



# The Two Faces of Zurich

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It is a town known for its tranquility, its wealth, even its watches. So what's this about revolutionaries?

Earlier this year, the Dalai Lama gave his most extensive teachings outside of India in Zurich, of all places. Who would have thought that this tidy Swiss city of commerce, efficiency and clean streets—home of the world's fourth-largest stock exchange—could have played host to an exiled Tibetan spiritual leader, who for eight sold-out days shared his inter-faith teachings to 300,000 rapt listeners?

Actually, the Dalai Lama is not the first alternative-type to make tracks to Zurich. The town has attracted many revolutionary thinkers over the years, from James Joyce to Vladimir Lenin to the bored young exiles who launched the Dadaist art movement. I couldn't help but wonder what, exactly, drew them, so I traveled there to investigate for myself.

I found a beautiful little city, its medieval spires sitting astride the River Limmat and its face turned to the crystalline waters of Zurichsee, a lake so clean its water has been certified safe to drink. The cityscape features so many clock-faces on church spires that I started to wonder about the faces of Zurich itself: Could this picture-postcard pretty facade be harboring something more interesting, original, subversive even? Even the Dalai Lama's visit here was controversial: The government minister who met him excited heated criticism from the Chinese.

I begin at the Bahnhofstrasse, the city's prosperous heart, a wide thoroughfare west of the river that is closed to traffic. It is also lined with designer stores and traversed by trams that pick their way through the twinkling Christmas lights. This is one of the most prestigious shopping streets in Europe, and is the place to go for that pricey Prada bag, fur coat or Rolex watch. To that point, collectors of valuable timepieces pour into the Beyer watch and jewelry store (Bahnhofstrasse 31; [www.beyer-ch.com](http://www.beyer-ch.com)), below which the Beyer Watch Museum charts the history of time keeping from an ancient Egyptian water clock.

Toward the southern end of the Bahnhofstrasse is the Paradeplatz, a little square where I stop to do some people-watching. The streets off Paradeplatz are packed with financial institutions, banks and designer boutiques, and the men bustling about are wearing some of the best-cut suits I've ever seen. Forget Italian style, the Zurchers have a sartorial edge all of their own, and its key is in the discretion that informs it. These people may control the world's gold, but you would never know it from their understated, if top-quality, attire. Nothing in Zurich screams money; it's just a whisper you may catch as it quietly wafts by.

I continue my explorations with an open mind—and empty stomach. To fuel both, I pop into Sprüngli (Bahnhofstrasse 21; [www.spruengli.ch](http://www.spruengli.ch)) one of Zurich's two famous confectioners. Downstairs I get lost in the bewildering array of chocolates, truffles and cakes in the display cases, but I finally manage to buy a selection

of Sprüngli's specialty, Luxemburgerli—little cream-filled pastries in a palette of pastel shades, a bit like mini-madeleines—and take them upstairs to savor with a coffee in the tearoom, an old-world establishment with windows overlooking the Paradeplatz. It is the ideal spot for gazing down at those discreet, dapper suits and listening to Zurcher matrons gossiping over cappuccinos.

Across the road the city's Christmas market—one of several I discover—is doing roaring trade, but again there is nothing conspicuous in the consumption. Looking up, I see the two landmarks on this side of the river, both with fairytale spires: St Peter's church with the largest clock face in Europe—perhaps Zurich's better-known face—and the Fraumünster, a 13th-century Gothic cathedral found on an atmospheric cobbled square, lined with guild houses and centuries-old buildings with their dates carved out in the doorways.

The Fraumünster is the biggest tourist magnet in town with its Chagall-designed stained glass windows. Marc Chagall was 80 when he accepted this commission in 1967. The five, 10-meter high windows were fitted by the artist by 1979, and their jagged scenes of vivid, bleeding color fill the lofty Romanesque choir with a rainbow of light. Elsewhere, a 9-meter window by Giacometti, completed in 1940, would be the star were it not for Chagall's newer additions. Sitting in the choir looking up at these very modern windows, I have a sense of nascent admiration for a city that could enliven a historical building with the touches of a modern master: surprisingly innovative.

Outside, the guild houses are everywhere; they represent all trades in Zurich and still very much exist. Zufthaus zur Waage (Münsterhof 31) is a guild-house restaurant where you can get a good feeling for these vast wooden interiors, as well as sample delicious dishes of veal, the local specialty. Indeed, it was the existence of the guilds that ushered in the city's 1336 constitution, which gave everyone, craftsman or noble, the right to equal representation in the Council—they virtually ran the city until 1800. In Switzerland, government still works from the bottom up, with many laws decided by referendum at the local level.

I consider this as I stroll past fabulous little boutiques, shiny expensive cars and bankers who rub shoulders with teenagers blasting German rap out of portable stereos: typical of what I am beginning to see is Zurich's easy mix of commerce, history and alternative lifestyles—the city's other face.

Crossing to the east bank, I enter the medieval heart of town, a tumble of streets meandering up from the riverfront and its guild-house cafés. This is where I find the Niederdorfstrasse, a one kilometer-long cobbled thoroughfare radiating out in a web of alleyways and bijoux squares. Here is another shopping hub (and another atmospheric Christmas market) but instead of designer labels there are antiques, galleries and interiors shops. As the street reaches the train station, it becomes seedier, with fast food joints, strip clubs and cheap hostels. This is where I walk by wimpled nuns eating lunch with a couple of girls from the strip bar next door—by now I am growing accustomed to Zurich's ability to embrace contradictions.

These alleys lead me to the house where Vladimir Lenin lived from 1916 for over a year in Spiegelgasse (at number 14 in the home of Titus Kammerer, a cobbler). He left in a sealed car in April 1917—to return to Russia to lead the Revolution. I take a seat in the nearby Schober (Napf gasse 4), the city's other famous confectioner, a kitsch Garden of Eden with paper flowers twining the pillars and walls. I order a hot chocolate, made with melted chocolate rather than powder, and as I sipped the heavenly liquid I considered how Zurich was simultaneously home to Lenin, James Joyce (who worked on parts of *Ulysses* here) and a group of maverick intellectuals fleeing the war elsewhere in Europe who devised the absurdist movement of Dada. In fact, on the corner of Niederdorfstrasse, kiddie-corner to where I am sitting, is the Cabaret Voltaire, Dada's famous birthplace. Its ideas spread to New York City, Paris and the Netherlands, but I am intrigued that a movement whose greatest legacy was liberation from all previous rules of style and order should have come together in this neutral, seemingly placid city.

The end of the street leads me to the Münster gasse. Here, the imposing twin towers of Grossmünster can no longer be ignored: I head for the old church that dominates the skyline. Zurich, like all medieval cities, is tight-packed, its architecture small scale. But Grossmünster is from the land of the giants, a Gulliver to Zurich's Lilliput. Built on a Roman cemetery, Charlemagne founded the church in the ninth century; its present form took shape between 1100 and 1230. Inside, it is virtually free of decorative grandeur. This, I discover,

is down to Huldrych Zwingli, a 16 th-century preacher who was so committed to the Reformation that his 12 years at Grossmünster made the city a controversial religious center. His humanist ideals fell foul of the Roman Catholic Church, but he wouldn't relent, and by 1525 the Reformation had arrived.

Zwingli was one of the most anti-establishment figures in European history. He believed passionately in an individual's liberty to determine the course of their lives, free of strictures from the past. One of Zwingli's successors was Calvin, who was working in Geneva. Calvin developed his own strict theology, but the Calvinist Puritans who subsequently sailed to the New World took with them a doctrine initiated by Zwingli—that of personal liberty and a direct relationship with God.

With my discovery of Zwingli, everything falls into place. The lack of splendor in the public buildings, the discretion practiced by Zurchers in everything from tailoring to their distaste for displaying wealth... I finally understand why it is that Dada, Ulysses and the Russian Revolution were all conceived in this robustly bourgeois, unfussy place. Freedom of thought, as enshrined by Huldrych Zwingli, is the invisible hue giving that extra dash of color to Zurich's palette. And now I know why the Dalai Lama came here.

You missed the Dalai Lama but don't miss this...

All the Dalai Lamas in Zurich  
at the Völkerkundemuseum  
Pelikanstrasse 40  
T: +41 44 634 9011  
F: +41 44 634 9050  
[www.diedalailamas.ch](http://www.diedalailamas.ch)

until 8 January 2006

This exhibition will fascinate anyone interested in Buddhism or Tibetan art. The museum is set in a botanical garden festooned with Tibetan prayer flags, perfect for sitting and contemplating. On the first floor is the main exhibition, a comprehensive collection of art and artifacts relating to all 14 of Tibet's Dalai Lamas, charting 600 years of history and art with many pieces that have never been seen before. Upstairs is a moving collection of photographs of the present Dalai Lama by Swiss photographer Manuel Bauer. The pictures show Tenzin Gyatso's well-known public face, but also private moments: studying sacred texts over dinner and slipping into meditation in a hotel room in his undershirt. There is a screening too of four archive films of Tibet and its lost ceremonies from the 1930s on. This is a fascinating and illuminating insight into a rich spiritual and artistic tradition, and the path of one man working for peace.

Where to Stay

Baur au Lac  
Talstrasse 1, 8022 Zurich  
T: +41 44 220 5020  
F: +41 44 220 5044  
[www.bauraulac.ch](http://www.bauraulac.ch)

One of Europe's grandes dames hotels, the Baur au Lac has been owned by the same family since opening in 1844. Facing the lake and set in its own parkland-like garden, the Baur is still a favorite with the world's movers and shakers. Superlative service and a nice personal touch. Doubles start at CHF 720.

Widder Hotel  
Rennweg 7  
8001 Zurich  
T: +41 1 224 2526  
F: +41 1 224 2424  
[www.widderhotel.ch](http://www.widderhotel.ch)

Ten medieval townhouses off the Bahnhofstrasse have been imaginatively combined to make one of Europe's chicest design hotels. Attention to detail and witty touches, as well as impeccable, informal service make staying at the Widder a real event. Doubles start at CHF 645.

Lady's First  
Mainaustrasse 24  
8008 Zurich  
+41 44 380 8010  
+41 44 380 8020  
[www.ladysfirst.ch](http://www.ladysfirst.ch)

On the west side of the lake, this boutique hotel has just 28 rooms, carefully designed with clean lines. Until recently the hotel was for women only, now men are welcome too but the health spa at the top of the hotel is still for women only. There is no restaurant but meals can be arranged. Doubles start at CHF 245.