

Mittelland



The flat Swiss 'middle ground' embodies its nation's commitment to political compromise and linguistic plurality. Despite being home to the capital, it's not the most cosmopolitan or the most power-obsessed place in the country. Though it's largely German-speaking – with an infamously slow, lilting dialect – it retains pockets where French has equal footing.

This situation arises from history. Once an important city-state during the medieval era, Bern lost territory in the 1798 French invasion and was an unthreatening choice in establishing a capital in 1848. Geneva was too French, Zürich too German, Bern just right.

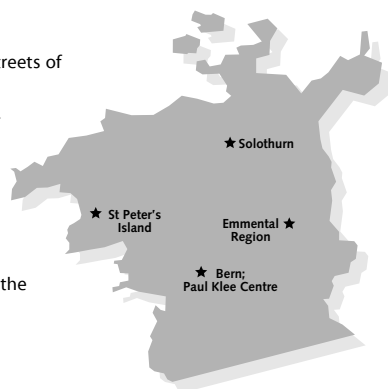
Yet, while Bern's political success has lain in being middling, its aesthetic qualities are anything but. This might be one of the most understated capitals on the planet, but it's one of the most appealing. Its 15th-century old town has an idyllic appearance, with terraced stone buildings, covered arcades, clock towers, church spires and cobbled streets. Add its compact space, laid-back pace and small-town friendliness, and its charm becomes irresistible.

Around Bern the countryside is just as benignly beautiful, with small villages and hundreds of farms dotted across rolling green hills. If the Mittelland can't claim to be the most energetic place in Switzerland, it can boast of being one of the most fertile. Fittingly, one of the products you can see being manufactured here is holey Emmental cheese, which on the international market does the trick as 'Swiss'.

Finally, along the eastern border of the region you approach Switzerland's so-called Röstigraben, or German–French linguistic divide. Here, the baroque town of Solothurn has the distinct atmosphere of a French village despite being formally German-speaking.

HIGHLIGHTS

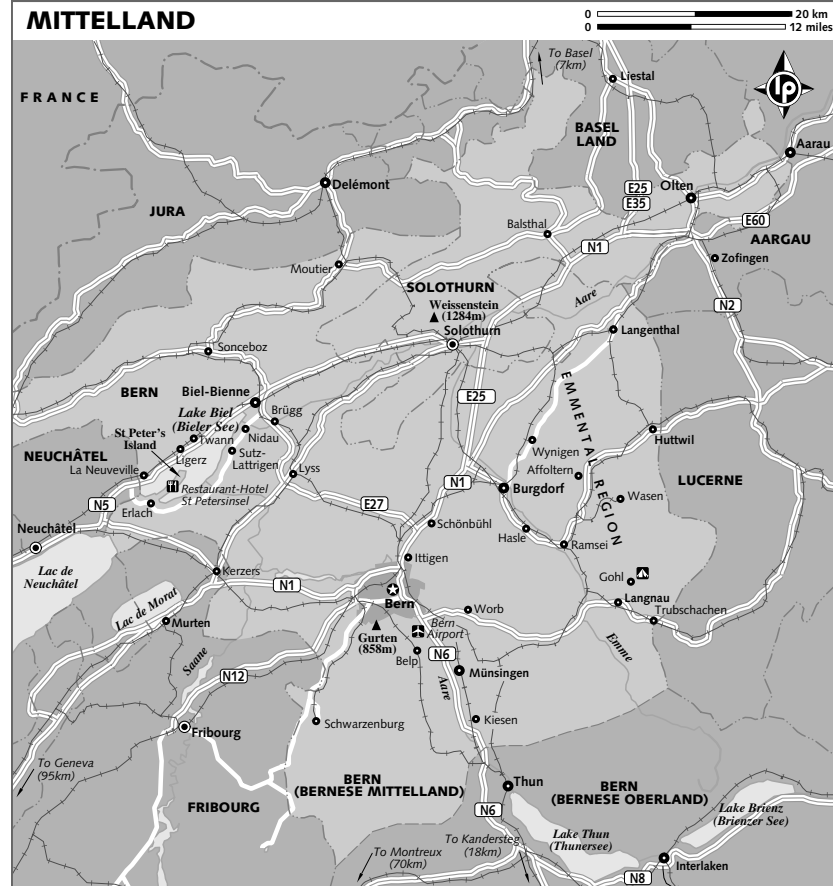
- Wandering through the fairy-tale cobbled streets of Bern's **old town** (p181)
- Surfing the delights of the stunningly wave-shaped **Paul Klee Centre** (p183)
- Exploring **Solothurn** (p192), with its baroque cathedral and waterside views
- Sipping wine onboard a cruise to **St Peter's Island** (p191) from Biel-Bienne
- Learning how Swiss cheese gets its holes in the **Emmental Region** (p191)



■ POPULATION: 369,211

■ AREA: 842 SQ KM

■ LANGUAGES: GERMAN, FRENCH



Orientation & Information

Switzerland's Mittelland (Schweizer Mittelland/Le Plateau Central) is a flat plain between the Alps and the Jura, comprising mainly the northern part of canton Bern (Bernese Mittelland/Le Plateau Bernois) and the canton of Solothurn (Soleure).

The regional tourist office is **Schweizer Mittelland Tourismus** (☎ 0313 28 12 28; www.smit.ch in German), but the **Bern tourist office** (☎ 031 328 12 12) dispenses region-wide information to personal callers.

Getting There & Around

Bern has a small airport, while road and rail links into the region are excellent in every direction. Some train services within

the region are operated by smaller, private companies.

BERN

pop 122,707 / elevation 540m

You won't spend long in Bern without hearing or reading the name Unesco. (Indeed, you just have.) Switzerland's capital is so proud of its medieval town centre it wants everybody to know that the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has declared this a World Heritage Site.

No-one would argue with that 1983 protection order. On the city's long, curving and

cobbled streets, lined with tall, 15th-century terraced buildings and arcades, you often feel as if you're in some kind of dizzying architectural canyon. From the surrounding hills, you're presented with an equally captivating picture of parallel rows of red roofs, all crammed on a spit of land within a bend of the Aare River.

Be warned, though: like Canberra in Australia and several other world capitals, Bern (Berne in French and sometimes in English) only got the gig by being the compromise candidate. It was simply the easiest choice for French and German speakers to agree on when the new Swiss Confederation came to life in 1848. So even today this remains an essentially provincial town –

with a parliament and bunch of bureaucrats attached.

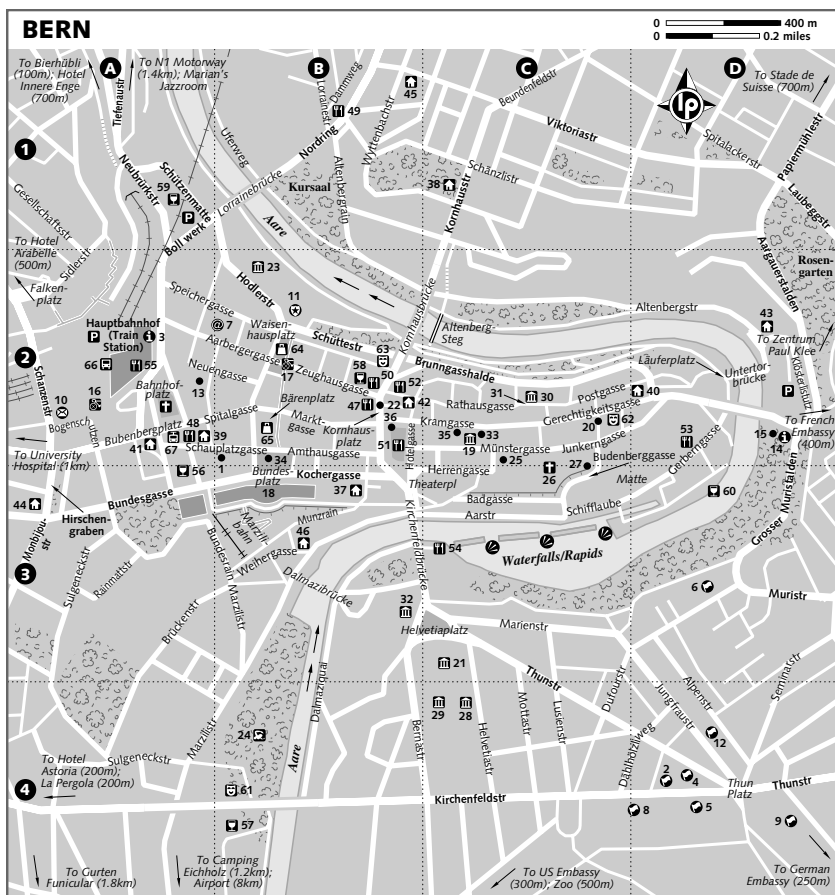
Orientation

Because the compact town centre is contained within a sharp U-shaped river bend, access to some main streets is restricted to pedestrians and trams. The main train station is at the mouth of this 'U' and within easy reach of the main sights.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Atlas (☎ 031 311 90 44; Schaufplatzgasse 21; ☎ 9am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-10pm Thu, 9am-4pm Sat) Travel books and backpacking accessories.



Stauffacher (☎ 031 311 24 11; Neugasse 25; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-9pm Thu, 8am-4pm Sat) Fiction and nonfiction books in English and French.

BUSINESS HOURS

Some shops do not open Monday morning; otherwise, business hours are standard for Switzerland (see inside front cover).

DISCOUNT CARD

BernCard (per 24/48/72hr Sfr17/27/33) Admission to the permanent collections of all museums, plus free public transport and discounts on city tours.

EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 031 321 21 21; Waisenhausplatz 32)

INTERNET ACCESS

Inside Internet Bar (www.iib.ch in German; Aarbergergasse 46; per hr Sfr7-9; ☎ 11-12.30am Mon-Sat, noon-10pm Sun)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Emergency doctor, dentist, pharmacist (☎ 0900 57 67 47; ☎ 24hr)

University hospital (☎ 031 632 21 11; Fribourgstrasse; ☎ 24hr) West of the centre, has a casualty department.

MONEY

SBB Change office (Basement, Hauptbahnhof; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun)

POST

Main post office (Schanzenstrasse; ☎ 7.30am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat, 4-9pm Sun)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bern Tourismus (information ☎ 031 328 12 12, hotel reservations ☎ 031 328 12 10; www.berninfo.com; Ground Level, Hauptbahnhof; ☎ 9am-8.30pm daily Jun-Sep, 9am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun Oct-May) Excellent tours and free hotel bookings. The office also distributes the informative *Bern Guide*.

Tourist office (☎ 9am-6pm daily Jun-Sep, 10am-4pm daily Mar-May & Oct, 11am-4pm Fri-Sun Nov-Feb) Across the river by the bear pits.

Dangers & Annoyances

Bern's hard drugs problem is less noticeable than before, but some addicts still congregate around the train station at night.

Sights

ZYTLOGGE & CITY FOUNTAINS

Bern's flag-bedecked medieval centre is an attraction in its own right, with 6km of

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covered arcades and cellar shops/bars descending from the streets. After a devastating fire in 1405, the city was rebuilt in today's sandstone, as opposed to the earlier wood.

An enduring focal point is Bern's clock tower or **Zytlogge** (*Zeitglockenturm* in High German), which was once part of the city's western gate (1191–1256). It's reminiscent of the Astronomical Clock in Prague's old town square in that crowds congregate to watch it chime – and then wonder why. The clock's revolving figures begin twirling at four minutes before the hour, after which the actual chimes begin. Tours enter the tower to see the clock mechanism between May and October (contact the tourist office).

It's said the clock tower helped Albert Einstein (see right) hone his theory of relativity, developed while working as a patent clerk in Bern. The great scientist surmised, while travelling on a tram away from the tower, that if the tram were going at the speed of light, the clock tower would remain on the same time, while his own watch would continue to tick – proving time was relative.

Another Bern landmark is its series of 11 decorative **fountains**. Built around 1545, they all depict characters from history and/or folklore and are concentrated along Markt-gasse as it becomes Kramgasse and Gerechtigkeitsgasse. However, the most famous lies in Kornhausplatz; it's the **Kindlifresserbrunnen** (Ogre Fountain), which depicts a giant, snacking...on children.

MÜNSTER

Its lofty spire is in all senses the high point of the 15th-century Gothic **Münster** (Cathedral; tower admission payable halfway up Sfr4; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sat, 11.30am–5pm Sun Easter–Nov, 10am–noon & 2–4pm Tue–Fri, to 5pm Sat, 11.30am–2pm Sun rest of year, tower closes 30 min earlier). At 100m, it's Switzerland's tallest and those with enough energy to climb the 344 narrow winding stairs (you can stop at 254) are rewarded with stupendously vertiginous views – all the way to the Bernese Alps on a clear day.

Back on terra firma, look at the decorative **main portal** depicting the Last Judgment. The mayor of Bern is shown going to heaven, while his Zürich counterpart is being shown into hell.

Don't forget to also wander through the **Münster Plattform** behind the cathedral. This

small patch of parkland drops away suddenly into a steep cliff, and you need the public **lift** (admission Sfr1.20) in the corner to travel down to Badgasse and the **Matte** (www.matte.ch in German) area on the river plain below. In good weather, a café on the platform serves coffee, cake and hot chocolate.

EINSTEIN HAUS

The world's most famous scientist developed his special theory of relativity in Bern in 1905, and the small **Einstein Museum** (☎ 031 312 00 91; www.einstein-bern.ch; Kramgasse 49; adult/student & senior Sfr6/4.50; ☎ 10am–7pm Apr–Oct, 1–5pm Tue–Fri, noon–4pm Sat Feb, Mar & Nov–mid-Dec, closed mid-Dec–Jan) was given a facelift recently to celebrate the centenary of that discovery.

The humble apartment where Einstein lived with his young family while working as a low-paid clerk in the Bern patent office has been redecorated in the style of the time. However, numerous multimedia displays now flesh out the story of the subsequent general equation – $E=MC^2$, or energy equals mass times the speed of light squared – which fundamentally changed humankind's understanding of space, time and the universe.

Upstairs, there's a short biographical film; choose between the German, French and English soundtrack.

BUNDESHÄUSER

The 1902 **Houses of Parliament** (☎ 031 322 85 22; www.parliament.ch, www.bundeshaus.ch in German; Bundesplatz), the home of the Swiss Federal Assembly, are built in an impressive Florentine style, and contain statues of the nation's founding fathers, a stained-glass dome adorned with cantonal emblems and a huge, 214-bulb chandelier. When the Parliament is in recess, there are hourly free 45-minute **tours** (☎ 9am–4pm Mon–Sat, plus 5pm, 6pm & 7pm Thu) in different languages. During parliamentary sessions, you can watch from the public gallery. A passport or other national ID is always needed to gain entry.

The car park in front of the parliament was reclaimed for public use during the recent refurbishment of Bundesplatz. At night, 26 illuminated **water jets**, representing every Swiss canton, now spout from the square's pavement. However, these are frequently turned off during the day for markets and other events.

BÄRENGRABEN & ROSENGARTEN

Bern sounds like it has something to do with bears, and indeed it does. Founded in 1191 by Berthold V, a powerful Duke of Zähringen, the city derived its name from his first hunting success in the area – a bear, or *Bärn* in the local dialect. Today, there are still **Bärengraben** (bear pits; ☎ 9am–5.30pm Apr–Sep, 9am–4pm Oct–Mar) in the city, where five animals live. They're very cute and undoubtedly well cared for, but animal lovers might not approve. Even the authorities are considering a replacement 'bear park'.

Next door, in the tourist office (see p181 for opening times), you'll find the **Bern Show**. This is a 'multimedia' display explaining Bern's history using a huge model of the city and other props; kids love it even if their parents might find it a bit tacky. There's a rolling programme of 20-minute English, German and French versions.

Up the hill is the fragrant **Rosengarten** (rose garden), where the view over the town is stupendous.

ZENTRUM PAUL KLEE

The **Paul Klee Centre** (☎ 031 359 01 01; www.zpk.org; Monument in Fruchtlund 3; adult/child/concession Sfr14/6/12, special exhibitions extra Sfr2; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun, 10am–9pm Thu) is Bern's Guggenheim, an eye-catching building by an acclaimed contemporary architect filled with popular modern art.

Renzo Piano's remarkable building curves up and down like ocean waves, forming three 'hills' in the agricultural landscape on the outskirts of town. It's a pity about the main road whizzing by, but the architecture is a refreshing blast of modernity in olde worlde Bern.

The structure's middle hill houses the main exhibition space, showcasing 4000 rotating works from Paul Klee's prodigious and often playful career. Interactive computer displays built into the seating mean you can get the low-down on all the Swiss-born artist's major pieces.

The other two 'hills' are given over to conferences, concerts, administration and a hands-on **children's museum** (admission Sfr15).

The best way to get here is take bus No 12 from Bubenberglplatz to Zentrum Paul Klee, but if you take tram No 5 from Bahnhofplatz to Ostring, you will also be within walking distance. Both services run regularly.

HISTORICHES MUSEUM BERN

Blockbuster exhibitions have dominated the **Bern Historical Museum** (☎ 031 350 77 11; www.bhm.ch; Helvetiaplatz 5; special exhibitions adult/concession Sfr13/8; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun, 10am–8pm Wed) in recent years. A superb, nearly two-year-long exhibition on Einstein and $E=MC^2$ winds down at the end of 2006, by which time work will be underway on a new building for special exhibitions. By 2008, the permanent collection, including a marvellous selection of tapestries, will be back in the main building.

KUNSTMUSEUM

The permanent collection at the **Museum of Fine Arts** (☎ 031 328 09 44; www.kunstmuseumbern.ch in German; Hodlerstrasse 8–12; adult/student Sfr7/5, special exhibitions Sfr8–18; ☎ 10am–9pm Tue, 10am–5pm Wed–Sun) includes works by Italian artists such as Fra Angelico, Swiss artists like Ferdinand Hodler, and others such as Picasso and Dalí. However, it's the interesting temporary exhibits you want to watch out for.

OTHER MUSEUMS

The following are all near Helvetiaplatz, on the southern side of the Kirchenfeldbrücke.

The **Museum für Kommunikation** (Museum of Communication; ☎ 031 357 55 55; www.mfk.ch; Helvetiastrasse 16; for either permanent or special exhibitions adult/concession Sfr9/6, combined Sfr13/10; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) houses items from antique phones and stamps to electronic communication.

The **Schweizerisches Alpines Museum** (Swiss Alpine Museum; ☎ 031 351 04 40; www.alpinesmuseum.ch; Helvetiaplatz 4; adult/concession Sfr9/6; ☎ 2–5pm Mon, 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) outlines the history of Alpine mountaineering and cartography, with the help of impressive relief maps.

Items at the **Naturhistorisches Museum** (Natural History Museum; ☎ 031 350 71 11; www.nmbe.unibe.ch in German; Bernstrasse 15; adult/student Sfr7/5; ☎ 2–5pm Mon, 9am–5pm Tue–Fri, 9am–6pm Wed, 10am–5pm Sat & Sun) include the taxidermied, moth-eaten remains of Barry, the most famous St Bernard rescue dog.

GURTEN

A little over 3km south of the town centre is the Gurten hill, whose peak boasts two restaurants, a miniature railway and an adventure playground. You can also enjoy fine views as you hike down the mountain (about one hour), following the clearly marked paths. To get here, take tram No 9 heading

to Wabern, alight at Gurtenbahn and change to the **funicular** (www.gurtenbahn.ch in German; adult one way/return Sfr5/9, child Sfr2.50/4.50; ☎ 7.10am-10pm) to the top. You can also do this whole trip on the Sfr12 version of the city pass.

Activities

In summer, the open-air **Marzilipools** (www.aare.marzili.ch in German; admission free; ☎ May-Sep), beside the Aare River, are the perfect place to get a tan; there's even a topless bathing area. Only strong swimmers should take a dip in the river itself.

Red-signed bicycle routes run parallel to the river and the city provides free loans of bikes, via the scheme **Bern Rollt** (☎ 079 277 28 57; www.bernröllt.ch in German; huts at Bahnhofplatz & the western end of Zeughausgasse; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm daily May-Oct). ID and a refundable Sfr20 are required as a deposit.

Walking Tour

Start at Bundesplatz, in front of the **Parliament** (1; p182). After enjoying the water jets (if they're turned on), head straight ahead past the right side of the building down a small flight of stairs and follow the terrace around to the left. From here, you have an excellent view across the River Aare. At Casinoplatz, turn left and right again until you come to the square facing the **Cathedral** (2; p182). The fountain over your left shoulder is the **Moses fountain** (3). Veer right into the small park behind the cathedral, the so-called **Münster Plattform** (4; p182). Now catch the **lift** (5; admission Sfr1.20) down to the area on the river plain known as **Matte** (6). The district of craftsmen, dockworkers and ar-

tisans during medieval times, it had its own distinctive dialect. More recently, during the floods of 1999 and 2005, Matte suffered extensive flood damage, and some evidence of that could still be visible.

Continue until you come to **Läuferplatz** (7), with its fountain depicting the cheeky city herald who once allegedly told off the French king for not understanding Bernese German. Cross **Untertorbrücke** (8). Here you could add to the walk by heading up and back to the **Rosengarten** (9; p183) for a brilliant view of the city's red rooftops. For a less taxing circuit, however, loop right until you come to the **bear pits** (10; p183).

Now it's time to plunge into the heart of the old district. Walk right up Gerechtigkeitsgasse into Kramgasse. These two historic streets were very recently repaved and the small stream between the city fountains restored. As you head away from the bear pits, you'll pass the **Gerechtigkeits fountain** (11), the **Samson fountain** (12) and **Zähringer fountain** (13). At Kreuzgasse, make a little detour to see the **Rathaus** (town hall; 14), before heading for the tour's endpoint, the **Clock Tower** (15; p181).

Bern for Children

Young children find Bern particularly enchanting, with its romantic old town, **clock tower** (p181) and storybook **fountains** (p181). They don't worry too much about the morality of the **bear pits** (p183), and they love the **Bern Show** (p183) much more than their adult companions. To keep little ones fresh, jump on a tram for some of your sightseeing or, with older children, borrow free city bikes from **Bern Rollt** (left).

As part of the children's museum at the **Paul Klee Centre** (p183) there's an open studio where children four years and over are encouraged to create their own works of art, based on Klee's designs. The **Museum**

of Communication (p183) and **Natural History Museum** (p183) also have visual elements that will appeal.

Older boys might enjoy a tour of the **Stade de Suisse** (p188) football stadium, while an outing to **Gurten** (p183) seems tailor-made for young families.

Bern also has a **zoo** (☎ 031 357 15 15; www.tierpark-bern.ch; ☎ 8am-6.30pm summer, 9am-5pm rest of year), take tram No 19 to Tierpark to get there, and **puppet theatre** (☎ 031 311 95 85; www.berner-puppentheater.ch; Gerechtigkeitsgasse 31).

Festivals & Events

Bern canton has a public holiday on 2 January (Berchtoldstag). On the fourth Monday in November, Bern hosts its famous **onion market** (*Zibelemärit*), where traders take over the town centre. Legend has it that the market dates back to the great fire of 1405, when farmers of Fribourg canton helped the Bernese to recover and were allowed to sell their produce in Bern as a reward. In reality, the market probably began as part of Martinmas, the medieval festival celebrating the start of winter. In any case, today the onion market is an excuse for pure, often bizarre, revelry, as people walk around throwing confetti and hitting each other on the head with plastic hammers, while many street performers add to the carnival atmosphere.

Bern has a **jazz festival** (www.jazzfestivalbern.ch) in early May and hosts the **Gurten Rock Festival** (www.gurtenfestival.ch in German) in mid-July. August's **Aare swimming race** (www.aareschwemme.ch in German) is a lively spectacle.

Sleeping

BUDGET Hostels

Hotel Glocke Backpackers Bern (☎ 031 311 37 71; www.bernbackpackers.com; Rathausgasse 75; dm 1st/ subsequent nights Sfr36/31, tw Sfr39/44, s/d without bathroom Sfr70/125, d with bathroom Sfr165; ☎ ☎) Reasonably new bedrooms, clean bathrooms, a kitchen and sociable lounge make this many backpackers' first choice, but its central location also means plenty of street noise. Dorms are mixed occupancy.

SYHA hostel (☎ 031 311 63 16; www.youthhostel.ch/bern; Weihergasse 4; dm Sfr35; ☎ reception 7-10am & 3-10pm, 5-10pm winter) Scenically located by the river, below the Parliament building and well away from traffic noise, this is a large,

friendly hostel, although the building is not particularly new. The paths down the hill are signposted, or take the Marzilibahn funicular (one way Sfr1.10).

Hotels

Hotel National (☎ 031 381 19 88; www.nationalbern.ch in German; Hirschengraben 24; s/d without bathroom from Sfr55/100, s/d/f with bathroom Sfr85/130/180; ☎) A quaint, charming hotel, the National wouldn't be out of place in Paris, with its wrought-iron lift, sprigs of lavender and Persian rugs over newly surfaced (but still creaky) wooden floors. The friendly owners leave the doors of vacant rooms open, so you can look in and choose the one you fancy.

Marthahauss Garni (☎ 031 332 41 35; www.marthahauss.ch; Wythenbachstrasse 22a; dm Sfr39, s/d without bathroom Sfr65/95, s/d/tr with bathroom & TV Sfr110/125/155; ☎ ☎) Located in a residential location, this five-storey building feels like a friendly boarding house. Clean, simple rooms have lots of white and a smattering of modern art, plus there's a kitchen. Take tram No 9 to Viktoriaplatz.

Hotel Landhaus (☎ 031 331 41 66; www.landhausbern.ch; Altenbergstrasse 4; dm Sfr30, d without bathroom from Sfr110, d/f with bathroom from Sfr140/180; ☎ ☎ ☎) This historic hotel has a stripped-back modern interior, with spiral wooden stairs and spacious individually renovated rooms. There's a very relaxed, friendly atmosphere and a guest kitchen. Only the claustrophobic, stall-like dorms prove a disappointment.

Camping

Camping Eichholz (☎ 031 961 26 02; www.camping-eichholz.ch; Strandweg 49; camp sites per person/car Sfr7.50/3.50, tent Sfr7-9, bungalows per person Sfr17.50-25; ☎ ☎ May-Sep; ☎) The nicest place to camp near Bern is south of the city, near the river. Take tram No 9 to Wabern to get there.

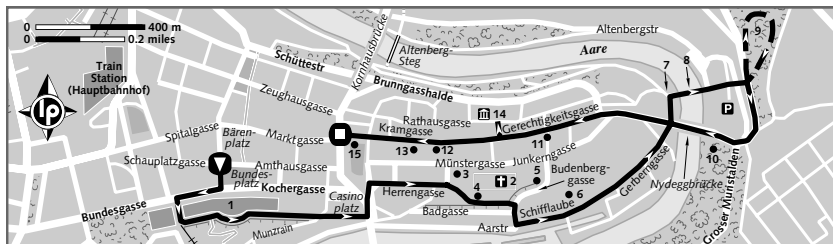
MIDRANGE

With government workers accounting for a large proportion of their clientele, many midrange hotels sport a brisk, businesslike atmosphere.

Hotel Belle Epoque (☎ 031 311 43 36; www.belle-epoque.ch; Gerechtigkeitsgasse 18; s/d Sfr245/340; ☎ ☎) A lovely and romantic old-town hotel with opulent Art Deco furnishings, the Belle Epoque's standards are so exacting it even cleverly tucks away modern aberrations –

WALK FACTS

Distance 5km
Time 1½ hours



like the TV – into steamer-trunk-style cupboards, so as not to spoil the look. It costs less on weekends.

Hotel Arabelle (☎ 031 301 03 05; www.arabelle.ch; Mittelstrasse 6; s Sfr120-135, d Sfr135-195; ☑ ☒ ☓) Small rooms feature bright colour schemes and parquet floors, adding character to what could have been a merely functional hotel. Nicer than its central sister, the Ador, it's only a short bus ride from the train station. Take bus No 12 to Mittelstrasse to get there.

Hotel Allegro (☎ 031 339 55 00; www.allegro-hotel.ch; Kornhausstrasse 3; s/d with views from Sfr250/290, without views Sfr215/255, ste from Sfr600; ☑ ☒ ☓) Cool and modern without being too pretentious, this curved sliver of a building just above the old town offers excellent views from its front rooms. Others look down into the unusual atrium. Decor ranges from sleek 'Asiatic' to brassy 'Broadway' and there's even a Paul Klee-themed suite. Suites cost Sfr400 on weekends.

Hotel Astoria (☎ 031 378 66 66; www.astoria-bern.ch; Zieglerstrasse 66/Eigerplatz; s/d from Sfr130/180; ☑ ☒ ☓ (P)) Not too soulless inside for a business hotel, the Astoria creates a sense of cosiness with dark-wood panelling and fluffy white duvets. It's also five minutes from the centre.

Hotel Bären (☎ 031 311 33 67; www.baerenbern.ch; Schauplatzgasse 4 & 10; s Sfr150-220, d Sfr200-300; ☑ ☒ ☓) You're paying for the supremely convenient location and thoroughly professional service in this hotel and its sister. The rooms are clean, comfortable and modern, but relatively generic and small. Its sister hotel, Hotel Bristol (☎ 031 311 01 01; www.bristolbern.ch; Schauplatzgasse 10), offers the same services and rates.

Hotel Innere Enge (☎ 031 309 61 11; www.zghotels.ch; Engestrasse 54; s/d from Sfr220/260; ☑ ☒ ☓ (P)) Not tonight, Josephine. But the French empress did stay (c 1810) in this historic mansion, set in parkland on the edge of town. After waking to Alpine views in your Art Nouveau room, saunter down to breakfast in the unforgettable park pavilion and spend your nights in the attached Marian's Jazzroom.

The following are also available:

Hotel City (☎ 031 311 53 77; www.hotelcity.ch; Bubenbergplatz 7; s/d Sfr130/180) Generously sized rooms that are slick and modern, although overwhelmingly pale green. Very central location.

La Pergola (☎ 031 381 91 46; www.hotel-lapergola.ch; Belpstrasse 43; s/d Sfr120/150) Another good-value

business hotel that's not too sterile. About 10 minutes from the centre.

TOP END

Bellevue Palace (☎ 031 320 45 45; www.bellevue-palace.ch; Kochergasse 3-5; s/d Sfr350/460; ☑ ☒ ☓ (P)) Bern's power brokers, and international statesmen like Nelson Mandela, gravitate towards Bern's only five-star hotel. Near the parliament, and recently renovated, it's the address to choose if you need to impress. Rates are cheaper on weekends.

Eating

BUDGET

Markthalle (Bubenbergplatz 9) This buzzing central arcade is full of cheap eateries, serving everything from pizza slices and kebabs to noodles. Most places have stools perched at bars or stand up tables.

Sous le Pont (☎ 031 306 69 55; Schützenmatte; snacks & light meals from Sfr5-15; ☒ 11.30am-2pm & 6pm-midnight Tue-Fri, 6pm-2am Sat) Organic meat and lots of vegetarian options are on the menu in the semichaotic surrounds of Reitschule (see p188). Every Wednesday evening, there's a speciality evening showcasing a different cuisine.

There's also an outlet of the vegetarian buffet restaurant **Tibits** (meals per 100g Sfr3.70) in the main train station.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Kornhauskeller (☎ 031 327 72 72; Kornhausplatz 18; most mains around Sfr32-38; ☒ 11.45am-2.30pm & 6pm-12.30am Mon-Sat, 6-11.30pm Sun, bar 5pm-1am Mon-Wed, 5pm-2am Thu-Sat, 5pm-12.30am Sun) Bern's surprisingly ornate former granary is now a stunning subterranean restaurant. Below tall vaulted arches covered in frescoes, well-dressed diners enjoy Mediterranean cuisine; on the mezzanine level above, beautiful people sip cocktails alongside historic stained-glass windows. With a neighbouring café as well, this is, in many ways, just as good as Schwellenmätteli (see opposite).

Santorini (☎ 031 312 18 12; Gerbergasse 34; mains Sfr20-40; ☒ 11.30am-2pm & 5pm-midnight Tue-Fri, 5pm-midnight Sat) Probably Bern's sole Gault/Milau-rated Greek/Mediterranean restaurant, Santorini is one of many good reasons to come to the Matte quarter, reopened after the 2005 floods.

Lorenzini (☎ 031 310 50 67; Hotelgasse 10; mains Sfr20-55; ☒ 11.30am-2.30pm & 6-11.30pm Mon-Fri, to

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Schwellenmätteli (☎ 031 350 50 01; Damaziquai 11; meals Sfr18-55; ☒ 9am-11pm) 'Bern's Riviera' announces a sign near these two very classy restaurants on the Aare, and the experience certainly shouldn't be missed. At night, the cool glass cube that is the restaurant Terrasse overlooks an illuminated weir, while Casa behind it enjoys a cosier atmosphere. Both concentrate on Italian/Mediterranean-influenced cuisine, although you can come for just a coffee or drink on the open-air terrace.

midnight Sat) The Lorenzini complex of bars, *enotoca* (lounge) and Italian restaurant is popular with a young professional crowd looking for merely a coffee and panini, or a full meal of home-made pasta or other Tuscan cuisine.

Altes Tramdepot (☎ 031 368 14 15; Am Bärengraben; mains Sfr18-38, menus Sfr15-25; ☒ 11am-midnight) Don't be deterred by its touristy location by the bear pits; even locals recommend this cavernous microbrewery. Swiss specialities sit alongside international dishes with an occasional Australian bent. Plus, there's a separate children's menu.

Ringgenberg (☎ 031 311 25 40; Kornhausplatz 19; mains Sfr20-42; ☒ 11.15am-2.15pm & 5.30-10pm Mon-Sat) Despite the pristine white tablecloths, this is a relaxed, brasserie-style eatery, with an emphasis on modern Mediterranean cuisine.

Du Nord (☎ 031 332 23 38; Lorrainestrasse 2; mains from Sfr17-35; ☒ 8-12.30am Mon-Fri, 9-12.30am Sat, 4-11.30pm Sun) This gay-friendly casual restaurant in the Lorraine quarter serves well-priced modern international cuisine to a trendy, alternative crowd. It also has a bar and hosts occasional gigs.

Anker (☎ 031 311 11 13; Kornhausplatz 16; mains Sfr16-35; ☒ 7.30am-11.30pm Mon-Thu, 7.30am-midnight Fri & Sat, 9.30am-6pm Sun) Unleash your inner tourist in this smoky Swiss restaurant, where the usual fondues, röstis etc are dished up on kitschy red-and-white check tablecloths.

Della Casa (☎ 031 311 21 42; Schauplatzgasse 16; mains Sfr28-40; ☒ 8am-11.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3pm Sat) Offering a much more refined take on the local cuisine, this historic old restaurant specialises in different types of *Bernerplatte*, selections of meat with sauerkraut, potatoes and beans.

Drinking

Bern has a very healthy nightlife, with more bars than any guidebook could list. See the *Bern Guide*, available from the tourist office, for more details.

BARS & LOUNGES

Kornhauskeller (opposite) and Altes Tramdepot, (opposite) and several clubs, also have bars.

Eclipse (☎ 318 47 00; Gurtengasse 6; ☒ 7-12.30am Mon-Wed, 7-3.30am Thu-Sat) These neighbouring bars are popular with hip young 20-somethings. During the day, people come for snacks, lunch or merely to chill out on the lounge chairs, but come evening they're heaving with eager wannabes out for a good time with cocktails and DJs.

Art Cafe (☎ 318 20 70; Gurtengasse 6; ☒ 7-12.30am Mon-Wed, 7-3.30am Thu-Sat) Sister establishment of Eclipse.

Pery Bar (☎ 311 59 08; Schmiedenplatz 3; ☒ from 5pm Mon-Sat) Another popular venue with a young crowd, the Pery Bar boasts a good-time atmosphere and pavement tables in summer.

Café des Pyrenees (Kornhausplatz 17; ☒ Mon-Sat) With its mixed crowd of wine-quaffing clients, this lovely Bohemian joint has the atmosphere of a traditional Parisian café/bar.

Du Theatre (☎ 031 311 17 71; Hotelgasse 10; ☒ from 6pm Mon-Sat) Part of the upmarket Lorenzini complex, this chic lounge bar has a cool 30-something crowd parked on its plump 1970s leather sofas. But even slightly older drinkers are also in evidence at DüDü, as it's affectionately called.

NIGHTCLUBS

Bierhübl (☎ 031 301 92 92; Neubruckstrasse 43; ☒ lounge from 7pm Mon-Sat, club according to programme) The huge old hall here (with balcony) hosts mainstream international bands and various club nights, but the chic DJ lounge is open six nights a week. In summer, there's a beer garden. Take bus No 11 to Bierhübl to get there.

Wasserwerk (☎ 031 312 12 31; www.wasserwerkclub.ch; Wasserwerkstrasse 5; ☒ Thu-Sat, some Wed) The main techno venue in town, this has a bar, club and sometimes live music. It boasts that both Moby and the Prodigy played here in their heyday. An alternative cinema, Cinematte, sits around the side of the building.

Reitschule (☎ 031 306 69 52; www.reitschule.ch in German; Schützenmatte; 🕒 daily) While determinedly cleaning up its act this infamous – and ramshackle – centre for alternative arts, music and theatre still attracts local slackers, students and curious tourists.

Gaskessel (☎ 031 372 49 00; www.gaskessel.ch; Sandrainstrasse 25) Inside this graffiti-covered domed building in Marzili is another counter-cultural centre, with lots of trance and rap and some popular gay evenings.

Entertainment

PERFORMING ARTS & CLASSICAL MUSIC

Dampfzentrale (☎ 031 311 63 37; www.dampfzentrale.ch in German; Marzillistrasse 47) This refined performing-arts centre combines jazz, funk and soul music gigs with avant-garde art exhibitions and dance. It's in a pleasant riverside spot and serves a brilliant Sunday brunch.

Stadtheater Bern (☎ 031 329 51 51; www.stadtheaterbern.ch; Kornhausplatz 20) Opera, dance and classic music are performed here, as well as German-language plays.

SPORT

Bern's new 32,000-seat **Stade de Suisse** (www.stadedesuisse.ch in German & French; tours adult/child Sfr20/15) will be one of four Swiss venues when Austria and Switzerland co-host football's Euro 2008 championship. Built over the demolished Wankdorf Stadium (which hosted the 1954 World Cup final) the new stadium is home to the local Young Boys team and already hosts international matches.

Outside matches, tours of the ground are available. The complex, which is topped by the world's largest expanse of solar panning (8000m²), also contains shops and restaurants.

Shopping

The shops situated in the western half of Bern's old town are considered more affordable, while those to the east are more exclusive.

There are open-air **vegetable, fruit and flower markets** (Bärenplatz & Bundesplatz) each Tuesday and Saturday (daily in summer). Waisenhausplatz has a general market on Tuesday and Saturday. On the first Saturday of the month there's a craft market in front of the cathedral.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Bern-Belp airport (☎ 031 960 21 21; www.flughafenbern.ch) is a small airport with connections to London City and Lugano on **Darwin Airline** (www.darwinairline.ch) and to Munich on Lufthansa, among others. **Fly Be** (www.flybe.com) also flies here from Birmingham and Southampton in England.

BUS & TRAIN

Postal buses depart from the western side of the train station. By rail, there are services at least hourly to most destinations, including Geneva (Sfr45, 1¼ hours), Basel (Sfr36, 70 minutes), Interlaken Ost (Sfr25, 50 minutes) and Zürich (Sfr45, one hour).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

There are three motorways intersecting in the city's north. The N1 (E25) is the route from Neuchâtel in the west and Basel and Zürich in the northeast. The N6 connects Bern with Thun and the Interlaken region in the southeast. The N12 (E27) is the route from Geneva and Lausanne in the southwest.

There are several underground parking spots in the city centre, including one at the train station (Sfr2.50 per hour). 'Park & Ride' parking is free at Guisanplatz, Wankdorf in the north, Neufeld in the northwest and Gangloff, Bümpliz in the southwest.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

There's a shuttle bus (Sfr15 one way, 20 minutes) between Bern-Belp airport and the train station, which is coordinated with flight arrivals and departures. A **taxi** (☎ 031 333 55 55) costs about Sfr40.

BUS & TRAM

Getting around on foot is easy in the centre, but buses and trams operate. Tickets, available from dispensers at stops, cost Sfr1.90 (maximum six stops) or Sfr3.20. A day pass for the city network is Sfr12 (Zones 10/11). If you're planning on clubbing, **Moonliner** (www.moonliner.ch in German) night buses depart Friday and Saturday nights from Bahnhofplatz at 12.45am, 2am and 3.15am; passes aren't valid and fares start at Sfr5.

BIEL-BIENNE

pop 49,157 / elevation 429m

Situated right on the **Röstigraben**, Switzerland's French-German divide, double-barrelled Biel-Bienne is the country's most bilingual town. Locals switch language fluently in mid-conversation, and sometimes it's difficult to know which one to choose.

In nobody's language is this Switzerland's most picturesque town. Despite a reasonably well-preserved historic centre and an interesting, slightly grungy alternative culture, it's the lake that laps Biel-Bienne's shores that's its biggest draw.

Orientation & Information

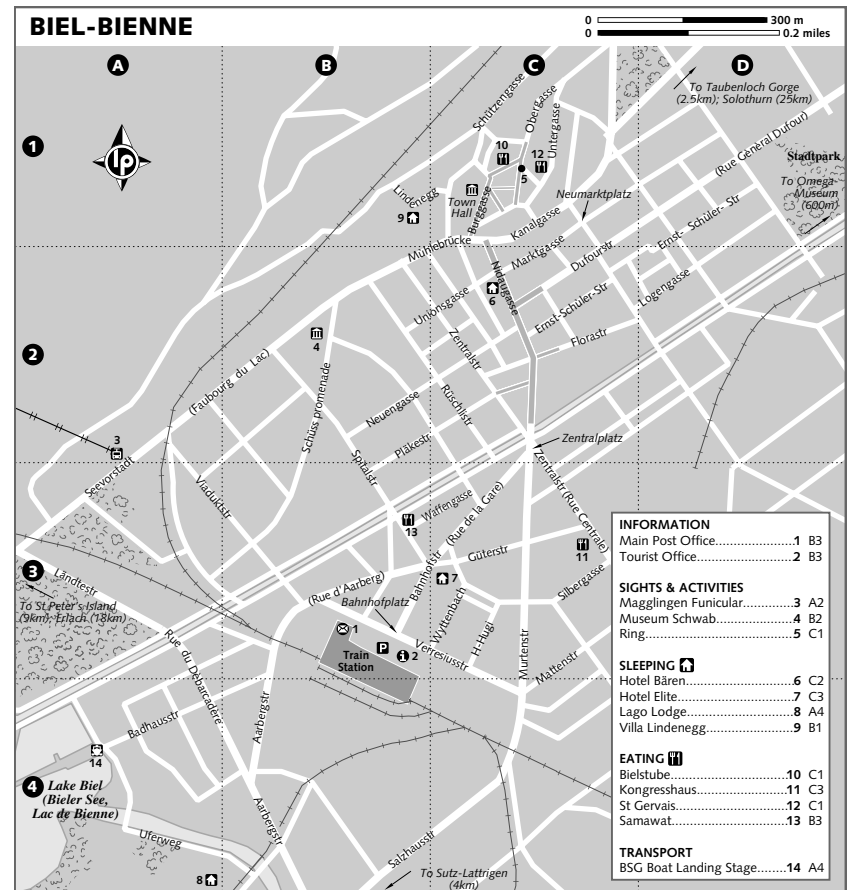
Biel-Bienne is at the northern end of Lake Biel (Bieler See, Lac de Biemme). The train station lies between the lake and the old town and has bicycle-rental and money-exchange counters. The old town is about a 10-minute walk north of the station (or take bus No 1).

Main post office (☎ 032 321 18 40; Bahnhofplatz 2; 🕒 7.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat)

Tourist office (☎ 032 329 84 84; www.biel-seeland.net; Bahnhofplatz 12; 🕒 8am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri, to 8pm Thu, 9am-3pm Sat)

Sights & Activities

At the heart of the old town lies the **Ring**, a plaza with a 16th-century fountain.



name harks back to bygone days when justice was dispensed here. The community bigwigs would sit in an intimidating semi-circle to pass judgment on the unfortunate miscreants brought before them. Leading from the Ring is Burggasse, where there's the step-gabled town hall and theatre, the Fountain of Justice (1744) and shuttered houses.

Outside town, the **Maggingen funicular** (Seilbahn Maggingen, Funiculaire Macolin; ☎ 032 322 45 11; www.funic.ch in German & French; Seevorstadt; one way/return Sfr2.60/4.20) takes you up the Maggingen hill, where there are hikes and views.

Roughly a 30-minute walk along the road to Solothurn (or take bus No 1) is the **Taubenloch Gorge** (Taubenlochschlucht, Les gorges du Taubenloch). A path runs along its 2.5km length (no entry charge, but there's a donation box).

There are a couple of museums in town, the best of which include these:

Museum Schwab (☎ 032 322 76 03; Seevorstadt 50; admission Sfr5; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun) It contains prehistoric relics from around the lakes of Biel, Murten and Neuchâtel.

Omega-Museum (☎ 032 344 92 11; Stämpflistrasse 96; ☎ on request) It showcases notable watches, from that worn by Lawrence of Arabia, to one that's been to the moon.

Bieler Braderie, held on the last weekend in June, is one of the biggest markets in the country.

Sleeping

Sutz-Lattrigen (☎ 032 397 13 45; www.camping-sutz.ch in German; camp sites per person/car Sfr10/6, tent Sfr7-9; ☎ Apr-Oct) This is a well-equipped site by the lake. The train to Sutz runs every 30 minutes (Sfr3) and brings you to within 1km of the site.

Lago Lodge (☎ 032 331 37 32; www.lagolodge.ch; Uferweg 5; dm Sfr25-30, s/d Sfr57/74; ☎ reception 10am-10pm; 📍) Between the train station and the lake, this place resembles an American motel, with its simple rooms laid out in a row over two storeys. Reception is in the bar, which brews its own delicious beer and is accordingly popular. Breakfast costs Sfr8.

Villa Lindenegg (☎ 032 322 94 66; www.lindenegg.ch in German & French; Lindenegg 5; s Sfr95-175, d Sfr150-250; 📍) Tucked away in a pleasant park just minutes from the centre, this small 19th-century villa offers elegance and per-

sonal service at a very affordable price. The rooms are a mix of modern and historic, and a few have balconies.

Hotel Elite (☎ 032 328 77 77; www.hotelelite.ch; Bahnhofstrasse/Rue de la Gare 14; s/d Sfr190/280, Fri & Sat Sfr150/190; 📍 ☎ 📞) The renovated Art Deco rooms are light and airy in this most upmarket of Biel hotels, providing every luxury you need.

Hotel Bären (☎ 032 322 45 73; www.rel-rutschi.ch; Nidaugasse 22; s/d Sfr100/150) This central hotel provides a good back-up option, with pleasant enough rooms. Reception is in the restaurant below.

Eating

St Gervais (☎ 032 322 48 22; Untergasse/Rue Basse 21; menus Sfr14.50; ☎ 9.30-12.30am Mon & Wed-Sat, 9.30am-3pm Tue, 2pm-12.30am Sun) Underneath vaulted arches, or at its popular pavement tables, this alternative-style eatery serves wholesome and frequently organic dishes, from curries to Italian-influenced dishes.

Samawat (☎ 032 323 88 81; Waffengasse/Rue des Armes 1; mains Sfr14.50-27.50; ☎ 9am-11pm Tue-Sat, 11.30am-8pm Sun) A delightful, slightly kitsch Afghan café/restaurant reflecting Biel-Bienne's growing multi-ethnicity, this serves a wide range of dishes, including Afghan tortellini with lentil sauce and yogurt. Samawat is closed for two weeks in August.

Bielstube (☎ 032 322 65 88; Rosius 18; mains Sfr20-36; ☎ 11am-2.30pm & 6pm-midnight Mon-Fri, from 9am Sat) An intriguing mix of Creole and Swiss food is served by this historic restaurant in the middle of the old town.

Kongresshaus (☎ 032 329 19 60; Zentralstrasse 60; menus Sfr15.50-18.50; ☎ 11am-11pm) Cheap lunch menus, vegetarian and meat-based, are served in the restaurant of this most unusual 1950s building – an A-line shape made from concrete.

Getting There & Away

Biel-Bienne can easily be reached by train from Bern (Sfr14.20, 30 minutes), Solothurn (Sfr10.40, 20 minutes), Neuchâtel (Sfr11.40, 20 minutes) and Murten (Sfr12.40, 50 minutes).

However, a more enjoyable connection in summer is by **BSG boat** (☎ 032 329 88 11; www.bielersee.ch in German & French). Services go to Murten (one way/return Sfr37/72, four hours) and Neuchâtel (Sfr24.80/49.80, 2½ hours) daily in summer.

Solothurn can be reached along the Aare River. There are five departures per day (except on Monday) and it takes around 2½ hours (Sfr25/50). See also p193.

AROUND BIEL-BIENNE

Several wine-growing villages line the western shore of Lake Biel, while the nature reserve of **St Peter's Island** (St Peterinsel/Île de St Pierre) lies in the middle. Actually, falling water levels mean this is no longer an island proper, but a long, thin promontory jutting out into the lake from the southwest shore near Erlach. It is possible to take a 1¼-hour stroll along this causeway from Erlach, but because of the difficulties in reaching Erlach from Biel-Bienne (you need to catch a train to La Neuveville and an infrequent bus to Erlach) it's easiest to catch a boat from Biel-Bienne (Sfr13.40, 50 minutes).

Political theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau spent, he said, the happiest time of his life on St Peterinsel and the 11th-century monastery where he resided is now the renowned **Restaurant-Hotel St Petersinsel** (☎ 032 338 11 14; www.st-petersinsel.ch in German & French; d Sfr220-270, s/d without bathroom Sfr95/155).

Visiting the island makes a relaxing day trip and if you buy a return ticket (Sfr26.80), you're entitled to get off and on as often as you like, including at the wine-growing villages of **Twann/Douanne** and **Ligerz/Gléresse**. The latter has a **funicular** (www.vinifuni.ch in German & French; adult one way Sfr5.20) to the hilltop settlement of Prêles, where there are views to the Bernese Alps on a clear day.

If you're more interested in swimming, there are spots at Erlach, on St Peter's Island and at La Neuville.

The neighbouring Lac de Neuchâtel and Lake Murten are connected to Bieler See by canal, and day-long tours of all three lakes are offered from 13 May to 20 October. Boats are run by two boat companies: **BSG** (☎ 032 329 88 11; www.bielersee.ch in German & French), based in Biel, and **LNM** (☎ 032 729 96 00), based in Neuchâtel. The three-lake tours depart around 9am to 10am, but ring ahead, as timetables change yearly; expect to pay about Sfr56 (with BSG) or Sfr52 (for a day-pass with LNM). Other regular lake services operate only in spring and summer, though there are special cruises (eg fondue evenings) in winter and autumn.

EMMENTAL REGION

Holey cheese, Batman! Sorry, that really was cheesy, but then, having given its name to one of Switzerland's most famous dairy products, the yellow stuff is what the Emmental Region is largely about. The valley (Tal in German) of the Emme River is a rural idyll east of Bern. Picturesque towns and villages, full of chalets with overhanging roofs, line the riverbanks.

Orientation & Information

Emmental tourist office (☎ 034 402 42 52; www.emmental.ch in German; Schlossstrasse 3, Langnau; ☎ 2-5pm Mon, 8am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Fri)

Sights & Activities

The **Emmentaler Schaukäserei** (Emmental Show Dairy; ☎ 034 435 16 11; www.showdairy.ch; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm) at Affoltern lets you see Emmental cheese being made into huge wheels (60kg to 130kg). Various production stages are instigated at 9.10am, 10.35am, 12.40pm, 2.05pm, 4.10pm and 5.35pm, although at any time you can listen to a succession of short videos explaining how milk becomes cheese. If you pay close attention, you will learn how Emmental derives its pockmarked, adolescent complexion. **Affoltern** is 6km east of Burgdorf; to reach it by public transport take the train from Burgdorf to Hasle Rüggsau, then postal bus No 195 (Sfr5.80). There's roughly one bus an hour, apart from a long wait around lunchtime. **Kiesen**, on the train route running southeast of Bern (Sfr7.80), also has the **Milchwirtschaftliches Museum** (Museum of Dairy Products; ☎ 031 45 33 31; admission free; ☎ 2-5pm Apr-Oct).

The town of **Langnau** is known for its ornamental crockery and has several demonstration potteries (*Schautöpferei*), as does nearby **Trubschachen**, reached by train or bus. Ask the tourist office.

From Burgdorf to Wynigen, there's an interesting three-hour Planetenweg **hiking** path. Afterwards, you can catch the train back to **Burgdorf**, whose main attraction is a **Franz Gertsch museum** (☎ 034 421 40 20; Platanenstrasse 3; adult/child Sfr10/5; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) showcasing the works of Switzerland's foremost photorealist painter.

Sleeping

SYHA hostel (☎ 034 402 45 26; www.youthhostel.ch/langnau; Mooseggstrasse 32, Langnau; dm Sfr25; ☎ reception 7-9am & 5-8pm) Langnau also has a hostel, in a quaint, farmhouse-style chalet. The huge overhanging roof is charming, but accommodation is quite basic. The hostel is a 10-minute walk from the station. It's closed early February and from late September to mid-October.

Hotel Hirschen (☎ 034 402 15 17; www.hotel-hirschen.ch; Dorfstrasse 17, Langnau; s/d from Sfr105/170) This hotel is in a similar homey chalet, with country-style Swiss rooms and lots of ornamental Langnau crockery around the place.

Hotel Stadthaus (☎ 034 428 80 00; www.stadthaus.ch in German; Kirchbühl 2, Burgdorf; s/d Sfr230/290; ☎ [P]) Try this option for unadulterated luxury. The only five-star hotel for miles, this former city hall has every amenity as well as brilliant views.

Getting There & Away

Every hour there's a fast train (15 minutes) and a local train from Bern to Burgdorf. The fare in both cases is Sfr8.20. Langnau can be reached by direct train from Bern (Sfr12.80) or from Burgdorf (Sfr8.20).

SOLOTHURN

pop 15,130 / elevation 440m

Solothurn (Soleure in French) is a little town with a big cathedral; the imposing, 66m-tall façade of St Ursus' may take you by surprise as it looms up out of the pavement at one end of the dinky main street. Without it, this could almost be a French village – an impression that makes more sense when you learn of confirmed-Catholic Solothurn's long-standing links to France. But the presence of the cathedral standing majestically alongside its fountains, churches and city gates gives weight to Solothurn's claim to be the most beautiful baroque town in Switzerland.

Orientation & Information

The train station is south of the Aare River and there is an information office, money-exchange counters and bicycle rental (all open daily). North across the river lies the old town, less than a 10-minute walk. The core of the centre is Kronenplatz, dominated by the cathedral.

Tourist office (☎ 032 626 46 46; www.solothurn-city.ch; Hauptgasse 69; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Diagonally opposite the cathedral. Organises 1½-hour walking tours (Sfr5, 2.30pm Saturday May to September).

Sights & Activities

The main landmark is the monolithic 18th-century **Cathedral of St Ursus**. Externally, architect Gaetano Matteo Pisoni managed to restrain himself, with a classical Italianate style. Inside, the church erupts into a complete white-and-gilt trip of wedding-cake baroque.

Two minutes east of the cathedral is the **Baseltor**, the most attractive of the city gates. In the opposite direction, just a stone's throw west down Hauptgasse from St Ursus', you'll find the **Jesuit Church**. Its unprepossessing façade disguises an interior of baroque embellishments and stucco work. In fact, all the 'marble' in here is fake: it's just spruced-up wood and plaster.

A little further west lies the **Zeitglockenturm**, a fine 12th-century astronomical clock where the figures do a little turn on the hour and the clock hands are reversed so that the smaller one shows the minutes.

The nearby **Justice Fountain** (1561) might also produce a wry smile. It shows a blindfolded representation of Justice, holding aloft a sword, while the four most important contemporary figures in Europe sit at her feet. The Holy Roman Emperor, in red and white robes, is by Justice's right foot, then proceeding anticlockwise, you'll see the Pope, the Turkish Sultan and...the mayor of Solothurn!

MUSEUMS

The centrepiece of the **Kunstmuseum** (Museum of Fine Arts; ☎ 032 622 23 07; www.kunstmuseum-so.ch in German; Werkhofstrasse 30; admission by donation; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-5pm Sat & Sun) is Ferdinand Hodler's famous portrait of William Tell. Before arriving in Switzerland, you might never have imagined the national hero as a red-haired, bearded goliath in a white hippy top and short pants, but you'll see this personification repeated many times. The *Madonna of Solothurn* (1522), by Holbein the Younger, is one of only a small number of other major works, but the museum does have interesting temporary exhibitions.

The **Altes Zeughaus** (Old Arsenal; ☎ 032 623 35 28; Zeughausplatz 1; adult/student & senior/family Sfr6/4/10; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Tue-Sun May-Oct, 2-5pm Tue-Sun Nov-Apr) is a reminder that Solothurn was once a centre for mercenaries, many of whom fought for French kings. Among the canons and guns sit 400 suits of armour.

Sleeping & Eating

For a small town, Solothurn surprises with several funky hotels and restaurants.

SYHA hostel (☎ 032 623 17 06; www.youthhostel.ch/solothurn; Landhausquai 23; dm Sfr29-39; ☎ reception 7.30-10am & 4.30-10.30pm; ☎ [X]) This hotel is one of the country's most modern – all stainless steel, glass and modern black chairs. Dorms are sometimes mixed gender, and the larger ones in the attic somewhat more basic. It's closed late November to mid-January.

Baseltor (☎ 032 622 34 22; www.baseltor.ch; Hauptgasse 79; s/d Sfr90/155; ☎ [X]) Above the popular restaurant (mains Sfr18 to Sfr36), you'll find a lovely hotel with a personal feel. There are nine simple but good-looking rooms (three in a separate annexe).

Hotel an der Aare (☎ 032 626 24 00; www.hotelaare.ch in German; Bernstorstrasse 2; s/d from Sfr115/150; ☎ [X] [P]) The nursing quarters of the 18th-century Solothurn hospital (itself built in 14th-century style) have recently been converted into a stylish, modern hotel. Brightly coloured walls and furniture give warmth to the many stone and exposed-brick features, and the location right next to the Aare is lovely, especially for the bar and brasserie. However, beware as it's also not that far from the railway line.

Hotel Kreuz (☎ 032 622 20 20; www.kreuz-solothurn.ch in German; Kreuzgasse 4; s/d/tr without bathroom Sfr50/90/120) This nearby hotel has simple, low-lit but spacious rooms above a cheap organic restaurant (menus from Sfr15) run by a co-operative. Ring the bell for reception when the restaurant is shut. Deduct Sfr5 if staying more than one night.

Sol Heure (☎ 032 625 54 34; Ritterquai 10; mains Sfr17.50-20.50, daily menus Sfr15.50-17.50; ☎ 11-12.30am Tue-Sun) When the sun is out, it seems half of Solothurn repairs to the outdoor riverside bar behind this trendy former warehouse. The food is casual, from red chicken curry to New Mexico burgers, but it's the buzzing atmosphere you come for anyway.

La Cantinetta Bindella (☎ 032 623 16 85; Ritterquai 3; mains Sfr15-40; ☎ 10-12.30am Mon-Sat) Dine

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Pittaria (Theatergasse 12; snacks Sfr7.50-13.50; ☎ 10am-11pm Tue-Sat) We were first bowled over by this unusual kebab shop/deli a few years ago, and not just because of its mint tea and home-made mango chutney ladled onto its falafel in pita bread. All the food excels and the friendly, familiar atmosphere, where vintage photos of owner Sami Daher's family hang on sunny yellow walls, the bench seating is laid with Persian rugs and people chat to each other, means you don't want to leave. We weren't the only fans. In 2004 and 2005, Pittaria was named the best takeaway in Switzerland. An unusual accolade, to be sure, but it deserves the award.

on white tablecloths beneath the trees of this Italian restaurant's leafy private garden, just across the street from Sol Heure.

Getting There & Away

Solothurn has two trains an hour to Bern on the private RBS line (Sfr12.80, 40 minutes, railpasses valid). Regular trains also run to Basel (Sfr25, one to 1½ hours, change required) and Biel (Sfr10.40, 20 minutes). Boats also connect Solothurn to Biel (see p190). By road, the Weissenstein mountain impedes access directly north, but the N1/E25 motorway is nearby to the east of town, providing a fast route to Bern, Basel and Zürich. Take highway No 5 for Biel.

AROUND SOLOTHURN

The grand **Schloss Waldegg** (☎ 032 622 38 67; www.schloss-waldegg.ch; Feldbrunnen-St Niklaus; adult/student & senior/family Sfr6/4/10; ☎ 2-5pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 10am-5pm Sun May-Oct, 10am-5pm Sun only Nov & Dec), a few kilometres north of town, was built in the 17th century and displays period furniture and paintings. Take bus No 4 from the station to the St Niklaus stop, then walk north past the church for a further 10 minutes. It's closed January and February.

The **Weissenstein** (1284m), north of Solothurn, is a mountain that's good for hiking, cross-country skiing or a scenic drive. A few kilometres northwest of Solothurn is **Lommiswil**, where a viewing platform (admission free) overlooks dinosaur footprints in the forest.

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