

FRIBOURG – A city on the edge

The edge in this case is the language and cultural barrier or the Röstigraben as the Swiss Germans are fond of saying. In Fribourg this divide is almost 50/50 with a slight bias towards French. However, everyone is happy to talk either French or German as well as English and it is a charming city with lots of history and a good deal of culture. It is also easy to get to; the train takes just one and a half hours from Nyon and if you time it right, there is no need to change.



The town is nestled on a rock promontory and is surrounded on three sides by the Sarine river. It has a beautiful medieval center with many Gothic facades and remnants of the walls, turrets and bastions that once protected the city. There is a pleasant city walk that ends up meandering over and along the river with many bridges that range from really old – The Bern wood-covered bridge which dates back to 1653 to the modern Poya bridge that was opened in 2014. The tourist office is close to the railway station has good maps with different walking routes.

The station is just a few minutes from the city center and I made my first stop at the Café du Midi just a few minutes away in the heart of the pedestrian zone. A good place for a coffee and to get your bearings. It is also one of the city's oldest inns and serves regional specialties including a wide variety of fondues including the legendary Fribourgeois "moitié-moitié" made with two cheeses: half Gruyère and half Vacherin Fribourgeois. Since I was there at 10h30, it seemed a little early for melted cheese.

A little further on is the impressive St.Nicolas cathedral that was started from German construction plans in 1283 and finished to meet French wishes in 1490. It's architecture is pure Gothic with magnificent stained glass windows and a 74 meter tower that can be climbed. From the top is a fabulous panoramic view of the city and the surrounding country side.

Very close to the cathedral is the Restaurant du Gothard, long known as a rendez-vous for artists. Jean Tinguely and his friend, the painter Le Boucher Corpaato used to hang out here. The atmosphere in the brasserie is still inspiring and it is a good place for a rest and a drink or snack after you have climbed the 720 steps up and down the tower of the cathedral.

A few steps away is the Espace Jean Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle, housed in a disused tram depot and dedicated to the sculptor and his wife. Tinguely was born in Fribourg in 1925. His machines (or sculptures) were built as a protest against consumerism, made from retrieved objects and deliberately imperfect and useless. They are connected to create movement and so they rattle, wheeze and clatter at the push of a button. Very entertaining and fun.



Equally fun are the colourful sculptures by Niki de Saint-Phalle that are beautifully exposed against a huge black wall. She was a great artist and feminist who continually disrupted long-held conventions in art. She paired bold, jubilant and cartoonish feminine forms with dark disturbing material in a multi-faceted career. Her pieces are highly expressive, bold and often playful.

<http://www.fr.ch/mahf/en/pub/index.htm>

Afterwards if you still have energy, you could visit the Art and History Museum of Fribourg which is just next door. Regrettably I did not get that far as it was a beautiful day and I chose to walk and feast on the lovely views of the city and the river.

The town has an upper modern, and a lower historic center and you need good legs to navigate it as there are lots of ups and downs. However a good way to get up again from the lower city is to take the historic funicular railway. This popular and nostalgic funicular has been operational since 1899 and is unique in Europe, for it runs on water. Ascending a 56 meter climb, the upper carriage uses filtered wastewater from the city in a 3000 liter tank as a counter-weight to pull up the lower carriage whilst the driver regulates the speed with the aid of a cogwheel. A bit of a special fragrance lingers in the air when the water tank is filled at the top station but it certainly is ecological and cost-efficient. You can reach the main railway station in just a few minutes walk from the top of the funicular to catch the train for your return journey.

