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Breathtaking Berne!

Berne, home of the Swiss government and parliament

IN 1191 Duke Berchtold von Zaehringen founded Berne on a peninsula in a bend of the River Aar.

A hundred years later the men of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden gathered on the Ruetli and founded the Swiss Confederation which Berne joined after 62 years, the eighth Canton to adhere to the League.

Throughout the next two centuries Berne played an important part in Swiss history, but it was not until 1848 that it became the capital of Switzerland, at the same time that the Federal Constitution was accepted.

Strictly speaking, Berne is NOT the capital of Switzerland. It is that of the Canton of Berne and it is the "Bundesstadt", the seat of government, parliament and administration of the Confederation.

But of course, it is simpler to call it the capital.

Malicious tongues have it that because Berne is the "Bundesstadt", it has been prevented from becoming the country's trade and finance capital, a position which Zurich has achieved. But nobody could possibly deny that Berne has the most charming old town, which grew out of the small settlement on the Aar peninsula.

Many generations of craftsmen created the stately buildings in medieval, gothic and baroque styles, and the result is a harmonious and unique town, with modern shops under old arcades, attractive and sometimes humorous fountains and medieval gateways.

The city's layout, unchanged for centuries, is divided by guild, trade and class into Junkerngasse, Metzgergasse, Kramgasse and Marktgasse. There was even a Gerechtigkeitsgasse, which true to its name, is dominated by a Renaissance multi-coloured Fountain of Justice.

These "Gassen" give Berne a special atmosphere usually found only in small places. Yet it is a town of some 160,000 inhabitants.

Apart from strolling through the "Gassen", visiting the fine gothic cathedral and watching the bears and their antics in the famous bearpit – it was Duke Berchtold V who gave the city not only a municipal charter in 1191, but also its coat of arms, the black bear – you have any number of trips available to Berne's charming surroundings.

But if you want to remain in town and enjoy a fine view – the terrace outside the Federal Parliament building, overlooking the river, is the place. From there you can admire the breathtaking scenery which includes some of the most famous peaks in the Alps, the Eiger, Moench and Jungfrau – an unforgettable sight.

The same view may be enjoyed from the geranium-trimmed terrace of the Bellevue-Palace Hotel adjoining the parliament building.

And this is where the new idea of Berne weekends comes in.

Dan-Air, the only airline which serves Berne (from Gatwick) and Swissotel's Bellevue have joined forces and now offer attractive weekend packages.

Dan-Air has been flying to Berne since 1972, and since last year it has been operating the new British Aerospace 146 jetliner – the "Whispering Jet" – which has cut flying time to half and greatly increased inflight comfort.

The Bellevue Palace Hotel was built in 1913 and has a reputation for excellence. As its name implies, it is a hotel from the days of opulence and grandeur, and its tradition of fine accommodation, service and food has been kept up over the decades.

The idea of the new weekend package features scheduled flights with Dan-Air to and from Berne, luxury accommodation, well-appointed conference rooms and a variety of extras such as excursions and evening entertainment. The basic two -night package starts from £148 a head with a minimum of 20 people.

I hope you think this a good idea and that you will be anxious to know more about it. Phone for the illustrated brochure to Davies & Newman Travel Ltd, Dan-Air's associate company, at 01-839 1192. You won't regret it.

Berne is a beautiful town and whether you have been there many times or have a first visit still to come – you will always want to repeat the experience. **MM**