

# Beyond the Art Fair, Things to Do While Visiting Basel

From riverside cafes to an exhibition on the video game industry, the city has plenty to offer.



The Grand Hotel des Trois Roi, one of the many worthwhile destinations in Basel. (If you're lucky, you might be able to enjoy a cocktail at its river-view bar.) Laurn Ishak for The New York Times

By Susanne Fowler

Sept. 21, 2021

Armed with face masks and Covid-related documents, art lovers and collectors descending on Basel, Switzerland, this month for the [Art Basel](#) fair may want to step outside the cavernous exhibition space in Messeplatz to explore this city on the Rhine.

Here's a taste of what else to see and do in Basel — a city synonymous with art fairs, watch fairs and the tennis star [Roger Federer](#), who was born here.

The [Basel Tourism](#) office in the Stadtcasino at Barfüsserplatz can get visitors started, with a brochure that includes five “circular” walking tours (they start and end at the same place). The guide and an audio app can also be [downloaded](#) in advance.

The Erasmus Walk, for example, which takes about 30 minutes with some uphill sections, includes the grave site of the humanist philosopher Erasmus of Rotterdam. The 90-minute Holbein Walk, named for the German portrait artist Hans Holbein the Younger who lived in Basel in the 16th century, takes you from the Old Town and across the river by foot or [by ferry](#) to [Kleinbasel](#), a multicultural area with vibrant streets and squares.

ADVERTISEMENT

Antiques and other secondhand goods can be found on Saturdays at the [flea market](#) in Petersplatz, while international food stalls and produce vendors are open daily in the revamped [Markthalle](#) (Market Hall), which sometimes has free live music in the evening. Throughout the week, a visitor to [Lido](#), a pop-up social space for eating, drinking and socializing, can be rewarded with a drink, a pizza or a game of bocce or beach volleyball.

For a more formal experience, there's a chance a table may be free at the otherwise fully booked five-star [Grand Hotel des Trois Roi](#) for a cocktail and a canapé on the balcony of its river-view bar.

Thanks for reading The Times.  
[Subscribe to The Times](#)

Often the best places in Basel are by the river, [Dr. Jörn Günther](#), a local rare-book dealer, said by email. “[Le Rhin Bleu](#) is a special place to eat, with swimmers just below your feet as you take in the spectacle of the river,” he wrote. “If you’re brave, you can also bring your own swimming costumes and take a dip — though it might be a bit cold.”

He also recommended [Deck57](#), “a great bar on the upper deck of a converted cargo ship” (weather permitting).

If the weather is good, another place for a stroll, he said, is the English-style landscaped garden of the [Ermitage](#), in Arlesheim, about a 20-minute tram ride from Basel's central train station.

ADVERTISEMENT

But for the more art-focused visitors, Basel's many museums are the draw. If you are staying at a hotel or an Airbnb property, you may request a free [BaselCard](#) to get 50 percent off museum admission fees, free public transportation and free Wi-Fi at various hot spots.

Elizabeth Doerr, editor of the watch-related website [QuillandPad.com](#), who lives in Karlsruhe, Germany, has often crossed the border to Basel for major watch fairs. A riverside cafe, she said by email, is “a great place to slow down, and for a larger city, Basel feels quite compact and comfortable.”

But she said her top recommendation was a visit to the city's museums.

“I particularly like the [Tinguely Museum](#),” she said, “because of the kinetic works — so pertinent for watch-loving people — and its location on the Rhine.”

Those works are by the Swiss artist [Jean Tinguely](#) and the museum named for him is marking its 25th anniversary this month, featuring an [updated permanent exhibition](#) that includes his sculptures, a special exhibition on Bruce Conner's [experimental films](#) and a show about the tattoo [art](#) of the [Leu family](#).

At the [Kunstmuseum](#) you might catch the last days of the [Kara Walker exhibition](#) “A Black Hole Is Everything a Star Longs to Be,” which runs through Sept. 26, or browse works by old masters like Rubens and Modernists like Picasso, Klee and Giacometti in the permanent collection.

ADVERTISEMENT

For technology buffs there is [HEK](#) (the House of Electronic Arts), which features “[Radical Gaming](#),” an exhibition about the video game industry and stereotypes on gender and identity.

For something a bit more unusual, the [Pharmacy Museum](#) offers rows of faience apothecary jars that held medicinal ingredients and the chance to learn about how things like powdered mummies or carbonized squirrels were used in old-timey treatments.

ADVERTISEMENT