

Bern: Bears and More in Switzerland's Medieval Capital City



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- [Stephanie Wilkins](#)

 The Zytglogge in Bern, Switzerland - Stephanie Wilkins Photography
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Switzerland's capital city of Bern, home to gothic cathedrals, medieval cobblestone streets and live bears, takes visitors back in time to the Middle Ages.

Visiting Bern feels like being transported back in time to the Middle Ages. Rising above a scenic bend in the River Aare, Switzerland's capital city is a picturesque mix of cobble streets and medieval buildings.

Founded in the late 12th century by Duke Berthold V, Bern has a long and storied history with bears. According to legend, the town was named after the German word for bear (bär), reportedly the first animal killed during the duke's first hunt. To this day, the image of a bear features prominently in the city's coat of arms.

After being destroyed by fire, the town's buildings were rebuilt in stone in the early 1400s. Many of Bern's main sights are centered around the medieval Old Town section and are easy to explore on foot. From gothic cathedrals to live bears, Bern offers something for everyone.

Old Town Bern (Altstadt)

Historic Old Town Bern has officially been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Made up of cobblestone streets, much of the compact Altstadt area is restricted to pedestrian foot traffic and public transportation, allowing visitors to leisurely stroll through the town and take in the sights.

The main artery through Old Town is made up of three adjoining streets - Marktgasse, Kramgasse and Gerechtigkeitsgasse. Each of these cobble streets is lined with arcaded shops set into historic buildings with ornate façades. Gilt statues and Renaissance fountains, depicting everything from ogres to bears wearing armor to Lady Justice, dot the streets.

On Kramgasse, visitors will find the Einsteinhaus, a museum housed in the apartment where the great physicist Albert Einstein lived in the early 1900s when he began developing his theory of relativity. Just off Marktgasse is the Bundeshaus, the Swiss parliament building, with its festive fountains and ornately decorated interior. Visitors can listen to public debates when parliament is in session.

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The Zytglogge

Bern's main landmark is the Zytglogge, also known as the Zeitglockenturm, located on Marktgasse. This imposing clock tower once served as the city's ancient western gate and later as a prison. The main feature of the tower is an intricate astronomical clock, depicting the signs of the zodiac and displaying the current time. At four minutes before the hour, the clock begins playing a series of chimes to mark the new hour. Visitors gather in the streets below with necks craned to watch a procession of mechanical figures on the clock's east face, as a golden figure strikes a bell in the clock tower. Guided tours are available.

Münster St. Vinzenz

One block off the main thoroughfare on Münsterergasse is Bern's gothic cathedral, Münster St. Vinzenz. The tallest church in Switzerland, the cathedral boasts a spire that is exactly 100 meters high. For a small entrance fee, visitors can climb the stone steps of the spire to catch a breathtaking panoramic view of Bern, the River Aare and the surrounding Swiss countryside.

The interior of the cathedral is made up of soaring stone ceilings and massive, highly detailed stained glass windows. Visitors should be sure not to miss the striking tympanum adorning the cathedral's main entrance. The main doors are surrounded by painted statues depicting the Last Judgment, with the damned on one side and the saved on the other.

Bern's Bears

Live brown bears have been kept in pits in Bern for nearly five centuries. The current Bärengraben (bear pits) are located a short walk from the east end of Old Town over the Nydeggbrücke, a bridge offering picturesque views of Altstadt and the River Aare. The bears now reside in a small park created on the land sloping down to the river. Visitors can view the bears from multiple observation platforms, or simply from the bridge itself.

Bern's connection with the bear is unmistakable. Aside from the live bears in the pits, a number of the city's statues and fountains depict bears and visitors will find bears decorating flags and even church ceilings throughout town. Any number of bear-themed gifts and trinkets are available in the town's souvenir shops.

Bern Rose Garden

Located up a steep stone path just above the bear pits, Bern's Rose Garden (Rosengarten) should not be missed. The garden is home to more than 200 varieties of perfectly maintained roses. Perhaps more impressive than the flowers, however, is the view from the garden. From the garden walls visitors are treated to an unobstructed view of Old Town Bern and the River Aare.

Despite its role as the national capital, Bern has an inviting, small-town feel. The historic buildings and old-world charm make it a must-see destination for anyone visiting Switzerland.

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 Stephanie Wilkins, travel writer and photographer, Stephanie Wilkins Photography

[Stephanie Wilkins](#) -

Stephanie is a freelance writer and photographer from Brooklyn, NY, focusing on international travel.

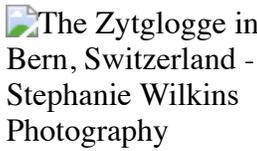


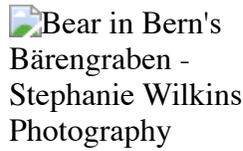
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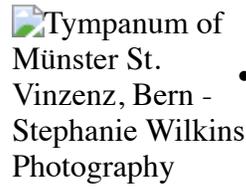


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