

Understand Switzerland

SWITZERLAND TODAY302

How has Europe's traditional home of Alpine skiing and secret banking fared amid a warming climate and a shaky global economy?

HISTORY304

Idiosyncratic, insular, forever neutral and famously privileged – learn about Switzerland's unique historical journey.

THE SWISS WAY OF LIFE 310

Four languages, bags of ancient Alpine tradition, an exceptional art and design scene: life in cultural Switzerland is enviable.

THE SWISS TABLE 316

There's far more to Swiss cuisine than chocolate, cheese and Swiss-German rösti. Tempt taste buds with this ravishing guide to Swiss food.

SWISS WINE 321

Have vineyard walks and wine tasting with local winemakers ever been so exquisitely scenic?

Switzerland Today

They don't call it 'Fortress Switzerland' for nothing. Seemingly immune to the troubles and travails of the countries that surround it, Switzerland appears intent on reinforcing its 'otherness' and its 'not in my backyard' mentality. With a strong economy, social stability and an emphasis on sustainability, the country remains happy to cultivate its independent streak and unique reputation.

Best on Film

Puppylove (2013) Coming-of-age story starring Lausanne-born Vincent Perez, directed by Delphine Lehericéy.

Sister (2012) Ursula Meier's award-winning film about the complicated dynamics between poor siblings at a Swiss ski resort.

Home (2008) A family unravels as life by an unfinished motorway takes its toll in this Ursula Meier drama.

Journey of Hope (1991) Oscar-winning tale of a Kurdish family seeking a better life in Switzerland.

Breathless (1960) New wave classic by Swiss avant-garde film-maker Jean-Luc Godard.

Best in Print

Swiss Watching (Diccon Bewes) Amusing, astute portrait.

The Alpine Set in Switzerland (Lindsay Greatwood) Charlie Chaplin, Graham Greene et al.

Swiss Politics For Complete

Beginners (Pierre Cormon) How the system works.

Grüezi: Strange Things in Heidiland (Andri Pol and David Signer) Switzerland's quirky side, explored via photo and text.

Popular Initiatives?

Most Swiss popular initiatives come and go with scant attention paid by those beyond Switzerland's borders. Not so the initiative against mass immigration, which aims to put the brake on immigration through the use of quotas, launched by the Swiss People's Party (SVP; the same party that in 2009 formulated the successful initiative against the construction of minarets in Switzerland).

In February 2014 the initiative, with a voter turn-out of 55.8%, passed with the slimmest of majorities (50.3%, with most support in the German- and Italian-speaking cantons), leaving the country (and the parliament, which has three years to turn the result into law) to deal with the fall-out from what has been regarded as a 'stunt gone wrong'. Given that over 20% of the Swiss population are foreigners, and that many industries (such as the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors) depend on foreign workers, the ramifications could be severe. In the immediate aftermath of the vote, the European Commission expressed its disappointment with the result and questions have been raised about Switzerland's bilateral agreements with the EU, in particular the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons.

The result has left pundits and voters alike wondering whether the popular initiative will have an effect on the federal elections to be held in 2015, not just in terms of outcomes, but also in voter turn-out (the 2011 federal elections saw 49% of the Swiss electorate cast their vote). Many voters underestimated the support for the mass immigration initiative, believing that the SVP didn't have the numbers; they may well show up at the 2015 polls just to make sure there are no further electoral shocks that draw unwanted attention to Swiss politics.