2% in Africa.

The largest community of the Swiss Abroad outside Europe is in North America, in the US to be precise, where 83,700 Swiss people or one in ten Swiss Abroad live. In the Latin America and Caribbean region, Argentina is the country with the most Swiss people (15,100, or 2% of all Swiss Abroad). Of Swiss people in Argentina 95% hold multiple nationalities (as against 75% of all Swiss Abroad). In Asia, Israel has the largest Swiss commu-



nity (23,700), representing 3% of Swiss Abroad. A breakdown of the community in Israel by age shows a very large proportion of young people: 46% of Swiss there are aged under 18 (as against 21% for all Swiss Abroad). In Oceania,

the Swiss community is mainly located in Australia (26,400, or 3% of Swiss Abroad), whereas in Africa they are mostly in South Africa (7,700, or 1% of the total number of Swiss Abroad). (FSO)

Further information:  
[www.revue.link/statistic](http://www.revue.link/statistic)

