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Autor: Burkhard, Dimitri
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Switzerland – how well do we know it?

When you arrive in Switzerland, you find yourself to be in one of the safest, healthiest and most beautiful places in the world. But there is so much more to the country than the obvious mountains, banks and cuckoo clocks – and you probably do not need us to tell you that cuckoo clocks were a Bavarian invention, not a Swiss one.

In many ways, Switzerland is a land of contradictions, full of surprises for the uninformed visitor.

Did you know, for example, that this peace loving country is one of the world's leading exporters of weapons?

How would you feel if you were told that a country which allows animals the right to be represented in court is also a place where some people claim to have seen cats and dogs featuring on a traditional Christmas menu?

The Swiss are rightly proud of their direct, devolved democracy, but you may be surprised to discover that in some areas of Switzerland women did not get full voting rights until 1991.

Get ready to be amused, shocked and entertained.

LAW, JUSTICE AND POLITICS in Switzerland

Test your knowledge

1. Are the following true or false?

- (a) You can be fined for not giving up your seat on a bus to an elderly person.
- (b) A fish has a right to sue the angler who caught it.

2. Which of the following is a genuine political party in Switzerland?

- (a) The Anti-Power Point Party
- (b) The "Give Animals the Right to Vote" Party
- (c) The Drinking Milk and Eating Chocolate Party

Answers at end of article

Can you name a single prominent Swiss politician? There is a lot to be said for devolved, regional power as the system is perhaps less likely to attract the kind of person who goes into politics for the wrong reason. As for Swiss laws, quite a few of them come as a surprise to visitors from other countries. Here we bring you a collection of surprising facts on law, justice and politics – Swiss style.

1. You can be prosecuted for keeping a solitary hamster or goldfish.

Swiss animal rights laws insist that social animals must have companions of their own species. Pet suppliers will refuse to sell you a solitary rodent or fish, although you might be able to lease one.

2. Women were only given the right to vote in Switzerland in 1971.

In the referendum held on the matter, only sixty six percent of men voted "yes"!

3. Prostitution is legal.

Workers in the "horizontal sector" are required to pay income tax just like (almost) everyone else.

4. Some Swiss prisons have the walls inside cells painted in pink.

They claim that this colour scheme helps to keep the inmates calm.

5. If you fail your practical driving test three times, they make you visit a psychologist.

Well yes, they do take their psychology very seriously in Switzerland. The good news is that if you decide against a

fourth attempt, the visit to the shrink is not obligatory.

6. In Switzerland, animals have a right to be represented in court.

The prominent animal rights lawyer Antoine Goetschel once acted for a pike. The fisherman who had caught it was charged with causing excessive suffering.

7. All Swiss nationals are designated an official "place of origin".

This assignment of a Heimort to each person goes back to the mid 18th century. It is not necessarily someone's place of birth or where they live, but the place of origin likely says more about where the ancestors came from.

8. Fifty thousand people can demand a referendum on anything.

If you are Swiss and you care passionately about something, all you have to do is get fifty thousand signatures and you can force the government to hold a referendum.

9. Switzerland has four official languages, so all federal documents have to be translated.

While the majority speak Swiss German and French, Italian is also a prominent language. A minority population in the mountainous East speaks Romansh, a language derived from Latin.

Answers to questions at the beginning:

- 1. (a) False. In any case, it is good manners to do so.
- 1. (b) True. Swiss lead the field in animal rights!!!
- 2. (a) This worldwide political movement has quite a few supporters in Switzerland.

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