

# Romanesque churches in Switzerland

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# Romanesque Churches in Switzerland

At no time has Switzerland been famous for rich art treasures. With very few exceptions, there are neither important medieval cathedrals, nor castles and town halls. There are practically no Renaissance riches. At that epoch, Switzerland was far too poor and torn by interior disorders to produce significant works of art. The same can be said for the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

If we consider the Romanesque churches in Switzerland worthy of special mention, it is less for their size or their embellishments, but more for their picturesque positions in the Swiss mountainside and their expression of humility which corresponds to the deep and simple, almost naïve faith held at the period of erection. This is evident above all in the smaller places of worship. Thus in this essay we deliberately leave aside the few larger Romanesque church buildings such as the Fraumünster in Zurich, the Abbey at Payerne and the Cathedrals in Basle and Schaffhausen and shall concentrate on the modest churches providing such expressive evidence of true veneration.

In the construction of these churches, local stone was used and mostly slates to cover the roofs. The same simplicity is also found inside. There are no marble sculptures or mosaics on gold as one finds in Italy of the same era. One might possibly find some frescoes, but even these are of touching primordiality, even awkwardness.

In order to facilitate a visit to these churches, we have compiled a plan for a circular tour. This should lead the lovers of the arts amongst our readers to the most interesting small Romanesque churches and chapels.

## Western Switzerland

Let us begin the trip in the Jura, coming from Basle. It is well worth making a small detour by the fine route of Les Rangiers to *St. Ursanne*. In this townlet, cradled in the narrow valley of the Doubs, we shall discover a beautiful Romanesque collegiate church of the twelfth century. There are impressive cloisters and the remains of a monastery erected on the tomb of St. Ursicinus. Church and cloisters have recently been renovated with great ability and discretion. The South door alone deserves at least two stars in any art guide. It shows remains of the original bright colouring.

Travelling along the vineyards on the shores of the lakes of Bienne and Neuchâtel, we find a Romanesque church tower at Twann, a fine Romanesque chancel in the collegiate church in Neuchâtel, a fine portal, the only remains of a Cluniasian monastery, at Bevaix. The first wholly preserved Romanesque church, however, we find again at *Grandson*, the old townlet known from the Burgundian Wars. Small though it is, the old monastery church of St. Jean is widely and rightly known for its capitals. Pillars and arches are as elegant as sculptures and ornaments are naïve and

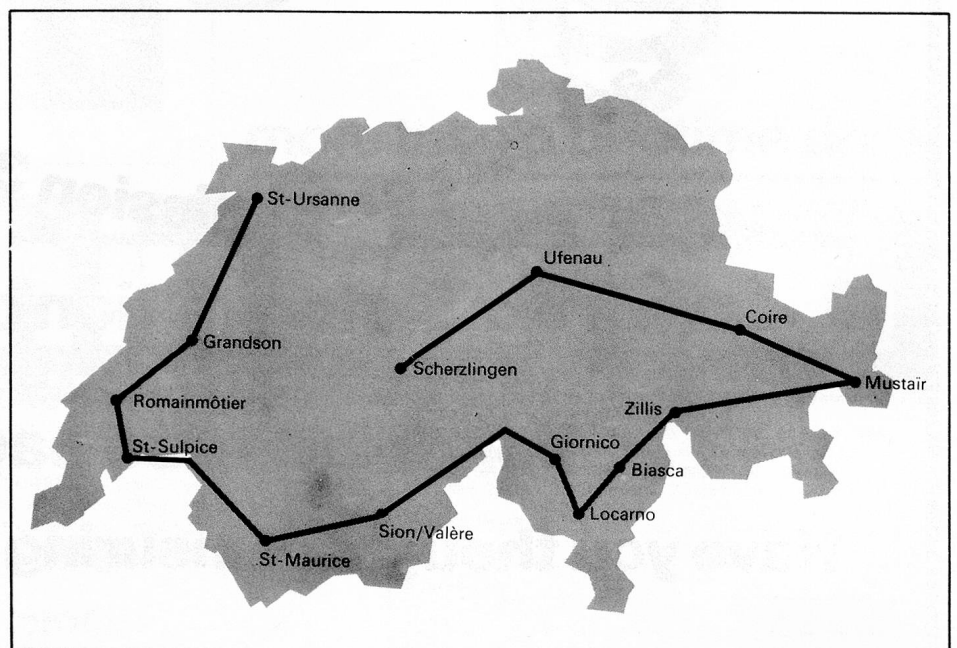
awkward, a combination not without charm. In addition, the whole interior is plunged in a mystic semi-darkness.

In the Vaudois Jura we find quite a few Romanesque churches: Bretonnières, Bavois, Cossonay and others, partly reconstructed at a later date, as well as the most famous of all: *Romainmôtier*, perfectly situated in a wooded valley. The porch and the beautiful chancel pulpit are justifiably famous. In spite of the considerable art treasures within the church, it has not become a museum, but has remained a place of worship in daily life. On the shores of the Lake of Geneva, not far from Lausanne, the aged monastery church of *St. Sulpice* has its reflection on the water. Unfortunately, the nave collapsed in the fifteenth century, so all that remains is the intersection on which a rather squat watchtower was put up, and three semi-circular apses.

Unfortunately the Basilica of *St. Maurice* which must have been one of the largest early church buildings of Switzerland, was moved to a safer place in the seventeenth century, for it was threatened again and again by falling rocks from the stone walls in the narrow valley. A few remains of the walls and the imposing tower is all that remains of the old place of worship. The importance of the old church is shown above all in the church treasures which contain some valuables of European repute, amongst them the gold jug of Charles the Great. It is covered in oriental enamel work and is considered the most precious piece of art of Romanesque times.

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The church of Münstair, a jewel of Romanesque architecture.



Sculptures on the church of San Nicolao at Giornico/Ticino.

Those who want to turn South already at Martigny, will find a specially lovely church tower at Bourg-St. Pierre, on the road to the Great St. Bernard Pass, shortly before the entrance to the motor tunnel. It is one of the oldest Romanesque towers on Swiss territory.

Those of the participants who wish to continue with us on our round tour, will get to *St. Pierre-de-Clages*, in the midst of the classical Rhone Valley with its rich orchards, poplar-lined roads and sunny vineyards on steep mountainsides. The church there is pure in style and has been preserved in its whole originality. The impressive octagonal tower is crowned with a shingle roof.

The capital of the Valais, *Sion*, gives us three Romanesque churches. The impression of their beauty is heightened by the unique skyline of the town with the three hills towering above it. The massive belfry of the Cathedral of *Notre-Dame-du-Glarier* is a classical example of Romanesque architecture. On each floor, the rows of windows increase by yet another opening. The church of *Valeria* dominates the town by its position on a cone-shaped rock. With its enclosing walls and towers it forms the counterpart to Castle *Tourbillon* and looks far more like a fortress than a place of worship. *Valeria* still houses precious church treasures and some rare pieces of furniture from Romanesque times. The third example of Romanesque architecture in *Sion* is the *All Saints' Chapel* at the foot of the *Valeria* hill.

### Southern Switzerland

On the new *Nufenen* Pass road we change over to the Canton of *Ticino*, particularly rich in Romanesque churches. Already in the first village, *Airolo*, we find a beautiful belfry from the twelfth century. At that time, the

*Ticino* depended on the Bishopric of *Milan*, which developed great activities in what is Southern Switzerland today.

Shortly after *Quinto* we reach *Prato* whose church of *St. George* also boasts a magnificent belfry. A little further down the valley, at *Chiggiogna*, we find one of the earliest churches of the *Ticino*, which has been preserved almost untouched throughout the centuries.

The medieval settlement of *Giornico* presents us with one of the highlights of our journey. The church of *San Nicolao* is probably the most classical example of a small Romanesque place of worship. Built on a green meadow between tall mountainsides, this church enchants us by its simplicity and its noble proportions which makes us overlook the small size. Everything is simple and original, but full of purity. The crypt below the elevated chancel is particularly impressive. An expert once said that *San Nicolao* corresponded to a petrified Gregorian chorus.

In *Biasca* we find a further example of untouched Romanesque architecture in the church of *St. Peter*. The small building on a promontory looks like climbing up the slope. In the interior, several stairways gradually lead to the chancel.

Now we have arrived at the southernmost corner of the *Ticino* valley. Romanesque churches, or at least their towers, have been preserved on the right and left banks of the river, amongst others at *Osogna*, *Lodrino* and *Cresciano*. *Arbedo*, remembered from History by its bloody battle between the Confederates and the Milanese in 1422, deserves a visit on account of the church of *San Paolo*, known also as *chiesa rossa*. This Lombardian structure was renovated most cleverly in 1900 – rather a

rarity – and presents itself today completely in its original form.

In the capital of the *Ticino*, *Bellinzona*, we must visit the beautiful *Basilica San Biagio* which used to belong to the site of the *Castello grande*. As a Romanesque church, it is of rather generous proportions. Its beautiful arches and the rectangular chancel give a hint of the Gothic spirit for all their Romanesque forms.

The former parish church of *San Vittore* in *Locarno* has a magnificent Lombardian façade. The three naves with their semi-circular apses, the elevated chancel and the dusky crypt are most impressive. *San Vittore* was erected on the foundation walls of a Roman temple. At the moment, comprehensive research is being made into its origins. On this occasion, significant remains of frescoes of the twelfth century were found. The beautiful belfry dates from a later period but matches the rest of the building extremely well. It has been established on many occasions that the Swiss mountain landscape forms an impressive background for Romanesque church buildings. Here in *Locarno* we realise that its subtropical vegetation in hotel and residence gardens also makes an excellent setting.

To reach our next stage, the *Grisons*, we have two possibilities. One of them is the *San Bernardino* route. *Mesocco*, the main place of the valley, is overlooked by the imposing ruins of a castle and a Romanesque church whose remains give a good impression of its original beauty. At the foot of the castle approaches, there is a second Romanesque church which has survived untouched by the passage of centuries. The other possibility is the *Blenio* Valley, which enables us to visit *San Martino* at *Malvaglia* with its fine belfry, probably





*The charming small church on the Isle of Ufenau near Zurich.*

one of the highest of that period, as well as the uniquely situated church of *Negrentino*. In spite of the last climb on foot in order to reach the church, we find it fascinating. The building itself is extremely simple and fits most aptly into the beautiful scenery. The interior contains superb frescoes which have a Byzantine touch, and this in the midst of the Swiss mountainside! Going up to the Lukmanier Pass we proceed past the proud Romanesque church tower of *Olivone*.

### The Grisons

If one has sufficient time at one's disposal, one should travel right up to Sedrun with its artistic Romanesque belfry which, as is usual with Italian churches, stands apart. In the picturesque *Domleschg* rich in castles, we find well-preserved Romanesque chapels at Dusch, Paspels and Cazis. If one is somewhat in a hurry, one will travel straight to Thusis and from there through the wild *Via Mala Gorge*. At its end where the valley widens, we reach one of the highlights of our journey, the church of St. Martin at *Zillis*. This place of worship has kept a unique Romanesque adornment: a wooden ceiling with 163 squares of which only 13 have been renewed. The rarity of this treasure is heightened by the isolated position of *Zillis* between two ravines.

Back at Thusis, we take the way back to the Engadine. High above the *Albula Gorge*, we must not miss the ancient church of St. Peter's at *Mistail*. Its position half-way between the deep and narrow valley and the sky endows it with something majestic in spite of its smallness. Its outline corresponds completely to the first Christian churches of the Orient. St. Peter's belongs to the very oldest churches in the Swiss mountains. In the Engadine, we again

find some of the more important monuments of the Romanesque period, above all the church San Gian near *Celerina*, beautifully situated on a small hill and the midst of the larch woods which change colour to a deep gold every autumn. The tall spire is partly in ruins due to lightning which struck it about 300 years ago. The former parish churches of Pontresina and Samedan are equally worth seeing; both are still used today for funeral services.

We now make a short excursion into the idyllic small Fex Valley where, at Crasta, we find a veritable small jewel of a Romanesque chapel. A further trip leads us to the Puschlav where, at Poschiavo, the church of St. Victor still has its magnificent original tower of the twelfth century. We go on and up to the small church of San Rumedi high above the blue lake of La Prese, one of the most impressive Romanesque churches in the centre of a superb circle of peaks.

The last stage in our journey in the Grisons takes us to Santa Maria in the Münstertal. The group of Romanesque buildings of the Benedictine monastery founded by none less than Charles the Great, is something unique. Anyone interested in Romanesque Switzerland should visit Santa Maria, even if it is in the most remote corner of the country. It is thanks to its isolated position that the whole complex has remained pure and untouched. The church dates back to the eighth century, and is therefore rather pre-Romanesque. Its interior is completely painted. The three apses, its frescoes, the statue of its founder, the



*The pre-Romanesque church of St. Peter, at Mistail in the Grisons.*

chapels, the two cloisters of the eleventh century and the old refectory are truly unique.

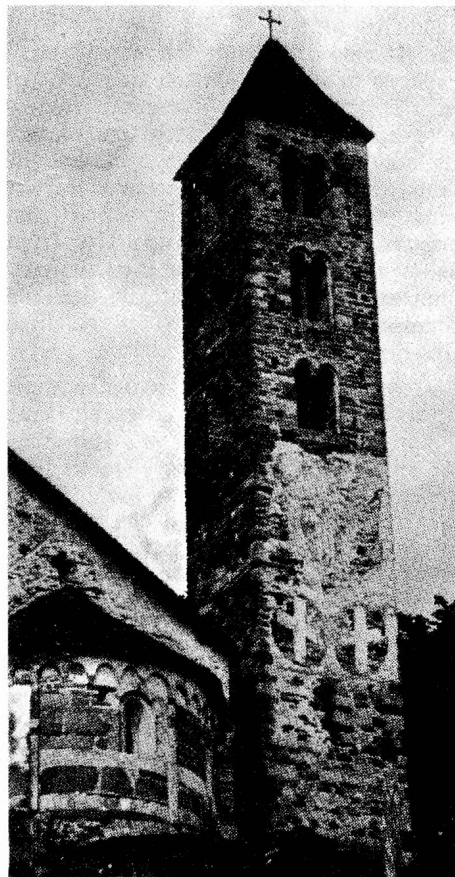
On our way back from this remote valley of Switzerland we make a short break in Chur. The cathedral of this old town, rising on the ledge of a hill above the picturesque roofs and pinnacles, is one of the most imposing cathedrals of the late Romanesque period. The chancel is elevated considerably and stands at a slight angle to the rest of the church. This makes the perspectives even more interesting. The main nave is unusually wide which gives the impression of squareness characteristic of the first Christian churches. This as well as the irregularities in the construction makes this cathedral resemble the small mountain churches we visited earlier.

Coming from the Grisons, we travel along the shores of the Lake of Zurich, and soon we see the small isle of *Ufenau*. It pays to sail across, for there we find one of the most pleasing Romanesque churches of all, as well as the chapel of the same origin.

Having crossed the *Brünig Pass*, we get to the Lake of Brienz where we find several small churches whose foundation walls go back to Romanesque times. In the neighbourhood of Spiez and Thun, there are several Romanesque churches mostly intact. The four of them, at *Spiez*, *Einigen*, *Scherzligen* and *Amsoldingen*, are simple buildings with no special embellishments, but of pure style and perfect proportions. In addition, they blend beautifully into the landscape and thus have a more peaceful atmosphere than many a large place of worship.

North of Berne we reach our last objective on the hillsides of the *Frienisberg*: a small church in the village of the same name. It dates back to the twelfth century when it was part of a monastery. From there, one enjoys a fine view of the Jura mountain ridges. That is where we began our journey and where we end it.

*Marcel Ney*



*San Carlo di Negrentino*