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Swiss UNESCO World Heritage Sites

Reflections on the end of our series

This issue of the Helvetia brings us to the end of the eleven Swiss Unesco World Heritage sites. It's been fascinating researching the various sites and a great opportunity to learn about these remarkable places. Hopefully you will have picked up a few new ideas for your next trip to Switzerland!



Before moving on to other topics, it is well worth giving some thought to what these world heritage sites are all about. What does it take to get a site on the list? Who manages them? What happens if things go wrong?

What are World Heritage sites?

World Heritage Sites include those sites around the planet that are truly unique in terms of their universal cultural and natural values. They are usually places of unique beauty and wonder, mystery and grandeur, memory and meaning. Visualise the pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal. Add the Great Barrier Reef, the Galápagos Islands and Serengeti National Park – and you get the drift! All these sites are included on the World Heritage List, together with those in Switzerland. Listed sites usually attract a lot of attention and create all sorts of new local opportunities, such as in tourism and education.

The World Heritage Convention

In 1972, amidst worldwide concern over the potential loss of the earth's outstanding cultural and natural heritage, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) established a treaty for the protection of these sites. This is known as the World Heritage Convention. The convention aims to identify and protect the earth's irreplaceable natural and cultural heritage, and conserve it for all times. The inclusion of a site on the World Heritage List is a powerful tool for its protection. Once a site is identified as being at risk, it is included on the List of World Heritage in Danger. The World Heritage Committee can take immediate action to address the situation if needed.

How are World Heritage sites listed?

Only the national government of a country (a States Party) that has ratified and signed the World Heritage Convention can nominate a site. Sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one of ten selection criteria. The World Heritage Committee, a group of elected representatives of 21 of the States Parties, then decides whether a site will be included on the list. State Parties must commit to the preservation of sites and strive to find solutions for their protection. As of 2014, there are 981 sites worldwide, of which 29 cross national boundaries. 759 are cultural sites, 193 natural sites and 29 mixed sites. 44 sites are in danger.

What this means for Switzerland

When a site is included in the World Heritage List, the communes and cantons concerned, together with the federal authorities, undertake to secure the long-term protection of the property.

While listing is primarily an honour and a mark of global recognition, it also involves a commitment to preserve the property for future generations. A joint agreement to this effect will enter into force if the site is included in the World Heritage List. National sovereignty remains unaffected, as inscription by UNESCO does not trigger any additional regulations. Conservation remains subject to national legislation, with sites often protected at the national, cantonal or regional level.

New focus on living traditions

Switzerland recently signed a new Unesco Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. As part of this, a list will include the world's unique and outstanding human cultural heritage – not necessarily tied to a specific site. Switzerland has compiled a list of 167 living traditions, of which four to five will end up on the list. Who knows, it may well be the Fondue!

Getting more information

The UNESCO World Heritage website is a treasure trove of information on the convention, heritage sites, as well as learning and best practice. Of particular interest is the colourful and informative on-line magazine.

By Susie Wood

Sources:

World Heritage List: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

Magazine: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/review/>

Swiss sites: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/CH/>

Swiss living traditions: <http://www.lebendige-traditionen.ch/index.html?lang=en>

Recapping Switzerland's UNESCO World Heritage Sites

- Benedictine Convent of St. John Münstair
- Castles of Bellinzona
- La Chaux-de-Fonds/Le Locle (tentative)
- Lavaux, Vineyard Terraces
- Monte San Giorgio
- Old City of Berne
- Prehistoric Pile Dwellings around the Alps
- Rhaetian Railway, Albula/Bernina
- Swiss Alps Jungfrau-Aletsch
- St. Gallen Abbey District
- Tectonic Arena Sardona



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