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Few have heard of the “Rütli of the Fifth Switzerland”

Brunnen is home to a special patch of land, the Area for the Swiss Abroad, which was inaugurated in 1991 to mark the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation. Today, the site is of symbolic importance to 800,000-plus Swiss Abroad around the world.

LISA STALDER

The Area for the Swiss Abroad in Brunnen (canton of Schwyz) is a spacious and inviting grassy area offering stunning views of Lake Lucerne and the surrounding mountains. It also has symbolic significance. This 5,400-square-metre site situated adjacent to Brunnen's Föhn harbour is a reminder of the 820,000 or so Swiss who currently live abroad, and of the sense of attachment that many expatriates feel to their native country. Some also call it the “Rütli of the Fifth Switzerland” – a fitting title given that Rütli itself, the legendary birthplace of Switzerland, is situated within viewing distance on the opposite side of the lake. Furthermore, the location marks the end point of the “Swiss Path” hiking route, which winds around Lake Uri and features stone markers indicating in chronological order the year in which each canton joined the Confederation. The Area for the Swiss Abroad hosts sporting and cultural events and is occasionally repurposed as a fan zone to screen big football matches. The Swiss Armed Forces use it for parades and flag ceremonies, while a number of Swiss National Day celebrations have also taken place there.

Remembering Switzerland's 700th anniversary

Despite the site's symbolic importance to the Swiss diaspora, surprisingly few people in Switzerland have heard of the Area for the Swiss Abroad. But when the Area for the Swiss Abroad was inaugurated, the circumstances were anything but low-key, explains Alex Hauenstein, who chairs the Area for the Swiss Abroad foundation. “The Area for the Swiss Abroad is one of the few surviving installations that were created to celebrate 700 years of the Swiss Confederation in 1991,” he says.

Let us start at the beginning. The Area for the Swiss Abroad Brunnen foundation was established in 1988 and belongs to the Swiss Confederation, the canton and the district of Schwyz, the municipality of Ingenbohl, Schwyzer Kantonalbank, and the



Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. Thanks to fundraising from Swiss Abroad around the world as well as a sizeable donation by the federal government, the foundation was able to acquire the site on the shores of Lake Lucerne ahead of the 700th-anniversary festivities. The Area for the Swiss Abroad was officially handed over to the public by then President of the Swiss Confederation Jean-Pascal Delamuraz on 4 May 1991. It was one of the main event hubs during the celebrations that year. On 1 August 1991, all seven members of the Swiss government gathered at the site to pay the “Fifth Switzerland” what could be classed as a state visit.

Opposition to “Springboard” project

Despite its spectacular location, the Area for the Swiss Abroad never quite captured the imagination as a venue thereafter. “Many hadn’t even heard of it,” says Hauenstein, who lived and worked for many years in Germany and only learned of the site’s existence in 2009 – just before joining the foundation in 2010 which he has chaired since 2014. He and other members of the foundation board wanted to turn the site into a meaningful

venue and make more people aware of it. They therefore commissioned the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW) to suggest ideas. The foundation eventually decided to hold a competition to come up with an installation that would enhance the site. Called “Springboard”, the winning project envisaged building a pedestrian jetty rising above the lake – a springboard into the big wide world beyond, so to speak. But it was dead in the water before it could get off the ground. “The conservationist lobby scuppered planning permission,” Hauenstein says drily.

Various uses

Despite this setback, it was obvious that the Area for the Swiss Abroad needed to become more of a draw, he adds. People were using the space for sunbathing, picnics and plenty of other activities, but the site rarely hosted major events. And such big gatherings were precisely what was necessary, because the foundation relied on revenue to fund the site’s upkeep. Hauenstein and friends therefore entrusted the Brunnen tourist board with responsibility for hiring out the Area



Boasting a jetty as well as stunning mountain views, the Area for the Swiss Abroad is situated at a prime location in Brunnen (canton of Schwyz). The many Swiss Abroad who come to visit the site range from expats visiting Switzerland for the first time to those reliving past memories.

Photos: provided (1) / Keystone (3)

for the Swiss Abroad. The Spettacolo international street artist festival, the Windweek Brunnen water sports event, and the European Championship in the International Six Metre class (a former Olympic sailing class) are some of the more prominent events hosted in Brunnen since then.

The foundation has also had to turn down certain requests. For example, the relatives of one of its deceased co-founders wanted to bury their loved one's ashes at the lake-side. Hauenstein says he understood the relatives' wishes. "But we don't want the site to become a cemetery."

Swiss artistic talent from around the world

Several years ago, the foundation started using the Area for the Swiss Abroad as a venue for its "Artist in Residence" project. This summer, Edinburgh-based Swiss musician Nathaniel "Nat" Cartier was invited to Brunnen for a five-week residency. This creative sojourn was funded by the foundation, which in turn commissioned Cartier to produce three songs and four paintings for the foundation to use at its discretion. Hauen-

stein says the 24-year-old musician made the most of his stay. Cartier teamed up with Brunnen's yodellers and had a go at playing the Alpine horn and the Swiss accordion. In one of the commissioned songs, he plays the saxophone with Fredy Fuchs joining him on the Alpine horn. At the end of his residency, Cartier was able to showcase his work in front of a sizeable audience at Brunnen lake-side.



Brunnen was a temporary home to musician and "Artist in Residence" Nat Cartier in summer 2024. Photo provided

After residencies in 2016 and 2017, this was the third time that the foundation had hosted a Swiss artist who is based abroad. The next time it plans to invite an artist to Brunnen is summer 2026, which coincides with the 35th anniversary of the Area for the Swiss Abroad. "We certainly want to celebrate this milestone," says Hauenstein.

A place to come home to

Overseeing the anniversary celebrations will also be the foundation chairman's last act of office before stepping down. After 16 years, he believes it is time to pass on the baton to someone younger. And it is now a long time since he was a Swiss Abroad himself anyway. He hopes that the Area for the Swiss Abroad continues to move with the times and adapts to the needs of Swiss Abroad. But the main thing is that the site is preserved, he adds. For many expatriates, the attachment to Switzerland remains as close as ever, as it has been for generations. The Area for the Swiss Abroad means a great deal to them. "It is a place they can always come home to."

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Federal votes

The proposals submitted to the people are set by the Federal Council at least four months prior to the voting date.

The Federal Council decided at its session on 9 October 2024 to submit the following proposals to the people on 9 February 2024:

- Federal Popular Initiative “For a responsible economy within our planet’s limits (Environmental Responsibility Initiative)” (BBI 2024 2488)

All information on proposals submitted to the people (voting pamphlets, committees, recommendations by parliament, the Federal Council etc.) can be found at www.admin.ch/abstimmungen or in the Federal Chancellery VoteInfo app.



Popular initiatives

The following federal popular initiatives had been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for signatures in brackets):

- Federal Popular Initiative “For food that is not genetically modified (Food Protection Initiative)” (3 March 2026)
- Federal Popular Initiative “For a direct democratic and competitive Switzerland – No to passive EU membership (Compass Initiative)” (1 April 2026)

The list of pending popular initiatives is available in French, German and Italian at <https://www.bk.admin.ch/> > Politische Rechte > Volksinitiativen > Hängige Volksinitiativen



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