



ZURICH'S SURPRISING NEW GROOVE

This is not the [Switzerland](#) you think you know. The capital city has street feasts in shipping containers, music events in former factories and the first museum for digital art. Here are the best things to do in [Zürich](#)

words by STEVE KING

FOR A WHILE in the early 1990s there was a huge sign on the approach to the central railway station that announced your arrival into ZUREICH. Even if your German was as limited as mine, and even if you weren't paying a great deal of attention, you registered the oddity. The sign wasn't in the right place - it wasn't on a platform, but on the side of a run-down old building. It wasn't the right size either. Surely too big. And the Swiss railways' SBB arrow logo - that looked a bit off as well. But sooner or later you figured it out. The sign looked weird because it was weird. It wasn't a mistake but a fake. It had been painted by art-school-educated squatters in imitation of the official SBB font and colours. And it wasn't telling you where you were but what you were. *Zu reich*. Too rich.

The squatters and their sign are long gone. But during my most recent trip here, it occurred to me that this had been more than just a smarter-than-average student prank. Fun but faintly unsettling. Madcap but also measured, like a ransom note written in perfect copperplate.



Credit: Matthew Buck

A café in district 4, Zürich

Zürich is a beautiful city, though temperamentally too demure, too self-effacing to be a fall-by-the-sword heartbreaker. True, the lakeside setting is lovely. And there's an austere elegance to the well-preserved medieval buildings of the Old Town on both sides of the Limmat river. Here and there are some exquisite flourishes. The hypodermic spike of the Grossmünster church's third spire, for instance, tipped in scarlet, never fails to provoke in me a strange shiver of delight - the involuntary tensing-up of the left arm of someone who still hasn't quite got over his childish aversion to needles.



Credit: Matthew Buck

Yet such moments of architectural drama are rare. On the whole the city gives few outward clues to its depths and oddities. You wouldn't know by looking that this was ever a hotbed of dissent, an incubator of revolution, a cauldron of learned mischief. But so it has been, in radical ways, over the past thousand years or more. Above all, of course, there was the small matter of the Protestant Reformation. It was in the Grossmünster that Huldrych Zwingli initiated an upheaval that would alter the course of Swiss history and world religion. It's customary to comment on the severity of the church's interiors, before going on to admire its ravishing stained-glass windows, the most extraordinary of which, fashioned by artist Sigmar Polke from thinly sliced agate, were added in 2009. But the whole thing seems entirely right to me. The solemnity and the sublimity are of a piece. 'As a writer, one is adventurer enough internally,' said Thomas Mann, who is buried (standing up) in Zürich. 'Externally, he should dress well, damn it, and behave like a respectable person!' Just, if you're a writer in Zürich,

make sure your tailor throws a startlingly vivid silk lining into your well-cut but otherwise sober grey suit.



Credit: Matthew Buck

You wouldn't know by looking, either, that so many branches of the modern-art tree grew out of a single unremarkable building on a narrow cobbled street just around the corner from the Grossmünster. But here it was, at the Cabaret Voltaire, that the Dada art movement was born a century ago in the middle of World War I. It was a joyous, if noisy and chaotic, occasion. The paediatrician was Hugo Ball, a German avant-garde theatre director; the midwife was Emmy Hennings, his lover and a nightclub singer; the nurses wore uniforms made of painted cardboard, recited nonsense poetry and banged on pots and pans. Far from offering privacy, the delivery room included a small stage and space for an audience of 40 or 50 expatriate artists, writers, journalists, actors, intellectuals, profiteers, spies and professional revolutionaries who had fled to neutral Switzerland.



Credit: Matthew Buck

Nordbrücke bar

The Cabaret Voltaire has changed considerably since then - largely for the better, I'd say. These days it maintains not only its commitment to its Dada heritage and an exciting contemporary-art programme but also a remarkably well-stocked absinthe bar. I dropped in to try out my 'Zürich: City of Contradictions' theory on its laconic young director, Adrian Notz. I started by mentioning the murals by Augusto Giacometti, as lush and velvety and saturated in colour as a rose garden in full bloom, which adorn the stone walls and vaulted ceilings of the central police station. How much more mixed can your civic messages get?

'Ye-e-e-e-s,' Adrian said. 'Zürich is indeed a dense combination of contradictions. Banks and Dada, and barefoot farmers less than an hour away.'

Did I know, he asked, anything about the guildhalls? These were - still are - the headquarters of the two dozen or so guilds that seized power from the abbey in the 14th century and transformed the way the city was governed.

Although officially guilds no longer have anything to do with politics, there are those who believe their members are still pulling the strings. 'The guildhalls are nothing much to look at from outside,' Adrian said. 'But they're palaces inside. Clandestine, mysterious. A symbol for how Zürich functions. You can't participate unless you're invited.'



Credit: Matthew Buck

The medieval Old Town

Adrian introduced me to the head of one of the guilds. Philippe Oswald Welti, the cheerful Zunftmeister of the Waag guild, told me that, secretive as they may appear, the guildhalls are partly open to the public (which is true - their restaurants are very popular). Moreover, the annual Sechseläuten procession in the spring, when members of the guilds march through the city in their traditional finery before setting fire to the effigy of a snowman, is as keenly anticipated and well attended by locals as the more internationally familiar Street Parade, a house and techno party featuring lovemobiles, DJs and thousands of scantily clad ravers, which happens in the summer (also true).

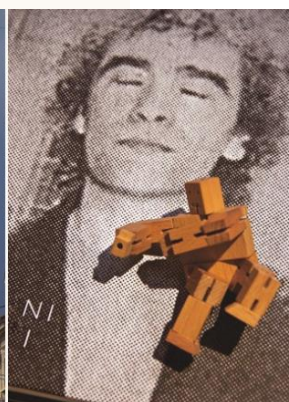


Seeking a change of scene after my brush with the Zürich establishment, I headed upriver into the north-western suburbs beyond the central station. Districts 4 and 5 are former industrial and working-class quarters with a large immigrant population. Over the past decade they have been transformed into something of a bohemian playground, one that, in pockets at least, retains an agreeably louche, Amsterdam-esque, anything-goes atmosphere. Some locals complain that District 5, where the process began, has already gone too far in the direction of gentrification. That wasn't my impression. It's a vibrant mixed-use neighbourhood, by turns surprisingly ugly and oddly delightful, light years away from the sedate gentility of the Old Town. The funky cafés, boutiques and galleries around Frau Gerolds Garten have attracted a good deal of attention, but for me the new spirit of the place is best exemplified by the staggering Toni-Areal complex, a former milk factory that now houses, under one enormous roof, the various departments of the city's art schools. Its brutalist concrete exterior, pillars and looping flyovers might have sprung from the imagination of JG Ballard. Inside, it's spotless, airy, ruthlessly functional and just shy of chic, echoing with the chatter of young creatives.



Credit: Matthew Buck

On my last morning in Zürich the sunlight had transformed the lake into molten silver. The medieval bells of the city's five main churches were ringing, all at once, neither simultaneously nor in turn but in a glorious confusion of overlapping chimes and peals that seemed to fill the air like a physical presence, a shimmering, juddering sonic haze. I couldn't decide whether it sounded like the music of the spheres or pure, unbridled anarchy. It brought to mind an entry in artist Hans Arp's diaries, describing an evening in 1916 when he and Augusto Giacometti decided to amuse themselves by visiting the restaurants along Limmatquai. They threw open the doors of each establishment in turn and yelled 'Vive Dada!' in the faces of astonished patrons, lingering for a moment or two afterwards to savour the clatter of fallen cutlery and overturned glasses.



A GUIDE TO ZÜRICH

The coolest hotels in Zürich

Marktgasse Hotel

The recently opened Marktgasse Hotel occupies two 15th-century buildings in the Old Town. There's been an inn or hostelry on the site for more than 600 years, but its current incarnation feels as fresh as a daisy. It's got a fantastic bar (dark but not forbidding) and restaurant (Swiss but not traditional), plus a New York-style deli (buzzy and fun, and hugely popular with locals as well as guests). The rooms are spare, minimalist and monochrome, but with elegant accents and thoughtfully preserved heritage features. Some are tiny, many have irregular shapes and most have sloping floors, all of which are unavoidable in a building of this vintage - and part of its considerable charm. The combination of location and a keen but understated design sensibility makes it unique.

Address: Marktgasse Hotel, Marktgasse 17, CH-8001, Zürich, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 44 266 1010

Website: marktgassehôtel.ch

Price: Doubles from about £215



Credit: Matthew Buck

Monochrome styling at the Marktgasse Hotel

Baur au Lac

The Baur au Lac, overlooking the lake, is the grandest of the old palace hotels. Most of the rooms have been given contemporary twists - oversized photographs and original art works, swirly carpets and padded leather headboards for the beds - though there are still a few classic suites left, wonderfully chintzy and stripy, and largely unmodernised. The lobby bar and the light-flooded Pavillon restaurant are glorious; the brand-new restaurant, Rive Gauche, just off the main bar, is contemporary and cool, with statement lighting and banquettes in a palette of lurid acid-greens. At the weekend the gilded youth of the city show off their limited-edition Lamborghinis and Ferraris at the intersection immediately outside, revving their engines before taking off for what must be a rather unsatisfyingly slow, stop-start spin around the lake. Posting photographs of these cars has become an internet sensation.

Address: Baur au Lac, Talstrasse 1, 8001 Zürich, Switzerland

Telephone: +41 44 220 5030

Website: bauraulac.ch

Price: Doubles from about £700



Credit: Matthew Buck

m Viadukt market hall

Where to eat in Zürich

There's something of an obsession in Zürich with urban gardens and responsibly sourced ingredients. In this respect, **THE ARTISAN** and the **WIRTSCHAFT ZIEGELHÜTTE** are exemplary, though a bit of a hike to get to. Closer to the middle of town are **BANK**, **MAISON MANESSE** and both **KÜCHE & BAR** and **DELISH** deli at the Marktgasse Hotel. **HAUS HILTL** deserves a special mention. It's Europe's oldest vegetarian restaurant, founded in 1898, and remains a Zürich phenomenon, always packed, always brilliant. In addition to the original premises in Sihlstrasse, it now has various smaller outposts, including one in the old central post office just off Europaallee, which retains lots of amusing and imposing features. Certain old stalwarts are not to be missed, such as the splendid **KRONENHALLE**, with original Picassos, and, just around the corner, the humble **STERNEN GRILL**, where you can stuff your face with your bare hands. The unrepentantly fancy **PAVILLON** at

the Baur au Lac is, on a sunny day, one of the most radiant spots in the city. At **SALTZ**, in the fairy-tale Dolder Grand hotel, there's tension in the air, literally. Swiss artist Rolf Sachs's elaborate installation involves an intricate network of climbers' ropes pulled thrummingly taut by a great big chunk of Alpine rock that hangs in the middle of the room.

The best bars in Zürich

Serious cocktail lovers should alight at the **OLD CROW**, **TALES** and **BALTHO**, or indeed at all three, one after the other - though good luck walking home afterwards. 'Grungy' might be a stretch, but certainly there's a pleasing element of texture to the absinthe-soaked **CABARET VOLTAIRE**, **NORDBRÜCKE**, **DANTE** and the irreverent **SCHICKERIA** - slogan: 'Bad Wine, Overpriced Cocktails and Boring DJs'. The fancy hotel bars are not to be sneered at either - those at the **BAUR AU LAC**, **PARK HYATT** and **WIDDER** are top-notch. The latter has long been a sort of finishing school for Zürich's best mixologists. The bar at the **KRONENHALLE** is as good as its celebrated restaurant; the nearby **CAFÉ ODEON**, however, is rather faded now since the days when it too was frequented by Lenin, Joyce, Einstein and Mata Hari.

Where to shop in Zürich



Credit: Matthew Buck

Lighting at The Chair furniture shop

The Bahnhofstrasse is the Bond Street of the city. But the real gems are elsewhere. The narrow pedestrianised streets of the Old Town on both sides of the Limmat are still blessedly full of independent shops and galleries selling paintings, prints, antiques, rare books, toys, musical instruments and cutlery (the Swiss, of course, have form with knives). Leading the regeneration in District 5 was **FRAU GEROLDS GARTEN**, a restaurant that grew into a cluster of artists' studios, bars, cafés and boutiques. Close by is **IM VIADUKT**, a mini-Notting Hill under old railway arches. **EUROPAALLEE**, on the other side of the tracks in District 4, used to be a freight terminal. It's currently a work in progress, on a fairly grand scale, with space for residential, retail and corporate tenants. Quite how it will turn out is difficult to say, although there are some promising signs, such as **VEG AND THE CITY**, which meets the potting and planting needs of the city's booming population of urban gardeners. Then there's chocolate. **CONFISERIE SPRÜNGLI** is celebrated for its Luxemburgerli macarons. The main branch on Bahnhofstrasse is popular with power-breakfasting bankers. There are fewer bankers behind the quaint old shopfront of **H SCHWARZENBACH**; instead, there's lots of coffee, tea, dried fruit, herbs, oils, spices and honey. And then there's gold. Buy - or, if necessary, stash - your bars, bullion, ingots and Krugerrands at Degussa Goldhandel.

Where to swim in Zürich

Zürich has one lake, two rivers, 18 lidos and 1,200 fresh-water fountains. The river- and lakeside beaches, with their wooden terraces and neat squares of lawn, may be the closest thing the city has to a social melting pot. They're where everyone goes, when the weather is good, to swim, sunbathe, picnic, preen or play beach volleyball. By night, many of these spots turn into badi-bars, or outdoor clubs. **RIMINI BAR** has pizzas and floor cushions; **PUMPSTATION** has, as its name would suggest, a charming old pump station; **SEEBAD ENGE** has fine lake views and stays open all year round.

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Riverside in Zürich

Credit: Matthew Buck