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The Canton Jura

Ignored by most travellers, but well loved by the Swiss themselves, Canton Jura, in the far northwest corner of the country, is a rural gem, perfect if all you want from your holiday is to walk or cycle your way through gentle, rolling countryside and dark, fragrant forests, with only the smallest of villages and simplest of hotels (or campsites) to provide material comforts.



Farmhouse in the Jura

This little bulge of land has over the centuries seen many changes: The King of Burgundy donated much of the land that today makes up Canton Jura to the Bishop of Basel in 999. The area was a sovereign state within the Holy Roman Empire for more than 800 years. After the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 the Jura had close ties with the Swiss Confederation.

At the Congress of Vienna (1815), the Jura was given to the canton of Bern.

This act caused dissension. The Jura was French-speaking and Roman Catholic, whereas the canton of Bern was mostly German-speaking and Protestant. The people of the Jura region called for independence. After a long struggle, which included some arson attacks by the youth organisation Les Béliers, a constitution was accepted in 1977. In 1978 the split was made official when the Swiss people voted in favour of it, and in 1979 the Jura joined the Swiss Confederation as a full member. However, the southern part of the Jura region, which is also predominantly French-speaking but has a Protestant majority, opted not to join the newly-formed canton, and instead remained part of Bern. This area is now known as Bernese Jura. The word Jura, therefore, may refer either to Canton Jura, or to the combined territory of Canton Jura and Bernese Jura.

Since 1994 the question of the Jura region has again been topical. In 2004 a federal commission has been proposing that the French-speaking southern Jura be reunited with the Canton of Jura, as the language question now seems to be more important than the denominational. Graffiti throughout the region showing the cantonal flag and the pro-

separatist slogan "Jura libre" speak of the turbulent and politically active recent past.



Horses roaming in the Jura



Limestone fountain

Free-roaming horses, majestic fir trees and farmhouses with wide roofs are characteristic features of the Franches-Montagnes, which is a high plateau mainly used for farming and family tourism. Jura also has several small towns with historical monuments, rivers full of fish, orchards, living rural traditions and gastronomy featuring local products.

The Jura - not only a canton

The northwest frontier dividing Switzerland from France is the Jura mountain range - line after line of long, northeast-southwest ridges that trap between them a succession of sausage-shaped lakes. The Jura are nothing like the Alps: much lower to start with (rarely more than 1500m), with none of the majesty but all of the ruggedness. Scrubby rounded hilltops and deep, parallel valleys are dotted by windswept, privately minded villages nursing a weatherbeaten Gallic culture cut off for centuries from both France and Switzerland. The whole Arc Jurassien, which takes in the highlands of the Jura Vaudois, the region's three largest lakes - the Lac de Neuchâtel, Murtensee and Bielersee/Lac de Bienne, which lie clustered together at the foot of the Jura range - Canton Neuchâtel, and Canton Jura in the far northwest, is well off the beaten track of most visitors to Switzerland. Guidebooks and brochures tend to skim on detail, since it doesn't easily fit into the usual Swiss pigeonholes. If you choose to venture out here, you'll find a minimum of tourist hype and few actual sights, but what exists in abundance is virtually untouched nature - and this is why the Swiss know and love the place.

If you don't have a car, the best way to get around is by bike, or even, if your legs can take it, on foot. Tourist offices in the area can direct you onto any number of cycling trails or footpaths that reach all scenic spots.