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Unesco Swiss World Heritage Sites

Old City of Berne

The Old City of Berne is the medieval city centre of Switzerland's capital, Berne. Built on a rocky promontory which fits tightly into a loop of the Aare River, the old city of Berne has retained its original layout developed between the 12th and the 15th century.

A major fire in 1405 destroyed most of the existing wooden buildings of the Old City. New buildings were thereafter built in sandstone, including he characteristic arcades (Lauben). Major construction efforts occurred also during the 18th century. Despite of this, the Old City managed to preserve its original medieval character thanks to a coherent planning strategy right into modern times.

The character of the Old City of Berne today is shaped by lovely old lanes, shady Lauben, warm sandstone buildings, quirky Renaissance fountains and a number of churches, including the Münster, Switzerland's tallest cathedral. Numerous buildings are protected as Swiss Cultural Properties of National Significance, as is the entire Old City.

Berne was founded around 1191 by the Duke Berchtold V of Zähringen, who set up his ducal seat the castle of Nydegg at the most eastern tip of the Peninsula. The Duke reputedly named Berne after a bear ("Bär" in German) which he hunted nearby. The first of Berne's many fountains features an armoured bear holding the standard of the city's founder.

When Berne became a free imperial city in 1218, it expanded west towards the Zytgloggeturm (time bell tower). During the protectorate of Peter II of Savoy (1255-65), the city was extended further west to the Käfigturm (prison tower).

Around the same time, Nydegg castle was removed. Its location is now marked by the Nydegg church. Parts of the fort's massive stone foundations survive here and there. Around it, and below the main city, a new suburb sprang up called the "Matte". For many centuries, this was a self-contained district of local craftspeople and dockworkers. They long retained a dialect related to the Jenisch language of the Swiss gypsies. This was dubbed "Matten Englisch" by the other Bernese to whom it was largely incomprehensible.

The final urban expansion of the medieval period took place in the 14th century. It was marked by the Christoffel tower which was demolished later in the 19th century to give way to new streets and Berne's railway station.

In 1360, the Aare was diverted through three artificial channels to power city-owned water mills near the "Matte" quarter. A Schiffländte (ships' landing place) was also built to allow for the unloading and loading of ships. Medieval sources record the nerve-wracking noise of the ceaseless activity of machinery, carts and commerce in the area.

Berne's cathedral (Münster) was constructed during the 17th century, when also many patrician sandstone houses were built. Towards the end of the 18th century, almost 80% of the original buildings were renewed. At the end of the 19th century, the Bundeshaus (Swiss Parliament Building) was built along the southern edge of the Pensinsula, where the prison tower wall used to be. Other important buildings which have been constructed since 1848 include the Museum of Fine Arts, the Historical Museum, Rathaus (City Hall), University, Municipal Theatre, etc.

The Old City was built along several parallel running rows of houses. The only major cross streets developed along major city walls as they were pushed out further west and therefore mark the major stages of the city's development.

The three quietest and most characteristic lanes in the Old City are Postgasse (post lane), Gerechtigkeitsgasse (justice lane) and Junkerngasse (squire lane). All meet at Nydegg bridge near the old castle site. Further west, the cobbled lanes of the old town stretch away on both sides of the Zytgloggeturm: Marktgasse (market lane) in the west and the elegant Kramgasse (grocers' lane) in the east. Many buildings feature Baroque façades which were attached to the medieval buildings early in the eighteenth century.

There are over 100 fountains in the City of Berne. Eleven are graced with Renaissance allegorical statues - the "Chindlifrässer" (child eater) fountain being one of the more curiously named one - most likely used as a reminder to children to behave.

Like many European capitals, Berne today offers an intriguing contrast of old monuments and contemporary buildings. The Bubenbergplatz is a particularly good example of this. However, in most areas, the Old City of Berne preserves the traditional old arcaded lanes, many of them pedestrian zones.

Sources: whc.unesco.org/en/list/267, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_City_of_Bern

Birdseye view of the Old City of Berne (Nydegg church and bridge at the eastern tip of the peninsula in the foreground)

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Münster cathedral, with Aare weir, Schiffländte (ships' landing place) and Matte quarter

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