

Travel Dispatches

from

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&
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Basel

July 28 - 30, 2024



We departed from the luxury of our Viking cruise at Basel's river port of St Johann, and a local taxi whisked us off to a room at a nice lodging house that Carolyn had booked for us. In the past 8 days we went from below sea level at Amsterdam to an altitude of only 803 ft at Basel, in the lowest Canton of mountainous Switzerland.



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We're in a quiet neighborhood with easy access to public transportation – one of our essential needs. We knew there would be no elevator here so we hauled our bags up a winding stairway to an ample room, with a shared bathroom down the hall. And it was kind of refreshing to get back to our normal semi student-housing lifestyle.

We're only half a block from the Glutenfreie Köstlichkeiten, a sweet little breakfast place that feels like your grandmother's parlor, with shelves of interesting books to read over coffee. We're also right near at least four good restaurants, several tram stops, and a few blocks from the city's main train station. A balcony across the street has fake birds on the railing to keep the pigeons off, and a wall sticker says, hopefully, that we're in a 'Nazi free' zone.



We have everything we need and we're ready to explore this modest city of about 177,000 inhabitants located right on the borders of France and Germany. And with some of the suburbs and transit lines extending into those neighboring countries, it's a very international city. The official language is Swiss Standard German, although the main spoken language

is the local Basel German dialect. Not that you asked, or that we'll be taking lessons soon.



This is an ancient river town that dates back to settlements in the 5th century BCE, and it's very near where Lucius Munatius Plancus established the first Roman colony on the Rhine in 44 BCE.

The city's long tradition of Humanism made the University of Basel a safe place over the centuries for such teachers and thinkers as Erasmus, Paracelsus, the Holbeins, Nietzsche, Jung and Hesse. This is where Albert Hoffman discovered LSD in 1938, and it's the hometown of Roger Federer. In 2019, Mercer ranked it as the tenth most livable city in the world.



The Kunstmuseum Basel

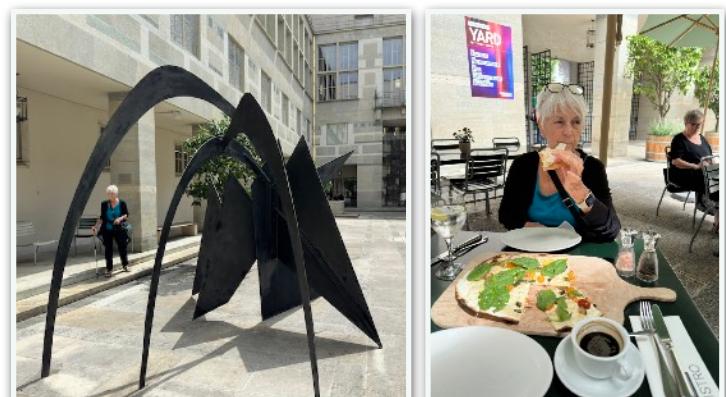
We've been through the gorgeous mountains of Switzerland a couple of times on our way elsewhere, but never actually stopped here. We'd heard that



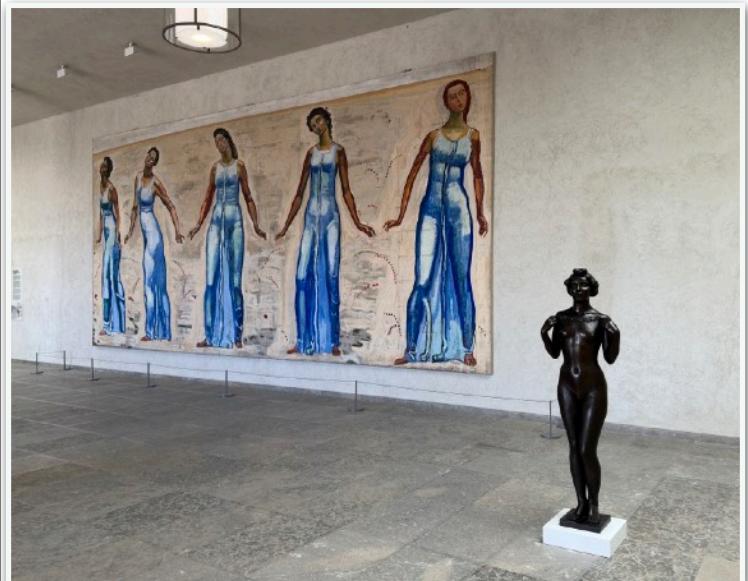
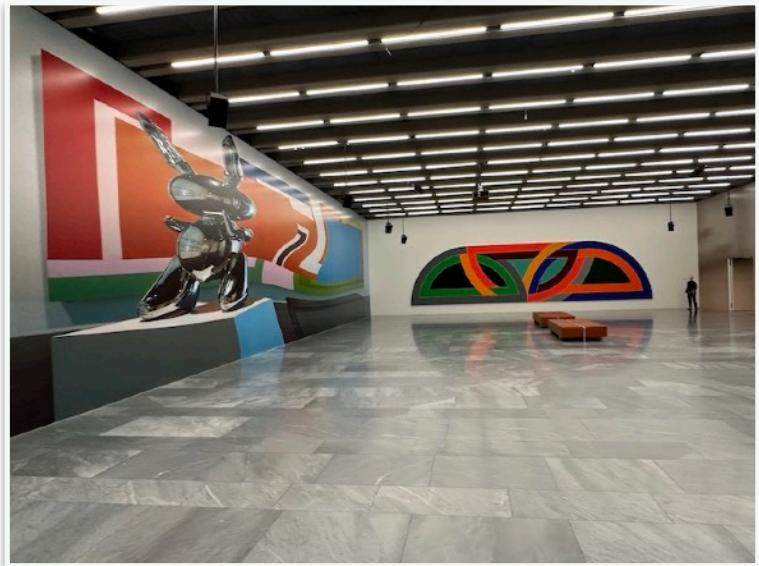
Switzerland is expensive, and on this trip we'll find that to be true although it doesn't have to be highly costly. Trams are a cheap way to get around and see the daily life of the city, and we enjoy walking. The beauty of Basel makes it worthy of a visit.



This is a city of well-regarded museums, and our first foray is to the Kunstmuseum Basel, the country's largest art museum – and since 1661, the world's first collection of art accessible to the public. The museum's quiet courtyard is where a very good lunch is first on the agenda, and there are few experiences as fine as lunch in the courtyard of an excellent museum. Joining us in the courtyard are large sculptural pieces by Calder, Rodin, and others.



The massive collection of art inside these walls
ranges from edgy experimental avant-garde to
modernists such as Egon Shiele and Paul Gaugin. So
it's well worth our visit.



Pablo Picasso's gorgeous "Seated Harlequin" (1923) shows his mastery of traditional forms and is one of two Picassos that had long been on loan to the museum. And in 1967, when the bankruptcy of the owner required their sale, the people of Basel voted to buy them for the collection. Picasso was so moved by the surprising outcome of the election that he donated 3 more paintings and a sketch of "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907) to the museum.



And so we've had a very good and intense first day of 'arting about,' to make up for all those short day-trips off the river cruise boat. It's a condition that our friend Jon Kaplan calls 'artism.' And we're clearly on the spectrum.

After a quiet dinner and a good night's sleep we'll be off to another local art encounter in the morning that promises to be equally interesting. We'll be looking for a place called Vitra, a bastion of unabashed modernism that's just over the border in nearby Germany.

Electricity

And now that we're no longer on the well-equipped Viking river boat, let's talk about some of the odd plugs and equipment we need in Europe to keep your gadgets charged. The difference in 110 and 220 voltage is not generally a problem for laptops and phone chargers that are now rated for both (it's printed on your charger). But so you don't fry your 110 hairdryer, leave it at home and buy a 220 unit (about €20) at a pharmacy when you arrive. And don't lug a heavy 110-220 converter around with you.



We carry a variety of Euro-UK plug-adapters, plus US-MX plugs – and spares. And a few night-lites can be very handy. Shops in many large European train stations and airports carry a good variety of adapters. In Spain the large "El Corte Ingles" department stores are another good source.



For budget travel, a couple of multi-outlet extension cords are essential as there's often only one plug per room in older rentals – and something important is already using that one plug.



Multi-outlets of four or so are important as an adapter can cover more than one outlet. And cords with a flat plug are needed, as that outlet is often behind a bed or a cabinet.

Different-colored stuff sacks help keep the US-MX plugs and UK-Euro plugs separate.

But in Basel we needed a special Swiss Type J plug-adapter – which we didn't have. Many older rental places in parts of Europe are not upgraded to the standard Euro

“Schuko” plugs, or combo Euro & US plugs. And the lady who rented to us only had one Swiss J adapter to lend out. So a trip to a hardware store was in order. And I bought three – one for each of us, plus a spare.

Here's a chart (by Gear Patrol), if you're really into the whole ‘plug thing.’ The Type ‘J’ plug is for Switzerland, Liechtenstein and Rwanda. No, I don't know why.

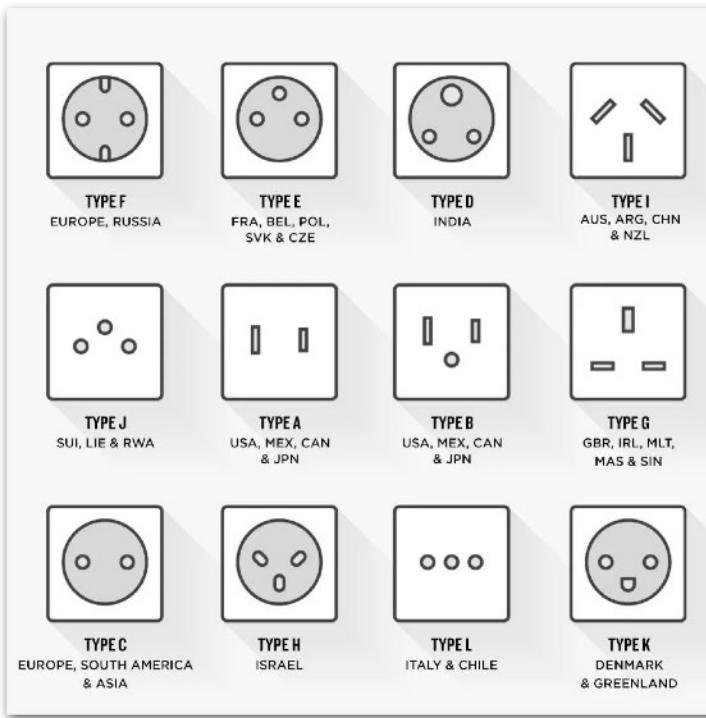


And the Swiss use ‘.ch’ as their internet domain name because it stands for ‘Confoederatio Helvetica.’



Vitra

It's another nice sunny morning as we board a local tram, and then transfer at the Barfüsserplatz on another cheap city tour that takes us from the large center city over the scenic ‘Middle Bridge’ (Mittlere Brücke), crossing the Rhine into Klein Basel.





Vitra is a high-end furniture factory and modern design experience that's located on Charles Eames Strasse, in Weil am Rhine, Germany. It's about half a kilometer from the tram stop, and the quiet pathway is well-marked at intervals along the lane, with tiny replicas of famous modernist furniture pieces (Breuer, Eames, Bertoia, Van de Rohe, Noguchi) rotating inside little glass cases.



We're interrupted – I am, anyway – at the sight of a gorgeous classic Citroen that's been marvelously well cared for. I fantasize, briefly, about asking the owner for a ride down the lane to Vitra. But Carolyn assures me that I really need the exercise after a week on that river cruise.



And so we follow more tiny furniture displays of leading modern design houses (Herman Miller, Knoll, Artek) that beckon us onward to this so-called Vitra nirvana that awaits our efforts. And it really is a pleasant day for a stroll under the apple trees.

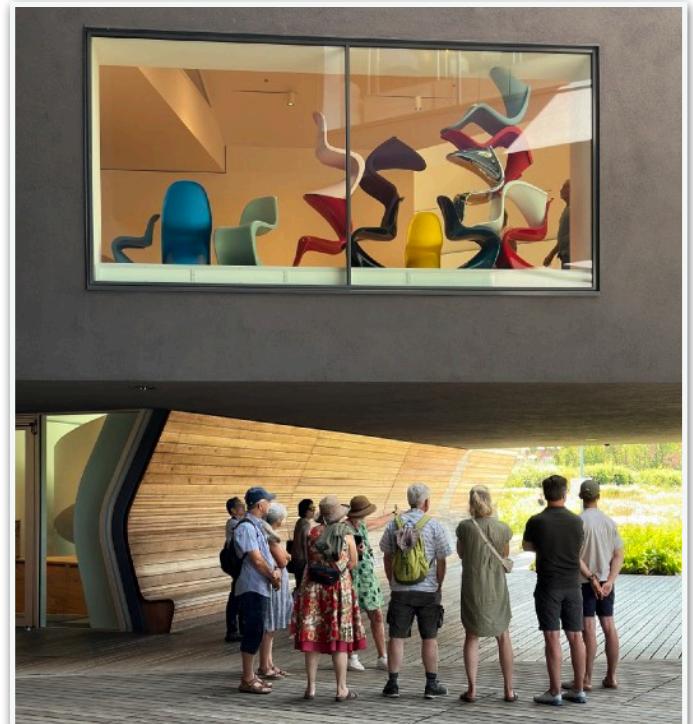


But all of that can linger for a few more minutes as we settle into the shade with a couple of cold drinks and a luncheon charcuterie board.

After lunch, and a prolonged break in the shade, we're again ready to confront this "Xanadu for modern furniture fanatics" (Washington Post, 2024-04-17).



As we draw slowly closer, and the day progresses from nice to hot, we're directed through a maze or two, and past a large herb garden, toward a gray angular structure with broad overhangs that seems to promise a bit of relief. And maybe some art.





The stuff on display is outrageously attractive to any connoisseur of the arts. And it would be easy to imagine a striking house of modernist design in which much of it would appear almost natural. But even if we had the extra space in our bags (which we don't), and wanted to haul the additional weight for a couple of months (see above), a glance at most of the price tags informs us that we really don't require many of these items to make our lives complete.

A peek through the beguiling windows of the Lounge Chair Atelier invites us to dream of having such a grand and comfortable chair in our distant home, and suggests that the original beautiful leather Herman Miller chair and ottoman combo designed by Charles Eames is still being made here and is available today. Plus shipping.



Or, we might even find a vintage 1956 Eames Chair [online](#) for about US\$15,000 or more. Plus shipping. If we had that kind of money. And that kind of passion.



From the large grey VitraHaus it's a pleasant short ramble further into the sprawling campus along Ray-Eames-Strasse to the adjacent Vitra Design Museum, and a fascinating array of displays to consume the rest of your day. Or ours, anyway.

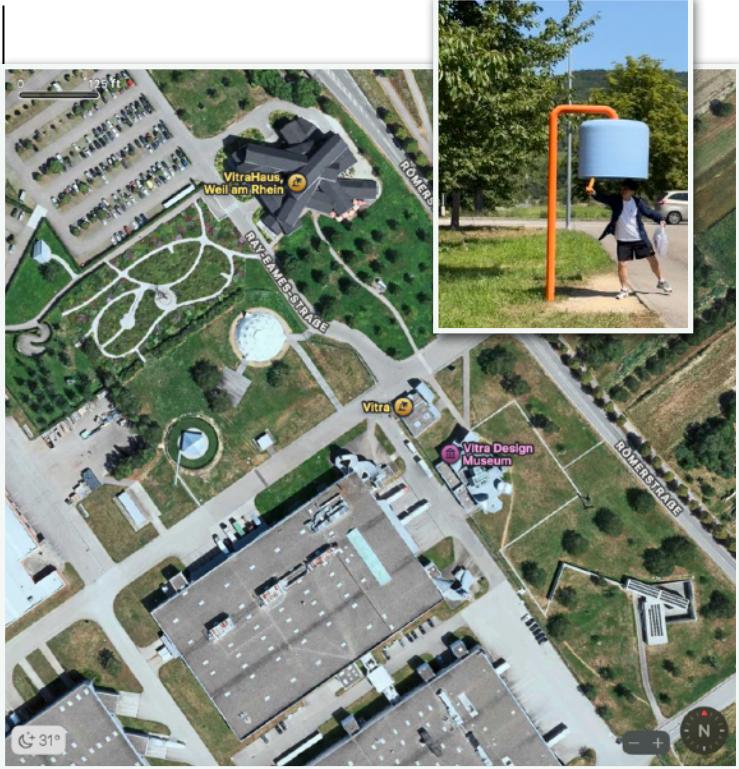
And beyond handling very high quality furnishings, the entire Vitra campus is a design playground, with architecture by Zaha Hadid (her first built project), Frank Gehry, Álvaro Siza, Jean Prouvé, Tadao Ando, and Bucky Fuller. So it's worth the time and effort to get here, if design is an interest of yours.





The husband and wife team of Charles and Ray Eames were important visionaries in the world of modernism. Their list of significant architectural and graphic design works is long and it influenced a lot of our world. It's good to see them honored here at Vitra. For an inside peek at some of their deep thinking process, take a look at this short film. It will take you from an afternoon picnic in a Chicago lakeshore park to the edge of the universe, with the scale increasing each ten seconds by a power of ten. And then back again, by negative powers of ten into the molecular level:

Powers of Ten (www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fKBhvDjuy0)

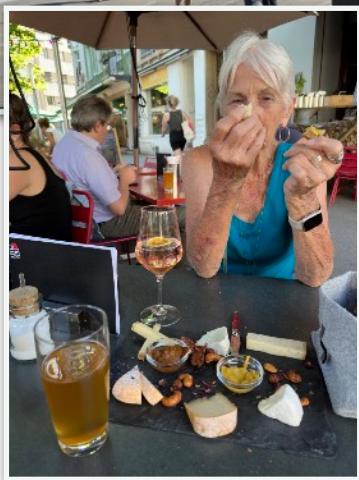


And soon we're back at the main Basel train station, bedraggled, but only a few blocks from some really good food. And some essential cold refreshment.



In all, it was a very nice walk to the Vitra Campus down a quiet lane on a summer's day. However, we arrived somewhat bushed and with many of our ancient joints in rebellion, to find that the whole place is designed to keep us walking. And in the end, we had no reserves of energy to continue the trek onward to several distant sections of the widely-spread place.

In the waning afternoon we were reluctant to face that long hike back to the tram, but then noticed there is a convenient bus stop right by us on the Romerstrasse. We could see it from the cafe! And so we avoided another long slog back to the tram station. The bus stop was just past a big blue bell hanging from an orange post, that seemed to say "Ring Me!" Or at least it did to the guy who rang it....



Here's the link to Vitra for more (a lot more!) information about this inspiring operation:
<https://www.vitra.com/en-lp/about-vitra>

Fondation Beyeler

In the morning, we're again refreshed and ready for another day – another art-ing-outing around Basel. We'll be heading toward the Fondation Beyeler, yet another of the city's highly-acclaimed attractions for the artistically-minded wanderer.

It takes us a few minutes to unravel the mysteries of the Basel tram map. And soon we're on the correct route (we hope), passing more of the city's amusing sculpture, the distinctive red Rathaus (City Hall), and the busy Marktplatz.



The Beyeler is in the beautiful nearby pastoral setting of Riehen (pop: 21,788), where about 90% of the population speaks German, and there are even 29 folks who speak Romansh. This is the first town in Switzerland to elect a woman to political office, in 1958. It was the childhood home of Roger Federer, and the mathematician Leonhard Euler, and the entire town is listed on the Inventory of Swiss Heritage Sites.

The small town of Riehen, with tram stops on the 2 and 6 lines, could hardly be in a more convenient location for visits from the city. We hop off at the Beyeler tram stop and a glance at the elegant entryway suggests this will be a special piece of the art world that we have come to experience on a pretty summer's day.



The Beyeler Foundation collection was bequeathed by the art dealers Ernst Beyeler and Hilda Kunz, and is housed in a graceful modernist museum by Renzo

Piano, designer of the innovative Centre Pompidou in Paris. It was opened to the public in October of 1997, with a showing of 140 modern classics that included 23 Picassos. The overall collection of 200 works ranges from Monet, Cézanne and Van Gogh, to Dubuffet, Warhol, Pollock, Basquiat and Louise Bourgeois.



Inside the enclosing red porphyry wall a richly attended garden greets the visitor, and the art gallery embraces the natural world just outside, framed by tall and elegant windows. The art inside is large, varied, and engaging, as we make our way through the many quiet rooms. There's no hurry as each room invites us to linger. Feet shuffle, people murmur in a variety of languages, and I can almost hear the soft strains of Eric Satie in the background.

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnacdOIoTBQ)



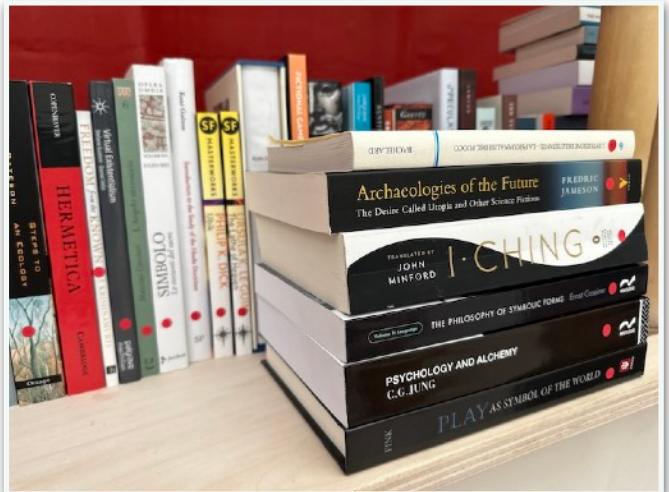
Soon we're in the presence of Alberto Giacometti, who was born in southeastern Switzerland in 1901. Both his tall Standing Woman and Striding Man are studying the art, just as I am, although they're not inclined toward conversation at the moment. We'll get back to Giacometti later, as we wander further toward his birthplace in the farther reaches of Alpine Switzerland.



This is a museum that knows how to have a bit of fun and the Giacomettis have drawn us deep into a curious region of ‘art studying art.’ Yet they leave us to draw our own conclusions. Especially about a mermaid hugging the Pink Panther.



There's a well-stocked library that could keep us entranced for weeks or months. Or maybe years.



And a two-story window wall looks out over a pedestrian pathway, beyond to the fertile plains of lowland Switzerland, and just over the border to the Tüllinger Hills in southern Germany. One could well imagine spending considerable time here in this idyllic countryside, in quiet summer days among leafy woods, bee-tended flowers, good books, and inspiring art.



The world just beyond those large windows beckons us to the rear gardens and a quiet pond sporting an odd ogre-fountain. The dribble of water mingles well with the slight rustle of leaves on old oak trees.



In the entry garden at the other end of the gallery, several interactive events are underway, including a rising mist from the entryway pond. You can just lose yourself in it, but watch your step.



And the onsite cafe is a welcome stop for a delicious lunch break. It's hard to imagine a finer place for lunch than in the gardens of your favorite museum. Or on a rooftop overlooking the city. Or wherever they've tucked it away just for you.



We finally leave the Beyeler after a long and satisfying day. And that's when the Galerie Marc Triebold beckons to us from just across the street. But while we're tempted, there's no time left to us on our first visit to Basel, although there are plenty of discoveries to make here that could bring us back. Maybe someday soon.

The afternoon wanes as we board the tram again and return to Basel's modern railway station, with its fine old refurbished entry



lobby. From there we find a good street side cafe and we relax over one last delicious dinner, with a couple of refreshing Aperols on a warm evening.

The time has come for us to depart the fine city of Basel on the famous Rhine and to travel onward. We have an ambitious itinerary ahead of us over the next few months as we try to cover a lot of Europe that we've never had time, or resources, for in the past. The important fact is that we're now entering what's probably the last decade or so of the time that was allotted to us to explore this marvelous and diverse planet, and we hope to make the most of it.



Our next stop will be Zurich, in the heart of Switzerland, on the shores of the Zürichsee, as we make our way across this mountain-studded country and beyond. Please join us for that dispatch, coming up next.

— PRW & CJK

