A glimpse of Zurich

DISCOVER THE SECRETS OF A MEDIAEVAL CITY
SET ON TWO SIDES OF LIMMAT RIVER

By Mohammed Reza Amirinia

CATEGORY: TRAVEL DESTINATIONS



THE LIMMAT RIVER
Fed by Lake Zürich

GROSSMÜNSTER
Twin Towers Since the 12th Century

CABARET VOLTAIRE
Home of Dada Since 1916

OPERA FOR ALL
10,000 Spectators Under the Sky

A GLIMPSE OF …

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I was there for 72 hours to discover the secrets of a mediaeval city set on two sides of Limmat River and fed by the 40 kilometre-long Lake Zürich

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Zurich is just a short flight from London City Airport, about ninety minutes in all. As the plane descended through the clouds, the beautiful green velvet fields and forests surrounding the city caught my eye. Entering the airport was just like already being in the city. There was a shopping mall with many shops, cafes and restaurants plus a shopping store as you exit the arrival hall. The train station was conveniently located a floor below Swiss International Air Lines check-in desk.

A double-decker train, took me to the hauptbahnhof in the heart of the city in only 12 minutes. As it sped on its journey, I passed through industrial estates and boxy modern apartment blocks with vibrant and diverse colours.

II

Zurich's name is associated with international banking and insurance, but little known as a tourist destination despite its rich heritage and epic past. I was there for 72 hours to discover the secrets of a mediaeval city set on two sides of Limmat River and fed by the 40 kilometre-long Lake Zürich. The mountainous setting of this charming old city within two forested chains of hills and close to the foothills of the Alps, makes it a lively place to be.

The history of the area goes back to the time when prehistoric communities built their shelter lodgings around the shores of the lake.

Before I started my stroll around the winding alleys of Altstadt, I could not imagine such a courteous monumental setting like a crown jewel of beautiful buildings crafted in a ring decorated by green velvet diamonds. It was a very joyful moment to be lost in the cobbled hilly streets and hidden narrow alley-ways ending up in a fountain square.



the Limmat river

III

The Altstadt is still a residential neighborhood but some houses have been converted to restaurants, cafes, stylish shops and elegant hotels. As I walked deeper into the old town, I strongly felt the animation and simplicity of a small village and the warmth of family life.

I came across a small window shop of Vohdin Backerei. A lady dressed in a pink outfit with her warm smile was selling different kinds of local bread. Their business has passed on from generation to generation since 1621. They live in the upper floors and bake their different types of bread on the ground floor, running their business through just a small window.



Vohdin bakery

In the Grossmünsterplatz close to the banks of the Limmat, the twin towers of the Grossmünster protestant church built in the twelfth century dominate Altstadt along with other important church towers of the city such as Fraumünster, St. Peterkirche and Predigerkirche. The interior of the church is simple and the architectural features are in Romanesque style, with carved porches and gliding columns. A stone crypt believed to be from 11th century is located underneath the floor of the church.

IV

I continued my stroll along Münstergasse passing galleries and trendy shops until I came across a coffee roaster machine in the window of the Schwarzenbach specialty store. A man behind an open window was processing the raw coffee whilst, at the same time, displaying a variety of beautifully ground brown coffee beans to the public. This family run business has been selling fine coffees, a variety of teas, chocolate, pastry and dried fruits over the last 150 years. Next door in the café, you can taste any of these coffees and teas.. The family lives over the ship in the top floors of the building.

While I was strolling around the old town two things caught my attention. Firstly I noticed that many houses in Altstadt have a name on them. In the old days, there were no numbers, every house was known by a unique name. The names were normally nicely crafted at the top of a stone edge around a wooden door. Secondly I was amazed to see the collective number of fountains. I found them in the corner of an alley, in the middle of a square, in a hidden courtyard and almost every unimaginable place. When I researched it, I found out that there are over 1200 drinking fountains in Zurich. I never did find out why there are so many



gazing in the Schwarzenbach window

V

Cabaret Voltaire

Further down in Münstergasse and in the corner of Spiegelgasse, I came across Cabaret Voltaire, the eccentric home where of the artist Dada lived from 1916 onwards. I was curious about this literary cabaret, and entered to find out about Dada. I have seen posters on the walls of the city about the 100-year anniversary of Dada. Dadaism is a radical artistic and political movement for entertainment through a variety of odd performances. It was formed by a number of young artists in 1916 during WWI when Switzerland was a neutral country and many refugees including many artists came to the country. There was a bookshop on the ground floor with a variety of unusual experimental artwork. I took the narrow stairs to the upper floor to visit the trendy bar that also has regular live music performances



Dadaesque art

ILeaving Dada behind, I crossed the Rathausbrücke pedestrian bridge in the west part of the old town and found myself in another hilly part of the old town overlooking the Lammit River. I passed cafes and restaurants and climbed the pathway of Pfalzgasse to the green ground of Lindenhof hill, a small park with several sections to play chess with large chess pieces. When I reached the far end of the park, there was an amazing picturesque scenery across the Limmat River, the old town and Grossmunster Church. Lindhof, which used to be the site of a Roman fort in the fourth century and witnessed many historical events including the oath sealing of Helvetic Constitution, today is a retreat at the heart of the city. Guess what? There was a fountain where birds gathered to drink water.

VI

Manifesta 11

I was in Zurich in a good timing to learn about Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art that changing its location every year. This year, Zurich hosts the eleventh edition of Manifesta. This year, more than ever before, there are more innovative cultural practices, curatorial exhibits and emerging artistic expressions all of which feature within a European context. Manfesta 11 began on 11th June and runs until 18th September.

Zurich's magical urban setting with a rich and advanced economic foundation along its historical artistic liberalism provides a new dimension to reflect the social, political and artistic mission of Manifesta. The theme of Manifesta 11 is "What People Do For Money: Some Joint Ventures". The artists work with local professionals to create extensive collaborative projects throughout the city to elaborate the theme.

On my second day in Zurich, I visited a number of Manifesta exhibitions in Kunsthalle Zürich, Helmhaus Zürich and Cabaret Voltaire. But my most interesting experience was visiting the Pavilion of Reflections, a floating arena and stage on Lake Zurich to show on a big screen the videos of the story and process of each project and the resulting collaborative work which was an educational program to feature the lives of working people in Zurich.



an image from Manifesta



opera for all; even the baby was watching

In the afternoon, I crossed Münsterbrück to get into Münsterhof Square where eleventh century Fraumünster church is located. The crowd had gathered to see some music and literary Dada-esque performances. Part of the show was an unusual concert by Harley-Davidson bikers in the middle of the square. A conductor dressed in a red outfit led a group of bikers in black jackets performing using their lights, horns and engine noises.

My day was completed when I witnessed an "Opera for all" in Sechseläutenplatz in front of Zurich Opera House. The large crowd of over 10,000 spectators watched the performance of the Zurich Philharmonic and Tchaikovsky's Pique Dame better known to us as Queen of Spades, directed by Robert Carsen. It was a great family occasion for all ages to get together for a collective experience. People sat on the floor or used folding chairs to enjoy the show.

What I experienced, was just a glimpse of what Zurich has to offer. I wish had more time to visit the Switzerland National Museum in Zurich, many other museums and art galleries in the city and do my shopping in chic BahnhofStrasse. The Zurich Travel Card is very handy to use in a marvellous network of trams and trains and free access to many museums.

I hope in my next visit to go cruising over the Limmat river and lake and then discover the countryside and hike around the surrounding hills and mountains. It would be a particularly great day out to go to the top of Zurich in Uetliberg Mountain.

Although I flew from London City, Zurich can be reached by flights from Birmingham, Dublin, Edinburgh, (this is seasonal only) Gatwick, Heatrow, Luton and Manchester.

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