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# Of Castles & Clocks

Ruby Boukabou discovers it's not just bankers and bureaucrats that make Geneva tick. Underneath the city's precision is a creative world of musicians, artists and chefs. And don't leave town until you taste the chocolate, of course

With an ambiance somewhere between a crisp Alpine city, a chic café and an international airport, Geneva is unique, works by the clock and is ridiculously well organized. But is it a 'neutral' landlocked village lacking soul, or a gem of a city in the heart of Europe? Well that depends on your agenda...

Flying over the Alps, the snow-capped mountains jut through clouds that open up to reveal a stunning, picture-book view of a huge glistening lake, neat, pale green vineyards, and a clean, pretty town. The precision in the landscape translates and it becomes easy to understand why the Swiss have got the watch-making, chocolate refining, cheese melting and the transport system down. They seem to have an inbuilt system of timing, refining, definition and planning that surpasses their neighbours by light years.

There's a saying that heaven is where the French are chefs, the Italians lovers, the English police, the Germans mechanics and it's all organized by the Swiss. This surely rings true in Geneva where transport is never late and, if there's a chance of your

bus arriving 30 seconds early, there will be a traffic light that holds it over so it arrives on the dot. All very well if you're on a tight schedule, but foreigners, internationals and even locals moan about the lack of spontaneity (in apartments, you're even given an allocated time of two hours a week to use the washing machine). It can all be a bit confining – Dostoevsky apparently wrote in his diary: "Went to Geneva. It's a good place to commit suicide". In this city, it's best to give even close friends a couple of weeks notice for a rendezvous. Even for a coffee. And don't be late. But, knowing that life here is planned to the minute, don't pull your hair out, pull out your schedule and enjoy advance planning, Swiss style.

Home to several major United Nations agencies, Geneva is pretty much bilingual. But it's a good place to brush up on your French as the pace is slower than Paris, the accent more sing-song and people have the time and patience to repeat something twice or thrice.

An obvious note for your diary could be the music festivals in and around Geneva which are platforms for local and

international talent. These include Fête de la Musique ([www.fetedelamusique.ch](http://www.fetedelamusique.ch)) in June, Paleo Festival ([www.paleo.ch](http://www.paleo.ch)) just 15 minutes away in Nyon in August, and of course the Montreux Jazz Festival ([www.montreuxjazz.com](http://www.montreuxjazz.com)) in July which is a gorgeous train journey away along the lake. The line-up (since 1967) has included Ella Fitzgerald, Prince, Miles Davis, Bob Dylan and Lenny Kravitz. Montreux can be expensive, but the popular 'Festival Off' concerts just outside the halls are free.

For a relatively small city, there are a large number of quality jazz musicians in Geneva. Unfortunately there is a lack of jazz venues, with musicians often having to work elsewhere, but the main centre in town is AMR on Rue des Alpes ([www.amr-geneve.ch](http://www.amr-geneve.ch)). Established in 1974, this association is dedicated to improvised music. The centre houses a jazz school, creates a network of musicians and has concerts, cheap rehearsal rooms and a bar. Every Tuesday night there is a jam session for a five franc entry. It's not Paris or New York, but it's a warm environment with cheap drinks and some surprises, depending on who turns up.



In terms of alternative venues, the biggest is L'Usine (4 place des Volontaires), a one-time gold refining factory which sits between the bank district and the river. It houses music labels, a recording studio, a cinema, workshops and two music spaces for bands and DJs. For this town, it's refreshingly cheap with a mixed crowd.

Geneva has a symphony orchestra, chamber orchestra, ballet company, opera house, contemporary ensemble and chamber quartets, which often feature imported star conductors and musicians. The chamber orchestra notably uses period instruments to transport their audiences back in time.

Victoria Hall and The Grand Theatre, near Plainpalais, are the two main concert halls. If you're early, drift by the Park Bastion and take time out to watch (or join) the old men playing at large chessboards inside the park gates. These are just up from the statues of the four founding Protestants of Geneva. Amongst these is Calvin, who arrived from France in the 1500s and was responsible for the strict spiritual dictatorship, banning theatre and 'bawdy' arts and making Geneva

a rigid religious city and refuge for Protestants around Europe. Today in the more bohemian circles his name is muttered as a swear word synonymous with extreme conservatism.

Continue up the hill a little to take a wander through the cobbled old town (Vieille Ville). Aside from the Quartier des Bains, this is the place for boutique art galleries. In winter you'll catch comforting odours wafting from the fondue restaurants

and roast chestnut huts, and on December 12 there is the annual Geneva patriotic festival. 'Escalade' celebrates the Duke of Savoy's failed night-time attack on Geneva in 1602. The story goes that as his soldiers were scaling the city walls, a woman spotted them, ran to her soup pot and poured it over them, burning the soldiers and raising the alarm.

If you're after Heidi's Switzerland, there are a few traditional yodel clubs and groups ▶

#### DESTINATION FILE

##### GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

**Where** Located in the south-western corner of the French Swiss Alps, by the shore of Lake Geneva. About 227 kilometres from Zürich, 414 km from Paris and 740km from London

**Getting there** Regular flights leave from every major European city, and also from Australia's major cities. International trains run regularly

**Population** 178,400

**Average temperature** summer 13-25C, winter -2-6C

**Currency** Swiss Francs (CHF)

**Exchange rate** \$1 = 0.89 CHF





Café society: Geneva may run like clockwork, but there's plenty of opportunity to sit back and enjoy its charms

such as La Brante which teaches traditional instruments such as the Alpine horn and there's a yodel festival in Carouge in June. For typical Swiss cuisine served in traditional costume, book into the Edelweiss restaurant at 2 place de la Navigation in the Pâquis.

While not initially so visible, there is cultural diversity in Geneva. For world music, the Ateliers d'ethnomusicologie, founded in

smooth but funky electro tunes from resident DJ Goldfish and a friendly Australian barman, Karl, who, if you're lucky will do some cocktail flairing.

However it must be said that Geneva, in comparison to other European cities, is less about the nightlife and better enjoyed during the crispness of the day. Whether it's by getting lost in time at the Saturday morning

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1974, organises festivals, concerts, courses and music productions ([www.adem.ch](http://www.adem.ch)). There's also the festival of oriental cinema in April ([www.filmoriental.com](http://www.filmoriental.com)).

The main Geneva film festival is at the end of October ([www.cinema-tout-ecran.ch](http://www.cinema-tout-ecran.ch)) at the Grütli Theatre ([www.grutli.ch](http://www.grutli.ch)). Numerous theatre groups and contemporary dance companies are based in and around Geneva, and perform in various venues from the gorgeous Grand Théâtre to the art deco Palais Mascotte cabaret in the Kings Cross, of Geneva, the Pâquis.

The electronic music scene here saw the beginning of DJ starlet Miss Kittin and underground funk DJ icon Chill Pop. Clubs include Weetamix, La SIP and b'club, or for the sexy jet-set crowd, Java Club and FLOOR TWO in the Grand Hotel Kempinski. Though be warned that for some of these, you may need a Swiss loan to get even a lemonade. There are smaller and affordable bars and restaurants such as the delightful L'Armoire at the foot of the Old Town (4 rue de Vieux-Collège) which has a great mixed menu by chef Mohcin El Hachimi, inspiring

flea market in Plainpalais (not to be explored without a rich Italian coffee or chai tea from the resident caravan café) or a walk in the surrounding Alps (or ski during winter) with stunning views to clear your mind. In summer, the Bains des Pâquis is the hottest bathing place in town with La Terrace bar next door by the lake, an after-work and weekend hang. For winter, the Bains



This picturesque city is best explored by day



The spectacular Jet D'Eau at Lake Geneva

transform into a popular (and cheap) sauna where you can sweat out your stresses and toxins while watching the snow fall over Lake Léman. There is also a 365 day-a-year massage service and restaurant ([www.bains-des-paquis.ch](http://www.bains-des-paquis.ch)).

Don't leave town without sampling a fondue or trying the traditional hot breads, delicately sauced game, truffles, fabulous cheeses like Gruyère and good local wines. Bains des Pâquis is one of the cheap and cheerful places, or if you're ready to splash out, there are many fine restaurants, such as world renowned Philippe Chevrier's French-style rustic chateau which overlooks the vineyards in Satigny, just 15 minutes from Geneva ([www.chateauvieux.ch](http://www.chateauvieux.ch)).

And so while at first glance, Geneva sleeps in a valley of bankers, oil companies and bureaucrats, etch a little gold from the pavement and you can find a community of directors, musicians and chefs living and creating in this impressively smooth city. If it all gets a bit too much and you want to float back on the wind, you can try parachuting from the Alps, or for a change of scene just head to Cornavin station where you can board a 3½ hour TGV to Paris, or take a longer but pleasant train trip through the hills to Milan, Barcelona or Venice. Keen to make friends quickly at your new destination without breaking the bank on diamante watches? Simply pass by a Coop or Migros supermarket before leaving. The block chocolate, a staple in the Swiss diet, is not at all expensive and is utterly, blissfully, divine... 1