



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Covering 15,937 square miles (41,277 square kilometers), Switzerland is just smaller than Denmark, or about twice the size of New Jersey. Switzerland is sometimes called the “roof of Europe” because of its towering Alps, which cover more than half of the country, running east to west. The Jura Mountains extend across another 10 percent of the territory. The highest mountain peaks include Monte Rosa, at 15,209 feet (4,635 meters), and the Matterhorn, at 14,691 feet (4,478 meters). Numerous lakes and large, flat green valleys are interspersed throughout the majestic Alps. Because of the mountainous terrain, only one-fourth of the land can be used for farming. Swiss waters drain into five key European rivers: the Rhine, Rhône, Po, Adige, and Danube. Waterpower is one of the chief natural resources of Switzerland.

The climate varies according to elevation and region but is generally temperate. In major cities, daily summer temperatures average 77°F (25°C), while winter temperatures range between 27 and 32°F (-3–0°C). Winters tend to be long and snowy, especially in mountainous areas. The Alpine region of Switzerland has about 10,000 avalanches a year. Swiss valleys are frequently foggy and rainy. Switzerland's diverse landscape and distinct seasons make it one of the most beautiful places on earth.

History

The Celtic tribes that occupied the area of present-day Switzerland were part of the Roman Empire for five

centuries. Later, Burgundian tribes settled in the west and Alemannians in the east; both were Germanic tribes, but they developed along different lines. During most of the Middle Ages, Switzerland was part of the Holy Roman Empire.

Switzerland is one of the world's oldest democracies. The founding of the Swiss Confederation took place on 1 August 1291, when the mountain territories, or *cantons*, of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden began a revolt against Austrian Hapsburg control by signing the Perpetual Covenant of 1291. Through a series of military victories, Swiss soldiers gained a reputation for their fighting prowess. The confederation later grew more powerful by adding other *cantons* (Luzern, Zürich, Bern). After withstanding turmoil and war during the 16th and early 17th centuries, Switzerland received official recognition as an independent nation in the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia.

In 1815, because of a brief invasion by Napoleon, Switzerland declared permanent neutrality. Early in the 19th century, Switzerland became a centralized nation-state. In 1848, it adopted a constitution, making it a federal state. In 1874, direct democracy by the people became an integral part of the constitution. Switzerland experienced industrialization and urbanization during the 19th century. While other neutral European nations fell to attacking armies during World Wars I and II, Switzerland, aided by natural geography, remained neutral and was not invaded.

As part of its position of neutrality, the Swiss Federation is not a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the European Union (EU). However, it did join the United Nations in 2002, and it maintains solid relations with many nations. Switzerland serves the world by

sponsoring the International Red Cross, hosting some UN offices, and acting as an impartial location for peace conferences and summits.

Switzerland's image was tarnished in 1996 after Jewish groups and others alleged that its status in World War II was not entirely neutral. Millions of dollars belonging to European Jews were deposited in Swiss bank accounts before or during the war and then “lost” or used to fund Nazi activities. Several years of negotiations led to an August 1998 settlement by the two largest Swiss banks to pay a US\$1.25 billion sum to cover losses from Holocaust survivors during World War II.

In April 1999, the Swiss approved several constitutional amendments, including changing the requirement that the currency be backed by gold, granting the right to strike, and giving equal opportunity to the disabled.

Switzerland is dealing with the effects of its decision to forego European integration, though it still cooperates on many levels with a united Europe. The Swiss must also deal with issues of how to regulate immigration and how to maintain their high standard of living.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Switzerland's population of 7.6 million is growing at around 0.22 percent annually. Switzerland is home to a variety of ethnic groups, most of whom share a common history. Germans, who account for 65 percent of the total population, dominate in the east and central *cantons*. The French, who comprise 18 percent of the population, are located mostly in the west. In parts of the south, most people are of Italian descent and account for 10 percent of the total population. One percent of the population has Romansch ancestry. The Romansch are native to southern Switzerland and northern Italy. Their language is also called Romansch. About 6 percent of Switzerland's residents have come from the Middle East, the former Yugoslavia, Spain, Greece, Italy, and other countries. Most of them are guest workers and do not have Swiss citizenship. Around 75 percent of the population lives in urban areas. The largest cities are Zürich, Geneva, and Basel.

Language

Four official languages are spoken in Switzerland: German, French, Italian, and Romansch. Each *canton* has the right to declare which language it will use. All street signs are in that language only. All the languages are available for study in most schools, but the language of instruction is that of the *canton*. Most Swiss can understand at least one of the other official languages of the confederation, and many speak English, which is also offered in the schools. Although French and Italian are basically spoken as written, written standard German (*Hochdeutsch*) is different from what is spoken every day by the German Swiss. The everyday dialect is called Swiss German (*Schweizerdeutsch*). It is rather unique and difficult for other German-speaking peoples to understand. Relations between the different language groups

and protection of minority languages continue to be important political issues.

Religion

Close to half of the Swiss people are Roman Catholic and most of the rest belong to various other Christian churches, mostly Protestant. There is a growing Muslim population (4 percent) and a small Jewish minority (0.3 percent of the population). Switzerland was the center of the Zwingli and Calvin Protestant Reformations of the 16th century and has produced important modern theologians. Swiss Protestant churches are locally controlled and democratic. Both Catholic and Protestant churches have generally worked toward greater harmony. Switzerland is a secular society. Participation in religion often is reserved for special events and holidays, and many people claim no religion. As elsewhere in Europe, religion has more influence in rural areas than in the cities.

General Attitudes

The Swiss value hard work, thrift, and independence. They prize tolerance, punctuality, and a sense of responsibility. A favorite saying claims that if people are late, they are either not wearing Swiss watches or not riding Swiss trains. The Swiss also value nature and beauty and are proud of their efforts to protect the environment. Their attitudes have been influenced by the majestic mountains and beautiful lakes found throughout the country. Recycling is widely practiced.

The Swiss are proud of their political and social system, which is unique in Europe. One of its key elements is the federal system that unites different groups into one country. The motto is “Unity, yes; uniformity, no.” Each *canton* is highly autonomous, but all citizens participate in national civic affairs. For example, every physically fit male is required to serve in the Swiss Army. Soldiers train regularly and keep their guns and uniforms at home—always ready to form a militia to defend the country. There are only a few professional officers; most serve part-time. While the size of the military has been reduced recently, the basic structure remains intact.

Switzerland's national self-image has been tested as the Swiss try to deal with domestic social issues, determine how best to adapt their grassroots democracy to the 21st century, and define their place in modern Europe. These tasks are further complicated by an intense commitment to neutrality and by disagreements between the French- and German-speaking populations, especially where European integration issues are concerned.

Personal Appearance

People dress conservatively and well, following modern European fashions. The Swiss place a high value on cleanliness, neatness, and orderliness. Suits and ties are required for businessmen. Some people may wear casual clothing to work, depending on the situation. Traditional costumes are reserved for special occasions.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

A handshake is appropriate for both men and women. Close friends may exchange three kisses on the cheeks, first on the left, then the right, and back to the left. This custom is different from that in much of Europe, where people give one kiss on each cheek. When entering or leaving an elevator or a store, most Swiss exchange simple greetings, even with strangers. Residents of small villages exchange greetings on the street.

Because the Swiss Confederation is a multilingual society, actual verbal greetings may vary. German greetings include *Guten Morgen* (Good morning), *Guten Tag* (Good day), *Guten Abend* (Good evening), and *Auf Wiedersehen* (Until we meet again). *Grütsie* (Hi) is a typical Swiss German greeting used throughout the day. In formal situations, French speakers often say *Bonjour* (Good day) or *Bonsoir* (Good evening). Friends may greet each other with *Salut* (Hello) or *Chao* (Hi). It is most polite to address others by their title and surname. Although young people use first names, adults generally reserve first names for close friends and family members.

Gestures

People generally avoid speaking with their hands. Chewing gum or attending to matters of personal hygiene in public is not appropriate. Talking to an older person with one's hands in the pockets is generally considered disrespectful. Legs generally are crossed with one knee over the other. When one is entering or leaving a building, it is polite to hold the door for the next person.

Visiting

The Swiss enjoy associating within sports, religious, or cultural associations. They also get together with their families on special occasions. However, people tend to keep to themselves, and spending time at home is important to most adults. When visits do occur, they are planned in advance. This is especially true of weekend visits.

The Swiss are hospitable to guests and expect courtesy in return. Dinner guests often bring chocolates or a bottle of wine for the host and flowers for the hostess. Flowers generally are presented in odd numbers and beautifully wrapped. When one leaves a home, it is customary to shake hands with all members of the family or group.

Eating

Lunch is usually eaten between 12:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m., and dinner is eaten around 7:30 p.m. Many Swiss at offices and schools also take short coffee or snack breaks at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. The Swiss use the continental style of eating; the fork is held in one's left hand and the knife stays in the right. Soft foods, such as potatoes, are cut with a fork, not a knife. Cutting such foods with a knife implies they are improperly cooked. The best compliment one can give is to take additional helpings. Asking for salt or pepper is often considered an insult because it implies the food is improperly seasoned. When finished eating, a person places the utensils

side by side on the plate. If they are placed another way, it may indicate the person wants to eat more. During a meal, hands (not elbows) are always kept above the table. In restaurants, service charges usually are included in the bill, which is paid at the table.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The nuclear family is the most important social unit in Swiss society. Families are generally small, with only one or two children. Family privacy is important. The man is traditionally the head of the household. An increasing number of women work outside the home, although still fewer than in many other European countries. Maternity benefits for working women include three months of paid leave. Children of working parents are sent to schools and day care. Women gradually are taking a greater part in political life. Only in 1971 did women receive the right to vote in national elections and in most *cantons*. By 1990, women in all *cantons* had gained the right to vote on local issues.

Housing

About 70 percent of the Swiss population rents their housing. Most urban families live in three-bedroom flats or apartments; houses are more common in rural areas, where the chalet-style homes Switzerland is known for are located. People's homes are generally neat and clean. Housing is built in harmony with the environment; balconies and rooftops provide access to fresh air, sunlight, and perhaps a small garden. In urban areas, the Swiss generally take care to be quiet from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m., all day Sunday, and on public holidays. During these times, people refrain from playing loud music, doing laundry, or taking out the trash. Because of a comprehensive public transit system, almost all Swiss dwellings are within 10 minutes walking distance of a bus, tram, or train.

Dating and Marriage

Teenagers often socialize in groups at first and begin dating a few years later. Going to nightclubs (discos), restaurants, pubs, and the cinema are popular activities. The legal age to marry is 18 for women and 20 for men. Most Swiss believe it is important to finish school or become financially established before getting married. Adults usually marry in their mid- to late twenties. Many couples also prefer to live together for several years before or instead of marrying. However, many choose to marry before having children.

For a couple to marry, they must have a civil ceremony, which may be followed by an optional religious one. Church weddings are popular and typically followed by a dinner and dancing. At the reception, bridesmaids sometimes offer guests colored handkerchiefs for good luck. Couples register for gifts at nearby stores, but sometimes guests give money to the couple. There are no obligations between families; the couple usually finances their own marriage.

Life Cycle

Upon the birth of a child, a family might place a wooden stork outside of their home. Small gatherings with relatives in the days following the birth are common. Military service is mandatory for males: at 18, men may serve in the military for a year or they can initially serve for eleven weeks followed by three weeks of service per year until they reach their 40s. University study usually ends around age 25, and most young people host a small celebration upon completing their final exams. Normal retirement age is at 65, though the ample Swiss pension plan, into which all workers must contribute, allows for early retirement at a reduced payment.

Diet

Meat, potatoes, and milk products (cheese, yogurt, creams, etc.) are the main foods. Potatoes are prepared in a variety of ways, such as *Röstis* (grated, pan-fried potatoes) or *Gratin* (potatoes sliced and baked with cream and garlic), french fries, or boiled potatoes. Grilled sausage, known as *Bratwurst* (in German) or *saucisse* (in French), is popular. Regional specialties include various sausages, rich cheeses, special wines, fish, leek soup, and pork. Each *canton* has its own specialty bread. *Fondue* (a traditional dish in which pieces of bread are dipped in melted cheese) and *Raclette* (melted cheese on a piece of potato) are popular cheese dishes. Fruit pies and cakes are enjoyed also.

Breakfast is usually light and might include various types of fresh breads, cheeses, and coffee. Lunch usually consists of a main dish with meat, some form of potatoes, and a salad. Open-faced sandwiches commonly are eaten at dinner. In major urban areas, the trend is to have the main meal in the evening; in other areas it is eaten at midday.

Recreation

The Swiss enjoy vacationing, either within their own country or abroad. They love nature and the outdoors. The Swiss like hiking, mountain climbing, and other such activities. Almost half of the population of Switzerland skis regularly (both cross-country and downhill). Gun ownership is widespread, so marksmanship contests are a national pastime. The most popular sports are soccer and cycling. A small number enjoy traditional Swiss games, such as *schwinger*, a type of wrestling that is similar to Greco-Roman wrestling but does not have weight classifications. The Swiss also enjoy taking walks, watching movies, and attending cultural events.

The Arts

Swiss visual arts have increased in stature in the 20th century. Photography and graphic arts are prominent. A variety of excellent museums, both large and small, provide access to the work of artists from around the world.

Prominent Swiss writers include Nobel Prize winner Carl Spitteler, as well as contemporary dramatists Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Le Corbusier was an important figure in developing the International Style, a major architectural influence in the 20th century.

Swiss folk music is famous, particularly yodeling and alpenhorn blowing. The alpenhorn, up to 12 feet long, was traditionally used by herdsmen to call their cows to pasture.

Now it is most often used to provide music for ceremonies and other events. Other popular folk art forms are wood carving and embroidery.

Holidays

Major holidays in Switzerland include New Year's Day, Easter (Friday–Monday), Labor Day (1 May), Ascension, Whitsunday and Whitmonday, National Day (1 Aug.), Federal Day of Prayers (a mid-September thanksgiving holiday), and Christmas. Christmas is the biggest celebration of the year. On Christmas Eve, gifts are exchanged and the family gathers for a large meal. The family relaxes on Christmas Day and visits friends on 26 December. New Year's Eve is a time for parties and fireworks.

SOCIETY

Government

Switzerland is a highly decentralized federal state; most political power resides in the 26 *cantons* as well as in local communities. Constitutional amendments can be instigated by popular initiative, and virtually all important legislation is subject to popular referendums. Each community has its own constitution and laws but is under the supervision of the *canton*. Each *canton* also has its own constitution and control over such things as school systems, police, welfare, and local issues. At these two levels, decisions are made directly by the people.

At the federal level, democracy becomes more representative. The Federal Assembly has two houses, one with representatives of the people (200-seat National Council) and one with representatives of the *cantons* (46-seat Council of States). Members of both bodies are directly elected to four-year terms. Several political parties have legislative representation, including the Radical Free Democratic Party (FDP), Social Democratic Party (SPS), Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), and Swiss People's Party (SVP).

The Federal Council constitutes the executive branch; it has seven members who are each elected to a four-year term by the Federal Assembly. Each year, the council selects one council member to serve as its president, a largely ceremonial position. That person is then technically the president of Switzerland for a calendar year. A vice president is also chosen for a year. President Micheline Calmy-Rey's term as president lasts until the end of 2011. The federal government is responsible for foreign policy and matters affecting all *cantons*.

Economy

Despite a lack of natural resources, Switzerland has one of the strongest and most stable economies in the world. Its people enjoy a high standard of living and have the highest rate of job satisfaction in Europe. Its economy has high standards of performance and a strong middle class; poverty is nearly nonexistent. Unemployment and inflation remain low.

Switzerland is known as the banking and finance capital of the world. Changes to its banking laws have been made to prevent the opening of accounts by corrupt sources. Its

finance industry has fueled economic success for the country. The 2008 global financial crisis did necessitate a government bail out of the largest Swiss bank; however, the Swiss financial industry remains comparatively strong. Tourism is a vital and driving force in the economy; industrial production is equally important. The Swiss produce not only fine watches, chocolates, and cheeses but also machinery, chemicals, textiles, and various precision instruments, which are known for their excellent craftsmanship. Switzerland donates money to international development.

Against the advice of Swiss business and political leaders, the Swiss electorate have voted not to join the EU. In a 1992 national referendum, voters rejected a proposal to join the European Economic Area (EEA). Some fear this decision will further isolate Switzerland from the European economy. However, Swiss voters approved closer trading ties with the EU in 1999 and entered the EU's passport free zone in 2005. Switzerland's currency is the *franc* (CHF).

Transportation and Communications

Switzerland's small land area and high population density create a perfect environment for public transportation. The well-developed system includes buses, streetcars, and trains. Still, most families have cars, and private transport is common. A high-speed rail link operates between Geneva and Brussels. Opened in 1980, the Saint Gotthard Road Tunnel in south-central Switzerland is one of the longest tunnels in the world. It has greatly improved road transportation between Switzerland and Italy.

Communications systems are excellent and completely modern. Numerous television and radio stations broadcast throughout the country. Cable and satellite television offer widespread access to foreign broadcasts. Daily newspapers are available everywhere.

Education

Education is the responsibility of the individual *cantons*. Education is free and compulsory until age 15. There are three basic levels: primary, secondary, and *gymnasia* (high school). The high schools provide preparation for a university education. Many students choose to enter a vocational school after their secondary education. There are a number of private schools in addition to the state schools. Seven *cantonal* universities, two federal institutes of technology, a college of education, and a university for economic and social sciences are available. Built in 1460, the University of Basel is the oldest university in Switzerland. Many students travel abroad for advanced training. Switzerland spends a slightly lower percentage of its income on education and has a lower enrollment rate than many other industrialized countries.

Health

Switzerland has both private and public hospitals. Medical facilities offer efficient care, and personnel are well trained. While the government provides benefits for the elderly and social welfare, it does not have a uniform system of health insurance. Each *canton* has different laws regarding insurance, but most people must purchase private insurance. All residents are required to have health insurance. The Swiss

generally enjoy good health, a fact reflected in their high life expectancy. Switzerland, which has one of the highest rates of drug addiction in Europe, voted against a proposed 1998 amendment to legalize heroin and other narcotics.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	7,623,438 (rank=94)
Area, sq. mi.	15,937 (rank=133)
Area, sq. km.	41,277

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	13 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	4 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$41,200
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	4 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	78 (male); 84 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).