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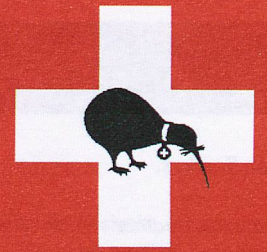
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Life on the Röstigraben



Photo © Tourism Switzerland

Pop quiz: When you think of Biel, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Crime hotspot? Bad weather? Transit train station? Or simply... where's Biel?

Sitting right on the French-German language border (the so-called Röstigraben), Biel/Bienne is Switzerland's largest bilingual city. Since January 1, 2005, the official name has been "Biel/Bienne". Until then, the city was officially named Biel. When you go into a shop, you never know which language the cashier will speak. All street signs and menus are in both languages, and the city even has a bilingual newspaper, the Biel-Bienne.

The city is a melting pot of cultures, with around 30 percent of the population being foreign citizens, unusual for a city of just over 50,000 inhabitants. The city also hosts the region's largest Swiss National Day (August 1st) firework display.

Biel/Bienne is the heart of the Swiss watch-making industry. Trademarks such as Swatch, Omega, Rolex, Bucherer, Candino, Century, Festina, Perrelet, Leroy, are closely associated with the city of Biel. The Swatch Group has its worldwide headquarters in the tree lined "Seevorstadt".

The city has a small and beautiful historic centre, with a gothic church (15th century), impressive guild halls and fountains.

Röstigraben is a humorous term used to refer to

the cultural boundary between German-speaking and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. The first part of the term is derived from the Swiss German name for hashed potatoes, rösti, which originated in the Canton of Bern and is considered typical of Swiss German cuisine. "Graben" has both the concrete and abstract meaning of rift, with the Saane/Sarine river valley in the bilingual Canton of Fribourg separating the linguistic areas.

Geographically the line stretches from the Jura Mountains (Canton of Jura and Bernese Jura) in the north along Lake Biel, Lake Neuchâtel and Lake Murten through the Swiss plateau, then crosses the Swiss Alps and the Rhone valley, separating Lower and Upper Valais, and finally reaches the Italian border between the municipalities of Evolène and Zermatt. Folklorists lay emphasis on the importance of the parallel Brünig-Napf-Reuss line further in the east, separating the historic Alemannic and Burgundian spheres of influence.

By analogy, the term Polentagraben is used to refer to cultural and political differences between Italian-speaking Ticino and German-speaking Switzerland. The canton of Ticino is seen as strongly supportive of traditional social values and having a much tougher stance on immigration. Concerning affairs of foreign policy, the Swiss Italian-speaking population usually votes along with the German Swiss citizens.

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