

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1984)
Heft: 1814

Artikel: Solothurn - city of ambassadors
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688857>

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'Most beautiful baroque jewel in Switzerland'

Solothurn - city of ambassadors

FROM early spring until late autumn, people sit in one of the many colourful sidewalk cafes along the boulevards and plazas in the heart of old Solothurn, enjoying the balmy southern atmosphere.

Droves of men and women from both near and far come to take part in one of the 120 market days per year in the town and for those who prefer a more serious cultural note, there is the Stadttheater or any one of seven different museums.

In a word: in spite of its small size, Solothurn is a city with many countenances, snuggled securely between the Aar and the Jura mountains.

Long before the Romans came, Solothurn was already a fortified settlement inhabited by the Celts – which supports its claim to be the oldest town in Switzerland.

French ambassadors resided here on the banks of the Aar between 1530 and 1792.

In those days, Solothurn (Soleure) was the most beautiful baroque jewel in Switzerland. Showpiece of the old sector of the town is the St Ursus Cathedral, with its small steeple visible from all sides, its imposing facade, and its flight of monumental stairs imbedded in

the old houses adjoining them.

The Church of the Jesuits, a baroque masterpiece, the ancient twelfth-century clock tower, the town fortifications or the impressive landing house on the Aar are only slightly less well known as characteristic symbols of the city.

The distinctive atmosphere of the old sector of the town is provided by the diverse yet harmonious historic buildings; the honey-combed effect of a miniature world all on its own; the staggering proximity of churches,

merchant homes, guildhalls and old inns; the movement of modern commercial life within old town walls; and the cosy local taverns.

Today Solothurn has just over 15,000 inhabitants. The town, however, has its own theatre ensemble, shared as a joint project with neighbouring Biel. That provides an opportunity for young Swiss playwrights to stage their works and transform their ideas into reality. The Swiss Film Exhibition in Solothurn also attracts international attention.



Since 1914, the old Armoury has housed one of Europe's most important collections of uniforms and weapons. The Equipment Room was already used as a museum at the beginning of the 19th century. Olten artist Martin Disteli (1802-44) created lifesized armed figures (background) from the "Diet of Stans".

Yet Solothurn is also a museum town – for those who are primarily interested in culture or just seeking a good way to spend a rainy day. The old Armoury contains one of the best-known collections of uniforms and weapons, providing insight into the way of life functioned in bygone epochs.

The Museum of Art has specialised in Swiss artists of the latter half of the nineteenth century, among others. The Museum of Natural History, the most modern in Switzerland, is housed in a magnificent building designed by Paolo Pisoni. It brings the visitor closer to the natural setting of the Aar Valley and the Jura.

The most valuable item on exhibition in the Treasury of St Ursus is the Hornbacher Sacramentary, dating back to 983.

The Blumenstein Museum, a few hundred yards north of the old town, features French home décor of the eighteenth century, as well as a valuable collection of music boxes.

A small museum on the Gurzelngasse reminds one of the deeds of Polish hero Tadeus Kosciuszko, who spent his last years



St. Ursus Cathedral, built 1762-73 on plans of Gaetano Matteo Pisoni of Ascona. It is a symbol of city, often called the Acropolis of Solothurn.

Turn to Page 12

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Above, the Landing House, former landing place for river traffic, built in 1722
Below, St. George Fountain (1548, restored 1975). St. George on his steed attacking the dragon to save the king's daughter



From Page 11

in Solothurn. Above the Einsiedelei, a ravine north of Solothurn still inhabited by a hermit, there is a new museum displaying Solothurn stone and its uses.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays, local farmers offer their wares in the streets of the old town. Fruit, vegetables or flowers predominate, according to the season. And every second Monday in the month, travelling vendors from all over the country converge on Solothurn's old town quarter.

Practically everything under the sun can be found, from braces and suspenders to rubber boots, from medicinal herbs to sturdy bulls. The market is more than just a commercial opportunity; it is a cultural event, the unbroken thread of custom.

Fun and good cheer reign during carnival time, when the people of Solothurn put an end to evil spirits and Ole Man Winter. An ancient pagan custom, the "Chesslete", rings in the carnival season. In the early, dark hours of morning, whiteclad forms flit through the streets, making full use of bells, horns, drums, cans, or other noise-producing instruments.

That overture is then followed by days of genuine Solothurn cheerfulness and celebration. Masks are worn while promenading through the streets and in local taverns, climaxed by a parade and the burning of the "Böögg", Ole Man Winter.

The townspeople also carry on other ancient traditions: the number "11" for example. In 1481, Solothurn was admitted as the eleventh canton to the Swiss Confederation. Since then, "11" belongs to Solothurn. There are 11 churches in the town and eleven chapels, eleven historical fountains and eleven towers.

The Cathedral of St Ursus has eleven altars and eleven bells, is six-times-eleven-metres long, has a steeple just as high and has its monumental steps arranged in eleven sections of eleven steps each. Old Solothurn is divided into eleven bailiwicks and eleven guilds.

And present-day Solothurn? At the moment, there are eleven banks.

The surroundings of Solothurn are interesting in their own right. From Solothurn's home mountain, Mt Weissenstein (1,291m), one has an unparalleled view across Plateau and right up to the Alpine peaks. The Weissenstein is also an ideal departure point for hikes through the Jura.

In Altreu, there are more than 100 storks living in the oldest and best-known stork colony in Switzerland. Moreover, the Solothurn-Altreu-Biel excursion on the Aar is reputed to be the most beautiful river excursion in Switzerland.



A favourite walk for people of Solothurn is through romantic Verena ravine to the Hermitage of St. Verena in Rüttenen, where a religious brother still lives. St. Martin's Chapel (1663) is pictured with Romanesque influence.

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